WORLD RELIGIONS AND THE FINALITY OF CHRIST:  
A CRITIQUE OF HANS KÜNG’S ON BEING A CHRISTIAN  

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ABSTRACT  
Küng’s case for the relevance of Christianity and his program for dialogue with other religions include claims for the exclusive uniqueness and normativity of Christ. This article raises the following questions: (1) Are such claims necessary for personal commitment to Christ and for fidelity to the New Testament witness? (2) Do they allow for genuine dialogue with other religions? (3) Are they even possible in the light of prevalent norms for theological and historical-critical methodology?  

A Fundamental Question  
Any consideration of Hans Küng’s attitude towards world religions must begin with the “direct question” with which he opens his book: “Why be a Christian?” Naturally, the whole book is his response. But already on the first page of the main text a central ingredient in that response is clearly stated. Küng feels that to make an intelligent choice to be a Christian, a person must be able to affirm, reasonably argue, and claim before the world that “compared with the world religions and humanisms . . . Christianity [is] something essentially different, really something special” (p. 25). As Daniel Donovan states: “The whole book is structured around the concepts of ‘difference’ and ‘uniqueness.’ ” And as becomes clear in the section on Christology, the rock-foundation for this difference and uniqueness is the Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth is “ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal for man’s relations with God, with his fellow man, with society” (p. 123).  

1 On Being a Christian, tr. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 25. All further page references will be found in the text.  
3 The German word is “massgebend,” better translated as “normative.”  

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These quotations, as well as the entire book, make clear just how Küng understands the concepts of "unique" and "different": not simply in the sense that every individual and every religion is different and therefore unique; rather, "unique" means: surpassing all others, one and only, superior, absolutely and universally normative for others, definitive. He clearly argues that Jesus is ultimately archetypal, and so is not just one of the many "archetypal men" that Karl Jaspers has identified throughout history (p. 124). Therefore, to make an intelligent responsible choice for Christianity, according to Küng, means to claim such uniqueness for Christ and for Christianity.

As a theologian and as a Christian, I feel the need to question such a viewpoint. This raises an issue which, in our age of pluralism, confronts Christian theology as never before: the validity of claiming uniqueness for Christ over other religious figures and for Christianity over other religions. That this issue is painfully pricking Christian sensitivity is evident from theological discussions and literature over the past years.

The following reflections on Küng’s understanding of the finality of Jesus and world religion are presented in the form of three theses; or

Küng’s understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus can also be stated in terms of the familiar distinction between "inclusive" and "exclusive" Christologies. (For a succinct statement of this distinction, cf., David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 206-207. To claim that Küng’s view of Jesus’ uniqueness grounds an inclusive Christology is correct but inadequate. True, such a view allows for and includes the positive, even salvific content of other revelations. However, it clearly excludes the possibility of there being other revelations equal to that of Christ and insists that all other religions and religious figures need to be judged and completed by Christ. It is this a priori exclusivist content of Küng’s Christology which I am questioning. Or, as Monika Hellwig put it: “Given... [our] contemporary experience, it would seem that theologians must now ask themselves: can there be a non-exclusivist Christology, i.e., one which does not make unmatchable, unsurpassable claims for Jesus?” “Seminar on Christology: Exclusivist Claims and the Conflict of Faiths,” in Luke Salm (ed.), CTSA Proceedings 1976, p. 130. Cf., also D. T. Niles, “The Christian Claim for the Finality of Christ,” in Dow Kirkpatrick (ed.), The Finality of Christ (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), pp. 13-31.

This does not imply that such traditional claims for uniqueness apply in the same way to Christianity as to Christ. As the neo-orthodox theologians and Paul Tillich remind us, a clear distinction must be maintained between Christ and Christianity. Yet despite Tillich’s insistence to the contrary, any claim for the exclusive uniqueness and normativity of Christ leads, willy-nilly, to similar claims for the religion that has originated from him. Cf. Paul Tillich, Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 79-97.

better, I should call them hypotheses. They are tentative and need further scholarly examination. Given the limitations of a short article, I can state them only schematically, frequently merely referring to data which I feel substantiates them.

Therefore I propose that the claim that Christ and Christianity are unique in the sense understood by Küng is: (1) not necessary for Christian identity and living, (2) not conducive to genuine dialogue with other religions, and (3) not possible according to the norms of theological and historical-critical method.

I. Claims of Uniqueness Not Necessary for Christian Identity and Living

A. Such Claims are not Necessary for Commitment to Christ

This statement contradicts common Christian attitudes and convictions. On the popular as well as the academic level, it is taken for granted that to be fully committed to Christ, he must be the one and only, or at least the definitive and therefore the best Savior and Revealer. Yet today we are forced to ask: is this really so? Intellectually and psychologically, is it not possible to give oneself over wholly to the meaning and message of Jesus and at the same time recognize the possibility that other "saviors" have carried out the same function for other people? Is it not consistent, as John Macquarrie claims, to be fully committed to Christ and at the same time fully open to the salvific significance of other religions? This does not imply simplistically to water down the content of the Christ event and proclaim that all religious leaders are "talking about the same thing." Differences, and therefore uniqueness, are maintained. And thus the universal significance of Jesus is preserved; the difference he makes is felt by Christians to be vitally important for all religions. Yet while holding to this, the Christian can also, I feel, be open to recognize the "vitally important difference" of, for instance, Buddha.

B. Such Claims are not Necessary for Fidelity to Christian Tradition

Fine, some may respond, but what do we do with the fact that such claims for the uniqueness of Christ have been made by Christian tradition, especially in its originating testimony, the New Testament? And Christianity understands itself as a religion grounded in history, therefore bound by fidelity to its past.

A reply to this plunges us into the complexities of the hermeneutical question. Recognizing this, I suggest that especially in the light of recent hermeneutical studies, it can be argued that the claim for Jesus' exclusive uniqueness does not form part of the central assertions of Christian

texts, i.e., of what David Tracy, with Paul Ricoeur, calls the "referent" of the text, its suggested "mode-of-being-in-the-world." More precisely, while these texts of the New Testament do claim that it is in Jesus of Nazareth that this new mode-of-being-in-the-world is revealed (and this is part of their central assertion), the further claim that this takes place only in him can be said to result from the historically conditioned world view and thought-patterns of the time. Therefore these latter claims do not belong to the core of the Christian message.

To substantiate this assertion properly would move us beyond the limits of these reflections. I can only summarize some arguments which, at the moment, appear to me to demand serious consideration.

(a) Given the prevailing Jewish eschatological-apocalyptic mentality, it was natural that the early Christians should interpret their experience of God in Jesus as final and unsurpassable. Their particular philosophy of history was such that they expected a new and definitive stage; also, it was a stage that was to break forth on the world only from Jerusalem. So when they encountered the overpowering presence of Jahweh in Jesus, the spontaneous conclusion was that this stage had arrived. Furthermore, since at least in the early New Testament writings, the end of history was thought to be immanent, possibilities of other revelations or prophets were simply beyond one's consideration. Is not such an apocalyptic mentality, understood in the literal sense, culturally limited? Must it be taken as part of the essence of the Christ-event? If Jesus had been experienced and interpreted in another philosophy of history, e.g., that of India, would he have been said to be final and unique?9

(b) As many scholars (as we shall see, Küng is among them) contend, the idea of incarnation was one of the many mythical patterns with which the first Christians tried to articulate the meaning Jesus had for them.10 Again, we can point out that absolutist claims were a part of this mythical thinking. Jesus, as the incarnation of preexisting divine Wisdom or Logos, was thought to be absolutely unique among all humans. But we can and must ask: if we take this myth not literally but seriously, are such absolutist claims intrinsic to its meaning? Maurice Wiles poses

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8 Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, pp. 72-79, 131-136.
the provocative question: just as we have gone through the painful but meaningful process of remythologizing the "special," one-time, one-man character of the First Adam in the Creation-and-Fall myth, should we not do the same for the Second Adam in the Incarnation myth?"

(c) Gregory Baum offers another consideration to explain the historically conditioned character of the early church's absolutist language. "I propose that the exclusivist claims of the New Testament, and the proclamation of the early church that apart from its message there is no salvation, were survival language." By this he means that given the historical context in which the communities had to "close ranks" in the face of so much opposition, it was natural for them to speak of Jesus and his "way" as unique. But given an age in which survival is much more secure and relations with other religions are not those of opposition and syncretism but cooperation and dialogue, cannot the meaning of Jesus be articulated without such exclusivist survival language?

(d) A much more general line of argument is based on Bernard Lonergan's distinction between classicist and modern-historical cultures. Pointing out that culture provides the "beliefs" or general outlook (P. Berger would use the term "plausibility structures") with which people interpret their world, Lonergan describes the radical differences between the beliefs of classicist and modern cultures. The classicist outlook, which for the most part characterized the world of the New Testament and Western civilization until the Enlightenment, took for granted that truth could be only one, unchanging, and therefore normative for all. Our modern-historical consciousness, on the other hand, has become aware that all statements of truth are in process, subject to many expressions, and therefore never normative in a once-and-for-all sense. The New Testament writers, therefore, as men of their age, naturally spoke of Jesus in a once-and-for-all, exclusivistic manner. But do these one-and-only claims pertain to the core-content of their message? Can we not speak of the vitally important meaning of Jesus according to the mentality of our historical consciousness?

In light of these sketchy considerations on New Testament interpretation, I feel that we can. The heart of the New Testament witness is that in Jesus men and women encountered the fullness of God and thus experienced "a complete and true manifestation of the fundamental..."

11 "Does Christology Rest on a Mistake?" Christ, Faith, and History, ed. Sykes and Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 3-34. This question will be taken up more fully below.

12 "Is There a Missionary Message?" Mission Trends No. 1, eds. Anderson and Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1974), p. 84. (Emphasis mine.)

meaning of authentic human existence.¹⁴ This message can be maintained without insistence that he is the only such manifestation.

II. Claims of Uniqueness not Conducive to Dialogue with Religions

This “hypothesis” holds that even though one may be animated by a sincere desire to dialogue with people of other faiths, if one meets them with the kind of claims for the uniqueness of Christ which Küng feels he must make, that dialogue will be essentially hamstrung. This is not to say that one should not bring to dialogue clear positions and prej­udgments; not only are such pre­judgments unavoidable, they are necessary for effective exchange. But if Küng's insistence on the finality of Christ is one of these clear positions, the dialogue will go nowhere. His chapter on the World Religions is, I feel, an illustration of this.

A. Dialogue Hindered by Preliminary Assumptions

Elaborating on key ideas in a paper he prepared for a conference sponsored by the 38th International Eucharistic Congress in Bombay, 1964,¹⁵ Küng urgently calls for a more positive Christian attitude towards other religions. Such an attitude is indispensable in an age when “For the first time in world history, it is impossible today for any one religion to exist in splendid isolation and ignore the others” (p. 89). And Küng vigorously argues for the removal of what he feels are doctrinal obstacles to dialogue: the teaching on “No Salvation Outside the Church,” reinterpreted as the theory of “anonymous Christianity.” He calls this theory a “theological fabrication” (John Hick terms it an “epicycle”¹⁶) which both waters down the concept of the church and proves to be an insult to members of other religions (pp. 97-98). Further, he chides theologians for reaching theological conclusions “without a closer knowledge and analysis of the real world of religions” (p. 99). And Küng shows that he has tried to do his own analysis in a concrete, if abbreviated, description of what he calls the “wealth” of individual world religions (pp. 91-96).

Yet even before this analysis, it seems that Küng has set up his own theological a prioris which cannot be contested; all of them stem from the basic a priori that Christ is the final norm for all religions. He takes for granted that the other religions are ways of salvation “only in a relative sense, not simply as a whole and in every sense” (p. 104). (Must not the very same thing be said of Christianity?) He holds that Christianity must claim “absolute validity” and still be “ready to revise its own

¹⁴Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, p. 223.
¹⁶God and the Universe of Faiths, pp. 122-130.
standpoint” (p. 114). (Doesn’t absolute validity place radical limits on any revision?) Also, as an attempt to steer a middle path between the exclusivism of Barth and the syncretism of Toynbee, he maintains that Christianity see itself as a “critical catalyst and crystallization point” for other religions (p. 112). This seems to boil down to the “Fulfillment Approach” of mainline Protestant theology represented by Hendrik Kraemer, Emil Brunner, Paul Althaus. This approach would state: “While other religions have something of value, they can truly know it only by becoming Christian.” And so, after Küng reviews the positive elements in other religions, he adds that all this can “. . . be brought to its full realization in Christianity” (p. 113). “. . . that God may not remain for them (non-Christians) the unknown God, there is needed the Christian proclamation and mission announcing Jesus . . .” (p. 447).

Now all this may be true. Christianity may be true. Christianity may be the fulfillment crystallization point for all religions. But this can be known and asserted by non-Christians and Christians only after genuine dialogue. Therefore Jürgen Moltmann is correct, I feel, when he takes to task such views as Küng’s notion of “critical catalyst”: they “. . . are still not based on dialogue since they proceed from the Christian monologue, not from the dialogue itself. They all formulate the Christian position before the entry into dialogue. They do not formulate it in the context of dialogue.” As John Macquarrie reasons, this is to destroy dialogue: “A creative dialogue is possible only if there is complete openness, and no preliminary assumption that one revelation . . . must be the yardstick for all others.”

B. A Blurred View of Other Religions

Because of his “preliminary assumption” Küng’s analysis of the religions is in many respects blurred. To a Buddhist or Hindu, or to someone who has tried to “pass over” to their religious experiences (like Thomas Merton, Raymond Panikkar, John Dunne), Küng’s treatment of their teachings frequently seems to be insensitive and/or incorrect, and his evaluations somewhat too facile. One indication that he should have done more thorough study before formulating his evaluations is his glaring mistake, repeated four times, of confusing the dualistic Samkhya school of philosophy (traced back to the seventh century B.C.) with the nondualistic Advaita school of Shankara (eighth century A.D.) (cf., pp. 17


19“Christianity and Other Faiths” (cf. footnote 9), pp. 43-44.
93, 108, 115, 301). Other examples: to brand the Hindu experience of 
maya as a declaration of the world’s unreality (p. 108) misses the intent 
of this doctrine to point out the deeper, hidden meaning of the finite; and 
to conclude that 
maya leads to “cosmic pessimism” or “supreme indif­ference toward the social needs of men” among Buddhists is to leave out 
of consideration Mahayana’s affirmation of the world of samsara as well 
as Buddha’s doctrine of karuna, universal compassion. To accuse the 
Eastern “cyclical world picture” of predeterminism (p. 107) forgets the 
Hindu invitation to all to use free will in order to do something about 
their karma; such a world picture is no more predetermined than the 
Christian insistence that history is moving towards the parousia. Küng’s 
rather disparaging references to “the grimacing gods of Bali” and the 
Phallus (p. 102) do not even allow the possibility that these symbols 
might be as religiously effective as the often grimacing aspect of the 
crucifix.

More generally, one of the criteria (besides the normativity of Christ­
ianity) which Küng uses in his evaluation of the religions is 
“modernity”—the secularization resulting from modern science and 
technology (p. 106). True, Eastern religions do have to adapt to our 
“modern industrial society” (p. 110), just as Christianity, renegingly, 
had to. Yet, again, Küng’s acceptance of the achievements of modernity 
seems too facile; he might also have pointed out the limit-situations 
which our growth-oriented technological society have created—prob­
lems to which Eastern religions, with their emphasis on interiority and 
seeing-through-the-material (maya!), might speak more meaningfully 
than Christianity can.

Such instances of imprecision might have been avoided, I feel, if 
Küng were not so certain about his “preliminary assumption” that Christ 
and Christianity are normative for all other religions.

Similar imprecisions are evident when Küng turns from pointing out 
the deficiencies in the religions to concluding explicitly to Christianity’s 
superiority. His arguments do clarify areas in which other religions can 
and should criticize and “fulfill” themselves through dialogue with 
Christianity. Yet none of these arguments indicate finality or absolute 
normativity for Christian revelation, for in each of these areas it can also 
be shown how Christianity can and should learn from the religions. 
Mutual dialogue and mutual self-fulfillment are required.

For instance, it is true that Eastern religions are called upon by 
Christianity to elaborate more “scientific theologies” (p. 105). Yet on 
this same point, a Buddhist or Hindu would remind the Christian scien­
tist that his theological speculations must be based on personal experi­
ence of the Transcendent (what Bernard Lonergan in his Method of 
Theology calls “Foundations” or “religious conversion”). Also, one

must object to Küng's sweeping conclusion that the messages of the "great individual [religious] figures cannot be interchanged" insofar as Buddha called for "world annulment," Confucious for "world becoming," Muhammad for "world dominion," while Jesus announced "world crisis" (p. 213). Is Küng so sure these views are mutually exclusive? Did Jesus proclaim only world crisis? Are not all of them, in their real differences, complementary? Such questions demand further investigation. Finally, one of the central arguments used by Küng to establish the normativity of Christianity is its vision of a personal, loving God in contrast to the "impersonal divinity" of the East (cf., pp. 300-318). And here again, while these differences are real, they can be seen to be more complementary than exclusive or subordinated one to the other. Küng recognizes that there is abundant evidence in Eastern traditions that Deity has been experienced and spoken of as personal and loving, e.g., in Amida Budhism and especially in Bhakti Hinduism (not mentioned by Küng). Even more significantly, Küng admits the dangers of biblical anthropomorphism and concedes that Godhead is better conceived as "transpersonal or superpersonal" (p. 303). Is it not precisely here that Christian theology also can learn from the East? Hindu and Buddhist thinkers, while admitting the power of personal symbols applied to Brahman or Nirvana, have been much more conscious of the limitations of such symbolism. Might they be said to own a certain "superiority" over Christian thought in this regard?

In any case, the data Küng assembles for establishing the absolute normativity of Christianity does not appear to be convincing. This brings us to the final hypothesis.

III. Claims of Uniqueness Not Possible According to Norms of Theological and Historical-Critical Method

A. According to the Revisionist Method of Theology

At least in theory, Küng seems to agree for the most part with David Tracy's revisionist model for fundamental theology. This model invites the theologian to carry out a mutually clarifying and critical dialogue between the two sources of Christian theology: "the Christian fact" (scriptural texts and tradition) and "common human experience."21 Any cognitive claims made by the theologian must be based on both these sources. Küng states the same thing when he explains that his own theological method wants to avoid the extremes of "dialectical theology" (i.e., neo-orthodoxy, based solely on God's Word) and "natural theology" (unduly emphasizing experience and reason [p. 83]). More clearly, he insists that faith statements cannot be grounded exclusively

21Blessed Rage for Order, pp. 43-56.
on the authority of the Bible (p. 84) but must find "verification" from "the horizon of experience of man and society" (p. 65). "The rules of the game in theological science are not in principle different from those of the other sciences" (p. 87).

If this be true, then I do not see how it is possible, at the present moment, for Küng to claim that Christ holds a finality or normativity over other religions. In the present state of knowledge of and dialogue with world religions, the revisionist theologian simply does not have enough data from "human experience" to verify the claim that Christianity is based on a revelation which surpasses and can "catalyze" all others. Better to follow the more scientifically reputable path of David Tracy who claims that for Christians Jesus is clearly the revealer of a decisive truth about God and human existence and that this truth has universal significance; but he cautions against concluding to the finality of this truth for other religions:

For the fundamental theologian, to show that decisiveness—or, in the more classical terms, that "finality"—more historically would demand, I believe, a dialectical analysis of Christianity in relationship to the other world religions: a task which would demand a full-fledged use of history of religions in fundamental theology and would, in the final analysis, prove a theological task whose successful completion would require a complete Christian dogmatics... .22

Such a task has not yet been carried out either by Christian fundamental or dogmatic theologians. Whether it would yield a verification of Christ's finality is uncertain. In the light of the processive, ever incomplete character of reality and of the continued vitality of other religions, it would seem unlikely. And if this were so, the Christian theologian and/or believer would not, as indicated in our first hypothesis, need to feel threatened.

B. According to the Historical-Critical Method of scriptural Analysis

One of the hallmarks of Küng's Christology is its insistence on historical foundations; he labors admirably for a Christology "from below." He has little doubt that there is reliable historical data to construct the essence of Jesus' message and the impact it had on his followers. But he goes further. Throughout the book he makes claims that historically we can know the moral perfection of Jesus' life, how he actually lived, his sinlessness, his self-awareness. "We know incomparably more that is historically certain about Jesus of Nazareth than we do about the great founders of the Asian religions" (p. 147). He states that not only did Jesus reveal God's word and will but that in his "life, being and action" he was

22 Ibid., p. 234.
“God’s word and will in human form” (p. 443). And he finds the distinctive element in Christian ethics to be the “person” of Jesus as “the living, archetypal embodiment of his cause” (p. 545). It is also on the basis of such historical knowledge about the life of Jesus that he establishes his claim that Jesus was like no other man, that he is the norm for all others.

Here a vigorous word of caution must be spoken. Numerous scholars, in view of the nature of the New Testament documents, point out the difficulty if not impossibility of such historical assertions. Tracy admits to “... the insuperable difficulties present in any attempt to reconstruct Jesus’ own actualization of those possibilities (contained in his message) by either historical or modern philosophical methods.”

Dennis Nineham, in a challenging article in the recently published The Myth of God Incarnate, summarizes:

The chief concern of this paper is to ensure as far as possible that those who continue to make such a claim for the uniqueness of Jesus and speak, for example, of “the new humanity,” “the man wholly for others,” or “the man wholly for God,” are fully aware of the problems involved in making and justifying any such claims ... it is impossible to justify any such claim on purely historical ground, however wide the net for evidence is cast.

Perhaps Maurice Wiles is correct in observing that many theologians who are “acutely aware of the intellectual difficulties in the basic affirmations of theism” are “naively credulous in their handling of the historical traditions about Jesus.”

These considerations do not at all undermine the fact that the message of Jesus, as contained and interpreted in the New Testament, is existentially reliable and decisive for Christians; nor do they deny that Jesus serves as a salvific symbol for the realization of that message. They do, however, indicate the probable impossibility of appealing to the way Jesus lived and concluding to his normative excellence over all other religious figures.

C. According to Küng’s Understanding of Incarnation

While I find myself in basic agreement with Küng’s interpretation or “re-mythologization” of the doctrine of incarnation, I do not think he is aware of its implications for his views on the finality of Christ. Küng holds that the manner in which the incarnation has been understood and

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23 Ibid., p. 218.
then elevated as "the central dogma" of the faith detracts from the "center" of the Christian message (p. 436). This has led to a simplistic identification of Jesus with God and, contrary to Jesus' own preaching, has made him "an end in himself" (p. 391; pp. 286-287). Recognizing the importance of the titles given to Jesus for our own Christian experience, Küng warns against understanding these titles, especially those claiming divinity, too literally or metaphysically (pp. 184-292; 390-392). They were attempts, he holds, to articulate an experience. Küng, therefore, opts for a functional Christology from below which stresses what Jesus did and does for humankind, rather than on ontological Christology from above, which insists on what his nature was and is, especially his preexistent nature (pp. 436-450, 390, 291). In reality, then, talk of incarnation and such divine titles as "Son of God" attempt to express the experience that Jesus was the "representative" and "the real revelation of the one true God" (pp. 390-391, 444). Incarnation means: "God himself as man's friend was present, at work, speaking, acting, and definitively revealing himself in Jesus..." (p. 449). Küng lines up a more contemporary, re-mythologized list of titles: God's "advocate," "deputy," "delegate," "spokesman," "plenipotentiary" (pp. 449, 440).

There are, I would say, both theological and especially pastoral grounds for affirming such a functional interpretation of incarnation. Yet such an interpretation also places Christianity's traditional claims for Jesus' absolute uniqueness on shaky ground. If incarnation is no longer seen as a one-time descent of God to earth, if it is meant to express the people's experience of a man who was and/or became a true revealer and representative of God, then the question is unavoidable: have not others carried out essentially the same role? Can we not speak of other incarnations? At the most, the difference between Jesus and these others would be one of degree, not essence. But, such a difference of degree could not simply be claimed; it would have to be established through what Tracy called "dialectical analysis"—which is possible only on the basis of encounter and dialogue with other religions.²⁷ What has been

²⁶Cf. footnote 22.

In view of such understandings of the normativity of Christ, I think that Peter Schineller in his presentation of four "models" for contemporary articulations of the uniqueness of Christ (cf., footnote 6) should have added a fifth model. It would be inserted between models three and four and, following Schineller's terminology, could be called
said of Rahner's transcendental Christology can also be applied to Küng's functional Christology: "From this point of view the challenging question about the incarnation is not 'whether,' but 'why only once'?"²⁸

Perhaps suspecting this, Küng offers a number of arguments to verify his claim that the revelation of God in Jesus surpasses, definitively and normatively, all others. But again, we can ask: are these arguments as convincing as he thinks?²⁹

(a) He states that in Jesus' words and deeds, the human situation was "fundamentally changed." In Jesus were opened "completely new possibilities, the possibility of new life and new freedom, of a new meaning in life . . . the freedom of love" (p. 265). I think anyone versed in comparative religions would have to ask: were not such fundamental changes and new possibilities presented, for example, in the life and message of Buddha, especially in his promise of liberation from the chain of rebirth (a symbol perhaps similar to that of "sin" or "the law") and in his call to live karuna, universal compassion?

(b) Elsewhere Küng states that it is the cross which distinguishes Jesus from all others: "the ultimate distinctive feature of Christianity is quite literally according to Paul 'this Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ crucified.' It is not indeed as risen, exalted, living, divine, but as crucified, that this Jesus Christ is distinguished unmistakably from the many risen, exalted, living gods and deified founders of religion . . ." (p. 410). Küng's interpretation of the meaning of the cross (pp. 428-436) is one of the most powerful sections of his book, but again one must ask him whether the doctrine of the cross is essentially different from similar insights in other religions. The symbol of the cross calls upon us to embrace, when necessary, the mystery of suffering and to believe that it leads to fuller life. While Buddha did not die on a gibbet, did he not invite his followers to take the risk of living a life of total anatta—no-self and to believe that it will lead to a higher form of existence, one of peace and oneness? And the call of the Bhagavad Gita to act without seeking the fruits of one's actions, is it not a call to a selfless life of trusting love? The crucifix is indeed one of the most powerful symbols with which to confront the mystery of suffering and evil; but it is not the only one.³⁰

(c) It is presumptuous to take up the question of the resurrection and Küng's interpretation of it in one short paragraph. Yet despite his

²⁹We have already considered other arguments in hypothesis II: Jesus' view of God as personal and his proclamation of "world crisis."
downplaying of the resurrection in our last quotation (p. 410), he does consider it a distinguishing element of Christ's revelation. He makes a theologically defensible case for his interpretation of the Easter event (pp. 370-381). Refusing to appeal to any kind of "supernatural intervention," he views the resurrection not as an "objectified" or a "simple historical fact" but nevertheless as "real." Its reality does not necessarily depend upon belief in the empty tomb or even in certain appearances (p. 371) but upon a "vocation received in faith"—a vocation to "shape one's own life out of the effective power of the life of this Jesus as related in the Easter stories" (p. 380). In this sense, it is real; in this sense the Crucified is not dead but lives on. But given the validity of this interpretation (and I think it is valid), can we limit the reality behind the Easter stories only to an experience of Jesus? Is it not essentially what countless men and women have felt in their experience of other archetypal religious leaders? Again, Buddha is an example. Although his followers certainly did not speak of resurrection—that was not a heuristic category in their thought-world—did they not experience a "vocation received in faith" after his death? It was not only a matter of recalling his message but experiencing "the power" of that message. This case can be pressed all the more meaningfully in later development of Mahayana when Buddha was deified and given a "glorified body" in the Trikaya doctrine.

Such elements of the Christ event—cross, resurrection, personal God, call to love—are indeed distinguishing features of Christian revelation and are therefore vitally important for all peoples of all time. Yet they are not lacking in other religions, though terminology and symbolism differ. Thus the possibility of claiming absolute uniqueness for Jesus on such grounds appears highly questionable.

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The above criticisms of Küng's claim that Christ and Christianity are "essentially different" do not intend to take away from the overall merits of his book. It is, for both academic and popular audiences, one of the most valuable "Summas of the Christian Faith" (p. 20) to be published over the past decades. His case for the relevance of being a Christian in today's world is convincing. My criticism boils down to: it would be just as, if not more, convincing if he avoided such terms as: "only," "essentially different," "normative."