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The Küng is dead, long live the Küng: The value of Hans Küng's theology

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Hans Küng's influence on the church and its theology in the 20th-century theology has been immense. It has also not been without controversy, from his role at Vatican II to the loss of his teaching licence and his often-combative relationship with Benedict XVI. In 2021 Hans Küng died at the age of 93. This article offers an autoethnographic response to his work experienced over roughly two decades, from my early days as a theology student, struggles with Church authority, to personal illness. Küng's work provided a reference point for many of the challenges faced in 'being a Christian'. The first part of the article establishes an autoethnographic methodological approach, leading to the exploration of four key texts from Küng, highlighting their general value while also noting their connection to my own theological journey. By examining Küng's work in connection with my own life, I hope to make an argument for the continued relevance of his core ideas, while also introducing his life and work more broadly to those unfamiliar with Küng and his contribution.

Contribution: This article offers key insights into the theology and relevance of Hans Küng's work from an autoethnographic perspective. It engages with some of the key texts in Küng's oeuvre, with the goal of personal and societal changes in mind. It has been written in light of Küng's recent death in 2021.

Keywords: Hans Küng; autoethnography; theology; Christianity; value.

Introduction

On 06 April 2021, the renowned yet controversial Catholic theologian Hans Küng died, at the age of 93. Küng lived a long and tumultuous life, with the majority of his teaching activity taking place at Tübingen University in Germany. He was Swiss though and would often return home to his house by the lake in Switzerland driving a sports car. If he drove fast in his car, his life was lived at a frenetic pace too. Eventually, he would publish over 50 books in theology, philosophy, science, global ethics and religion. Küng was prolific. He was also deeply influential. A recently published obituary by the *New York Times* quoted Peter Habblethwaite, a Vatican expert, as suggesting that never again would a Catholic theologian have so much influence. Habblethwaite (2021) noted that all of Küng's proposals were accepted in modified form at Vatican II.

The broad contours of Küng's life are well known and will be touched on shortly. This article, however, is not designed as a memorial to Hans Küng, nor is it seeking a deep critical engagement with the key aspects of his work. Rather, it is a personal engagement with Küng in terms of my own theological and life journey. It is also hoped that this might introduce readers to Küng's work, more generally for those who are not familiar with his work, but also provide an argument for the continued importance of Küng's work for the future. Many of the challenges Küng confronted persist today, from questions relating to the nature of the Church, interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, science and religion debates, and questions of death and the good life. Hence, following the autoethnographic account, I will step back briefly to evaluate what I consider to be the central driver of Küng's work and its value as we move further into the 21st century.

The specific methodology adopted in this article is an autoethnographic one. This endorses storytelling as a legitimate form of knowledge creation, challenging the bias against the use of emotion. Stories are valued and powerful in that (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015):

> [S]tories we tell enable us to live and to live *better*; stories allow us to lead more reflective, more meaningful, and more just lives. (p. 1)

Hence, this approach affirms personal experience in its engagement with cultural beliefs, practices and experiences. Although autoethnographic research has multiple approaches in its narrative

storytelling, I will be endorsing the first-person voice (Ettorre 2016:1). Mackinlay challenges analytical perspectives that separate writers from their vocative endeavours, encouraging vulnerability. Crucially for Mackinlay (2019:210–211), autoethnography is a weaving of ideas, experience and theory. Hence, in my engagement with Küng I will be using autoethnography to describe my personal journey with Küng's theological work, arguing both for the importance of the insights I have gained, and by default the continued relevance of Küng's work today. To do this, I will articulate several encounters with Küng's ideas at crucial junctures in my theological development. This will not cover all aspects of Küng's work, and in this, some might be disappointed. It will, however, illustrate how several key contributions made by him find concrete grounding and expression in my own life. To lay the groundwork for this, I will begin by introducing the readers to Küng, particularly my first encounter with him.

Küng the devil?

Twenty-five years ago, when I began my first year of my bachelor's degree in theology studies, I enrolled in an introductory theology unit. One of the two prescribed texts was Hans Küng's (1993) *Creedo: The Apostles Creed Explained for Today.* I had never heard of Hans Küng but was familiar with the Apostles' Creed. I distinctly remember the sense of disbelief that I had to read a book by a Catholic theologian. I had entered the Christian tradition from a fundamentalist Pentecostal perspective, where I believed that Catholics could not even call themselves Christian. Only 15 pages into reading the book I threw it across the room, believing it to be a work of the devil. How could my lecturers be expecting me to read this? Is it legitimate to be questioning the idea of God as a father? As with much of my early theological education, I had justified reading material I had disagreed with for its apologetic value. I would need to understand it to argue against it. Hence, I picked up the book and finished it. This began a journey that over a quarter of a century has not stopped. One of the reasons for picking up Küng's books was in order for me to learn and grow, and not to argue against it; the purpose was rather to gain understanding, critically engage and where possible apply its insights into my context. So who was Hans Küng?

Hans Küng was born in 1928 in Sursee in the canton of Lucerne. In the first volume of his memoirs, entitled aptly, *My Struggle for Freedom,* he articulates his early roots of freedom in that specific context in Switzerland amid the 'whole web of roots: historical, cultural, spiritual – land, history, nature, family, community, church' (Küng 2003). By his own account, his early years were lived amidst the shocking events of the rise of Hitler in Germany and its implication for his homeland. He had felt called to be a priest from the age of 11,[1] eventually beginning his studies in Rome in 1948, just 3 years after the end of the Second World War. Küng then moved to Paris to complete his doctoral work on Karl Barth's theory of justification in Barth's dogmatics. The encounter between Barth and Küng was a fascinating one. Küng believed that Barth's understanding of justification was in many respects the same as the Catholic position. Upon reading Küng's manuscript, Barth phoned Küng and started by asking him his age. Küng (2003) recounts this engagement. Barth asks:

> 'Tell me, are you really old or are you young?' My reply, that I am 27, makes him say: 'In that case something can still come of it'. I am to visit him soon in Basle. I will do that, and this will become the beginning of a great friendship. (p. 54)

Küng will eventually complete his doctorate and habilitation on Hegel. He will then spend the majority of his time, as already mentioned, teaching at the Catholic Department at the University of Tübingen. Küng will be a key advisor at Vatican II, having a significant impact, as already noted, in much of its eventual decisions. In time Küng challenged the doctrine of infallibility, leading to a suspension of his teaching licence to teach Catholic theology. However, he does not lose his position as a priest. In time his theological work will take him to all parts of the world and important engagements with the Global Ethic Foundation. He eventually met with Pope Benedict (who was part of the magisterium that had suspended his teaching licence as Cardinal Ratzinger). Late in life, he will affirm Pope Francis and the potential his appointment has for the church stating that:

> If Pope Francis commits himself to reform, he will not only find broad support within the Church, but will also win back many of those who have long since abandoned the Church. (Küng 2013:iv)

This brief introduction to Küng hopefully provides a good outline of Küng's life for those unfamiliar with Küng. What I now intend to do is explore autoethnographically my engagement with Küng around several key texts. My engagement with these texts is explored linearly, from my early engagement with Creedo, through my early faith formation, to his work entitled *Does God Exist* related to my experience of cancer.

Creedo and Küng

In the introduction I noted my first experience of reading Küng's book *Creedo,* and my initial response to it. Being the prescribed text of my first theology unit, it was always going to prod and push me in unique and profound ways. The book's intention, as most of Küng's work attempts to do, is to engage critically with the Christian tradition in response to current challenges. It is not hard, even now, to remember the specific things in the text that began to open me up theologically. The first was the difficulty of affirming God as a father, and the potential for different ways to understand God relationally. My own father was quite distant, particularly reserved, and did not offer affection in an outward matter. Truth be told, the language of God as father often made it difficult for me to think of God as a being that could be close, or is close, to me.

1.This is an aspect of his life I identify with. When I became a Christian at the age of 11, I felt an overwhelming sense of wanting to become a minister within the context I found myself. Another similarity is having developed an excessive desire to buy theological texts, something which Kung biographer Robert Nowell suggests almost bankrupted Kung as a student!

Küng's reflections on God as creator challenged me to think of the universe as being much older than I could have possibly imagined, or had been told as a young Christian. Küng discusses the origin of the universe in the big bang. He argues that our scientific endeavours can take us back to the first few seconds of the big bang, but do not allow us to know what came before it. Küng notes that this is not something that science or theology can prove either way. For both science and theology, it becomes a question of speculation as to both the cause and origin of the big bang. This is a challenge that both science and theology must confront.

Aside from the useful theological engagements with the Apostles' Creed that Küng offered me, what I learnt from the book was what I would learn from many of Küng's texts. The Christian tradition is not monolithic and can be creatively engaged with. Küng's book was an affirmation of that tradition rather than a simple endorsement of it. In time this understanding of the Christian tradition would bring me into conflict with my church, which would lead me to another of Küng's texts.

Infallibility and leaving the church

Küng's first brush with the Doctrine for the Congregation of faith followed the publication of his book *Infallible?* in 1971. He had also previously publicly criticised celibacy and birth control. Eventually, he had his teaching licence revoked with the approval of Pope John Paul II in December 1979. Cardinal Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict II) would accuse Küng of disputing Catholic teaching and not speaking in its name (Nowell 1981:339). Küng would, however, continue to teach at the University of Tübingen following the revocation of his teaching licence. The situation at the time is recounted by his colleague, the Protestant theologian Jurgen Moltmann (2008), as follows:

> When Küng's Catholic permission to teach (mission canonica) was withdrawn in 1979 and he had to leave the theological faculty, my colleague Eberhard Jüngel and I came out on his side publicly and very vigorously. The outcome was the so-called Tübingen solution: Küng, together with the ecumenical institute, was placed directly under the president of the university; that is to say, he remained a university theologian, even if Rome was no longer prepared to view him as a Catholic one. (pp. 151–152)

The book *Infallible? An Inquiry* is a challenge to the belief that the Pope's decisions as the supreme exercise of his office are infallible. Küng traces this incorrect assertion to the pronouncement by Vatican I in 1870 that the bishop of Rome may make infallible statements on moral issues and doctrine (Küng 2007:137). The book *Infallible?* provides a concise history of the problem of infallibility, why it is a problem, and a potential solution. Critical to the argument proposed by Küng (1971) are the numerous errors of pronouncements made by the Pope for:

> In every century the errors of the Church's teaching office have been numerous and indisputable; scrutiny of the Index of forbidden books yields abundant evidence of this. Yet over and over again it has found it difficult frankly to admit them. Generally, the correction of past mistakes has been only 'implicit', carried out in veiled fashion, lacking in courage and frankeness, and lacking above all any open admission of having been at fault. It was feared that the admission of infallibility in certain important instances would be detrimental, if not fatal, to the claim of infallibility in others. (p. 28)

Like the majority of Küng's books, I remember vividly where I was when I read them. Rather morbidly I read large sections of *Does God Exist* in a graveyard in the weeks running up to my operation to remove cancer in my colon. Reading *Infallible?* found me waiting to get picked up by my late father as my car was being repaired. It took him three hoots before I looked up, as I was so engrossed in what I was reading. I was not engrossed because I doubted the veracity of what Küng was suggesting. As a fundamentalist, I had never found the doctrine of papal infallibility convincing. This was because I had my own paper pope, the Bible.

Although by this point in my theological journey, now quite far into my theological studies I was beginning to broaden my perspective on theology, I was still wrestling with how to understand and interpret scripture. For most of my Christian life, I had held firmly to the belief that the scriptures were infallible.[2] Initially, this was true of scientific pronouncements too, although I quickly found ways around those challenges. Morality was different though. Pronouncements around women and homosexuality remained infallible for me. The church that I was a part of at the time held that women could not be in ministry and that homosexuality was not part of God's plan. It sought to make very clear which teachings were infallible. Divorce and slavery were two issues that could be worked around, so to speak, but not homosexuality and gender. Nonetheless, I found Küng's logical and forceful rebuttal of infallibility persuasive. Scripture too had made numerous pronouncements that were now scientifically debunked, or morally outrageous (the killing of children and massacre of peoples being sanctioned by God). On what basis were my views on women and homosexuality (which I believed had a clear warrant in scripture) not open to revision or potentially wrong? The church I was a part of was making the question of the role of women in the family and church a litmus test for leadership. When one's income is tied to a church (which was in my case), and one's relationships are located there, it is difficult to stand up to church pronouncements that one is at odds with. Küng provided an example of someone willing to confront church authorities in pursuit of what he believed was right. In this sense, Küng's attitude gave me the courage to do the same. Hence, my engagement with the book Infallible? offered both the logic to question my infallible assertions concerning scripture and the courage to challenge my church around their moral and doctrinal pronouncements. Ultimately, as I have written elsewhere, this resulted in the loss of my role within the church, and I entered a particularly challenging time of my life. In time, I would ask myself whether I could still be a Christian. The examples I had been offered, and having to leave my church, left me with little hope. It was then in 2007

2.I appreciate that there are finely tuned nuances in how inerrancy and infallibility are understood. My intention here is not to engage in hair-splitting. But for clarity, I believe infallibility and inerrancy are troublesome views, and subject to the same critique Kung offers of infallibility with regard to the pope.

that I turned to Küng once again to help me answer that question by engaging in his now-famous book *On Being a Christian* (Küng 1976).

How do I be a Christian now?

Following the challenge of having to leave the church community I had been part of for years, and in which I had been in several leadership roles, I began my doctoral studies wondering what a Christian should or could be like. What was the Church? Can it be a life-giving institution amidst a changing and challenging world? I had spent some time overseas in Amsterdam with my wife and first daughter in 2006 and 2007. Upon returning to South Africa, and before eventually arriving in Australia, these were the questions I was wrestling with. These are, of course, the very questions Küng had been wrestling with in his two major books: *The Church* published in 1967 and *On Being a Christian* published in 1974. Concerning the Church, he notes that the Church should never freeze-frame itself in any one of its historical manifestations. It should also see the challenges in society not as a cause for anxiety but as an opportunity (Küng 1967:3). In *On Being a Christian*, from the very first sentence, Küng does not leave us guessing about the point of the book. 'This book is written for all those who, for any reason at all, honestly and sincerely want to know what Christianity, what being a Christian, really means' (Küng 1967:9). That, of course, was me.

In the book, Küng argues for a return to the earthly Jesus to help us grasp what it means to be a Christian. He notes four groups living at the time of Jesus – the zealots, the Essenes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. All represent different temptations – political revolution, withdrawal, morality and legalism. Küng believed that Jesus did not fit any of those categories. Küng has been rightly criticised for his 'overly stylized characterizations of the religious-social groups of Jesus's environment and the other world religions'. However, his text gave me a lens through which to imagine the kind of Christian I could become. It painted a portrait of Jesus that was not simply located in the metaphysical pronouncements of early church councils. After returning from the Netherlands to South Africa, we moved in with my in-laws. I remember meandering through their garden for weeks on end with this book. As I hold it now, it battles to maintain its shape. The pencil marks throughout the book help me remember key aspects of the book that struck me. His bringing to life the Jesus of Mark's gospel and its importance has never left me. Being a Christian will mean for Küng being radically human. Even now in his assessment of some aspects of what this means I can no longer agree with him. What Küng offered however was that as a Christian one might affirm all that is good in being a human, all forms of humanism. Even after all my years of theological education, I was battling to move away from metaphysical conceptions of Jesus, conceptions that seemed unrelated to my life as a human being in the world. I was looking to affirm all that was good in the world, whether Christian or not. Küng's suggestion that 'Being Christian cannot mean ceasing to be human' (Küng 1976:601) found fertile ground in my imagination.

What happens if I die: *Does God Exist*?

In November 2013, I was diagnosed with colon cancer. Within weeks I had a surgery followed by 6 months of chemotherapy. My life and my theology have subsequently changed forever. It was in the 4 weeks between diagnosis and my operation that I found myself turning once again to Hans Küng, and this time his book *Does God Exist*. As I faced the prospect of my own mortality in a way I had never had before, I found much of the theological scaffolding beginning to crumble. What would eventually evolve in the years following my cancer experience would be a completely different structure. Küng's book allowed me to pressure test some of the crucial ideas I held concerning God. I remember the very real feeling of imagining nothingness after my death (obviously, as Epicurus reminds us, we would not be able to *actually* experience nothingness after our death).

Evangelical theologians Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson (both of whom had been strong influences on my early theological development) strongly commended Küng's book. In an otherwise strongly negative appraisal, they suggested that (Grenz & Olson 1992):

> Perhaps its greatest strength lies in its provision of an apologetic for a secular age. Few if any theologians have wrestled as profoundly or in as great detail with the challenges of atheism, agnosticism and nihilism as has Küng. The breadth and depth of his knowledge of these secular ideologies is amazing, as is his ability to probe their strengths and weaknesses. He approaches them with sympathy and candor while casting a critical eye towards their inner contradictions and their inconsistencies with experience. (p. 269)

Does God Exist did not offer me a watertight case for the existence of God, or an unimpeachable case for God's existence. Rather, Küng provided me with a reasonable and rational account of both the importance of the 'masters of suspicion' and why they do not have the final word on God's existence. In this sense, Grenz and Olson are right in seeing the value of Küng's contribution. The same might be said of Küng's substantive engagement with science, which neither confirms nor denies the existence of God. Küng leaves one with a sense that faith is *reasonable*, but it is still a faith that can be held with confidence. During those days in a graveyard reading Küng, I came to realise that whatever cancer might bring in my life, a reasonable hope persists. And that I was also not scientifically or philosophically naïve for believing so. Küng's recent death prompted this autoethnographic response in gratitude to his influence on my own theological trajectory. This final section is a stepping back to evaluate briefly Küng's central contribution more generally, as well as to ask what this might mean into the rest of this century.

Retrospect and prospect: Critique and future possibilities

Küng's central and driving concern was the reform of the Catholic Church. In 1987 Küng's subtitle to the co-edited

volume, *The Church in Anguish* (eds. Küng & Swidler 1987), asked the question *Has the Vatican Betrayed Vatican II?* Küng (1987:10) suggested at the time that the ecclesiastical bureaucracy within the Catholic church was seeking a restoration movement that attempts to 'keep the gearshift of power in its own hands' and in doing so negatively affects 'science, technology, the world economy, politics, and of course also religion'. A quarter of a century later, in one of his final books outlining his hope for reform in light of Pope Francis, he asked 'what is to be done if our expectations of reform are dashed?' (Küng 2013:338). Going back 50 years from that question we find the same concern for reform in *Council and Reunion* (1961).

The quest for reform of the Catholic church, as these three books spanning almost his whole career demonstrate, is that this is a central and driving feature of his work. Yet, reform is not done simply for reform's sake. In *Council and Reunion,* Küng (1961:5) argues that renewal and reform in the Church ought to have an ecumenical impact, in the same way that he argues reform in the Church has scientific, political, economic and religious import too (Küng 1987:10). In this sense, it is hard to call Küng a systematic theologian in the traditional sense, although I suspect many will dispute this. As the autoethnographic approach in this article suggests, Küng's work spans apologetics, ecclesiology and Christology. Not discussed in significant detail though was his tireless ecumenical work as well as his interreligious engagement and reflections on the relationship between faith and science. I would argue that Küng's work in these diverse areas always has at its root a hope and desire for reform in the church. Reform and renewal of the church allow us to re-examine our doctrines and beliefs. Thus, it also enables us to reach across our various church traditions in an ecumenical fashion. Reform and renewal challenge us to engage more generously with other religions and the scientific community. In this sense, Küng's oeuvre *demonstrates to us in practice* what reform and renewal might look like. In tackling doctrinal, ecumenical, scientific and interreligious issues, he seeks to chart a way forward for us. Hence, reform and renewal are not so much for us, as it is for others.

Critiques of Küng have tended to focus more on whether he is truly Catholic because his emphasis on the Church as sinful, as well as his strong emphasis on a biblically based theology (Livingstone 2000:252). Evangelicals, although sympathetic to the above critique, have wanted to take it further. Grenz and Olson (1992:69–270) would accuse Küng of being a 'liberal protestant' more connected to the historical-critical approach to the biblical text.

Ultimately, regardless of whether these general or particular critiques of Küng are justified, they perhaps miss the more decisive contribution that Küng offers. Küng gives us a way to think about the nature of renewal and reform within the Church, one that encourages us to be faithful critics. To stay within, rather than without. He offers us a way to link that reform and renewal to revaluating our doctrines, engaging with science, ecumenical and interreligious questions. Whether we agree with the positions he takes regarding these issues is important, but perhaps moot. In my autoethnographic account, I hope I have demonstrated my own attempt to locate myself within a renewal tradition and to show how Küng can aid in that.

Looking forward into the 21st century, we might seek to emulate his commitment to and critique of the Church. The questions that Küng asks us to take seriously are still seriously important today. How does the Church engage ecumenically? How do we engage in interreligious, philosophical and scientific dialogue? My theological journey as demonstrated here has been largely around rethinking key beliefs and doctrines that Küng has helped me to explore. But that was never the final goal for Küng, which was for reform to lead to a more generative engagement with the world. As we grapple with Küng's legacy into this century, we are encouraged to take seriously the challenge to do just this, but to do so from within the church as faithful critics.

Conclusion

I have been unable to cover all of Küng's work and its relevance. Some would have liked a more substantive account of his Global Ethics Foundation and interreligious work. These are both issues that are important to me too. I have tried though to allow the personal dimension of my experience, through the use of autoethnography, to shape the engagement with Küng. If I work my way backward, I could say that through this engagement with Küng I have come to affirm the reasonableness of belief in God's existence, the gift of being a Christian, the importance of scripture but not its dominance, and the fact that Christian belief is evolving and changing.

Certainly, the challenges to Christian belief are not likely to recede, despite the continued growth of Christianity worldwide. Küng's philosophical and scientific engagement theologically will continue to add value. His interreligious work is crucial in what will be a strongly interreligious world in this century. With the growth of Christianity worldwide, can Küng's articulation of infallibility provide value for future engagement with scripture? Perhaps, but perhaps less so than his affirmation that being a Christian is still possible, and that Christian belief can still engage with its core tradition while being open to the newest philosophical, scientific and religious insights.

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