

# Hans Küng: architect of radical Catholicism

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Is it possible for a Roman Catholic theologian to believe in justification by faith alone, oppose papal infallibility, reject apostolic succession, and even question the deity of Jesus Christ? Yes, it is. Hans Küng, perhaps the best known living Catholic theologian, does exactly those things. How is it possible for Küng to do it?

One clue to achieving an understanding of Küng, the Swiss-born professor at the University of Tübingen, is recognizing his ability to make himself heard. His readability scores are so attractive that they provoke the ultimate curse among scientific theologians: 'He is a popularizer.' But Küng does have the ability to write so that he is understood by the theologians and the laymen—and he writes prolifically. Küng's working and writing are not yet finished, however, so any evaluation of his contribution is difficult and tentative.

Ignoring the example of the prudence of angels, I will rush in with three keys which I believe will unlock the essence of Küng's contribution to contemporary theology. These three keys are: a radical biblical dogmatic, a radical rejection of infallibility, and a radical ecumenism.

## Radical biblical theology

Karl Barth's work on Romans has often been likened to a bombshell and he would be pleased that his fellow-theologian, Küng, dropped a similar bomb upon the 'playground' of Catholic theologians. Küng's 'bomb' was, ironically, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*. The controversy created by this book centred on two things—Küng's remarks about Barth and Barth's remarks about Küng.

The two theologians have much in common. Küng shares Barth's dual concerns for 'the word of God' and 'christocentric concentration'. The two stress man's wretched sinfulness and understand that God must act first in justification. Both deny man any claim to a subordinate or effective contribution in salvation and see a very personalistic atonement. Both reject human 'merit' or works. Both see redeemed man as *simul justus et peccator*, a state achieved by *sola fide* and *solī deo gloria*. To

add to the amazement of the theological world, Küng's *Justification* carried the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*!

As if these conclusions of Küng did not produce enough surprises, the book contained, as a foreword, a letter from Karl Barth. In that letter, Barth stated: (1) 'Your readers may rest assured . . . that you have me say what I actually do say and that I mean it the way you have me say it', (2) that if Küng really expresses Catholic thought, then he, Barth, agrees with Catholic theology, and (3) that he, Barth, doubts that the Canons of the Council of Trent express, in fact, what Küng finds in them.<sup>1</sup>

The theological world was stunned. William Visser t'Hooft, longtime General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, said that if these ideas are widely accepted in the Catholic Church, 'protestantism will no longer have any important reason for its protest'.<sup>2</sup>

Like the observers at the day of Pentecost, modern man asked, 'What meaneth this?' Some theologians wondered if Küng's views were really tenable with Catholic dogmatic. Bernard Ramm observed that Küng 'has moved to protestant ground and doesn't know it'. Barth had mused about the necessity of another pilgrimage to Trent, but Ramm continues that 'the real traveller is Küng and the destination is Luther's study in the Augustinian house of Wittenberg'.<sup>3</sup> But Montgomery warned that 'before evangelicals become too enthusiastic over Küng's efforts', they must realize that neo-orthodoxy does not represent orthodox reformation theology.<sup>4</sup>

Barth and Küng see Scripture as central, yet they view it critically. And in spite of a common starting-point, the two have very different motivations. Küng's concern for the authority of the church (which must not be mistaken for the structures of hierarchy) and for renewal separate him from Barth. Hans Küng is best understood as

<sup>1</sup> Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (NY: Nelson, 1964) with Barth's 'A Letter to the Author,' pp. xixff.

<sup>2</sup> J. J. Carey, 'Infallibility Revisited', *Theology Today* XXVII (Jan. 1972), pp. 237-238.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Ramm, 'Justification: Barth and Küng', *Eternity* XVI (winter, 1971), p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals, and Rome* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 103-104.

built: this Christ'.<sup>24</sup> The third part, 'The Programme,' considers God, man, faith, and community. It is possible for Küng to elaborate upon each of these, although Scripture narratives like the nativity story of virgin birth are merely 'a collection of largely uncertain, mutually contradictory, strongly legendary and ultimately theological motivated narratives, with a character of their own'.<sup>25</sup> A final section of the book, 'Practice', finally arrives at the suggestion that because the supernaturalism of God can no longer be brought to modern man, the humanness of man must be brought to God. To be a Christian means to be radically human. The human is raised or transfigured into a better humanity.

Rejecting the infallibility of Chalcedon and the other creeds which define Christology 'from above',

<sup>24</sup> Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977) p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.

Küng prefers to formulate a 'theology' of Christ from below. Christ, so often mentioned in the past rather than the present tense, receives stress as the model for Christians to follow.<sup>26</sup> The possibility that Christ is in the present and that he has fellowship with his followers never is offered as a possibility. This perhaps is the greatest weakness of Küng's theological journey. The Christian pilgrim crossing the desert of modern values must have an oasis.

Regardless of how much one admires Küng's erudition and productivity or how one identifies with his struggle for honesty about Scripture, infallibility, and ecumenics, he leaves much unanswered. If so much of Christianity can be stripped away, what does Küng really offer as the church's *Untrüglichkeit*? Then, considering not the believer, but the unbeliever, will such a secularized gospel have any appeal to secular man strangling on his secularity?

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.