

Notes and Comments

ON THE WITHDRAWAL OF HANS KÜNG'S AUTHORIZATION TO TEACH

What to many people may seem like a bolt from heaven is, in reality, the culmination of ten years of intensive and tragic investigation. No objective judgment can be formed without access to the nearly 200-page appendix to the statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Conference of German Bishops.¹ It contains all the relevant documents from 1967 to 1979. When studied without prejudice, the surface perturbances recede and the real issues come to the fore. In the following I shall refer to source materials by page numbers in the Appendix of the German Bishops' statement.

One can be justifiably annoyed by

Küng's poor taste in publicly questioning and throwing doubt on the Pope's Christianity and then falsely claiming that in retaliation he was deprived of his teaching position. The disrespect with which he addresses the representatives of the Congregation is also irritating. But most aggravating is his obstinacy in leaving the bishops' questions forever unanswered and, instead, focusing attention on Roman procedures which he deems unsatisfactory. His technique of prolonging the proceedings is, to say the least, provoking: he answers invitations too late or with a curt "I have no time," or "it is mid-semester," or "I am traveling," or "I am writing a book." It is amazing that the Roman and German authorities have had that much patience with him.

One follows with anguish how those who were sincerely well disposed toward him become frustrated and finally write him off: Cardinal Volk writes, "I beg you from the depth of my heart to speak for once with Rome." Cardinal Doepfner toward the end of his life concedes that if at long last the difficulties are not cleared up, "I will hardly be in a position to help" (p. 115). The Bishop of Rottenburg also loses heart: "An unpleasant sequel is unavoidable" (p. 185). Küng, in answer to continued pleas for revision, occasionally makes a promise or holds out hope for explanations to come in a new book.

The Roman procedures were "closed for the time being" on April 9, 1974, with a final warning to Küng to cease teaching what is incompatible and irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine, such as denying that the Church's teaching authority derives directly from Christ or asserting that lay persons can validly celebrate the Eucharist in an emergency. Küng totally ignores these admonitions and says so specifically

in his preface to Hassler's second book on Vatican I, as well as in his theological meditations on truth inherent in the Church. At that time the Sacred Congregation called it to his attention that "it was the Church's authority that gave him the faculty to teach theology, in the spirit of the Church's authority and not from a point of view that distorts these teachings or casts doubt on them" (p. 104).

In the course of time dogmatic problems have become more numerous. Particularly after *To Be a Christian* appeared, not merely the Church's authority but central tenets of Christology, teachings about the Trinity, about redemption and grace have been questioned. One shares the wish that Küng would take a clear stand on the essentials of the *Credo*. His answer is gruff: "I find it highly unreasonable that a confession of faith is demanded from me, a tenured professor of theology" (p. 147). But a few sentences further in the document he states: "These extremely subtle and complex questions that are asked from all theologians cannot be answered by the catechism" (p. 148). Avoidance tactics first to one then to the other side? Surely. But it still leaves us on the periphery of the real problem.

The central focus is fundamentally simple: To Küng, Church authority derived from Christ is an unproven belief that would have to be thoroughly discussed (with him) before he would accept a statement or question based on this premise. Actually, he gave the answer—a negative one—in his book on the Church. He questions the continuity between Christ and the Church (echoing Bultmann) and therefore a theologian (read here Karl Barth) stands only under the authority of the Word of God and not under that of the Church. "What authority

validates my opinion? The authority of the Word of God, whom as a theologian I have to serve" (p. 102). Hence, it is logical that he continues to demand that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith first prove to him theologically its authority. Therefore, "to quote only those teaching documents which refer to my questions is a vicious circle; what should be proven is taken for granted" (pp. 51, 74). "It is an easily seen through *petitio principii* to present as a proof those authoritative texts which... are exactly questioned" (p. 178).

Küng wants Rome to engage in a debate with him. He invites the members of the Congregation to come to his seminar. Their travel expenses to Tübingen would be reimbursed (p. 52). If Rome does not clarify scientifically its claim to authority, the demand for "a colloquium is meaningless for both parties" (p. 73). But the "the Congregation is incapable" of giving proof to its empty statements (p. 53). Therefore, it should hold its peace and leave the theologians to "conduct their inquiries without obstacles" (p. 78).

Contesting that the Church's authority issues from Christ has a corollary: the demand for unlimited freedom of theological research. Küng repeatedly refers to an allegedly lost document demanding this freedom that was signed by 1,360 theologians. They granted bishops the office of pastoral evangelization but claimed for themselves the authority of "scientific teaching" and resisted "any form of even the subtlest inquisition" (p. 77). "Pastoral" is to be strictly differentiated from "theological." When question-

¹Obtainable from the Secretariat of the Conference of German Bishops, Kaiserstrasse 163, D-500 Bonn, Germany.

ed about this, Küng said: "Yes, a Catholic Church community was possible and again could be possible without a strongly authoritarian leadership (such as monopoly by the Church's teaching authority to interpret Scripture and tradition) and with free, unbiased scientific research" (p. 179).

What for Catholics are "binding truths" are for him "not so simple" considering the problems—discerned even in Rome—that were created by the magisterium's decisions from Galileo through the Syllabus to the encyclicals *Humanae Vitae* and *Humani Generis* (p. 96). Though behind these actions stand old and new conciliar and papal definitions, these on their part do not claim to be "infallible statements" (p. 172). Ultimately, all statements are historically determined (p. 75). Hassler's book on Vatican I is grist to Küng's mill. In his preface to this book he throws all reserve to the winds and demands a complete revision (to be understood as "withdrawal") of the Council's statements (p. 181).

Can one be astonished by Küng holding this point of view, the inner consistency of which is beyond question? (His personal honesty has not been questioned.) I don't think so. These are good Protestant points of view, which many evangelical Christians hold *optima fide* and the reasons behind them are understandable even to Catholics. All these faithful can profess *Una Catholica* if they understand by that term the "general, all inclusive church which continues in faith and community despite all ruptures." To this Küng also professes allegiance (p. 180). But it is harder to accept the none-too-light cross with which this church would saddle its followers by placing itself under the sole authority of the Word of God and simultaneously submitting this to the forum of the historical-critical

method. Küng fully understands this difficulty.

It is not necessary here to go further into the Catholic position, which sees in the hierarchical office (of bishops, councils, popes) a line of communication, established by Christ himself, between the Incarnate Word of God and ourselves and which, of course, implies apostolic succession. Two things should be clear about the Catholic position: as the Word of God in the Gospels speaks in human terms understandable to every man, so the essential truths of the *Credo*, of the Councils, of the catechisms, have a transparent meaning which is pre- or supra-theological, if one means by theology a specialized scientific discipline. Theology can study and explain these truths but it cannot critically wipe them out. Among these truths belongs also, according to Catholic understanding, the ecclesiastical authority of the successors of the apostles—firmly based on the words of the New Testament, with Peter as the unifying link—whose task is to announce the Word of God but also to keep it uncontaminated. This implies the possibility of examination (that terrible word "inquisition" means nothing more than "examination") which, as the painful case of Küng shows, can be conducted fairly. The writings of the New Testament tell of several such housecleanings, which then as now were simply definitions of an already existing situation. No doubt, spiritual authority in the hand of imperfect man is a dangerous instrument. The closer something is to the holy the more it can be misused—otherwise we would not have had the Reformation.

In closing, I can't but remember that shortly before his death, Karl Barth told me that Hans Küng (whom he began to mistrust) had paid him a visit and said to him

triumphantly: "We will witness a new Reformation in the Church." And Barth answered "A reform would suffice."

Hans Urs von Balthasar
(Translated by Andrée Emery)

RELIGIOUS HARASSMENT IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The following letter, by a group of Czech and Slovak priests, was recently sent to Pope John Paul II. The translation below was made in Holland:

Holy Father,

In this time of distress we turn to you, for you are the shepherd of all Catholic believers, and have the right to know what we are suffering from. Reality has convinced us that we have nobody to speak on our behalf among the present representatives of the Church. The state organization of priests, which professes to speak for the Catholics, in fact only aims at making religious life die out systematically. Efforts to obtain justice from state functionaries ended in criminal prosecution of those who had taken the initiative.

That is why this is the only course we can follow. Very many believers would readily add their signatures to ours, but cannot do so for various important reasons. On principle, we do not ask it of the good priests among the Church-leaders, fearing that God's people might have to lose them. We, too, know that, by signing, we risk all sorts of persecution, but we feel we have to act this way. When competent spokesmen keep silent, there simply has to be somebody else to express the deepest feelings of God's people. Otherwise, the permanent silence

from the side of the Czech and Slovak Church might be interpreted as a sign of approval with the fact that it is being gradually liquidated. And whoever renounces his own right of existence will not find any help anywhere on earth.

But our Church lives and wants to live; to live its own life. It is aware of the fact that it has been sent by Christ, and that is why it cannot be content with the so-called "satisfaction of religious needs."¹ Its wish to live according to the Gospel is also proved by the increasing number of instances of oppression of religious life by administrative measures and police action. That oppression reached its climax, lately, in a large-scale campaign undertaken by the State Security Service, which was the immediate cause for this letter.

On 10 September 1979, the houses of a large number of believers and priests in Moravia, Bohemia, and Slovakia were searched. On the whole, religious literature was taken away, such as your encyclical, a book about you, and pictures of you with a prayer for you on them. Interrogations and arrests from the side of the police followed, while up until now eight people are being remanded. They, and others, were accused of "unlawful enterprise activities" (section 118 of the Penal Code). By that is meant the work of helpful believers who do their utmost partially to satisfy by a substituted provision² the hunger for the literature we lack here, but

¹This is how, following the Soviet Union legislation, the Czechoslovakia law formulates religious freedom, which is said to be guaranteed.

²The "substituted provision" as referred to here practically amounts to the multiplying and spreading of writings which state publishers refuse to print and bring out. Takers of these writings sometimes give some money in order