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The 'straight arrow' theologian and the pope

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Hans K¸ng (CNS/Harald Oppitz, KNA)

TÜBINGEN, GERMANY -- Hans Küng has always held to his progressive theological views. He believes that the present crisis in the church shows that he was right. The whole Roman system is in question, he maintains, though neither the Vatican nor the majority of the bishops yet realize it.

We are sitting in the arbor at the end of the veranda of his house above Tübingen, looking out at the gorgeous view across the Swabian hills. He muses, ?My critics said, ?He always repeats the same thing.? But we have the greatest crisis since the Reformation. What alternative was there? We need to go on again in the line of the [Second Vatican Council].?

He sees only ?pseudo-reforms,? such as the merging of parishes under one priest, that do not touch the centralization, absolutism and clericalism that for him are at the roots of the bishops? cover-up of criminal acts of clerical sexual abuse. He is encouraged by big changes at the level of local Catholic communities, and a growing conviction at that level that more must come. But ?the main problem is how we can change our absolutist leadership in a peaceful way. We cannot use the methods of the French Revolution.?

He wears a T-shirt with a zippered collar. The curls of his bouffant hair have settled a bit now that he is 82, a year younger than Pope Benedict XVI, who as Joseph Ratzinger was a colleague at Tübingen until frightened into leaving the progressives? camp by the student revolts of 1968.

The two men had a ?very similar? upbringing, Küng reflects. ?We both came from traditional Catholic families in traditional Catholic regions. We had the same sort of schooling.? But Ratzinger ?was from the beginning fixed on this tradition. When as pope he received me in his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo? -- they talked for four hours -- ?he told me, ?I have to keep the tradition.? But by ?the tradition? he means the tradition he knows very well, which he thinks is *the* Catholic tradition.?

Like everyone else, he was impressed with the success of Benedict?s visit to Great Britain Sept. 16-19. ?I was not surprised,? Küng said. ?He is personally very charming.? He applauds Benedict?s outspoken comments on the sexual abuse crisis.

But Küng wants Benedict to go further. ?I ask for a mea culpa from the pope himself. He should not, for example, ask the Irish bishops to carry all the blame, when he himself as Joseph Ratzinger at the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] enjoined secrecy on the episcopate in his 2001 letter.? Küng thinks the difficulties afflicting the respected Cardinal Godfried Danneels in Belgium -- ?whom I know very well and always sympathized with? -- are more proof that the fault lies in ?the whole system.?

It is symptomatic, Küng thinks, that the pope, who is by nature a humble man, should have adopted ?pomp and circumstance? since his election. Küng was particularly disconcerted when Benedict put on the liturgical vestments of Leo X, ?who condemned Luther without knowing him or having any idea of the Reformation.? Küng tells me that he wrote to Benedict, ?at the time when we were still exchanging views,? asking him why he was doing this. Did he get a reply? ?No, when he lifted the excommunication of the four schismatic Lefebvrist bishops and fished in Anglican waters, I did not think there was any point in continuing.?

While researching for his 1980 book *Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today*, Küng read deeply in the philosophy of science. There he came across Thomas Kuhn?s theory of ?paradigms? -- sets of controlling ideas that govern scientific opinion before giving way in a ?paradigm shift? to a succeeding set of ideas that then becomes the norm. It struck him that there were close parallels -- as well as differences -- between scientific revolutions and epochal changes in Christianity, and he applies the paradigm theory to explain Benedict?s thinking.

?For me the first paradigm is the Judaeo-Christian one. He has no serious theological knowledge of it. The second paradigm, the Hellenistic one, is what interests him. For him the Enlightenment is the Greek enlightenment, when the biblical message meets Greek philosophy.? This second paradigm, he explains, then gives way to the third, the medieval Catholic paradigm that established itself in the 11th century with Gregory VII and culminated in the Renaissance.

Küng recalls how French theologian Yves Congar, who played a major part at Vatican II (1962-65), would tell him, ?If you want to understand the Roman Catholic church today, look at the 11th century.? There one sees the break between West and East, the rise of ?Roman absolutism? and ?enforced clericalism -- including the law of celibacy.? Küng thinks that Benedict is still wedded to that paradigm. ?He is an antimodernist in the deepest sense of the word.?

By contrast, Vatican II set itself to take account of the succeeding two paradigms of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Unless this aim of the council is understood and implemented, Küng warns, its work will be ?falsified.? For an example, he points to the ?absolutely impossible statement? by Ratzinger?s doctrinal congregation in 2000 that the churches that issued from the Reformation ?are not real churches.?

But this subverts the council?s teaching, objects Küng, as stated in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, that ?the unique church of Christ ? subsists in the Catholic church? (the Latin is *subsistit in*). At the time, Küng recalls, he wrote to the Belgian secretary of the theological commission, Msgr. Gérard Philips, to ask why they had said ?subsists in,? rather than ?is? as the preliminary text for the council had had it. The reply he received was that ?we wanted to keep the matter open.?

Küng relives the promise those days held. ?The great majority of the bishops and theologians were expecting that after the council all this would be settled anyway. We were on the right track, we thought, and we shall go on.?

Küng?s ideal pope is always John XXIII, who launched the council. Constantly in his writings Küng pleads for a papacy of pastoral service, like that of John, empowering the bishops, rather than one based on jurisdiction. ?I am certainly not in favor of a straw man in Rome. But a pastoral authority is more powerful than just a

jurisdictional authority.? In many ways, he believes, John had more authority than his predecessor, Pius XII. ?In an audience in the Greek College in Rome, Pope John said, ?I am only infallible if I speak infallibly but I shall never do that, so I am not infallible.? That was his way, not making great historical arguments, but proceeding by his natural Christian feeling of what is authentically Christian and what is not.?

Küng said he is still devastated by the withdrawal in December 1979 of his license to teach as a Catholic theologian. When I ask him about his regrets as he looks back on a long and eventful life, his reply surprises me. He singles out his decision to go skiing that Christmastide, only for the bad news to be telephoned to him while he was on top of a mountain. It is not that it would have made any difference if he had not gone, but that his decision to do so seems to him to throw into relief his misjudgment. ?I was under the illusion that the Vatican would follow their own statutes. I thought they would not withdraw my license without going through the whole procedure. Everything was blocked because they did not want to give me the files. I thought they would not dare.?

He deals with those events in the second volume of his memoirs, where it is clear that he came close to a breakdown. ?Yes,? he admits, ?no doubt about that. It was a very serious case. You can come to a situation where you are entirely isolated. You feel despair. I would be marginalized in the university, without students anymore, which had been my life.?

He was upheld, however, by ?the deep Christian conviction that I was basically right,? and the university created a special ecumenical chair for him. In the years that followed, he was able to engage with world religions and all people of goodwill, bending his efforts to working out a global ethic on which all could agree.

He shows me a new paperback booklet hot from the press in German and English, titled *Manifesto for a Global Economic Ethic*. It advocates principles for economic activity that ?can be endorsed by all men and women with ethical convictions, whether these be religiously grounded or not.?

He is pleased that the first print run of his new book, *What I Believe*, was 60,000 copies. ?That shows that theology is not over and done with, if it is presented in the right way.? The book attempts to appeal to its readers, whether they have a belief or not, on common ground of experience and reflection. Küng hopes it will help them to go beyond the empirical world. ?When someone says, ?I am not a materialist, I think there is a spiritual reality,? I am already happy, for that is a grace.? But ?it?s ultimately a great mystery,? he tells me. ?We shall see. To meet God face-to-face is not given here.?

I have the same experience when meeting him this time that I have had before: I find that he has opened avenues for me. But I am aware that there is only room in the church for one pope. Cartoonists have sometimes depicted Küng wearing the papal tiara. He wears a wry expression when I remind him of the apocryphal story of the deadlocked papal conclave where the cardinals decide that perhaps Küng may be the candidate they seek. They go to see him. Would he be interested in running for the job? But Küng remembers that he has criticized the dogma of papal infallibility. Sadly, he has to turn down their invitation to step into the pope?s shoes, because if he did, ?I would no longer be infallible.?

Who is Hans Küng? After dinner with him during Vatican II, Congar wrote in his journal: ?Küng goes straight ahead like an arrow. He is a demanding, revolutionary type, rather impatient.? Congar added: ?We need such people.?

[John Wilkins is former editor of *The Tablet*, a Catholic weekly published in London.]

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