

# RESPONSE TO STEVEN KEPNES

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It is so much easier to respond to a paper that one finds problematic. But when one largely agrees with the argument and drift of a paper, a response is difficult. It is tempting to simply assert 'I concur' and leave it at that.

However, given the conventions of these occasions do not permit such a response, I shall instead offer a supplement to Kepnes' argument. The primary problem in interfaith relations is the providing of reasons for 'orthodox' adherents of our faith communities to view each other constructively. And the strategies of liberal modernity are doomed to failure. Instead Kepnes' strategy shows how our sacred texts model a possible way of both affirming our particularities and our obligation to respect the other.

To start this exercise, I propose to offer a summary of Kepnes' argument that works from his conclusion.

1. The temptation of modernity is to think in terms of 'universals'. Yet the dynamic of religious faith needs to celebrate the particular. Therefore appeals to 'respect human rights' or 'recognize all religions are partial including our own' have a very limited appeal.
2. The approach of Scriptural reasoning is that both the universal and the particular are celebrated and affirmed.
3. Embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures are important symbols of Islam.
4. Scripture is deliberately ambiguous in the treatment of these characters reflecting both the status of the other within a certain tradition and at the same time the obligation to co-exist in some meaningful way with the other.
5. A Scriptural approach is preferable to a modernist approach.

I want to suggest this argument is sound. And I shall supplement the argument in two ways. First, I shall look at the ways in which alternative approaches to religious difference are misguided; and second, I shall extract

from Kepnes' approach the criteria for a legitimate internal exposition of the other.

So on the first, please allow me to start with a prediction. In one hundred years time, the approach to religious difference that characterizes much of the interfaith industry will be rightly criticized for being deeply misguided. Kepnes' gentle argument that modernity takes a distinctive approach that loses sight of many of the particularities is exactly right. For example, Hans Kung has spent much of the last twenty years working on a Global Ethic. A text was adopted at the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993 (Chicago), which has continued to be disseminated and discussed. It starts with the environmental and justice issues and calls for a mixture of individual responsibility, mutual respect, non-violence, recognition of our mutual interdependence, and a striving for a just social and economic order.

Kung hopes that this document will have the same impact on world history as the American Declaration of Independence. This is very optimistic. And it overlooks the relationship of the Declaration of Independence to the American War for Independence. The document succeeded partly because it was enforced. The Declaration was a rhetoric, which was firmly grounded.

Now the problem with the Global Ethic is that it persuades those who are already persuaded. For all those already living in a tradition, which is heavily shaped by liberal modernity, it is easy to identify with such rhetoric. But for all those inhabiting a particular tradition, with its internal explanations for those who are different, the rhetoric disappears behind a set of prior questions. For the orthodox in many faith traditions, the problems are truth, soteriology, fidelity, and the relationship of ethics to belief. In other words, although the Orthodox might be sympathetic to the global ethic (and many do support non-violence, justice, and respect), the platitudes overlook so much more that matters.

For this reason, Kung's Global Ethics is unhelpful. It represents the sloganizing of modernity at its most naïve. In much the same way that my eight year old son can't understand why people don't just play a chess game to resolve arguments instead of resorting to war; so Kung suspects that

articulating these principles will make the particularities of each tradition disappear.

Kepnes' response is much more thoughtful. He is tapping into arguments that historically have already persuaded orthodox adherents to behave in a constructive way towards the other. When Aquinas used the work of Maimonides, he did so because the Jew has received so much from God that it is reasonable to assume that a near contemporary Jew had further insights from God. Granted Aquinas still made highly unhelpful (to say the least) observations about both Jews and Muslims, but it didn't stop him believing that God had disclosed truth to the Jew and Muslim from whom he could learn.

Kepnes is also suggesting arguments that can work today. Kepnes wants to work with the people of faith who take their Scriptures seriously. Therefore Kepnes wants to work with the vast majority of believers. (The liberals in each tradition are in a pathetic minority.) He wants to take the orthodox and deeply committed and help them to see that their Scriptures justify highly nuanced attitudes to the other. It will not be as neat as Kung, but we can be sure it will be more effective.

This leads to my second area of discussion: can we identify the criteria that makes Kepnes strategy work? What exactly is legitimate? At what point does it become illegitimate?

Allow me to suggest four criteria. The first is that the strategy must draw on authentic resources of revelation. For the orthodox, the primary goal of faith is to discover what God requires. For the Jew, this must involve taking the Torah (and by extension the Prophets and the Writings) seriously. For the Muslim, it is the Qur'an and the Hadith. For the Christian, it is the insights disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the text which witnesses to Jesus, namely the Bible. Any strategy that doesn't take the source of revelation seriously is deeply flawed. Correspondingly, any strategy that does take the text seriously is to be commended. The second strategy must involve an interpretation of the text that does not do violence to the text. The linking of Ishmael and Hagar to Islam is centuries old. (See for example the Qur'an Sura 37) The third strategy should celebrate

ambiguity. The mistake Kung makes is that he wants everyone just to 'like' each other. The truth is that engagement across the religious divide will inevitably involve both affirmation and criticism. For those of us committed to bringing peace amongst the religions (to quote the Kung slogan), we recognize it will be a peace that will assume that the other is fundamentally wrong in all sorts of ways. As someone on the left of the political scene, I am committed to peaceful relations with my Republican friends (and on some issues can form a common alliance and learn from them) but I still feel that their underlying commitments are mistaken. So by analogy, the best we can hope for and perhaps all we should strive for is constructive relations which still recognize deep areas of disagreement. The fourth strategy is that an analysis should be 'tradition-constituted'. Kung wants to solve the problem of religious diversity from a transcendent vantage point. (In truth of course he is really imposing his vantage point of liberal modernity— to allude to MacIntyre's argument in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* ) The illusion and conceit of this project should be repudiated. (It is an illusion to imagine that one can find a transcendent discourse in which problems and difference can be solved; it is a conceit because really it is imposition of the values of the *New York Times* reader on everyone.)

Kepnes achievement is to sketch out a strategy for understanding the other, which meets these four criteria. This is the reason why I enjoyed the paper and admired the achievement so much.