

24. Küng, Hans, *The Catholic Church: A Short History* (A Modern Library Chronicles Book 2001)

In his introduction Küng makes several personal statements. The very first thing Küng writes (on his page xvii):

As the author of *The Catholic Church: A Short History*, I want to say quite openly, right at the beginning, that despite all my experiences of how merciless the Roman system can be, the Catholic Church, this fellowship of believers, has remained my spiritual home to the present day.

Küng, on the next page, gives his history of his rising, as a priest and scholar, to the "expert" nominated by Pope John XXIII himself, to be part of the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. Then of his falling at the hands of another Pope in 1979 when the Inquisition withdrew his permission to teach in the church, although he kept his status as priest, and his university job, he is a priest still and a professor with an endowed chair and an institute. He discusses the pro and con arguments made against the Catholic Church's history and suggests that balance is the only fair way to judge an institution or a nation or anything else.

At the end of the Introduction he makes this statement coming back to his first one (page xxv):

For in spite of all the radical criticism of the church, it has probably already become clear that I am buoyed up by an unshakable faith. This is not faith in the church as an institution, since quite obviously the church continually fails, but faith in that Jesus Christ, his person and cause, which remains the prime motif in the church's tradition, liturgy, and theology. For all the decadence of the church, Jesus Christ has never been

lost. The name of Jesus Christ is something like a golden thread in the tapestry of church history. Though often the tapestry is torn and grubby, that thread is constantly worked in again. Only the spirit of this Jesus Christ can give the Catholic Church and Christianity generally a new credibility and enable it to be understood. But precisely when one reflects on the origins of Christianity, its starting point, a fundamental question arises which cannot be passed over in a church history: did Jesus of Nazareth found a church at all?

That is how the Introduction ends. The answer to the question is given in the next section and is a resounding "no"(pages 3 and 4):

Biblical critics are agreed on this point: Jesus did not proclaim a church, nor did he proclaim himself, but the kingdom of God. . . .

Jesus was a provocative prophet, who showed that he was critical of the temple and, indeed, engaged in a militant demonstration against the commerce which was so prominent there. Although he was not a political revolutionary, his words and actions thus soon brought him into a fatal conflict with the political and religious establishment. Indeed, in the view of many this young man of thirty, with no specific office or title, transcended the claim of a mere rabbi or prophet, so that they saw him as the Messiah.

However, in his amazingly brief activity—at most three years, or perhaps only a few months—he did not seek to found a separate community, distinct from Israel, with its own creed and cult, or call to life an organization with its own constitution and offices, let alone a great religious edifice. No, according to all the evidence Jesus did not found a church in his lifetime.

But we must now immediately add that a church in the sense of a religious community distinct from Israel came into being immediately after Jesus' death. This happened under the impact of the experience of the resurrection and the Spirit. It was reported that—on the basis of particular charismatic experiences (appearances, visions, auditions) and a particular pattern in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (persecuted prophet, suffering servant of God)—the Jewish followers of Jesus, men and women, became convinced that this man . . . did not remain dead. . . .

Küng says much more, but for my purposes I'll move on to one of his concluding statements on pages 4 and 5:

So this is the answer to the question. Although the church was not founded by Jesus, for its origins it made an appeal to him, the one who was crucified yet lived, in whom for believers the kingdom of God had already dawned. The church remains the Jesus movement with an eschatological orientation; its basis was initially not its own cult, its own constitution, its own organization with specific offices. Its foundation was simply the confession in faith of this Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, and it was sealed with baptism in his name and through a ceremonial meal in his memory. That was how the church initially took shape.

Daniélou (see Item # 13) could not have described the earliest Jewish Christians any more succinctly!

Küng next describes what a church actually is if one sticks with the meaning of the word in the time of interest, and shows it has changed over time. Küng also answers another question (page 6): "was this Jesus, to whom the Catholic Church constantly appeals, really catholic?"

A most interesting discussion follows on pages 6 and 7 along the lines of 'what would Jesus do if he showed up in a "papal mass in St. Peter's, Rome?" He speculates the church might see him as an unwelcome disturbance. After all, this is the man who attacked the religious power structures of his day, who called both men and women to discipleship, who praised marriage and called married men to be his special witnesses, who thought the highest should be servants of the lowest, who was the original preacher of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." For those of you not familiar with Catholicism, all of these items might be considered subversive of the current structure of that church with a male priesthood of celibate single men who are an elite with inordinate power and collective wealth and demand respect and obedience within their highly structured hierarchies and from the community of believers.

Küng knows the objection that is coming next: what about the apostles and Peter? There is no evidence for any sort of hierarchy or structure of authority until after Peter's death and James became known as the leader of the Jerusalem church, a community of Jewish Christians. On pages 9 through 12 he discusses the evidence for Peter's life and death and though the evidence is a bit late, acknowledges it likely that he traveled to Rome and was killed during Nero's bloody persecution. Though evidence is scant . . . (pp. 11-12):

For a long time there has been a consensus among scholars. Even Protestant theologians now affirm that Peter suffered a martyr's death in Rome. Conversely, however, Catholic theologians concede there is no reliable evidence that Peter was ever in charge of the church of Rome as supreme head or bishop. In any case, the monarchical episcopate was introduced to Rome relatively late. . . .

Kuhn next launches into a discussion (pp. 12-13) of what sort of people followed Jesus in the earliest years: Jews, men and women of the lower classes with no economic power. Not all were poor, but emphasis in the community was on helping the needy by sharing, Christianity was "a community which was showing social solidarity." These were observant Jews, he reiterates. But then comes the next question, . . . "how did the break between the Jews and the Christians come about?"

As before, Kuhn answers the question, at the same time explaining why there is so much animosity in later writings (the New Testament) between Christians and Pharisees. On page 14 he makes clear that there had already been breaks during the times of Roman persecution, when collusion between Jews and the Roman authorities led to the killing of Stephen, the two Jameses, Peter, and Paul. But the great break was at the time of the destruction of the second temple. The Romans sacked it in 70 A.D. For some reason, the Pharisees set up a . . . "council in Jamnia (near Jaffa); . . . this was the formal excommunication of the Christians, a curse on heretics which was to be repeated at the beginning of every synagogue service." This, Küng suggests, is at the heart of Jewish-Christian animosity.

Now he moves into the light of Paul's ministry and beyond, and my interest is waning rapidly since I was trying to study the Jewish Christians only. Küng believes that the link from early Christianity to the Catholic faith is through Paul. Two statements on this were of interest to me, especially since one contradicts the Freke and Gandy (see Item # 19), and even the MacCoby (see Item # 27) allegation that Paul invented Christianity (pp.18 and 19):

Paul was not the real founder of Christianity—though this is constantly asserted by those who will not be

taught. In many respects Paul stood in continuity with the preaching of Jesus, but in the light of Jesus' death and new life he transformed it in a brilliant way with the help of both Jewish and Hellenistic concepts and ideas.

Küng continues this line of thought by noting that Paul's innovation was not to say that one could be saved by faith alone, that was already in early Christian thought because it was Jesus' teaching. His innovation was not to do away with the Law, he granted it to those who wished to maintain it and observed it himself when among Jews. His greatest innovation was to remove the requirement of first becoming a Jew, with circumcision and keeping the law, from the prerequisites for becoming a Christian. This was a de facto separation of Judaism from Christianity before the Great Excommunication, in my view but Küng does not characterize it that way. What he does say on page 19 is:

Paul established that a gentile could become a Christian without previously going over to Judaism, without having to fulfill the works of the law.

With his program and his restless activity, in intellectual matters and theology as well as in missionary work and church politics, the apostle had resounding success with his mission to the gentiles. . . . Despite its universal monotheism, Judaism, which also engaged in an intensive mission to the gentiles, in Antioch in particular, did not become the universal religion of humankind; it was Christianity which most approached that status, and the little church of its beginnings became the *ecclesiastica catholica*. To this extent it is no exaggeration to say that there would have been no Catholic Church without Paul.

OK, so what Paul did was brilliantly transform Christianity. He did not invent Christianity. But just maybe he invented

the flavor of Christianity that would have a much broader appeal than the Jewish Christian flavor. But the same life, death, and coming back to life story served as the basis for both. One stayed within the belief and practice structure practiced by Christ, the other said that was no longer necessary, just believe in Christ and the necessary good works shall naturally follow as evidence of the indwelling Christ.

Küng goes on to say many other things, obviously, since we are only just barely into the book. But the only other thing I found of interest is that in establishing his churches, Paul did create a hierarchy of sorts, servants of servants of servants. There were many callings named, bishops, presbyters, deacons, and prophets and prophetesses, etc. Küng alleges that these callings were changed into offices and were restructured by the later Catholic faith into a very rigid and authoritarian structure that excludes women and demands celibacy and obedience, etc. It is a man-made hierarchy, in other words, and that is the good news, since God never said it should be this way, it can be changed (see his page xxv).

So, now we have moved into Paul and beyond. What does Küng say happened to those earlier Christians, the ones at one time persecuted by Paul? He summarizes their exit from the scene on page 23:

What happened to the Jewish Christians?

Important parts of the earliest community emigrated from Jerusalem to Transjordan (Pella) as early as 66, after the execution of James, the leader of their community—in other words, before the outbreak of the war between the Jews and Rome. After a further Jewish rebellion, with the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the expulsion of all the Jews, the fateful year 135 also brought about the end of the Jewish-

Christian community of Jerusalem and its dominant position in the early church. Soon Jewish Christianity and its Christology with a Jewish stamp, along with its observances of the law, was perceived by the gentile church as merely a sect surviving from an earlier stage. Very soon it was felt to be heretical. However, where these Jewish Christians preserved the oldest beliefs and patterns of life, they represented the legitimate heirs of early Christianity. Sadly, though, this tradition was later to get distorted and lost, in Manichaeism and probably also in Islam.

So, "very soon" after 135 there was a general feeling that the remnant Jewish Christians were first perceived as an anachronistic sect and then declared heretical by the church with which it shared a common root: Christ. This means something happened in the second century that changed the face of the gentile-based Christian church.

Küng relates that in the second century there was a necessary (but regrettable in some aspects) centralization of power in the Roman church. It was a response to the second century challenge posed by a Gnostic religion that was nibbling at its membership and seemed a serious threat. On page 27 Küng says:

In the second century, the spiritual argument was concentrated on that great religious movement of late antiquity which promised a spiritual elite gnosis, that is, knowledge, a redemptive knowledge of the origin of evil in the world and of the divine spark of life which has descended into the human body and needs to be freed so that it can rise again from the evil world of matter into the divine world of light. It was a form of thought and attitude which many people found fascinating.

But bishops, theologians, and theologian-like

bishops like Irenaeus of Lyons defended the simple faith (Greek *pistis*) of the Christian community. They defended the simple gospels, commandments and rites in the face of the allegedly higher, purely spiritual knowledge which rested on particular revelations, myths, secret traditions, and world systems, combined itself with mysterious rituals and magical procedures, and was marked by a syncretistic mythologization and hostility to the world, matter, and body.

Never mind the fact, not mentioned by Küng, that some of these hostilities are to be found in Paul's writings, and Christianity itself. But Küng says that in reaction to this challenge the Christian church at that time did three things to defend itself against being taken over by Gnostics and other heretics. First was the development (pp. 27-28) of a "summary creed" to be recited at baptism fortified with "definitions or dogmas that marked out the limits of right, orthodox belief."

Next there was the "eventual establishment of a New Testament canon of scripture" (p. 28) Third there was a strengthening of the office of bishop to go beyond church organization and expanded into also taking on the task of being the "episcopal teaching office" with reference to this being a continuation of the apostolic tradition ("apostolic succession" was born here). The result? Bishops became powerful and . . . "displaced the charismatic teachers, and also the prophets—and prophetesses!"

Küng sees this as a bad thing. Male domination became entrenched and female emancipation was and still is prevented by this structure. It was what allowed the church to succeed, however (p. 29):

However, despite all the criticism, the fact cannot

be overstated that with the three standards mentioned above, the Catholic Church created a structure for theology and organization and with it a very resistant inner order—but at the expense of the original freedom and multiplicity. . . . But what must be more important for a religious movement than any institutions and constitutions is its spiritual and moral power, and in the early centuries the church was by no means lacking in this.

This reminds me of a testimonial statement about the current Catholic Church, a church in crisis according to Küng, which appeared in the Introduction (page xxii-xxiii):

. . . quite apart from its great organization, on all fronts in this world it has as its disposal a uniquely broad base of communities, hospitals, schools, and social institutions in which an infinite amount of good is done, despite all their weaknesses. Here many pastors wear themselves out in the service of their fellow men and women, and countless women and men devote themselves to young and old, the poor, the sick, the disadvantaged, and the failures. Here is a worldwide community of believers and committed people.

This statement follows an admission of many failings of the Catholic Church, and is an attempt to show where the real power of a faith lies: in its people, its believers, not in its structures and institutions.

At heart I believe Küng is correct in his historical reconstructions. I also believe he has a very good point when he suggests that belief can and should advance in spite of old and new revelations from history and historians. I also believe he is very correct to point out that since historical research is showing that a lot of what is problematic in the

church is man-made, it can (and should) be changed. I think this is a good object-lesson for all Christian faiths, since all share these same roots. Except for those few who are based, like Paul's, on a new revelation from Christ. But the content of these revelations seem questionable when, for instance they support what was taken at face value a century or two ago and has now been found to not have been so after all. Christ needs to come up to speed with the theologian-historians who have rediscovered who he really was, and contrasted it with what he has become in the hearts of modern believers (in this vein, consult Item # 37 by Vermes).