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The Integral Humanism and Global Ethic of Jacques Maritain and Hans Küng

By Douglas Roche

The recent death of Hans Küng has caused me to reflect on how Küng and Jacques Maritain — two polar opposites in the Catholic Church — were major influences in the development of my own thinking on the modern-day problem of human security. These two intellectual giants, Maritain the conformist and Küng the non-conformist, also showed the universality of the Church. Although they operated quite differently, each advanced our understanding of the universal need for an ethic of equity.

At first, it seems a bit jolting to put Jacques Maritain and Hans Küng in the same sentence. Maritain, born in 1882 in Paris, was a profound disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas and was lauded by the Church when he died in 1973. Küng, born in 1928 in Sursee, Switzerland, challenged Vatican doctrine on many fronts in his quest to reform the Church, and was censured as a Catholic theologian. One was diplomatic to the extreme in his writings, the other dissident and brusque. One wrote for scholars, the other for the general public.

Yet their thinking, each in its own way, made an enormous contribution to understanding and advancing human rights. The oneness of humanity was at the centre of their thinking. From different starting points, they converged on the essential integrity of each person, which must be affirmed by morality and protected by law. That is a very powerful lesson to be learned in the age of weapons of mass destruction.

Maritain was born into a French Protestant family and it was only at age 24 that he and his wife Raïssa, along with her sister Velma, were baptized in the Catholic Church. Shortly after, Jacques began an intensive study of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century Dominican whose influence on the Church as a philosopher and theologian became so towering through the ages that he is still regarded today as a model teacher for those studying for the priesthood. Aquinas taught that God is the source of both the light of natural reason and the light of faith.

Maritain wrote books on religion and culture, gaining widespread respect and, in 1928, was appointed to the Chair of Logic and Cosmology at the Institut Catholique de Paris. He began to develop the principles of a liberal Christian humanism and defence of natural rights and, during the 1930s, became an established figure in Catholic thought. He lectured at the Institute of Mediaeval Studies and to St Michael's College in Toronto and at Columbia and Princeton.

He held that there is a single natural law governing all beings with a human nature. This natural law is 'natural' because it not only reflects human nature, but is known naturally. However, that knowledge of the natural law varies throughout humanity and according to individuals' capacities and abilities. He sought growth in an individual's or a collectivity's moral awareness. This thinking led him to advocate "integral humanism" as a basis of Christian outreach. He argued that secular forms of humanism were inevitably anti-human in that they refused to recognize the whole person. In *Integral Humanism* he explores the prospects for a new Christendom, rooted in philosophical pluralism, in order to find ways Christianity could inform political discourse and policy in a pluralistic age.

In short, as *The New York Times* wrote when Maritain died at 90, "the state of men's societal and economic needs was as much his church's concern as the state

of their souls.” Maritain himself had written in *The Range of Reason*, “The best means for winning victories of the spirit is not to barricade one's self behind the walls of a fortress but to go out into the highways to conquer through love and the gift of self.” He developed a theory of cooperation to show how people of different intellectual positions can nevertheless cooperate to achieve common practical aims. Maritain's political thinking was extremely influential: it was a primary source behind the formation of the Christian Democratic movement and it formed the basis of the outreach of the Second Vatican Council.

Following the liberation of France in the summer of 1944, Maritain was named French ambassador to the Holy See, serving until 1948 when he became head of the French delegation to UNESCO. There, as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy recounts, he was importantly involved in the promotion and, indirectly, in the drafting of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed in 1948. Through his understanding of one humanity under God, he was able to see that even people coming from antagonistic cultures in the four corners of the earth could agree on the affirmation of the same set of convictions concerning a common humanity. Maritain, the expert on the common law of civilizations, saw the Universal Declaration as “the preface to a moral charter of the civilized world,” and as a document containing “rights ... which any society which has attained a condition of political justice is required to recognize,” and that could serve as “an unwritten common law.”

Following Raïssa's death in November 1960, Jacques moved to Toulouse, where he decided to live with a religious order, the Little Brothers of Jesus. So great was the esteem accorded Maritain that Pope St. Paul VI referred to him as “my teacher” and “a saint,” and chose him to represent the intellectuals of the world at the closing ceremonies of Vatican II in 1965. Reputedly, Pope Paul wanted to make Maritain a cardinal.

During this time he wrote a number of books, the best-known of which was *The Peasant of the Garonne*, a work sharply critical of post-Vatican Council reforms, published in 1966. The book astonished the Catholic world, for here was the scholastic architect, whose own ideas were part of the inspiration for the Council, now pushing back against what he considered the restiveness over church dogmas brought about by Vatican II. He scornfully attacked the Council's "genuflection to the world."

Was this book merely the humourings of an old man, disenchanted with the turmoil that offended his scholastic mind? Or was the book a reflection, and perhaps a warning, that the implementation of integral humanism, his driving thought, could not be done in the confines of his well-ordered study?

When Pope John XXIII announced, in 1959, his plans for the Second Vatican Council, Hans Küng was ready. As a Swiss seminarian, the eldest of seven children in his family, Hans had studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome before his ordination in 1954. More studies, including a doctorate in theology at the Institut Catholique, followed, and in 1960, he was appointed professor of fundamental theology at the University of Tübingen in Germany. He immediately launched his writing career with *The Council, Reform and Reunion*, an international best-seller, in which he outlined much of what became the program of the upcoming council. Küng wrote vividly about his hopes:

"The reunion of separated Christians, as conceived by John XXIII, is bound up with a renewal within the Catholic Church, to which the coming Council is to make an essential contribution."

Pope John appointed him a *peritus* to the Council, at 34 the youngest such expert. In 1963, he lectured across the U.S. on "The Church and Freedom" to enthusiastic audiences. In a sign of things to come, the Catholic University of America would not allow him speak there. The next year, Küng published in English his

doctoral thesis, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth*, concluding that the divisions between Barthian and Catholic theologians on justification, the act by which God moves a willing person from the state of sin (injustice) to the state of grace (justice) were not fundamental and did not warrant a division in the Church.

Another popular book, *The Church*, followed, in which he said that the early Christian communities in Corinth and elsewhere had had lay members preside over eucharistic services in the absence of a priest. He questioned papal infallibility, criticized mandatory celibacy and promoted women as deacons. He took issue with the Church's ban on artificial contraception. The Holy Office (as it was known at the time) opened a file on him, summoning him to Rome to answer unspecified charges against him. Küng demanded a written list of the questions regarding his book as well as the names of those vetting the work.

The Vatican responded by revoking his *missio canonica*, or license to teach as a Catholic theologian at the University of Tübingen. Sixty American and Canadian theologians protested the Vatican action, stating, "We publicly affirm our recognition that he is indeed a Roman Catholic theologian." The university then moved Küng to its Institute for Ecumenical Research, which he had founded and directed since the early 1960s, and which was outside Rome's jurisdiction. Küng continued to teach as a tenured professor of ecumenical theology until his retirement in 1996.

Although grievously wounded by the Vatican hounding, he remained a priest in good standing all his life and, when Pope Benedict XVI (the former Josef Ratzinger, who was a colleague of Küng's at Tübingen and separated from him over the Catholic teaching issue) was elected Pope in 2005, the two men held a four-hour meeting that stretched into dinner. The reunion turned into a reconciliation. Patricia Lefevere, a veteran reporter who covered Küng for 40 years, wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter*: "The two did not take up any doctrinal questions. Nor did Küng ask that his teaching license be restored. Instead, they found accord on matters relating to science and religion, faith and reason, and social issues con-

cerned with ethics and peace-building....Benedict praised Küng for his efforts to build a global code of ethics that enshrined the values that were held in common among religions and recognized by secular leaders, too.” When Kung’s funeral was held, Pope Francis sent greetings and brotherly blessings "in Christian communion.”

Although Küng gained fame as a dissident, his work in formulating a global ethic was a towering achievement that never received the public attention paid his criticisms of church practices. A dedicated ecumenist, he published volumes on Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Chinese religions. He came to realize that despite dogmatic differences between religions, their common expression of ethics could be the foundation for a global ethic. He embodied this in a document, “Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic,” proclaimed at the 1993 [Parliament of the World's Religions](#) by religious and spiritual leaders from around the world. Küng said there will be no world peace without peace between the religions, and no peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions: “Our different religions and cultural traditions must not prevent our common involvement in opposing all forms of inhumanity and working for greater humanness.”

Unity did not mean uniformity for Küng. The reconciliation that he stood for takes courage, a quality never lacking in his controversial life.

Though different in so many ways, Jacques Maritain and Hans Küng both showed the route to peace in the world. Maritain’s “integral humanism” and Küng’s “global ethic” speak directly to the need to uphold, in freedom, the human dignity of every person. People are not cogs in machinery, whether the “machinery” is secular or religious in nature. They have an irrevocable right to live in peace. The “right to peace” has already been proclaimed at the United Nations, but needs much more development to be fully understood. Maritain and Küng have laid the basis for a new understanding of humanity.

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