**May, 2021 Reflections Vol 43 No 7**

**Hans Kung and Church Reform**

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The influential Catholic theologian Hans Kung died April 6, 2021, at the age of 93. He rose to prominence with his book, *The Council: Reform and Reunion*, published in 1960, two years before the start of the Second Vatican Council. In the late 50s, as a priest of the diocese of Basel, Switzerland, he served in a large parish for about a year and a half, which gave him some sense of the challenges ordinary Swiss Catholics faced in living their faith. In the early stages of the Council, which began in October 1962, Kung served as an official expert on the important commission drafting the document on the Church headed by the conservative Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. When his effort to oust Ottaviani failed, he quit his position on the commission against the advice of his older theological colleague, Karl Rahner, and pursued his own effort to provide a theological framework for church reform, which issued in his 1967 book *The Church.* He spent the rest of his life in the academic world fighting for church reform, which would bring the separated Christian churches into unity and facilitate dialogue with the world religions for the good of the whole human family. When Pope Paul VI issued his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, forbidding artificial contraception, Kung responded with his book, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, claiming the promising reform of Vatican II was being thwarted and that a misunderstanding of infallibility was part of the problem. His critique of the Vatican I teaching on infallibility produced an acrimonious public debate with Karl Rahner, who defended a nuanced interpretation of the teaching.

In 1979, Kung wrote an article assessing the first year of the papacy of John Paul II, praising him as a champion of human rights and social justice but also criticizing his authoritarian style. Later that year, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent Kung a letter declaring he could not “be regarded as a Catholic theologian nor perform the task of teaching as one” because he “departs from the integral truth of the Catholic faith.” Kung, who was defended by Rahner and many other theologians around the world, continued to teach at the University of Tubingen in an ecumenical capacity and to speak out publicly for church reform. For example, in 1985 he issued a scathing attack on Pope John Paul for halting church reform, blocking ecumenical progress and failing to treat women as equal members of the church.

In 2010, Kung sent an open letter to the Catholic bishops around the world on the fifth anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Benedict, his former colleague at Tubingen. After praising the pope for his helpful encyclicals on faith, hope and charity, he pointed out his many missed opportunities to improve relations with Anglicans, Protestants, Jews and Muslims. He went on to criticize Benedict for failing to promote the intended reforms of Vatican II and in many cases interpreting the conciliar texts against the “spirit of the council.”

In 2013, Hans Kung was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, which limited his public activities. However, he did manage to express early appreciation for the reforming efforts of Pope Francis and his “brotherly attitude.” In 2016, Kung sent a public letter to Francis pleading with him to “allow a free, unprejudiced and open-ended discussion“ of the infallibility dogma, in order to build up the church and to promote Christian unity. The pope did not formally establish a commission to study infallibility, but he did continue to pursue church reform and to support the ecumenical movement. Shortly before Kung died, Francis sent him a very welcomed reconciling message.

My own interactions with Hans began in 1968 when I attended his classes on ecumenical sacramentology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. An outstanding teacher, he was well-prepared, presented his material in clear, understandable language and answered challenging questions honestly. During that semester, he gave a series of public lectures to huge crowds in the large Riverside Church in Manhattan on the topic of truthfulness in the church. In that public setting, he was energized by the crowd, which was electrified by his passion for truth, reform and reunion. That material, published as *Truthfulness: The Future of the* *Church,* still maintains great relevance in our post-truth world. We do well today to reflect on Kung’s definition of truthfulness as “that basic attitude through which individuals or communities, in spite of difficulties, remain true to themselves without dissimulations and without losing their integrity: a genuine candor with oneself, with one’s fellows and with God, a genuine candor in thought, word and deed.”

It was in 1986 that I next encountered Hans. When I heard he was coming to the University of Michigan to teach a course, I called him to see if he would come to Toledo to give a lecture. Kindly but firmly, he said no because people within driving distance could come to Ann Arbor to hear him. As fortune would have it, the U of M Philosophy and Religious Studies Department asked me to teach his first class, since he could not leave Germany soon enough to get there for it. Based on his syllabus, I did my best to summarize his views on the challenges secularization presents to the Christian faith. When I first saw Hans after he arrived, he thanked me for taking his class and said he would reciprocate by giving a lecture at the University of Toledo. sponsored by Corpus Christi University Parish.

A few months later, he delivered a magnificent lecture on Martin Luther to a large crowd in the student union on the UT campus. He praised Luther as a brilliant, eloquent teacher with a deep faith, who intuitively understood the growing frustration over previous failed reform movements. He acknowledged that some of Luther’s reform proposals, such as the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, were finally accepted at the Second Vatican Council, but he also sharply criticized the anti-Semitic language in some of his later works. For me, Hans was at his best in the lecture: passionate in his commitment to church reform; honest in his critique of church authority; faithful to his reading of mainline scripture scholars; balanced in his assessment of Luther and the Lutheran tradition; responsive to the energy of the crowd; and eloquent in making his case for ecumenical dialogue and collaboration. Later feedback reinforced my sense that this charismatic Catholic theologian had touched the minds and hearts of many in his very diverse audience. In a private conversation later that evening, Hans talked about his relationship with Karl Rahner, including their acrimonious debate on infallibility carried out in German academic journals. During that conversation, he revealed that he took the initiative in setting up a private conversation with Rahner that produced a friendly reconciliation. Despite my many conversations with Rahner, I had never heard that part of the story, which increased my respect for Hans and solidified my conviction that he was not the arrogant radical that some critics claimed.

Later in that same year, 1987, Hans sent me a handwritten letter thanking me for an article I wrote about him and suggesting that I give more attention to his later works, which centered on interfaith dialogue and cooperation on behalf of world peace. It is true that, starting in the 1980’s, Kung devoted a good deal of his time and energy to interfaith issues, which, he argued, were absolutely crucial to the well-being of the human family. In this regard, he often repeated his fundamental conviction: “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.” For the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, Kung wrote “The Declaration of a Global Ethic,” which was signed by about 250 religious leaders from around the world. The document marked a new stage in interfaith relationships by stressing the need for collaborative efforts on behalf of peace and justice. In the declaration, Kung recognized that religions have at times been misused to promote disharmony, violence and wars, but he also insisted that they possess spiritual resources and common ethical principles which can help bring peace to our troubled world. The great religious traditions hold in common that all human beings possess an inalienable dignity which demands respect. This general principle leads to other commonly held ethical imperatives: you shall not kill, but should respect life; you shall not steal, but should respect property; you shall not lie, but should speak truthfully; you shall not commit sexual immorality, but should love one another. Kung concluded by calling on believers all over the world to commit themselves to a common global ethic rooted in their various traditions in order to further the cause of universal justice and peace.

In discussing world religions, Kung distinguished the “three great religious river systems,” which flow into the one religious history of humankind: the prophetic traditions of Semitic origin, today often referred to as the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the mystical traditions begun in India, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, which stress the experience of ultimate unity through meditation; and the Chinese wisdom traditions of Confucianism and Taoism, which treasure social harmony rooted in traditional ethical principles. Although the three systems intermingle and overlap to some degree, they do maintain a primary orientation or distinctive spirit which interfaith dialogue must respect. For Kung, the goal of the dialogue is not a superficial harmonization leading to one universal religion, but rather an open exchange of information leading to mutual transformation and effective collaboration for the good of the human family. The task for Christians is to deepen their commitment to Christ while maintaining the greatest possible openness to the cultural, ethical and religious values of the other traditions. Christians serve the cause of humanity by making the spirit of Jesus visible throughout the world in ever new cultural forms.

As part of his interfaith project, Kung published books on the three monotheistic religions: *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow; Islam: Past, Present and Future;* and *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future.* These are massive volumes, organized around “paradigm shifts” or major developments in the tradition. For example, the 936-page tome *Christianity,* which consistently focuses on Jesus the Messiah and Son of God, describes how Christianity developed new paradigms throughout history: the biblical period, the early encounter with Greek philosophy; the middle ages, the Protestant Reformation, the modern Enlightenment and the contemporary ecumenical movement.

Hans Kung’s work on interfaith dialogue, especially the development of a global ethic, remains important in today’s world, threatened by religious extremism and intolerance. Although some experts in the field consider his books on Judaism and Islam to be superficial, lacking a sophisticated understanding of the complex ways religion, politics, economics and demographics interact for good or evil. Others have applauded the general thrust of his interfaith work and noted its current relevance.

Kung’s contributions to Church reform have special significance within the Catholic community. In the United States today, there are well-financed Catholic groups with immense media outreach who oppose the open spirit of Vatican II and reject some of the important reforms of Pope Francis, especially his teaching on global warming and his pastoral outreach to divorced and remarried Catholics. In this situation, we do well to recall the example of Kung: his loyalty to the Catholic Church despite its sins; his respect for the papacy despite the limitations of individual popes; his fidelity to the truth despite severe official condemnations; and his continuing passion for church reform despite limited progress. Hans Kung did not produce a new theological paradigm or initiate a theological movement, as did the contemporary Catholic theological giants, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. He did, however, make a compelling case for ongoing church reform that is especially needed today so that the Church can be a more attractive spiritual home for all of us touched by the Catholic tradition and play a more constructive role in spreading the kingdom of justice and peace in the world.