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Sacred Spaces in Motion
Heilige Räume im Wandel

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Sacred Spaces in Motion
Heilige Räume im Wandel

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IN MEMORIAM

HANS KÜNG (1928-2021)

CYRIL HOVORUN*

It is hardly possible to add anything new to the massive Küngology, which has for several decades become almost a distinct theological sub-discipline. I put the prefix “sub” because it can be attached to many classical disciplines: systematics, ethics, modern Church history, etc. In this obituary, I will focus on the Küngian ecclesiology.

His ecclesiology occupied a central spot in what can be called “the Catholic theology of the 1960s.” This theology was inspired and driven by the ideas of emancipation, engagement and reaching out to new horizons. It featured many prominent figures and became embodied, to a certain extent, in Vatican II. Küng was among the leading theological minds behind the council’s decisions, particularly regarding the Church. He composed his most important ecclesiological *opera* in anticipation of, and as a follow-up to Vatican II. He started his ecclesiological series in 1960 with *Konzil und Wiedervereinigung*, continued in 1962, the year of the beginning of the conciliar work, with *Strukturen der Kirche*. He published his *Die Kirche*—a comprehensive ecclesiological summary—two years after Vatican II had adjourned its sessions. Küng concluded the ecclesiological series in 1970 with *Unfehlbar?: eine Anfrage*.

Post-war social and political developments, which culminated during the 1960s, instigated a powerful momentum for many theologians in different confessions to rethink the phenomenon of the Church and its relationship with the world. Küng seized this momentum, which continued to be his inspiration until the last day of his life. The catchphrase that the Church is *semper reformanda* became a slogan of his lifework. Many excellent theologians, who during the 1960s shared Küng’s fascination about the possibilities of renewal in the Church, soon changed their trajectory—when the tailwind started blowing in a more revisionist direction. Küng, nevertheless, continued moving, now against the mainstream. He preserved consistency in his theological intuitions and ideas throughout his entire life.

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The Church always occupied his attention. Küng was particularly concerned about the chasm between the Church as the subject of faith and an empirical phenomenon. Such a chasm became the focus of ecclesiological inquiries during the twentieth century. On one side of the chasm, there is the Church that we proclaim every time we cite the creed: "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church." We perceive this Church as ideal because it has been established by God himself and is a continuation of Christ's presence among the disciples. In this Church, the Holy Spirit acts and inspires hope for salvation. On the other side there is an empirical Church. Many mistakes and even crimes marked its historical journey. The more we live in this Church, the more our eyes open to its imperfections and shortcomings. Instead of inspiring hope, this Church sometimes causes despair. Such despair about the Church is probably one of the most severe challenges for Christians in our time.

Küng addressed it most candidly. He acknowledged a "dark side" of the Church. This ecclesial aspect originates from "the sinfulness of the members and from contact with a society filled with distortions and contradictions." (In Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 236.) Most Catholic theologians of Küng's generation acknowledged an imperfect side of the Church. However, they tried to reconcile the established tenets about the Church and its realities by reinterpreting the realities in the light of the tenets. Küng chose a different approach: if tenets do not correspond to reality, they can be discarded. Leonard Swidler summarized this ecclesiological method of his as follows:

A number of other Catholic theologians are aware of the results of historical and other critical studies, but at certain crucial points they "fudge" their application to Christian doctrine. In many cases it is a matter of having a fundamentally different ecclesiology; they start out with what the church has traditionally taught on some matter through some authoritative expression, e.g., a conciliar or papal document, and assume that it cannot be faulted, not "essentially," although they will nowadays allow for "development." The difficulties come when the "development" moves from, for example, Gregory XVI's and Pius IX's solemn condemnations of religious freedom to Vatican II's solemn approbation of religious freedom. Küng and others would say that in such instances one cannot meaningfully, honestly, speak about "development" but would have to admit the possibility of error in at least one of the two contradictory positions (the latter position is obviously his choice in this case).

(In Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty, eds., *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, 723.)

Küng suggested bridging the chasm between the Church of faith and the empirical Church by effectively differentiating between what I call nature and the structures of the Church. It is a differentiation between what is essential in the Church and what the Church can live without. The latter is subject to errors and abuses. In the way close to the Eastern Christian perception of the Church, Küng ascribed conciliarity to what is essential in the Church. At the same time, the papacy, for him, is non-essential. He was not against papacy as such but bluntly criticized its distortions. As Robert Nowell put it, for Küng, “if the model of the papacy we wish to justify is that of Pius IX we shall not get very far, but if it is that of John XXIII there is hope.” (Robert Nowell, *A Passion for Truth: Hans Küng and His Theology*. New York: Crossroad, 1981, 151.) In other words, from Küng’s perspective, primacy is not encoded in the Church’s DNA—in contrast to conciliarity, which is identical with the Church *per se*.

Many of Küng’s ideas were unorthodox from the perspective of the accepted Roman Catholic doctrine. Some of such unorthodox ideas, nevertheless, are closer to the Orthodox understanding of the church. The official Vatican tried him for his assumed unorthodoxy, and did not spare him. Leonard Swidler, whom I mentioned earlier, compared Küng with Galileo Galilei. Indeed, some of Küng’s insights, of which he was accused, are now emerging as blueprints for new Vatican policies, especially under Pope Francis. Even in his trials, Küng benefitted the Church. Thus, he criticized the prosecuting procedures for the lack of transparency. His international fame and outcry by many prominent figures formed leverage that made his criticism work. Although trials against Catholic theologians did not stop, they became fairer.

Hans Küng was a fighter. He fought for the Church and truth. He revisited the virtue of theological truthfulness in many of his books. Some of them were even titled with reference to truth, such as *Wahrhaftigkeit: zur Zukunft der Kirche* (1970) and *Kirche, gehalten in der Wahrheit?* (1979). The second volume of his memoirs is titled *Disputed Truth* (2009). We may disagree with some of his conclusions, but we will always appreciate his faithfulness to the truth. This is probably the main theological legacy of Hans Küng.