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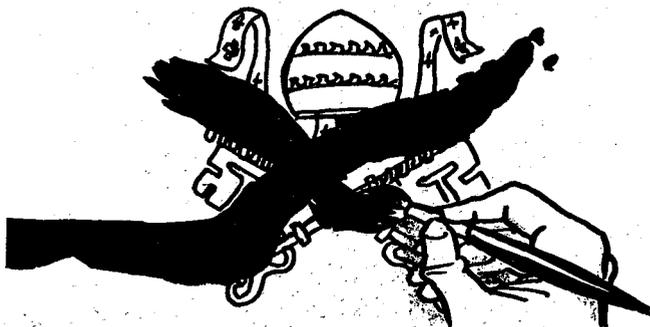
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# Hans Küng:

## Infallible?



## An Inquiry

W. H. MARSHNER

Hans Küng calls the preface to his new book "candid," a word whose ambiguity is the key to this deeply equivocal volume. In "candid confession" it implies a full disclosure of one's subjective state; in "candid camera" it implies unvarnished portrayal of the objectively real. Küng wants it both ways: his own growing sense of isolation since the Council is simultaneously predicated of the vast majority of the whole Church. Küng claims to know of no one who "really" believes in the birth control ban; Ignaz Döllinger said the same a century ago about infallibility.

The crisis point, then, is *Humanae Vitae*. Küng is certain the prohibition can never be reversed. It is the consistent and universal teaching of the Church for centuries, he says, reaffirmed with all possible exactitude in 1930, received by all the faithful under pain of eternal damnation, and now promulgated again by the highest authority. The only way to escape the teaching—Küng is honest enough to see it—is to reject the whole magisterial system. Hence, the present book.

It is, he says, an "inquiry." And there he is not so honest. It is a fist-swinging attack on the entire juridical structure of the Church, on the history of the papacy, and on the certitude of dogma. It is not a question but an answer. To be sure, it raises such questions as whether other theologians will follow along, and whether Rome will let him get away with it; but *not* whether the pope is infallible. That, after *Humanae Vitae*, is the excluded possibility.

One is not surprised, therefore, that Küng is now silent about theological method. He cannot tell us what the ground rules of "inquiry" are. To ask about the status of a dogma, even of all dogmas, implies the tools of dogmatic theology; to ask about Church history, those of positive theology. Or, if one candidly acknowledges the suspension of faith, there are the methods of the secular historian. Küng knows these distinctions, especially as his friend Yves Congar has developed them with singular brilliance. The silence, then, invites an educated guess: Küng is employing no method known to Catholic scholarship, is experimenting (confusedly) with a Protestant one, and hopes thereby to obscure the suspension of Catholic faith.

The closest we get to a stated norm is Küng's recurrent claim to judge all things in the light of the "gospel." What this "gospel" is, however, is less evident. It is not the New Testament; that much is clear when Küng demands civil divorce and total liberty in mixed marriages in the name of the "gospel." One is further perplexed when Küng says that St. Paul contrasted "law" and "gospel," for there is no place in the entire Pauline corpus, nor in Acts, where *nomos* (law) and *euaggelion* (gospel) are contrasted in any way. Paul speaks of a "law" of Christ (esp. Rom. 8:2); but of a "gospel" understood as antithesis of all law he knows nothing. Where the contrast does appear is in Luther, whereon may hang the tale. For it looks as though Küng, like Luther, is working from a personally formed and highly selective theological "synthesis," a construct based on favorite data in the New Testament, and boldly marketed as "gospel."

But since Küng is not a fundamentalist, he cannot claim that even this "gospel" is the final norm. He

has fixed its limits and content by "research." Like any neo-orthodox Protestant, Küng's ultimate norm is historical criticism (or the "consensus" of modern scholarship). This it is which adjudicates all questions about Gospels, Councils, and Popes. This is the *norma normans*.

*Infallible?* An Inquiry falls into two main parts, the second being "auxiliary," Küng says, to the first. Most commentators, however, have ignored the structure, and seized upon the second part as the kernel of the book. This is the now famous critique of propositions. Küng asserts that the idea of an infallible magisterium rests upon the assumption that there are infallible propositions: what else would such a magisterium teach? Yet the fact is, according to Küng, that there are no such things. All propositions are "fundamentally ambiguous," signifying different and even opposite things depending on context, usage, intention, etc. Thus "every proposition can be true and false." (It is only fair to say that Küng appears to sense something wrong in this argument: he has no sooner spoken of the fundamental ambiguity of propositions than he seems to take it all back by admitting that propositions *can* state the truth, and that they are not equally true and false. On the whole, though, and certainly wherever it suits his purpose, he insists on the true-and-false character of all propositions.)

**K**üng's vacillation is rooted in a major blunder—he has run afoul of three major distinctions. The first is that between propositions (or truths) and sentences. The Church has taught that what is revealed in Scripture is not the form of words (sentences) but the truths that those sentences convey. Thus she both avoids the Protestant dilemma of "verbal" inspiration and establishes her own power to reformulate. The Church is committed "irreformably" to all her truths but to none of her prose.

The second distinction is that between truth and successful communication. The truth of a proposition is its conformity with being and has nothing to do with the identity of the speaker's intention with the auditor's understanding. Never has the Church been so foolish as to maintain that her doctrinal definitions could not be twisted, distorted or otherwise abused. The whole history of heresies is proof to the contrary. The Church claims only that her propositions, rightly understood, convey faithfully the Truth committed to her; and that as her formulations become more precise, heretics will find it increasingly difficult to invent forms of words which contain *both* her truth and their own misunderstanding. In that she has been right; in every crisis the heretics have ultimately given up the attempt and gone openly into anti-Catholic counter-assertion.

The third distinction is that between ordinary propositions and those containing a mystery. From several examples Küng makes it clear that he rejects infallibility because such propositions as "God exists"

can never be wholly clarified (hence, remain open to misinterpretation). But again he is beating a straw man. The Church has never supposed that her theology, however technical, removes one scintilla of mystery. What is maintained is that when the Church defines proposition *x*, it contains the *same* mystery as that contained in some previously defined or revealed version of proposition *x*.

On the other hand, Küng tries to maintain a distinction where there is none: between "infallible" propositions and garden variety "true" ones. As far as their truth is concerned, these are all the same—the only difference being that "infallible" propositions have been promulgated by an infallible authority. Küng has set up a transported epithet and then fallen all over it. That is why it is not in the least surprising that his hot new "problem" has never been discussed in the Church before.

Küng's theory has elicited the comment that he may be experimenting with a multi-valued logic. Logical systems using three or more "truth-values" (as opposed to the traditional true-false duality) have been proposed and developed formally since 1921. Certain of these systems have found practical application in quantum and probability theories. Nor is it far-fetched to postulate their application to theology. Scholastics like Suarez anticipated a multi-valued logic (without recognizing it) in commenting upon the *objectum fidei*. But none of this research has anything to do with what our Hans is up to. For if he is saying that a proposition is *sometimes* true and *sometimes* false, he remains entirely within conventional two-valued logic. If he is talking about a third, true-false "value," he is foundering in contradictory premises. But if, as seems most likely, he is saying that *all* propositions are true *and* false, he is, besides foundering again, positing not three or more values but, quite obviously, only *one!* That theory would make all propositions logically equivalent and hence preclude the existence of any logical system whatsoever.

So much for Küng's "auxiliary" argument. We may turn to the main one which, in outline, is a rambling attack on the magisterium from an historical point of view. Vatican II is mined for "new insights" as a starting point. Then we are back in Apostolic times, where, of course, most of what the Church thinks to have been the case is said to be unfounded. We are then off upon a furious gallop through Church history, wherein we happen upon eight or so magisterial errors (no fooling around with true-and-false here) and an immense number of outrageous papal usurpations. Breathless, we arrive at Vatican I, keystone of the infallibilist edifice, and find it, of course, full of holes.

• Küng's technique for reading the texts of Vatican II consists of taking "inside dope" and the alleged "intent" of the conciliar "majority" as authoritative rather than the texts themselves. These latter are held to be "compromises" (here a bad word) between the "old" and the Spirit-given "new." Therefore, no text of Vatican II can be allowed to speak for itself. As an alternative Küng appeals to clauses buried here and there, which, integrated within a context supplied by

his own theology, acquire a significance startlingly different from what they would bear if interpreted within their documentary context. Similar to what certain biblical scholars have done to *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, this procedure, applied to the Council, leads to the conclusion that there exists, besides the publicly available meaning of the decrees, a hidden meaning—a gnosis shared only by certain ex-periti and their collaborators, who alone know the full significance of the buried phrases. The theological absurdity of this sort of thing needs no further comment.

• Throughout, Küng likes to load his dice by taking political terms he thinks the reader will like (liberal, democratic) and pinning them to theological phenomena he wishes the reader to approve of (Scripture, Vatican II). The contrasting lexical stock (conservative, absolutist) is applied to what he wants the reader to reject (Virgin Mary, Vatican I). It is a method that has all the intellectual probity (and cognitive merit) of a “commercial message.”

• Küng’s great bugbear is neo-scholastic “textbook theology.” What he means by this deprecating expression is unclear: Is this system found only in textbooks? Is it studied only by beginners? Does Hans Küng know neo-scholasticism only from textbooks? Never mind, says Küng; the methods of these “Roman” theologians are “virtuoso dialectic,” “tricks,” “perversion and distortion.” Such slurs stem, one discovers, from an invincible incapacity to enter the spirit of traditional theology, to take seriously its definitions or appreciate the cogency (and the flexibility!) of its syllogism. Given this alienation, Küng is able to import his own charmingly home-made notions into traditional formulas to produce, in all innocence, catastrophes like the structure of the following argument:

1. Unstated Küng premise: infallibility is a super-human incapacity to err in anything.

2. Traditional formula: the Apostles, in union with Peter, were infallible.

3. *Sed contra*: the Bible depicts the Apostles as “weak and fragile human beings,” sinners, who make mistakes like anybody else and need the “intercession, comfort, and support of their fellow Christians.”

4. *Ergo*: the text-book theology is unfounded! One has to rub one’s eyes, but there it is.

• There is also a quaint concept of the apostleship:

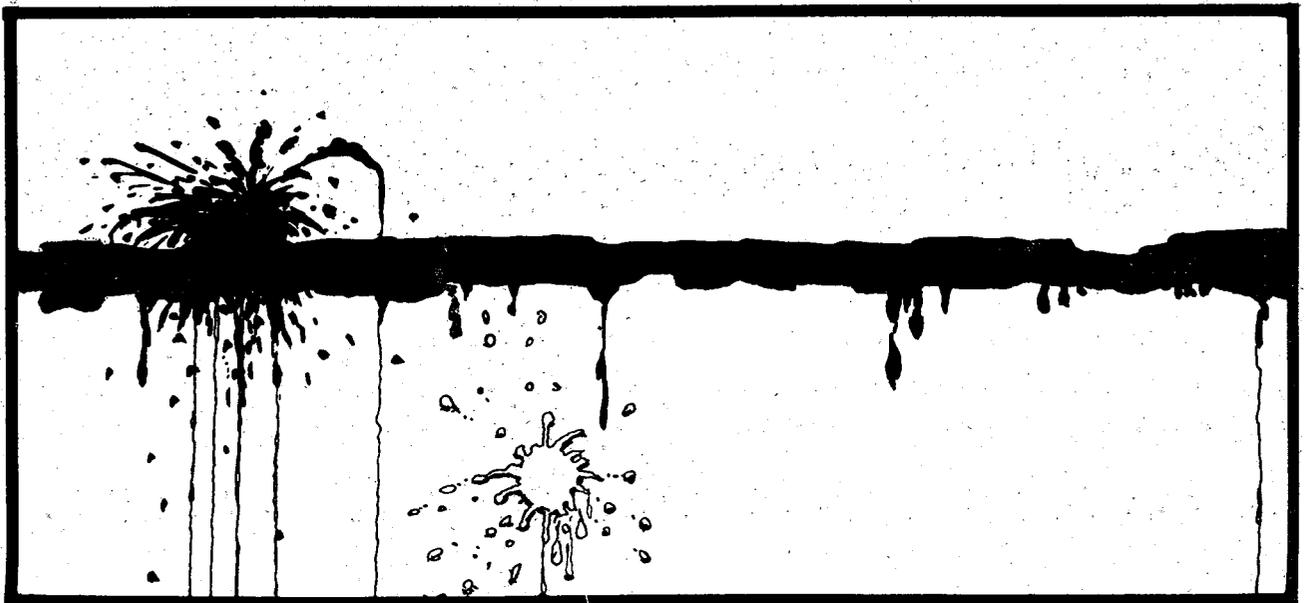
1. “As the immediate, primary witnesses and primary messengers of Christ, the apostles could not *a priori* [sic] be replaced or represented by any successors. . . .”

2. “Even though there can be no new apostles, the mandate and function of the apostles remain. . . . Apostolic mission and apostolic ministry, however, are primarily carried on further by the *whole Church*. *Every Christian* is in the succession of the Apostles in so far as he strives for harmony with the apostolic testimony. . . .”

Let the reader pass over the exegetical and doctrinal sins of these juxtaposed propositions in order to savor the full impact of their logic.

Is it *as* primary (in time?) witnesses that the apostles are un-succeedable? Does their *function* define them as such? But then Küng’s (2) must be false. Or is it only *as persons* that the apostles are irreplaceable, the function living on? But nobody supposes that persons succeed other persons *as* those persons; I cannot *be* my grandfather *redivivus*; so, in that case, Küng’s (1) is trivial. Meanwhile, if it *is* the function of primary (in authority?) witness that lives on, Küng’s (1) is false.

Again, there is the leap involved in predicating anything of the *whole Church* and then, without further ado, of every Christian! Küng himself holds the whole Church to be indefectible in some sense; does he hold every Christian to be indefectible in the same sense? And if not, the suspicion grows that the “neuralgic point” of Küng’s annoyance with the “textbooks” is a paralyzing incapacity for coherence; that his discomfort with “Roman” theologians is the discomfort of the tone-deaf with pitch-pipes!



- Having conjured with the first century, Küng plays about for several clumps of pages with ancient and medieval Church history in order to get some "goods" on the Holy See. It is thin stuff, especially since he cannot find anything that wasn't handled vastly better by Döllinger. Küng himself seems to be aware of wasting his time. Bad-mouthing papal history was hot stuff in 1520 and warmed a few imperial fires in 1870 but is marketable today only in Orange lodges.

- There remains Küng's greatest problem: the decree of Vatican I defining the infallibility. All possible manipulations of Vatican II documents, he admits, have not helped him. The Döllinger approach (the Council was not free, hence lacks authority) he exploits in a few passages, but ultimately rejects. Küng knows, further, that the decree is theologically a masterpiece of its genre. Too clear to admit of subversive "interpretations," *Pastor Aeternus* leaves Küng but one option: he must deny its truth outright.

**B**ut how to go about it and keep some pretense of being a Catholic theologian? Küng doesn't know, can't decide, and so resolves upon two mutually exclusive strategies. The second strategy is the "auxiliary" argument about propositions, which has already taxed us, but which (the reader should bear in mind) excludes, as a philosophical argument, historical relativism. Küng's first and preferred strategy, on the other hand, depends upon it.

He asserts that an "historical problematic" affects not only the "opportuneness" of Vatican I's definition but also "its very truth." The substance of the "problematic" is this:

Would papal infallibility ever have been defined in 1870 if the majority of the council fathers had not grown up in the period of the political restoration and of the anti-enlightenment and anti-rationalist romanticism of the first half of the century? . . . And would papal infallibility have been defined in 1870 if the whole work of the Restoration had not been threatened in its foundations during the second half of that century by liberalism?

Küng concludes from these questions that looking back on Vatican I from our own vantage point, we may say one of two things. If we are disposed to polemicism, we may say that the Council was the work of sinister reactionaries; if we are disposed to charity, we may say that its participants were simply responding to *their* historical situation, that at a time of anti-clerical revolution, infallibility was *their* way of showing the uniqueness of Christ's claims—a way that could not bind men of a different age for whom the alarms of the nineteenth century are irrelevant. Between the two dispositions, Küng's mood vacillates; but again, on the whole, he contrives to have it both ways.

This historicism, angry or benign, is of course the very recipe by which each generation of Protestant

theologians cooks, devours, and evacuates the previous generation. The effect of Küng's "problematic" is to remove Vatican I's definition from the context of faith (where the providence of God would be seen as working through the Council, *even if* its members had baseless or inadequate motives) and place it squarely in the domain of yesterday's politics.

**W**e see at last the full implication of Küng's *normans*. Beginning from the fashionable theory that revelation is primarily in the acts of God rather than in "truths," Küng can conclude that the Christian *validity* of Conciliar teachings is not in their propositions but in the history that allegedly prompted those propositions. Applied to Chalcedon, Trent, Vatican I (and, as we can now see, to Küng's peculiar handling of Vatican II), this "new" theology makes the historian (in union with the "consensus" of competent historians) the ultimate judge of "what the council intended to say" and hence of its doctrine. In fact, the "new" theology is Döllinger all over again. If it is right, then he was right; and no magisterial action against him has any more validity than the reading of history on which the action is based! Hence all Church authority dissolves (and all certitude of faith disappears) before the private interpretations of "scholarship." It is, as Cardinal Manning so perfectly foresaw, "the last and most subtle form of Protestantism."

Against this presumption, the Church must say just one thing: that she alone is the final judge of her doctrine and of her history. She can claim that authority because in her divine Head she precedes her own history. From Him, she possessed the fullness of her faith before there was a history of that faith, and she possesses even today that same fullness. She alone, therefore, through her authoritative offices, is the *sole* judge of tradition, both written and unwritten. Let the "scholars" traverse what trackless jungle of alleged facts they will, let them produce all the probable conclusions they want; she alone *knows*, because to her alone did God promise the fullness of Truth.

That is a joyful faith that Hans Küng cannot share. His is a sad world in which God remains in His Heaven, alone infallible; the Church on earth can claim nothing from Him except some vague indefectibility which preserves her from no error and offers mankind, lost in a swamp of existential "meanings," no firm ground, no light. It is, in the last analysis, the *visibility* of the Church that Küng has lost. All that is left to him is the old "high-Church" dream: a toothless "petrine ministry" agreed to for sweet unity's sake by all the "people of God" who see no cause to wrangle if nobody is certainly right.

Where, in this darkness, are men with the guts of the old Protestants? In high earnest to save their souls and desperate for an infallible truth (they hadn't the time for any other kind) they followed any schism that would promise it to them. For their wild longing there was, and is, but one balm. Blest are they who have found it and cry with one voice: *Habemus Papam!*