

Foreword

I am happy to welcome the book *Christianity in the Modern World* by Ambrose Mong as a contribution to a serious reflection on the experience of being a Christian in the modern world, in which the pluralism of religions is a living experience. The book is obviously written from a Christian perspective, as the title indicates. More particularly, Mong is inspired by a well-known German theologian, Hans Küng, though he is also familiar with all the important authors who have discussed these issues, particularly in Europe. At the same time, it is not a book of Christian theology, but more a social scientific reflection on the author's Christian identity and relationships, while living in a multi-religious society. This book will therefore interest members of other religions in a context of dialogue.

Thanks to migrations, the world today is multi-religious, though one or other religion may dominate in particular regions, like Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism in East Asia, Hinduism in India, Islam in the Middle East and Christianity in Asia, Europe and the Americas. Among the major religions, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have been missionary, propagating and establishing themselves in many places. Christianity, in particular, has spread across the world, due partly to European colonization. In earlier periods it propagated itself rather aggressively but in recent years, particularly in the post-colonial era, when communities are becoming multi-religious, it is more open to dialogue and living together with other religions. Such an experience throws up many problems and questions, and Mong discusses several of them. His approach is not strictly theological, but rather sociological, exploring questions that arise in such situations like monotheism and polytheism, tolerance, syncretism, secularism, pluralism, globalization, and others. The question is, how does one live in a religiously pluralistic situation? Mong offers us a teaching and a learning tool, with a clear

presentation of the themes, giving us questions for discussion at the end of each chapter. A vast amount of careful and critical reading, in the context of his own faith as a Christian, is obviously evident. He must have also worked with groups reflecting on his lectures.

Christianity claims to be strictly monotheist and condemns, for example, the Indian and other tribal and popular religions as polytheist. Yet the Christian God is Trinitarian. We do pray to the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. As a matter of fact the author says that the Trinity, in some way, reconciles the one and the many. There are also a vast army of Saints who easily acquire a divine status especially in popular religiosity. In South India, where I come from, Mother Mary and saints like Antony (of Padua) are honoured and prayed to more than God. The author suggests that monotheism tends to become totalitarian. A converse problem in popular religiosity, including Christianity, is syncretism, in which people mix symbols that have similar meanings from various sources. The orthodox believers have a negative view of syncretism, which is seen as an indiscriminate mixing of perspectives and meanings. Our author, however, equates it to what is normally called inculturation. I think that it can be seen more as inter-culturation. Syncretism may be seen as a mixture of cultures in which people live, especially at a moment of cultural interaction and transition, before a new composite culture emerges.

The chapter on 'Sociological Perspective' presents to us the views on religion of European scholars Marx, Engels, Durkheim and Weber. They represent different perspectives, relating sociology and philosophy, being perhaps more philosophical than sociological. In the next chapter, the author brings out the difference between secularization and secularism. While secularization is a philosophical process that empties religion of its transcendence, secularism is a socio-political process that seeks to separate religion from politics in public life. It is not negative towards religion, but rather respects the freedom of religions at their own level, provided they do not become political forces.

It is a fact that Asia has given birth to all the great world religions. Christianity and Islam were born in West Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China. Because of colonialism and migrations the whole world today has an experience of religious pluralism, though one or other religion may be dominant in a particular area. Besides these meta-cosmic religions there are a lot of tribal/popular religions. A society that claims political secularism may not achieve inter-religious harmony at the religious level, though there may be a certain tolerance. While invoking the usual paradigm

of ‘exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism’ in the study of religions, the author opts for pluralism. But, in practice, religious fundamentalism and communalism are not absent and can be sources of conflict. Fundamentalism is a religious attitude which claims that one’s own religion is the only true one. Communalism rather asserts that people who share a particular religion also share the same economic and political interests. It is communalism, rather than fundamentalism, that leads to active social and even political conflicts, but which are given a religious colour to encourage commitment to the struggle. The author indicates that, among the recent Popes, St. John Paul II was more inclusivist, while Pope Benedict XVI was rather exclusivist, as expressed in the document *Dominus Iesus* (the Lord Jesus).

Meanwhile, Pope Francis has shown himself a pluralist. In a document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* signed jointly by him and the Grand Imam Al-Azhar Ahamad al-Tayyib in Abu-Dhabi on 4 February 2019, they say:

Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept.

Pope Francis refers to and reaffirms this perspective in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Sisters and Brothers All: Nos. 271-284). At the end of this letter, the Pope quotes the appeal that he and the Grand Imam had made in *Human Fraternity*. I shall give here just a few quotes from that appeal.

In the name of God, who has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and who has called them to live together as brothers and sisters, to fill the earth and make known the values of goodness, love and peace

In the name of the poor, the destitute, the marginalized and those most in need, whom God has commanded us to help as a duty required of all persons ...

In the name of *human fraternity*, that embraces all human beings, unites them and renders them equal

In the name of God ... we declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.
(No. 285)

I am sure that our author would agree with this perspective. In his final chapter, he suggests the possibility of developing a global ethic, following the reflections of Hans Küng.

I appreciate and congratulate Ambrose Mong for his achievement in giving us a very useful and clear manual for a dialogue between Christianity and the modern world with its many religions. A second volume that explores the resources of other Asian religions like Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam and Hinduism for promoting harmony would be welcome, not ignoring the more popular religious traditions also present and active in Asia, so that the dialogue that he suggests could be carried on and prove more practical and fruitful for the peoples of Asia, reaching out to the grass roots. The present book's final sentence states that 'Christianity is here to stay' in Asia, while it may be losing steam in the West. So much the more reason that it should become more and truly Asian!

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