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Hans Küng : a Consideration

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IN THE WORLD OF theologians and of Christians who are theologically alert the name of Hans Küng is instantly recognised. An attempt to evaluate the work of Küng is limited by the fact that he is still a theologian of constant activity and vitality whose future writings may easily be as talked-about and as weighty as those which have appeared to date. This article can perform no more than a comment on what seems to be of prominent interest in Küng's writing so far and therefore is provisional.

Hans Küng was born in Switzerland in 1928 and studied for the regular priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church at the Gregorian University, Rome. Here he gained two licentiates; one in philosophy which dealt with the humanism of Sartre, and one in theology which dealt with the justification of the sinner in Karl Barth's thought.¹ Küng then pursued his studies at Institut Catholique in Paris where he received the degree of Doctor of Theology. After a short spell in parish work Küng returned to academic teaching, first at Münster, and then at Tübingen where he was professor of Fundamental Theology. He currently holds the chair of Dogmatics and Ecumenical Theology at the same university and is director of its Institute for Ecumenical Studies. When one considers that Küng is only in his mid-forties the sweep of his accomplishments begins to register.

A clue to the impact of this theologian is his ability to make himself heard. He is a gifted linguist and his published works are readable, if somewhat long-winded. What they lack in brevity they gain in lucidity, learning, conviction and freedom from theological 'shop'. Equally important is the timely nature of the theological output. From the outset Küng has displayed an uncanny awareness of the issues troubling the Roman Catholic Church and has been able to ventilate positions hitherto but half-articulated or cautiously debated in the world of learned journals. The plain speaking and the direct thinking through of the various topics with which he has chosen to deal has assured Küng

of wide readership and has made him one of the most discussed writers of the Roman communion. This publicity has made his voice one that cannot be ignored no matter how controverted his views may be.

The features outlined above are present in Küng's first major work which brought him immediate acclaim. This book was the published form of his doctorate which bore the title: '*Justification: the Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*'. As its title shows this was a continuation of a theme which had captured Küng's attention from his period of study in Rome. Of itself such a work would attract attention in dealing with a theme so crucial to the Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches alike. Further Karl Barth was the most respected thinker in the Protestant world and had already received careful study from Roman Catholics.² The interest in this book was intensified by two further facts:

- (a) The conclusion Küng drew from his researches
- (b) The conclusion Karl Barth drew from Küng's work.

Küng concluded that there was 'a fundamental agreement between Catholic and Protestant theology precisely in the theology of justification—the point at which Reformation theology took its departure'.³ Barth added to this unexpected conclusion by giving his imprimatur to the interpretation of his thought which Küng had advanced. The combination of these conclusions established Küng as an epoch-making theologian and initiated a lively debate as to the soundness of his conclusions.

From the standpoint of the Roman Catholic Church there was little serious criticism of the presentation of her teaching as expounded by Küng. Positive praise was evident for the manner in which the formulas of Trent were presented and explained. Küng's method here will receive comment below. On the other hand some scholars found it difficult to see how Barth's position could be in accord with Catholic teaching.⁴ The passage of time has not eliminated such misgivings among other theologians who made specialised study of Barth. Of particular concern was Barth's notion of faith as a creative act on man's part, through which God establishes him as justified. Despite the remarks of Barth concerning Küng, this criticism must be taken seriously as those who make it are themselves congenial to dialogue with Barth and have made substantial contributions to it.⁵ In particular it is noteworthy that one of these, Henri Bouillard, was himself something of a pioneer in pre-Vatican II thinking.⁶

Before turning to the more detailed aspect of this criticism two general conclusions may be drawn:

- (a) Küng's position as advocated within his work on justification is tenable within the Roman Catholic Church. It does not follow that it is the position generally accepted or predominates within it, nor should it on that account be over-rated.

(b) Küng's theology and its subsequent outworkings in other fields may owe more to Barth than he is aware.

It is this latter point that has been fastened upon by Colm O'Grady whose own earlier contribution to the debate between Barth and Roman Catholic theology lends authority to his analysis.⁷ O'Grady sees a consistent witness in Küng's work as a whole, stemming from his inheriting and assimilating a fault of Barth's theology. This fault is the latter's denial of any subordinate, though effective, contribution of man in obtaining his salvation. For Barth no human action of the justified man can contribute savingly towards man's position before God. By definition no human activity even when man is touched by the grace of God, can be equated *per se* as a fully divine activity as well. The issue emerges at every point in the debate between Barth and the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic theologian must ask: 'Are not the works of the justified man truly and faultlessly divine works too?' 'Does not the human reflection on the content of the Holy Scriptures elucidate the mind of Christ without error, being at certain points His thoughts as completely as they are man's?' 'Cannot the human agency, namely Mary, through whom God became incarnate, be a complete paradigm of our redemption, anticipating it in every respect?' Hence the Roman Catholic belief that the ending of sin's dominion and the glorification of the body are already Mary's as the exemplar and paradigm of God's redemption of the human race. The issues which such questionings uncover namely, merit, infallibility, and the place of Mary, all relate to the same issue. Can God's action upon man be totally effective here in this present age or must it be necessarily limited by human sinfulness? O'Grady traces Küng's difficulties with the doctrine of infallibility to this cause. Whether or not he has established his point may be questioned but there is little doubt that he has placed his finger on a vital issue. On the question of human works after justification Küng equates 'merit' with the biblical concept of reward but does not expand upon the subject at length.⁸ He does give serious attention to the formula 'simul justus et peccator' seeing in it a meaning which can genuinely be accepted by a Roman Catholic. This is the fact that the sinner can never be separated from his own past as a sinner; he carries his own history as a sinner despite his new character as the one whom God has justified and renewed. While this is true, it does not meet the understanding of the phrase 'simul justus et peccator' as Reformed churchmen have seen it. As they viewed the matter the phrase denotes the tension under which man, now justified, must live.

On the one hand man has entered a new relationship to God through Christ and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless as man he belongs to the old aeon in which sin is still active. This shows itself in that man must still experience death, though the quality of the experience has been transformed. Man also experiences the effects of a sinful nature and even his best works are those of a sinful creature awaiting

the final elimination of sin from his existence. All man does reflects both the old order of sin in which he still lives as the inhabitant of a fallen creation, and the new order in Christ to which he belongs as justified. This does not imply an unending dualism in Christian existence but it recognises the legacy of sinfulness which adheres to man. Thus the concept of works meriting reward in strict proportion to their goodness is excluded. Küng's account of 'simul justus et peccator' does not occupy this position. Thus it would seem that there is part of Küng's work which would lend weight to O'Grady's criticism (the treatment of merit) and part which does not neglect the traditional emphasis of Roman Catholic teaching.

Ecumenism

AS has been stated above Küng has written much and has managed to catch the ear of both the theologians and the wider Christian public. This has meant writing at more than one level and has led to a certain amount of overlap both in wording and in content in his works. The contributions are wide ranging but running through all is a common concern to make the empirical reality of the Church a credible expression of the theological reality. Küng is acutely aware of the gap between these two and of its importance. 'The finest theology is useless unless it is vindicated by the practical life of the Church'. Foremost among those things which make the Church non-credible is its disunion. Küng's concern with this prompted his widely hailed 'The Council and Reunion'. In this work he saw the second Vatican Council as a unique opportunity for the Roman Church to renew her life and commend herself to the non-Roman Churches. He believed that rapprochement in the divisive area of doctrine was possible. (His own achievement had shown how real the possibilities were.) He aptly pointed out that justification was not to-day 'a subject of debate on highways and byways'.⁹ This did not mean that there must be a playing down of the importance of doctrine or a disguising of disagreements, much less a shallow tolerance. What was needed was to listen to the other side 'to be carefully attentive, to be modestly enquiring, and finally to be understanding in interpretation'.¹⁰ What such understanding involved was to be expressed eloquently elsewhere.

'True understanding involves working out how people reach their conclusions, finding the punctum veritatis in their viewpoints and establishing points of contact with them; it involves discovering the valid concerns which underlie invalid statements, and measuring discrepancies, not against one's own theology, but against the original message of the Gospel.'¹¹

This empathy with thought different from one's own had already shown itself in the case of Barth and was to be extended to Hegel and Luther.¹² It forms the background to some of the most impressive exposition

found in the volume on the Church at those points where the topics of 'the Heretics', 'the Enthusiasts' and (supremely) 'the Jews' are treated.

Much of what Küng said about the approach to ecumenical understanding seems commonplace or even dated to-day, but his view of the Council did trigger off hope and expectancy among Christians within and beyond his own communion. While it would be oversimple to attribute the impulse towards interconfessional studies to Küng, his clear and decisive advocacy of this approach illustrates his ability to discern the times and their needs.

Methodology

KÜNG has consistently and increasingly made use of historical criticism to explicate the formulations of dogma to which his Church was and remains committed. The application of this method to the Bible had precipitated the 'Modernist' crisis within the Roman Catholic Church with the result that the subsequent application and development of historical criticism was carefully monitored.¹³ In the period following the Encyclical 'Divino Afflante Spiritu' issued in 1943, there had been a steady, if cautious, application of such criticism to biblical questions and an equally restrained use of it in terms of the doctrinal formulae of the church. Küng used the method to turn the edge of Barth's attack on certain pronouncements of the Council of Trent. Küng acknowledged the historically conditioned nature of doctrinal definitions and pressed the point with considerable skill. Such formulations, he insisted, were not and are not to be seen as 'rigid and frozen formulations'. They are intended as 'living signposts' for further research. Those who like Barth, view the decisions of Trent in this static way do them less than justice. The majority of dogmatic definitions originate in polemical situations and in defence of a point of Christian faith under attack. The disputed area is in need of clarification and the apologetic calls for an extended exposition. A side effect can be that other elements of the faith are not mentioned or are temporarily eclipsed. Applied to Trent this means that not everything that might have been said on the issue of justification has been said, but only that which it was felt necessary to say.

This view was not seen as detracting from the obligatory status of Trent's pronouncements of which Küng could say, 'Dogmatic definitions express the truth infallibly and precisely (not just approximately) and thus irrevocably'.¹⁴ This does not imply that the expression of the doctrine defined must be uniform. There can be many ways of expressing the ONE truth of faith. Later Küng was to explain more fully what this could mean and expanded the discussion under the rubric: 'Faith and Formulations of Faith'.¹⁵ Not merely can there be various expressions of the faith but there can be differing formulations

of it as well. These latter may vary to the extent of contradicting one another in their verbal expression. They are human achievements and are of necessity marked by imperfection, incompleteness, and fragmentariness. This does not imply that these formulations are to be dismissed. They are to be treated seriously and with respect, but they are not absolute nor final and require improvement. As before, the polemical situation which gave rise to these formulae conditioned them but it is now seen as having led to imbalance. Some dogmatic pronouncements were so committed to correcting errors that they are blind to the truth of which the error was an exaggeration. The outcome of this line of thought is brought to its logical conclusion:

'It is a simplification of truth to assert that every statement in its verbal formulation must as such be clearly true or false. Every statement can be true AND false—in accordance with its aim, structure and intent. Its meaning is more difficult to discover than its form'.¹⁸

It is clear that such an approach to dogmatic definitions must cause considerable difficulties in view of the commitment to treat those definitions as infallible. One had sensed earlier that Küng himself was aware of the problems when he conceded that definitions 'express the truth with infallible accuracy and are in this sense unalterable' whilst insisting that they share the limitations of human history. He surmised that a more comprehensive concept than infallibility would be found which would do justice to the strictly binding and profoundly fragmentary character of church definitions.¹⁷ Nevertheless there are expedients which Küng rules out as unacceptable. One has already been touched upon in reference to Trent, namely the acceptance of formulae at their immediate face value. This method, which may be associated with theological text books of the pre-Vatican II era, uses the decrees of church Councils as proof-texts to support a particular viewpoint. The text is handled like a legal document with all the woodenness this can give rise to. Küng rejects this approach as 'positivistic'.¹⁸

Equally unacceptable is the method which relates itself to the theory of development in the Roman Church. This theory sought to support the teaching of the church by elucidating what was said as something inherently implicit within the apostolic faith, but which became conceptualised only in the period subsequent to the New Testament. For example, the definitions of the Councils of Nicaea or Chalcedon are not to be found anywhere in scripture, but Christians who accept the teaching would argue that the content of the doctrine faithfully extrapolates the implications of the biblical evidence, albeit within another cultural or philosophical framework. This process is said to be a continuing feature of the church's life as it reflects upon the content of the original revelation. Faced with definitions whose worth is now much in doubt some theologians have sought to protect the formulae while evacuating the words of their original meaning. In Küng's phrase, 'The formula remains but the content is recast'.¹⁹ The flaw

in this method is its tendency to emend definitions to the point of contradiction. As particular instances to demonstrate his case Küng cites positions taken in Pius the Ninth's *Syllabus of Errors* on such questions as modern scientific progress, religious freedom or the possibility of salvation outside the church. No dialectic no matter how brilliant can disguise the contradiction between the positions then put forward and those accepted on these issues by the Roman Catholic Church to-day. This method of re-reading the content of the older positions is simply 'speculative'.¹⁰ By contrast the historical method takes account of the many-sided environment which gave the decrees their birth and provides the basis from which their worth (if any) to-day can be assessed.

In all this Küng is saying little not already evident in the works of other theologians. What is new is the openness and the uninhibited acknowledgement of what was and is happening within the Roman Catholic Church.

Infallibility

FROM the outset Küng was not regarded with approval by the authorities of his church who kept a dossier on him since the publication of his first book (on justification).¹¹ Published during the pontificate of Pius XII it was more likely to be proscribed than any other of his works. Such misgivings on the part of authority did not prevent him from being appointed the youngest *peritus* to attend the Second Vatican Council. Trouble over his views as expressed in his volume on the church led to it being investigated at Rome. In that work he espoused essentially the viewpoint later expounded in his most controversial work, *Infallibility?* This latter was bitterly attacked by serious theologians and its views form the background to a papal Declaration entitled 'What we Believe/Mysterium Ecclesiae'. The introduction to the English edition identifies Küng as the person towards whom its affirmations are directed. The debate has not subsided and has given rise to two substantial volumes of essays, not to mention argument conducted in the press and learned journals. It is not proposed to trace the course of that debate as it has not come to an end and Küng himself has edited just such a volume.¹² Two points in it however ought to be noted.

- (a) Küng's critique of Roman doctrine is completely consistent with the direction of his earlier writing. The question of birth control, whilst of intense public interest and serious pastoral concern, is entirely secondary. What is at issue is the extent of an infallible pronouncement. The encyclical *Humane Vitae* owed its decision and its authority to the conviction that pronouncements by the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church share the

infallibility ascribed to *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Pope. Küng, convinced of the wrongness of the decision on birth control, chose that moment to publish his radical questioning of the very conception of infallible sentences. Much of the argument has hinged on whether papal infallibility does imply that *ex Cathedra* decrees are to be taken as verbally inerrant. That this is implied in the original decree of 1870 seems clear both from the reply from Küng to his critics and the failure of those who would refine the issue into more subtle categories to produce citations from the text of the original decree itself in support of their case. In addition it is striking that the queries addressed to Küng by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith fastened on the issue of the verbal infallibility of such *ex cathedra* pronouncements.²³

- (b) The infallibility debate has highlighted once again the problem of how a dogmatic utterance is to be understood. It is ironic that Küng himself should be accused of misreading the Decree of 1870 through failure to differentiate the nuances within it. His reply is that interpretation comes to an end when it clashes with clear wording and sense of the definition; in other words at the point of contradiction.²⁴

Before turning to what is seen as the most important lessons to be drawn from Küng, some general remarks on his overall contribution may be permitted. Küng's work is bounded by issues of interest to the church and particularly of interest to the Roman Catholic Church. In one sense this is natural and to be expected in a period of renewal and increased theological activity when much that was formerly unquestioned became widely questioned. The unresolved issue is from what source will creative theology arise, when the issues to which the Roman Catholic Church is particularly sensitive, especially in the ecumenical area, are exhausted? Küng might reasonably counter this by claiming that certain of his works are not directed to the inter-church debate and that he has explicitly recognised that 'the fundamental question to-day is to know what is central'²⁵ in belief. His concern with Hegel and the implications of this for the doctrine of God points to a shift away from ecclesiastical issues. Yet one cannot escape the fact that much of Küng's output is strictly 'occasional' and that some of his less substantial writings have an 'off the cuff' atmosphere to them. They touch on a wide range of topics in a provocative but general way.

The importance of Küng's work and achievements for Anglicans is not especially obvious in contradistinction to their value for Christians as a whole. Evangelicals might take note of the seriousness with which Reformation concerns have been handled. The work on justification is important not only in itself, but as a prototype of further ecumenical re-assessments of positions of past controversy. It is remarkable that much of this has been done in exemplary fashion by

Roman Catholic scholars. Lutheran studies furnish a particularly good example of this.¹⁰ The lack of a thorough-going re-evaluation of stated Roman Catholic positions by Evangelicals is conspicuous and is an area of theology which requires their attention especially in view of a general coolness by Evangelicals generally towards any suggestion that the cleavage opened up at the Reformation has been overcome.

To return to what is here thought to be the most vital lesson which Küng has brought before his public. This is the problem of relating words and verbal concepts to God's revelation. This is a central question for all Christian theology and is an issue especially dear to Evangelicals who have a special commitment to revelation as given in the written word of the Bible. Küng is totally impatient of any notion that the Bible may be seen as infallible and rejects the notion decisively. To speak of the 'supernatural and infallible divine communication of propositions' as integral to revelation as a prominent American conservative does would be alien to him.¹¹ It behoves Evangelicals to clarify the relationship which they see existing between words and truth in Church formulations e.g. the Thirty Nine Articles and that which obtains in the case of scripture. The issue is central and it is Küng's merit that he has seen it to be so and has raised the issue in its distinctively acute form of Papal infallibility. To Christians everywhere he has presented the urgent and persistent question, 'Where is revelation to be found?'

¹ These Licentiatees were presented under the titles (a) 'Der Existentialistische Humanismus J. P. Sartres' (1951) and (b) 'Rechtfertigung des Sunders' (1955).

² See the writers referred to in *Justification*, pp. 313-314 (1964).

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 271.

⁴ See J. L. Witte 'Ist Barths Rechtfertigungslehre grundsätzlich Katholisch?', *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* Vol. 10 (1959), pp. 38-48 and Henri de Lubac *Documente* 6.14 Jahr (Dec.) 1958 *Zum Katholischen Dialog mit Karl Barth*, pp. 448-454 est. p. 451.

⁵ See Colm O'Grady: *The Church in Catholic Theology* (1969), pp. 238ff., esp. pp. 248-249 and Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth* Vols 2 and 3 'Parole de Dieu et existence humaine' (Aubier) 1957.

⁶ The pioneer work in question was *Conversion et grace chez Thomas d'Aquin* 1941. Bouillard's dissertation on Barth had the latter present at the oral examination. Further Bouillard was among those who examined Küng's thesis, cf. de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 453, note 6.

⁷ *Clergy Review*, December 1971, pp. 922-932 'Hans Küng's Ecumenical Programme'. O'Grady's understanding of Barth is found in *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth*, pp. 228ff. (1968).

⁸ *Justification*, pp. 257-259.

⁹ *The Council and Reunion* (1961 ET), p. 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹ *The Church* (ET 1968), p. 254.

¹² For Hegel see *Menschwerdung Gottes* (1970), p. 247; for Luther see *Theologie in Wandel*, pp. 449-469, esp. p. 466.

¹³ How far Küng's concerns and those of progressive theologians overlap with those of the Modernists has been variously assessed. See G. C. Berkouwer: *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism*, Grand Rapids (1965), p. 72 and A. Vidler: *A Variety of Catholic Modernists* (1970), p. 13.

¹⁴ *Justification*, p. 98; *The Council and Reunion*, p. 167.

¹⁵ *Structures of the Church* (ET 1965), pp. 344ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

- ¹⁷ *The Theologian and The Church* (ET 1965), p. 30.
- ¹⁸ *Truthfulness: The Future of the Church*, p. 190.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Der Spiegel*, March 13th, 1972.
- ²² *Zum Problem Unfehlbarkeit*, ed. K. Rahner (Frieburg 1971) contains essays critical of Küng. *Fehlbar*, ed. Hans Küng contains essays favourable to Küng and includes the editor's extensive review of the background and course of the debate, pp. 305-460.
- ²³ See Section IV of the Text printed in *Fehlbar*, p. 499.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 349.
- ²⁵ *Was in der Kirche Bleiben Muss* (Einsiedeln 1974). To this must be added the substantial work of general apologetic *Christ Sein* which is a general and sustained treatment of the issues facing non-Christians and the Church.
- ²⁶ An outstanding instance is H. McSorley: *Luther Right or Wrong* (1969).
- ²⁷ So C. F. H. Henry in *Frontiers in Modern Theology* (Chicago 1965), p. 80.