

## ISSUES OF TRUTH IN INTER-RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF HANS KUNG

### The Argument: Relativism As Opposed to a Rigorous Search for Truth?

The study of world religions in Christian schools has been boosted over the last thirty years by the inclusion of religious studies units within state senior secondary curricula. The benefits of this for the development of a more informed and tolerant Australian society are numerous, and the multicultural argument for the inclusion of the units has gained wide acceptance. It can be argued, however, that a more philosophical issue relating to the teaching of world religions, that of the discerning the relative truth of various religions, has not been tackled well in the educational literature. It is quite possible therefore that it is tackled very little by the teacher in the classroom. The danger of ignoring this necessary philosophical discussion is an indiscriminate pluralism where all is accepted, where no distinctions are made between religions, and phenomena within religions, and where every religion and religious phenomenon is deemed to be acceptable in a teaching approach that does not go beyond the descriptive.

A predominantly descriptive approach to teaching world religions certainly gives students information which will help them to understand the allusions to various religious phenomena which they encounter in their lives in a multi-faith society. However, if the result is a relativistic blurring of questions about truth, the process may do little more than contribute to indifference to all religions. If education is concerned with developing the critical, discerning and discriminating capacities of the student, so that they may make judgements and evaluate rather than simply absorb, a descriptive approach does not go far enough. This paper deals with the question of how the teacher and student of world religions, particularly in the Christian classroom (for Christianity claims to hold the fullness of truth, a position which will be analysed later in his paper) may approach the truth claims of the various religious systems. Many scholars of various religions have contributed to this discussion, (Dupuis, 1997; Hick, 1987; Hillman 1995; Panniker, 1975; Pieris, 1996) but eminent among them is Hans Kung, who (despite his censure by the Vatican in 1979) remains one of Christianity's leading ecumenists, bringing rigour and intellectual commitment to the task of inter-faith dialogue. This paper analyses Kung's contribution to the question of truth in religions, before claiming certain educational implications for

the consideration of the teacher in the Christian school.

### The Historical Context

In an earlier paper in his journal (Engebretson, 2001, p. 47) I drew on Kung (1967) to trace the origin of the axiom *extra Ecclesia nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church). This view that salvation came only from membership of the Catholic church had been taught by early Church fathers such as Irenaeus' (d. 200), Origen (d. 254) and Cyprian (d. 258). With Constantine's Edict of Toleration (313CE) Christianity began to move away from its status as a sporadically persecuted religion to one with legal status. In the fifth century then, when the monk, bishop and theologian, Fulgentius of Ruspe (d. 532) upheld the *extra Ecclesia nulla salus doctrine*, it was in a climate where Christianity was fast becoming the main religion of the Empire. The words of Fulgentius:

Of this you can be certain and convinced beyond any doubt: not only all pagans but also all Jews, heretics, and schismatics, who die outside the present Catholic Church, will go into the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels (Fulgentius, *De Fide, ad Petrum* 38, 79; PL 65, 704. Cited in Kung, 1967 p. 405),

were affirmed by the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and adopted almost literally by the Council of Florence in 1442. Papal documents (e. g., *Unam Sanctum* 1302) as late as 1862 (*Conficiamur Moereore*) upheld the doctrine that no-one could reach salvation unless they belonged within the community of the Catholic Church, although earlier in 1854 and again in 1863 Pius IX had insisted that this did not apply to those who had no opportunity of hearing the gospel. Certainly, in the medieval Church before the Reformation, it must have appeared that Catholic Christianity really had spread across the whole world (Kung, 1967). The Church was secure in its place as the religion of the known world, and according to Kung (1967) it was assumed that all people would encounter the Christian message. The axiom *extra Ecclesia nulla salus* is not surprising or even too difficult to accept in this context.

Two historical movements were to raise questions about whether this exclusivist position could be sustained. The first was the Reformation that began in the sixteenth century with Luther's challenge to

the Church, an event which ultimately had far reaching repercussions in the proliferation of Christian Churches in various relationships to Catholicism. The second historical movement was the missionary outreach of the Catholic Church itself. The "voyages of discovery" (Schreiter, 1995, p. 871) of the late fifteenth century associated the teaching of Christianity with colonial conquest. As imperial powers colonised the lands of the new world, Christian missionaries, drawn mainly from religious orders, served as agents of the crown (Schreiter, 1995, p. 871). Inevitably this expansion of Christianity into new continents brought it and its missionaries up against the fact that there were morally good and highly spiritual people outside of Christianity. Indeed, Christianity made little impact in the countries where there was already a highly developed and ancient religion. Kung (1974, p. 90) argues that even when there was some success in this missionary outreach, for example for a time in Asia, it was short-lived and resulted in large part from the alliance of the clergy with colonial powers. The brevity of the missionary success was due largely, according to Kung, to the attempt to transplant western Christianity in a completely different culture.

If Christendom at the time had not been so narrow-mindedly western, if the missionaries had enjoyed the same freedom as the first Christian missionaries in the Hellenistic Roman Empire, the history of Asia and its religions might have taken a slightly different course (Kung, 1974, p. 90).

Inevitably, in encountering the ancient religions of Asia, and even in the encounters between Christian missionaries and the animism that characterised many of the local religions, questions about salvation by paths other than Christianity arose. A realisation began to dawn that Christianity too is part of the historical process, an episode in the history of humanity which goes back hundreds of thousands of years, and which has an incalculable future. The new perspectives that came with the evolution of an historical and geographical consciousness meant that the axiom of *no salvation outside the Church* came under question, in particular in the period between the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which adamantly excluded the reformist Churches from salvation, and the Second Vatican Council's affirmation of the reality of universal salvation.

#### **Between Trent and the Twenty-First Century: Coming to Terms with Many Religions**

The struggle of theologians to come to terms with religious diversity is apparent in the various positions adopted in relation to other faiths leading up to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1966). An

awareness of God's desire for the salvation of all, led theologians to propose a baptism of desire, which could be imputed to those who had not received baptism. Another view claimed that there was a position of 'implicit' faith which could be taken into account for the person to whom the gospel had not been effectively presented. A third position claimed that there was a special grace offered in a moment of choice at the time of death (Clooney, 1995, p. 1160). None of these views was ultimately satisfactory, since they ignored the considerable spiritual riches and achievements of other religions in an effort to accommodate all under the umbrella of Christianity. These accommodations reached their high point after Vatican II in Rahner's (1969) idea of the 'anonymous Christian'. Rahner claimed that those who do not know Christ explicitly can nevertheless encounter him 'anonymously' and live in the grace of Christ in a mysterious, way thus being in communion with the Church. Kung (1974) dismissed all such attempts at accommodation, pointing out that adherents of other religions in general have no desire to be Christians, anonymous or otherwise.

Anyway, in reality they - Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists ... remain outside. Nor have they any wish to be inside. And no theological sleight of the hand will ever force them, against their will and against their desire, to become active or passive members of this Church- which in fact still seeks to be a free community of faith (Kung, 1974, p. 98).

Kung (1974, p. 98) concludes that a 'pseudo-orthodox' stretching of concepts such as Church and salvation does not meet the challenge of world religions, a challenge that it is crucial to face. Certainly by the early twenty-first century, with the increase in migration around the world which has led to national communities like Australia which are intensely multi faith, the issue of how we are to approach dialogue is urgent. Peace in the world and within our local communities is undermined constantly by religious tensions. These tensions arise, Kung (1986) observes, from mistrust, and mistrust arises from ignorance and arrogance. First at this time in history it is important simply to learn more about each other. However, the attraction of fundamentalism in all religions requires that we do more than this. We must engage with the issue of what is true and good in world religions, including Christianity, in order to make the dialogue fruitful.

#### **Kung's Four Positions in Relation to the Truth of Religions Other Than Christianity.**

While the two questions of salvation in religions and the truth of various religions are related, they are also distinct. The Second Vatican Council and



documents since then (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, [CDF], 2000) assert the principle of universal salvation, which implies that people can find salvation in other religions. The Church does not, however, assert that all religions are equally true, or that it makes little difference to which religion one belongs. It is an unarguable fact that while elements of religion are true, and these must be recognised and affirmed by Christians, for the Christian another religion does not offer the *whole* truth. While individual Christians may adopt elements from other religions, in general they would not argue that they might just as well be a Buddhist or a Muslim. The question of truth is an important one, and it is not served by an uncritical levelling down of religions which results in a relativist approach which ultimately demeans all religions. Christians recognise elements of truth in other religions but know that sometimes they contain beliefs and practices that are abhorrent from a Christian perspective (Kung, 1974). People will be saved Kung supposes:

Not because of but in spite of polytheism, magic, human sacrifices, forces of nature. They will be saved not because of but in spite of all untruth and superstition (Kung 1974, p. 104).

How then are we to approach this question of discerning the truth of religions? Kung (1988) proposes that there are four basic positions that are generally adopted in relation to this question. The first is the atheistic position that *all religions are equally untrue*. This position presents a challenge to all religions, claiming that they are all built on illusion, and that beyond human life there is nothingness. The atheistic position, Kung (1988) argues, must honestly take account of the fact that the earliest accounts of human life right through to the present, portray a need and desire to open up to the transcendent. Atheism is grounded in the western world, Kung argues, and is therefore a position of the minority.

The second position which is often adopted, and which seems to hold an attraction for many today, is the fundamentalist, absolutist position (that enshrined in the teaching of the Catholic church up to the Second Vatican Council) that one religion is true and all other religions are equally untrue. This *exclusivist* position is no longer held by the church, a fact that will be made clear in a following section of this paper which analyses the two key church documents which deal with this issue, *Nostra Aetate* (Abbott, 1966) and *Dominus Jesus* (CDF, 2000). The third position, often adopted in relation to the truth of religions is that every religion is true, or *all religions are equally true*. This relativist position is rejected by Kung as ultimately

demeaning of all religions, which are clearly not the same and arguably not always of equal value. Along with absolutism, he argues, we must reject an unthinking relativism which ultimately can lead only to indifference to all religions and religious phenomena. The fourth position, which Kung (1988, p. 235) describes as a "*generous, tolerant inclusivism*" is, he argues, the real solution. Those who take this position claim that while only one religion is true, all religions share in the truth of this one religion. "The result is that every other religion is de facto reduced to a lower or partial knowledge of the truth, while one's own religion is elevated to a supersystem" (Kung, 1988, p. 235). This position argues for a discerning of the relationships and interconnections which exist between religions without descending to either absolutism or relativism.

### The Contemporary Catholic Position

Two Catholic documents deal specifically with the issue of Christianity in relation to other religions. The first of these the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* is a brief document that was promulgated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1966). It is noteworthy principally for its inclusive tone, and for the fact that it appears to reverse the *extra Ecclesia nulla salus doctrine*. A large section of the short document is given to words of reconciliation with Jews, but the brief general statements make two things clear. First, the document advocates Christ as the 'way' of salvation.

Indeed she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) in whom men (*sic*) may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to himself (*Nostra Aetate*, # 2).

Secondly, it deals very briefly with the issue of truth in other religions, claiming that "certain ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth actually reflect salvific truth, indeed often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (*Nostra Aetate*, #2). So while Christ is the fullness of truth, other religions in various ways reflect that truth. The document does not actually announce that salvation may be achieved through other religions, but implies that this is possible to the extent that they 'reflect' the salvific truth of Christ. Further, the document does not indiscriminately give this status to all religious phenomena, but leaves the way open for the process of critique and discernment. *Nostra Aetate* is extraordinary chiefly for its inclusivism after centuries of an exclusivist position in relation to other religions. This brief analysis demonstrates

that the tone and approach of the document is clearly in Kung's fourth category, that is, a "generous, tolerant inclusivism" (King, 1988, p. 235).

The much longer declaration *Dominus Jesus* was promulgated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. It appears that the declaration has several purposes. First it encourages the continuation of inter-religious dialogue, and places this within the context of the Church's missionary vocation. Inter-religious dialogue is "part of the Church's evangelising mission" (# 2). An important purpose, reiterated several times, is to set down "certain indispensable elements" of Christian doctrine in relation to world religions, particularly in the context of "relativistic theories" which, in justifying religious pluralism, seem to dismiss or down play the necessity of Christ for salvation, the definitive nature of the revelation of Christ, and the Christian economy of salvation or elements of it (# 4). The document then sets out the elements of this economy of salvation. These are the creating and redeeming grace of God as offered to humankind, the Incarnation as the fullness of God's revelation and the requirement of the "obedience of faith" (Rom 16:26) to this revelation; the work of the Holy Spirit in effecting and teaching the mystery of salvation within the lives of the faithful and the role of the church as the mediator of salvation. The universality of God's will to save all people is reaffirmed, but it is made clear that this salvation is in and through Christ (#15).

Importantly however, the document does not identify the Catholic church with the Kingdom of God. This kingdom is the "manifestation and the realisation of God's plan in all its fullness" (# 19) and while it takes in the Catholic church whose task is to promote the Kingdom of God on earth, it is not restricted by it: "the action of Christ and the Spirit outside the Church's visible boundaries must not be excluded" # 19).

The document asserts two seemingly contradictory truths, that God wills all to be saved, and yet the necessity of Christ, the church and baptism for salvation. What then of the committed adherents of other religions? While acknowledging that this issue needs much more theological study, the document asserts that God "in ways known to himself" (# 21) makes accessible and available outside the visible church, a grace from Christ (# 20) which effects salvation within their "spiritual and material situation" (# 20). While the church is the way to salvation, those outside the church are enabled, in an act of grace, to share in the salvific truth of Christ through their own religious paths. Therefore there is one way of salvation (# 21) but other religions, as affirmed by *Nostra Aetate*,

contain "elements which come from God" (# 21) and through these elements in a "mysterious relationship with the Church" (# 20) salvation is offered. The document finally cautions Christian believers against an indiscriminate acceptance of all elements of religions, seeing that while some are "from God" (# 21) others arise from superstitions and are an obstacle to truth.

*Dominus Jesus* met with some criticism when it was first promulgated, particularly for its unbending assertion that Christ is necessary for salvation. However, a close analysis of the document suggests that the problem is more in the dogmatic tone that it adopts than in its content. In tone it is less conciliatory and more dogmatic than *Nostra Aetate*, but if we are prepared to overlook this in view of its different purpose, the document promulgates the same teaching as *Nostra Aetate* but in a more detailed and expository way. We would be surprised if a Catholic encyclical dealing with doctrinal matters did not assert the primacy of Christ for salvation, and the role of the church in mediating salvation through Scripture, Tradition and liturgy. Like the gospels, Catholic declarations are firmly grounded in a faith tradition, and speak out of and on behalf of that tradition. On the other hand we would be concerned if the possibility of salvation outside the church were denied, and the documents has not done this. In short, *Dominus Jesus* asserts the centrality of Christ and the church in the plan of salvation, but acknowledges that she does not have the last word, that the Kingdom of God is bigger than the church, and that the elements of truth in other religions may certainly channels of salvific grace. The position is not exclusivist, as has been claimed. Indeed, while it lacks the generous tone of *Nostra Aetate*, it takes an inclusivist position in relation to other religions. Kung (1988, p. 235) shows that those who adopt the fourth of the positions he describes in relation to the truth of religions, claim that while only one religion is true others share in the truth of this one religion. To summarise then, the contemporary Catholic position is inclusive, with Christ and the church claimed as necessary for salvation but with the allowance that the grace of God can and does work outside of the church in "mysterious" (CDF, 2000, #2) ways through the "rays of truth" (Abbott, 1966, #3) that can be found in other religions.

#### A Common Quest for Truth

The quest for truth is not served by the relativising of all truth claims and the facile equating of all values and standards. The hard work of dialogue between religions must engage honestly with questions of truth, and this too must be the work of the classroom if the exploration of religions of the world is to have educational value. I would like to bring this discussion together by proposing some



considerations for Christian teachers as they engage with world religions in the classroom.

First, the study and critique of other religions necessarily involves the Christian (therefore the Christian school, teacher and student) in a critique of Christianity. While Christianity argues that it possesses the fullness of truth, religions are historically conditioned, and even a brief excursion into church history shows us the process of development of thought and doctrine. No study of world religions can proceed from the fundamentalist position that there is nothing more to be learned about the home tradition. The educational endeavour requires a genuine openness to learn and critique but from the platform of a particular religious position.

A second necessary task of the classroom is the development of criteria by which the truth and goodness of religions and religious phenomena may be discerned from a Christian perspective. Kung (1988) proposes certain criteria which may well be the starting point for this. First, does the religion or phenomenon reveal God in ways that support and affirm something of the nature of God as the Christian understands it? Second, is the religion or phenomenon transformative; that is, does it advance, protect and dignify humanity, and call human beings to ongoing transformation? Third, does it entail fellowship and solidarity which makes love central, espouses forgiveness and mercy, sees institutions as at the service of people, and strives for a voice and a transformative role in culture? Kung's criteria emerge of course from his own Christian commitment, and this is a point that needs to be faced. In Christian schools, there is a platform from which critique may proceed, and an honest owning of this is as necessary as the willingness to do the hard work of learning about, evaluating and dialoguing with religions.

A third task of the classroom is the avoidance of both absolutism and relativism. The standpoint of superiority of the former (Kung 1986, p. xix) and the "arbitrary pluralism" of the latter both do a disservice to education. While nothing of value in other religions is dismissed or denied, nothing of little value is indifferently accepted. Therefore the process of discriminating and building arguments instead of simply narration and description, must take place. The teacher and student must "painstakingly develop areas where Christianity clearly agrees or disagrees with other religions" (Kung 1986, p. xviii). This is the real task of dialogue and ultimately the only way of studying world religions that will have lasting consequences for the education of the student, for his or her own religious self-understanding, and for the advancement of tolerance in society.

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