

Toward a common morality

by [William P. George](#) in the [October 7, 1998](#) issue

By Hans Kung, A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics. (Oxford University Press, 315 pp.)

When it comes to ethics, even truisms are telling. Once in a religion class I observed that the author we were discussing drew a pretty sharp line on a particular moral issue. "Well," the instructor reminded the class, "we all draw the line somewhere."

And so we do. Both street gangs and military academies have their codes, and even those postmodern gods, millionaire athletes, get sanctioned for choking their coaches. Moral lines are important and we know it--American "live and let live" attitudes notwithstanding. Several years of teaching have even convinced me that students are less likely to be moral relativists than selective absolutists. Scratch the surface and you'll probably find something which they believe everyone should do.

The significant ethical questions have to do not only with moral boundaries, but with how these are formed, who forms them, why a particular individual or group draws the lines here rather than there, how tightly or loosely lines are drawn, and how easily they contract or expand or erode. The metaphor of drawing lines applies to Hans Küng's important new book, the latest installment in his effort to advance a "global ethic." Küng, theologian and president of the Global Ethic Foundation, is seeking a viable "outline of the future." Given this future orientation, perhaps it is best to think of Küng's project in terms of moral vectors--lines with directionality and moral force--leading into the 21st century.

Küng is surely on to something. We--who hear daily about bloodshed in places like Kosovo, are affected by an Asian economic crisis with worldwide repercussions, and know that the \$150 Nike shoes sold in U.S. inner cities are cheaply made halfway around the world--are all globalists now on moral matters. And Küng is not alone in stressing the urgency of formulating a global ethic. He cites various world leaders who, individually or in concert, press for some sort of universal moral code.

Küng's underlying thesis is essentially the same as that of the 1993 statement of the Parliament of the World's Religions, "Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)": In the face of multiple global challenges (political, economic, ecological), a new world order is needed. But there can be no viable order without a viable global ethic. And among the major religions a consensus about the core of that ethic already exists.

Those familiar with the Parliament's document might recall that it contains two parts: a short "Declaration," drafted by a committee, and a longer section on "Principles," drafted primarily by Küng, who felt that a brief, "prophetic" statement simply would not be enough. In this book Küng presents "an ethically oriented overall view developed step by step through argument," a view which encompasses the global political and economic realms.

Küng begins with an analysis of Henry Kissinger's amoral construal of international relations and diplomacy, and proceeds to insightful discussions of Richelieu, Bismarck, Woodrow Wilson and the early international relations specialist Hans Morgenthau (with fascinating comments on Morgenthau's moral ambivalence and his intellectual relationship to Nietzsche). These early chapters reveal the need for an ethic that capitulates neither to crude political realism nor to lofty idealism.

The starting point for this ethic "must always be what is, with a progression from there to what should be." In his search for a middle way, Küng is "all for morality but against moralism," for the latter makes dialogue nearly impossible. Moral principles are clearly in order, but absolute pacifism, for example, is irresponsible. Readers familiar with Max Weber's famous essay "Politics as a Vocation," which calls for an ethic that falls between a romantic "ethics of ultimate ends" and a worldly "ethics of responsibility," will recognize affinities between that classic text and Küng's project. Küng's thought also has affinities to the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr (though Küng cites him but once).

Küng's second step is a fuller articulation of that needed ethic and, as a *sine qua non* for its effectiveness, a challenge to the world's religions to work for peace among themselves. These middle chapters are largely a review and development of Küng's earlier writings on global ethics and responsibility. The desired ethic, Küng argues, must be "related to reality," "penetrate to the deeper ethical levels," "be generally comprehensible" and be "capable of securing a consensus." The fact that an ethic meeting these criteria has already been formulated and published ("Towards a Global Ethic") should demonstrate to skeptics that such an ethic can be worked out.

The core of the ethic--"a minimal consensus, not a minimal standard"--is the principle that "every human being must be treated humanely." This may be reformulated in terms of the Golden Rule, found in various religions, and in terms of "irrevocable directives" concerning commitment to cultures of truth and tolerance, nonviolence and respect for life, economic justice, and equal rights and partnership between men and women.

It is important to emphasize what the ethic is not. It is not a duplication of the Declaration of Human Rights, not a casuistic moral sermon that would solve every difficult case, and not an enthusiastic religious proclamation. Each of these approaches would lead to an ethical *cul de sac*.

In the final part of the book Küng turns to economics and business at the macro, micro and intermediate levels. He states that globalization is inevitable, unpredictable, but not entirely beyond human control. Neither worn-out welfare-state models (Sweden) nor neocapitalism (Reaganism, Thatcherism) will suffice in this new situation. We require an ethic that is neither reductionistic and economic nor idealistic and moralistic, neither the pure market economics of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman nor the utopian, inefficient, antimarket economies of the left. An analysis of international declarations (often underestimated) and a growing concern about business ethics (evident in the work of Max Stackhouse, Dennis McCann, Shirley Roels and Preston Williams) indicates that something very much like the global ethic, with its fundamental guiding norms, is gaining ground in the economic sphere.

Küng engages an impressive range of thinkers. Some readers may object that he devotes so much space, in a book espousing a global ethic, to American and European (especially German) writers and issues. Also, while the intended religious audience is broad, Küng singles out his Christian sisters and brothers for challenge and critique.

Here I would come to Küng's defense. Non-Western voices are not absent from this book, and in other writings Küng has been exemplary in engaging other religions and cultures. Furthermore, even if primarily Western in origin, the political and economic doctrines Küng discusses have had a worldwide impact. They must be addressed.

Finally, given the "minimal" character of the ethical consensus, particular developments and refinements will inevitably occur within as well as between and among traditions. Küng therefore is justified in placing more weight on his own tradition--which is by no means monolithic. The American reader, for instance, will learn a great deal from the European writers (e.g., Max Huber) on whom Küng draws. Küng would no doubt welcome parallel efforts from other traditions to develop the consensus that he and others claim already exists.

As he seeks to bring the global ethic to bear upon politics and economics, Küng makes several historical and systematic forays into each sphere. For instance, he offers a detailed evaluation of misguided steps in the Bosnian debacle, and in order to show why religion ought to be taken more seriously in international affairs he draws upon but rejects Samuel Huntington's thesis about a "clash of civilizations." He makes important judgments about the legitimate place of "interests" in economics--without, however, probing deeply enough the morally questionable aspects of this often uncritically accepted term. Political scientists, economists and other readers might quibble with these and other aspects of Küng's argument, and if they don't stop at quibbling, this is all to the good. Küng hopes that those who think about and influence politics and economics will test his "ethically oriented overall view" and thus advance the project. I, for one, hope that Küng's work can provide a basis for discussion and action on several fronts.

In that spirit, I enter certain reservations about Küng's project. One has to do with the assumptions that seem to guide the work. Implicit and sometimes quite explicit in his argument is a Kantian framework for thinking about morality. The Golden Rule functions as a categorical imperative, and duty is strongly emphasized. As John Maynard Keynes observed, behind every proposal there is probably some theoretically minded scribbler, and for Küng one of those scribblers is Kant.

The precise manner in which Küng is or is not a Kantian I leave aside. The issue is whether the imperatives can in fact be applied to concrete circumstances, especially without giving more attention to virtues, such as we find in the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions. If not, then the consensus surrounding the imperative may not count for much.

For example, the claim that "every human being must be treated humanely" begs important questions, namely, Who counts as human? and What does humane treatment entail? The history of slavery, the treatment of women, and the persistence of legalized torture should remind us of this. Küng is aware of this problem: "What is truly human is not always easy to define," he says, "but anyone can give many examples of what is truly inhuman." Perhaps, but even the definition of "inhuman" is often up for grabs.

Küng could have clarified what he means by concretizing the ethic had he taken up, for instance, the death penalty--an issue about which he is silent. In the wake of the widely protested execution of Rwandan war criminals, the well-publicized execution in Virginia of a Paraguayan national (despite the pleas of Madeleine Albright and the World Court), and the remarkable Soering case (wherein the European Court of Human Rights unanimously held that the extradition of a German national from the United Kingdom to the U.S., possibly to face the death penalty, would constitute a breach of the European Convention prohibiting torture and inhuman and degrading treatment), surely this is a fitting test case for a concrete global ethic.

How might Küng handle this issue? With Michael Walzer, he would probably place it under the heading of a "culturally differentiated morality," about which "consensus is not necessary." "In disputed concrete questions like abortion or euthanasia," Küng tells us, we can learn from Walzer that "no unifying demands should be made on other nations, cultures or religions to have the same moral praxis." If anyone doubts that the death penalty qualifies as a "disputed concrete question," that person has never led a group of undergraduates through a discussion of *Dead Man Walking*. So I assume Küng would counsel against any "unifying demands" upon the U.S. to cease this practice. But implicitly, at least, certain international human rights groups and the European Court of Human Rights are making just such a claim. They believe that the "moral praxis" in the U.S. is wrong and ought to change.

If "unifying demands" must await moral consensus at the local level, what remains of the global ethic and, especially, its prophetic edge? What "moral praxis" is not, at one time or another, disputed? Does the fact that the humaneness of bonded child labor, often tied to the caste system, is disputed within India mean that "no unifying demands" should be placed on that country to halt the practice, or that India should not pass laws on the

subject (as it has) until its citizenry is of a common moral mind?

Or consider the issue of abortion. In the negotiations over the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, now accepted by virtually every nation except the U.S., the minimum age at which the fetus becomes a child was hotly disputed. The convention finally included in its preamble words taken from the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child, stating that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth." However, no such language appears in subsequent articles, leaving it unclear whether the convention means to regulate abortion.

A similar ambiguity appears in "Towards a Global Ethic," which states that "every human being *without distinction of age* . . . possesses an inalienable and untouchable dignity" (emphasis added). This would seem to render most abortions morally suspect if not reprehensible. But clearly that argument would not enjoy consensus--the disagreement about when human life begins is too great. Thus, in the case of prenatal life, the "minimal consensus" about "irrevocable, unconditional norms" turns out to be minimal indeed and begins to evaporate into thin air.

Given the range of pressing moral issues that Küng takes up (including war, genocide and ecological destruction), I would not make so much of this issue except for two things. First, in the section on politics, Küng attacks the prevailing dichotomy between personal morality and the morality (or amorality) of politics at the macro level. But to relegate abortion (or, say, assisted suicide) solely to the realm of personal--indeed, private--choice and leave it there seems to reaffirm that dichotomy.

Second, in his discussion of economics as it intersects with ecology, Küng has an interesting section on responsibility toward future generations. He draws heavily upon the philosopher Hans Jonas, who in turn shows the importance of a religiously grounded moral vision. But to expect that the global ethic can tell us something important about our responsibilities to far-off future generations when deep disagreements keep it from being specific on our responsibilities to prenatal life strikes me as moral leapfrog. It is but a short step to saying that the global ethic is a very good guide, except in areas of real and immediate controversy. At this point, relativism and moral isolationism ("Who are we to judge other persons' and cultures' morals?") win the day. Apparently, human beings don't live in one moral world after all.

We are back to the question of drawing the lines--where we draw them, and why. In the future, Küng and others seeking to further the global ethic project might pay less attention to the "minimal consensus" and more attention to the several types of bias that tend to vitiate and fragment the content of an ethic that is already quite thin.

An historical example might help us here. In his zeal to protect indigenous people of the West Indies from Spanish conquistadors, the 16th-century Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas advocated the importation of African slaves, whom he believed would be treated better than the Indians. Later, he repented of this view. I suspect that many of us are like the "early" Las Casas: we're all for treating human beings humanely, but partially blinded as to just what that entails.

As Küng clearly understands, categorical imperatives can take us only so far. What is required is conversion--a theme present in this book but which could be further explored. Conversion is often quite particular and requires us to confront our own, not just somebody else's, morally jaundiced view.

Successful pursuit of the global ethic project requires us to be humble about our own "little conversions," as Karl Barth once put it, and thus to be willing to find the best in those with whom we disagree. Las Casas's concerns about indigenous peoples were no less justified because he had a blind spot regarding a proper strategy for their relief. We may commend the one even as we fault the other.

In this regard it is disappointing that Küng's treatment of his own Roman Catholic tradition is one-sided. The present papacy represents for him a destructive and rigid "moralism" at odds with the spirit of an ethic consisting of norms which, as "Towards a Global Ethic" puts it, are "helps and supports" to people, rather than "bonds and chains." In Küng's view, John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* renders him a dualist who separates the life-loving sheep who uphold Vatican teachings on abortion, contraception and euthanasia from the death-dealing goats who do not. Also anathema to Küng are the Vatican's alliances with fundamentalist Islamic nations at the conference on population in Cairo and the conference on food in Rome.

There may be fitting rebuttals to Küng's charges, but even if there are not it is regrettable that, when it comes to economics, he barely mentions John Paul II and the tradition of Catholic social thought. If Küng is looking for a middle ground and wants to demonstrate the viability of a religiously grounded vision, then surely Catholic social teaching deserves more weight. Shortcomings notwithstanding, it has been seeking a prophetic, creative and responsible middle way between collectivism and laissez-faire capitalism for more than a century.

Finally, I would suggest that though one can't do everything in a single book, at a certain point the global ethic project must engage more fully and critically the various symbols and tenets of the great faiths. Critical analysis of background beliefs and practices--in other words, theology--might help clarify how and why particular moral boundaries are drawn as they are, and whether and how they should be redrawn.

Furthermore, as Küng points out, religion cannot be reduced to ethics. One cannot really talk about religious ethics, then, unless one is willing sometimes to forget about ethics and focus on other, "higher" things. A more robust theological focus will bring to light religion's profound contribution to a world in need: not merely consensus on moral imperatives, as crucial as this is, but hope in the face of moral impotence and profound evil, confidence in otherworldly aid in this life, the courage to change, and even holy fear. Without leaving politics, economics and interreligious dialogue behind, Küng can advance the global ethic project by returning to those themes upon which, in a dissertation on Karl Barth, he sharpened his theological wits: the fact of sin, the call to repentance and the mystery of grace. These, too, are urgent global issues.