

A Muslim's Reflections on Hans Küng

by

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THE observations and commentaries on Hans Küng's essay* made here below come not from the point of view of a particular school of Islamic theology, but from that of the Islamic tradition itself, and in fact of tradition as such. To have lived and experienced any religion fully is in a sense to have experienced all religions. To have meditated on the basic intellectual problems concerning a particular religious community is to have confronted these problems as they face people of religion everywhere. The unity of the human race and the universality of the intellect as it functions in human beings are such as to permit the followers of one religion to think about and comment on the theological perspectives of another religion, especially in a world such as ours where traditional barriers between various civilizations have been lifted.

Yet, precisely because it is religion which actualizes the potentialities of those who follow it and provides an objective cadre for the functioning of that inner revelation within humanity, which is the intellect—in its original rather than debased meaning—particular problems of each religion remain its own. In commenting upon Küng's theses, I am therefore fully aware that I have no right to deal with the specific religious and dogmatic problems of Catholicism and might be accused of being simply an intruding outsider were I to deal with specific issues of the Catholic faith and practice in a purely Catholic context. Still, it is amazing how religious issues in one religion are also confronted by other religions and how the weakening or floundering of a particular religious universe can affect others. It is with full awareness of these factors and in humility as an outsider to the scene of present-day Catholic theology that the following comments are offered.

At the beginning of his essay Küng writes, "However, the Second Vatican Council demonstrated that this [neo-scholastic] theology was unable to deal effectively with the contemporary problems of humanity, the church and society." The question to ask is whether the neo-scholastic theology, which is a revival of Thomism, is unable to deal with contemporary problems because of innate flaws in Thomism, or because its principles have not been applied to contemporary problems or because these problems are for the most part pseudo-problems brought into being as a result of ill-posed questions. Is Thomism true? If it is true, that is, if it is

* The present article is a commentary on an essay by Hans Küng published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Vol. 17, No. 1, Winter 1980).

an expression of metaphysical truth in its Christian form, then it cannot cease to be true. Its language might need modification but its message and content must continue to possess validity. And if there are other forms of theology necessary in the present context, are these other forms of theology different ways of explaining the eternal message of Christianity in a particular historical context with full consideration of the contingent factors involved, or are they no more than theologizing about passing and ephemeral experiences or so-called scientific “truths” which often cease to be of any great relevance from a theological point of view by the time the theologians have finished theologizing about them?

Truth must always come before expediency and even timeliness, especially as far as theology is concerned. Theology is after all literally “the science of God.” It should explain the temporal with reference to the Eternal and not the Eternal in the light of temporality which is made to sound very *real*, central, and important by being baptized as the human condition, the modern world, or urgent human problems. There is no more urgent a human problem than the task to distinguish between the real and the Eternal on the one hand and the illusory and ephemeral on the other. The plurality of theologies is valuable only if it means different paths opening unto the same Truth, as it was in fact the case in early Christianity, and not of relativizing the Absolute and positing pseudo-philosophies based upon the confusion between the Eternal and temporal orders alongside authentic forms of theology which remain conscious of the basic mission of theology as the study of God and of creation in the light of God and God’s Wisdom and Power.

Küng is not even satisfied with post-Conciliar theology because, in his words, “since modern exegesis was generally neglected in otherwise productive movements of theological renewal, such as the patristic-oriented ‘ressourcement’ (H. De Lubac, J. Daniélou, H. U. von Balthasar) as well as the speculative-transcendental meditation of Karl Rahner, their insufficiency became more and more apparent.” Would a theology inspired by St. Augustine and Origen be insufficient because it does not take into account modern exegesis, by which is usually meant the so-called “higher criticism”?

This issue is quite sensitive from the Islamic point of view since Islam is based wholly on a sacred book. For it, “higher criticism” can only mean the unveiling of the inner meaning of the sacred book (*ta’wīl* or the *kashf al-mahjūb* of the Islamic esotericists). Moreover, this process can only be achieved through the use of the higher faculties of humanity associated with the Intellect which resides at the heart or center of humanity’s being. It implies an inwardness and drawing within the “book” of one’s own being in order to reach the inner meaning of the Sacred Book. It certainly has nothing to do with archaeology or rationalistic analysis of texts and documents. The so-called “higher criticism,” which in fact reduces the really “higher,” which can be nothing but revelation, to the level of human reason, is based on the twin error which in fact characterizes so much of modern historicism and also science.

These two errors are, first of all, the presupposition that anything for which there is no historical document did not exist, and secondly, that there is a kind of “uniformitarianism” in the laws and conditions of human society and the cosmos similar to what is posited as the key for the interpretation of the past by geologists and paleontologists. According to this thesis the systems, laws, and relations between cause and effect must have existed in days of old, let us say at the time of Christ, in the same way and mode that they can be observed today. To walk on water must be “understood” and explained away because no one can walk on water today. There is no better way to kill the inner meaning of a sacred text and the very elements which allow the human mind to ascend to higher levels of being than the so-called “higher criticism” whose result is the death of the meaning of sacred scripture as revealed meaning and the gate to the spiritual world.

Neither “higher criticism” nor the exegesis of sacred scripture, based on the common experience of a humanity which has been cut off from spiritual nourishment and lives in a world of ugliness, which stultifies the heart and the mind, can cause a theology based on the eternal truths of any religion to fail. If such a theology does exist and it appears to have “failed,” the failure must be laid to those who have not succeeded in understanding it rather than to the theology itself, provided the theology in question is a veritable “science of God.” It would be better to have a true theology understood by just one person than a diluted or distorted theology based on compromising the truth but expressed by the multitude. Surely in the question of religious truth it cannot be numbers that reign; otherwise what could one say concerning the lives and actions of that very small minority known as the early Christian martyrs?

The author believes that the only theology that could survive the future would be one which blends the two elements of “a ‘return to the sources’ and a ‘venturing forth on to uncharted waters’ or... *a theology of Christian origins and center enunciated within the horizon of the contemporary world.*” We could not agree more with the author concerning the doctrine that God is at once the origin and the center, the beginning and the “now.” Therefore, theology must obviously be concerned with origins and the “now” which is the only reflection of eternity in time which binds humankind to the Eternal. But religion is also tradition. It is a tree with its roots sunk in heaven but also with a trunk and branches and a law of growth of its own. Also, like a living tree, a living religion is always amenable to a revivification and rejuvenation. Every “back to the roots” movement which negates the existing trunk and branches, the long tradition which binds the particular person or community wanting to return to the roots to the origin, only weakens the tree as a whole. There are many examples of this phenomenon in nearly all the major religions of the world, and their result is almost always a much impoverished version of that religion which resembles the origin outwardly but is never actually able to return to it. An awareness of Christian origins and center is exemplified most positively in the history of Christianity by St. Francis of Assisi who was called “the second Christ.” If by returning to the origin and center such an event or reality is implied, then certainly what it would produce would

not only live through the future but in fact shape and make the future. What it needs, however, which is most difficult to come by, is another St. Francis.

As for the “uncharted waters,” as a result of the rampant secularism of the Western world, the water is first charted by non-religious forces and then religion is asked to take the map of a secularized cosmos and navigate through it. From the traditional point of view, however, it is religion itself which must lead the way and chart the course. Theology as the intellectual expression of religion must be able to *make* the future and not simply follow the secularized disciplines with the hope of guaranteeing some kind of survival for itself by placating the “enemy” or even ceasing to call a spade a spade. Today there are many physicists who wish theologians would take theology a bit more seriously and modern science somewhat less as far as its theological implications are concerned.

It is in the light of this statement that K ung’s agreement with Schillebeeckx on the “two sources” necessary for the creation of a “scientific theology” must be examined. These sources are “the traditional experience of the great Judeo-Christian movement on the one hand, and on the other the contemporary human experiences of Christians and non-Christians.” First of all in the term “non-Christians” two very disparate elements are covered in an indiscriminate fashion. A non-Christian can be a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist or he or she can be an agnostic or atheist, who in fact is, to say the least, as far removed from the followers of other religions as she or he is from Christianity and Judaism. There are then three groups or “sources” to consider rather than two: the Judeo-Christian tradition, the other religions, and modern secularism. There is no doubt that the time has come for serious theology in the West to take cognizance of the religious and metaphysical significance of other religions, whose presence in a less mutilated and secularized form than much of contemporary Christianity is in a profound sense a compensation sent by heaven to offset the withering effect of secularism and pseudo-religious ideologies. A veritable dialogue in the spirit of an ecumenism which would respect the totality of each tradition and not reduce things to a least common denominator would certainly be a great aid to future theological formulations among Christians. The writings of such figures as Frithjof Schuon have already made accessible the remarkable richness of this perspective.

But as far as the experience of the secular, or even modern science itself, is concerned, we do not believe that this can be a “source” for theology. Rather, it must be an element which contemporary theology must seek to explain in the light of its own principles. It is not theology which must surrender itself to modern science and its findings. Rather it is modern science which must be critically appraised from the metaphysical and theological points of view and its findings explained in this light. As the basic role of religion is to save the human soul from the world and not simply to carry out a dialogue with the “world,” the role of theology is to cast the light of the Eternal upon the experiences of humankind’s terrestrial journey. If modern humanity has experienced the void and nihilism, theology can explain the reason for such an experience and the meaning that such an experience can have in bringing humanity back to God, for as Meister

Eckhardt has said, “The more they blaspheme the more they praise God.” But this experience of the void or despair or injustice cannot be a “source” of theology without doing grave injustice to theology and destroying the sacred which alone can render meaning to human life.

There are a few other particular points in Küng’s statements of agreement with Schillebeeckx which need to be commented upon in a few words. Küng states, “*divine revelation is only accessible through human experience.*” “Human experience” yes, but no ordinary human experience. There is more to consciousness than what we usually experience. There is a hierarchy of consciousness as there is a hierarchy of experience leading to the concrete experience of the spiritual world. Genuine revelation is certainly an experience but not on the same level as everyday experience. It has been said of the messenger of divine revelation in Islam, namely Muhammad, that he was a man among men but not an ordinary man. Rather, he was like a jewel among stones. For Christianity, which is based on the doctrine of the incarnation and the God-man, surely divine revelation cannot be reduced to the level of ordinary human experience, especially in a world where the higher modes of experience available to a human as a theomorphic being have become so rare.

As for revelation coming, in Küng’s terms, “in a lengthy process of events, experiences and interpretations and not as a supernatural ‘intrusion,’” what is meant by revelation here is the disciples’ faith in Christ and not Christ himself who is the revelation in Christianity. But even on the level of the apostles, this secondary mode of “revelation” was not necessarily always a lengthy process. It could certainly have been an immediate “intrusion” and illumination if the substance of the disciple in question were already prepared. For people living today it is hardly conceivable to imagine what it would mean actually to encounter a great saint, not to speak of the Abrahamic prophets or Christ himself.

Closely allied to this assertion is the second point of agreement between Küng and Schillebeeckx, namely that revelation is always reached through the human experience which is never “pure.” This would negate the “supernaturally natural” function of the Intellect in humanity which is able to know objectively and to discern between the absolute and the relative. It would also negate the possibility of “annihilation” or what the Sufis call *al-fanā’*, through which the soul becomes “nothing” and removes itself as the veil, allowing the Supreme Self within to say “I.” If humanity could not know the truth in itself, truth would have no meaning as either the source of objective revelation or that inner revelation which is the illumination of humanity’s inward being. To say that there is no such thing as “pure experience” of the truth is in a sense a negation of his very thesis. We must first accept that there is such a thing as pure experience unveiling the truth in its pristine purity in order to decide that our experience is not pure experience in comparison with this pure experience—of which we must have had some kind of knowledge if we were going to compare something with it.

The third point of agreement between Küng and Schillebeeckx involves the significance of the “*living Jesus of history*” as “*the source, standard and criterion of Christian faith.*” While not

at all questioning this distinctly Christian position, we would only like to add that one cannot at the same time forget or neglect the central significance of that trans-historical Jesus who said, “I am before Abraham was.” Islamic Christology, which emphasizes the trans-historical Jesus, is more akin to certain early forms of Christology rejected by the later councils. It is strange that, now that there is so much attention paid to the “origins” and patristic-oriented theology, contemporary theologians do not emphasize more the Christ as the eternal *logos* to which in fact many young Christians in quest of the rediscovery of integral Christianity are strongly attracted.

Finally, a comment must be made on each of the ten “guiding principles for contemporary theology” which Küng had formulated in his *Existiert Gott?* and which he repeats in the essay under review.

1. “Theology should not be an esoteric science only for believers but should be intelligible to non-believers as well.”

Comment: First of all every living tradition *does need* an esoteric science which, however, is not usually called theology. As for theology, it should of course be written in such an intelligent manner that even the intelligent non-believer would be attracted to it. But it would be better for theology not to lead believers to unbelief in its attempt to be intelligible to unbelievers.

2. “Theology should not exalt simple faith nor defend an ‘ecclesiastical’ system but strive for the truth without compromise in intense scholarly fashion.”

Comment: Certainly the goal of theology must be the truth, but if current scholarly methods are sufficient to attain the truth, then what is the difference between theology and humanistic and rationalistic scholarship? The role of theology cannot but be the defense of the truth as revealed in God’s religion. Then there is the basic question of what guarantee there is in each religion for the protection of the truth. Each religion has a different response. In Christianity it has always been the *magisterium*. How can one prevent the truth from becoming reduced to mere individualistic whim and fancy if the authority of the *magisterium* is denied?

3. “Ideological opponents should not be ignored or hereticized, nor theologically co-opted. Rather their views should be set out in a fair and factual discussion and interpreted *in optimam partem* as tolerantly as possible.”

Comment: Views of opponents should certainly be studied factually and objectively without passion. But truth is one thing and charity another. We must love other people, but that does not mean that we must be indifferent to the truth. Where truth is no longer of any consequence, the question of agreement or opposition is of little importance. It is easy to be tolerant when there are no immutable principles for which one stands. The situation becomes much more difficult when we have faith in a particular form of the truth which we call our religion and then either see those who possess other forms of truth which also come from God (a tree is judged by the fruit it bears), or simply live in error from the point of view of the truth we accept as truth. It is this

much more delicate problem that all “living theologies” of today and tomorrow face and will face not only in Christianity but in all other religions.

4. “We should not only promote but actually practice an inter-disciplinary approach. Along with a concentration upon our own field, we must maintain a constant dialogue with related fields.”

Comment: This is indeed sound advice provided it is not carried out from a position of weakness and with an inferiority complex and that theology remains faithful to its own nature, mission, and genius. Physicists should also follow the same advice, but that does not mean that tomorrow they will go into the laboratory and study subatomic particles through theological methods, even if they draw theological conclusions from their physical studies.

5. “We need neither hostile confrontation nor easy co-existence, but rather a critical dialogue especially between theology and philosophy, theology and natural science: religion and rationality belong together!”

Comment: This is certainly true but it can come about only if theology stops its retreat before the onslaught of both philosophy and natural science. Dialogue is possible only among equals or those nearly equal. Theology has as much a right to study nature and the mind as do science and philosophy. Each discipline has a different approach and hence reaches different aspects of the truth which in its wholeness can only be seen by the science of the whole or of the totality, which is metaphysics in its original sense.

6. “Problems of the past should not have priority over the wide-ranging, multi-faceted dilemmas of contemporary humanity and society.”

Comment: It is mostly as a result of neglecting the past as a source both of tradition and of experience for humankind that so many problems face present-day humanity. Of course, theology must deal with contemporary dilemmas, but always in the light of the truth, which is and does not *become*, and the profound aspects of human nature, which despite appearances remains remarkably the same. It is in the light of this permanence that apparent change should be explained.

7. “The criterion determining all other criteria of Christian theology can never again be some ecclesiastical or theological tradition or institution, but only the Gospel, the original Christian message itself. Thus, theology must everywhere be oriented toward the biblical findings analyzed by historical-critical analysis.”

Comment: Without in any way denying the central role of the Gospels we cannot but be astonished at how this Holy Book could serve as the source for the truth of the Christian faith without the church, the oral teachings, the traditions and all that in fact connect a human being who calls her or himself Christian to the origin of this religion. If the Gospels sufficed, how could there be so many different schools all basing themselves on the same book? Although the phenomenon of the proliferation of schools and “sects” is the same in all religions, nowhere has

it been as great as in Christianity when the Gospels became considered by certain schools as the main source for Christianity. But even in most of these schools, until now, certain other aspects of Christianity as a historical reality have also been accepted. If the Gospels were to be taken as the sole source of theology, again the question would come up as to what guarantees the truth of the religion and what is the origin of the faith in the light of which the Christian reads the Gospels.

8. “The Gospel should not be proclaimed in biblical archaisms nor in Hellenistic scholastic dogmatism nor in fashionable philosophic-theological jargon. Rather, it should be expressed in the commonly understood language of contemporary humanity and we should not stay away from any effort in this direction.”

Comment: We disagree completely with this thesis. The so-called commonly understood language of contemporary humanity is itself no more than a debased jargon, influenced by the mass media and often deprived of the beauty of the language in question. Sacred books are too sublime to be cast in the molds of a language form by the lower psyche of a humanity which is being dragged down-wards by the very “civilization” it has created. Religious texts have always been elements of beauty which have adorned human life, and today humanity is in need of this saving beauty more than ever before. Why should the words of God sound like the outpourings of a football announcer? In other religions such as Islam where the Sacred Book is couched in the immutable beauty of a sacred language, the unchanging nature of the language has certainly not made people any less religious over the ages, even people whose mother tongue has not been Arabic. The experience of Islam should be of some value for those who believe that catering to contemporary jargon will somehow draw people more to religion and the study of the Gospels. Let us not forget that even on the American frontiers the Bible survived in the language of Elizabethan England and was probably more widely read than many of its Americanized descendants are read by the “more-educated” descendants of those cowboys.

9. “Credible theory and livable practice, dogmatics and ethics, personal piety and reform of institutions must not be separated but seen in their inseparable connection.”

Comment: We could not but agree with this thesis, for in all religions method and doctrine must go hand in hand. But as far as reform is concerned, it is most of all the reform of ourselves that is at stake. Modern humanity wishes to reform everything but itself. That is why so many of its reformations become deformations.

10. “We must avoid a confessionalistic ghetto mentality. Instead we should express an ecumenical vision that takes into consideration the world religions as well as contemporary ideologies: as much tolerance as possible toward those things outside the Church, toward the religious in general, and the human in general, and the development of that which is specifically Christian belong together.”

Comment: Expressing an ecumenical vision in the sense already mentioned, by all means, but joining world religions and contemporary ideologies, which are the products of a secularized West, is really an insult to those religions. The much more logical position would be to place all the religions, including Christianity, in one world or camp before which stand the forces of agnosticism and secularism. In fact Christianity, already scarred by several centuries of battle against humanism, secularism, and rationalism, has the choice of either returning to the universe of religion as such, to the sacred cosmos in which Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. still breathe, or attempt to bring about some kind of a wedding with secularism, which itself was born from a void created by the loss of the all-embracing Christian vision in the West. For the sake of humanity, let us hope that the first alternative will be followed and that the West will rejoin the rest of humankind, for from the marriage with secularism there cannot come into being anything but those beasts which shall lay the earth in ruin and to which the *Book of the Apocalypse* has referred so majestically.

I feel somewhat embarrassed criticizing a well-known Catholic theologian, but perhaps this exercise can be seen as a counterpart to the voluminous works written by Orientalists on the present and future of Islam and even Islamic theology. In contrast to some of these works, however, my intentions have derived not from hatred but love for Christianity and the followers of Sayyidnā Isā, as the Quran has called Christ. Moreover, an aspect of the experience of contemporary humanity necessitates a universal perspective on religion and an awareness of the interrelated nature of the spiritual destiny of all of humankind which makes an interest in other religions imperative for a Muslim concerned with the future of his own religion as well as religion as such.