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*The Catholic Church: A Short History.* By Hans Küng. Translated by John Bowden. Toronto: Random House, 2003. ISBN 0 8129 6762 3. Pp. xxv + 230.

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*The Catholic Church: A Short History* is so compelling precisely because it demonstrates Hans Küng's commitment to both the Roman Church and its reform. Few thinkers have had a greater impact on European and North American Catholicism than Küng, a Swiss theologian. Along with Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and other progressive Catholics in the early 1960s, he helped set the stage for Vatican II and the various reforms that have ensued. In his recently published memoir *My Struggle for Truth* (2003), Küng documents his long struggle for a Church open to reform, whether behind the scenes as a pre-Vatican dialogue partner with Rahner or publicly as an outspoken critic of Catholic traditions such as papal infallibility. In fact, his book *Infallible?* (1970) led the Holy See to ban him in 1979 from teaching as a Catholic theologian. Despite his often public confrontations with Church hierarchy, Küng has remained faithful to the Church, its social teachings, and the vocation of the priesthood.

In *The Catholic Church*, Küng offers no pretence of writing a history of the Church as a trained historian or even as an academic who is appropriating established historical methods. Instead, he acknowledges that his history stems from theological questions and is framed by faithfulness to the gospel. As a result, Küng thinks that his history is "both Catholic and evangelical at the same time, indeed ecumenical in the deepest sense of the word" (xxiv). Moreover, in contrast to more traditional historical methods, Küng acknowledges that the primary purpose of the book is not to convey facts about the Church. Rather, its task is to provide an "orientation" to the development of dominant structures, themes and figures in the Church; to historical-critical assessments of the tradition; and to current reform movements that have emerged since Vatican II. Given that Küng offers a warning, especially to Catholics, to be prepared to confront the history of the Church in all of its glory and ignominy (xxv), this orientation approach is perhaps better understood as theological "revisionism." While Küng's many followers have come to expect such an approach, readers coming to him for the first time, and especially Catholic readers, will inevitably encounter a Church that can be neither cynically dismissed as a thoroughly corrupt institution nor idolized as God's sinless community.

The body of the book is divided into eight chapters. The first two address the emergence of the Jesus movement and the rise of the early Christian community. Consistent with his emphasis on "orientation", Küng eschews a traditional chronological account of the early Christian community to frame the narrative in these early chapters. Instead, the chapters are driven by rhetorical

questions: Was Jesus the founder of the Christian church? Was Jesus Catholic? Was Peter ever the bishop of Rome? Was Paul solely responsible for the Gentile Christian church? To each of these questions Küng responds with a definitive “no”; that is, except for the case of Peter’s involvement with the church in Rome, where he offers a qualified “no.” Following academic-historical research, Küng notes that, while there is no New Testament record of Peter in Rome, the *Letter of Clement* (c. 90) and Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) do attest to Peter living and dying there. Yet, Küng also notes that there remains no reliable evidence that Peter, an uneducated Galilean Jew and not a Roman citizen, was ever in charge of the church in Rome. Of course, Küng realizes that many Catholic readers (including those in the Vatican) may take this as an assault on one of the Church’s core doctrines. This would be a mistake—Küng simply wants Catholics to own up to the fact that the tradition contains flaws in order to build a more solid foundation for genuine Catholic faith. Ironically, Küng seems strangely bothered that Peter did not exact more power in Rome than the historical record indicates. Instead of a Jewish-Christian worldview, which Peter would have no doubt promoted as bishop, the churches of the Mediterranean adopted a Hellenistic worldview. After the execution of James in 66 CE and the disbanding of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem in 135 CE, the Jewish emphasis on right practice (orthopraxis) was superseded by the Hellenistic pursuit of reason (orthodoxy). To Küng, this ideological shift led not only to new forms of hierarchy, it also contributed to anti-Jewish attitudes within the church.

The next three chapters deal with the political and ecclesiastical struggles that defined the Catholic Church’s relationship to governing authorities throughout the Middle Ages. In the chapter entitled “The Imperial Catholic Church”, Küng states at the outset that the declaration of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire was not due to the piety of Constantine but to his shrewd mastery of *Realpolitik*; consequently, the resulting ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 CE was an attempt to consolidate power “under one God, one emperor, one empire, one church and one faith” (37). Not every topic is as contentious, however. He intersperses discussions of foundational issues, such as the *filioque* controversy and the investiture dispute under Gregory VII, with provocative, often detailed excursions into matters such as the forged Pseudo-Isadorean Decretals, the papacy of Innocent III, the “heretical” doctrines of the Cathars and Waldensians, as well as the mysticism of Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart.

Despite his distaste for “top-down” theology and ecclesiastical authority, Küng is refreshingly generous in his presentation of the “Father of Western Theology”, Augustine of Hippo (44–53). He does not portray Augustine as a sexually-repressed figure bent on reshaping the church in the image of Roman

society, which some historians have been tempted to do (cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* [1988]); rather, he focuses on Augustine's dialectical and Christological approach to church-state relations. Due in part to Augustine's critique of political authority and his belief in the sinfulness of all human institutions (*City of God*), Küng's Augustine comes away looking remarkably more like a Vatican II reformer than the "father" of medieval theology. By contrast, Küng portrays Thomas Aquinas simply as a brilliant theologian: an unsurpassed scholar who updated Augustine with the help of Aristotle, but also a scholastic who ultimately failed to leave his library or, at least, raise any critique of unbridled papal authority (101–104). Indeed, the more cynical reader may wonder whether Küng is actually substituting Thomas's name for Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine the Church as it confronts the Protestant Reformation and the early pangs of modernity. Küng rightly characterizes the waning authority of the Church as a complex ecclesiastical-sociopolitical phenomenon. On the one hand, there were theological transformations taking place through the work of intellectuals such as William of Ockham and reformers such as Jan Hus; on the other hand, the Borgia and Medici popes had consolidated papal authority in Rome as a means to forestall reformist tendencies associated with Renaissance culture. Developing the reformist orientation of the book, Küng thus sides with Luther instead of Leo X and the Council of Trent in the church split. To Küng, Luther was a faithful Catholic theologian who expressed his disdain for institutional corruption and who promoted a doctrine of justification that was thoroughly Catholic (Küng notes with some pride that this point was confirmed in 1999 with the Roman Catholic-Lutheran consensus document on justification—Küng's 1957 doctoral dissertation is entitled *Justification*). The medieval nature of Trent, Küng laments, inadequately prepared the Church to deal with the scientific, philosophical, and political revolutions in the modern world. The inability to recognize the truth in these often explicitly non-Catholic projects led the Church to forbid various works by Copernicus, Galileo, Bruno, Vanini, Campanella, Descartes, Spinoza, Lessing, Kant, Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, Grotius, and a host of others—a legacy of dreadful blindness that the Church has only recently started to redress. Instead of privileging reactionaries such as Pius VI and Pius IX, Küng points to reformers—Abbé Grégoire, Bishop Ketteler of Mainz, and the little-known Ignaz Heinrich von Wessenberg—as examples of faithful Catholics seeking to revitalize the Church by focusing primarily on practice and not (exclusively) on doctrine.

The final chapter, "The Catholic Church—Present and Future", opens with a sympathetic discussion of Pope Leo XIII and his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The remainder of the chapter is an outline of the Church's inconsistent, if not chequered, record of dealing with the landmark and often-catastrophic events of the

twentieth century. Küng has little positive to say about Pius X or Benedict XV. As for Pius XII, Küng expresses nothing but frustration with the pope's "medieval Counter-Reformation anti-modernist paradigm" (177) and utter contempt with his silence in the face of the Holocaust. By contrast, Küng trumpets John XXIII as the most significant pope of the twentieth-century for his work in calling Vatican II. In turn, Küng spares little in identifying John Paul II as the individual who has done the most to betray the reforms of Vatican II (190–96). Not surprisingly, the book ends with a hope-filled discussion of grassroots reform movements such as "We Are the Church" that emphasize a bottom-up, democratic approach to the Church. To go forward, Küng concludes, the Church will need a Vatican III with a "John XXIV" at the helm.

I used this book in my first-year introduction to Roman Catholicism course. I chose it primarily because of the book's accessibility. Undergraduates in introductory courses often feel overburdened by the sheer volume of material in many history books; as a result, many instructors choose thematic approaches, reserving history texts for courses in church history. This past term, however, I wanted to integrate both the historical and thematic approaches. Küng's book, in conjunction with Thomas Rausch's *Catholicism in the Third Millennium* (2003), actually worked very well on two levels. As a reference, *The Catholic Church* provides students with a timeline to contextualize the themes in Rausch's text, which are based on the Catechism. Students found the chronology at the beginning of the book especially handy, as it focuses on events that have shaped the major themes in the tradition. As a work of theology, the book demonstrates how Catholic theologians can think through their tradition, critiquing it and yet remaining faithful to it. This "doing" aspect of the book is every bit as valuable from a pedagogical standpoint as the resource component.

These strengths in the book do, however, come with limitations. Küng's *Catholic Church* is not suitable for a course in church history, that is, unless the book is included as a sample of post-Vatican II liberal theology. For courses on the history of Catholicism, a more suitable text would be Thomas Bokenkotter's relatively conservative *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (1978). Also, Küng's lack of referencing or providing alternative views on controversial subjects makes the book only marginally useful to academics. Because of this lack of scholarly protocol, there is a tendency toward polemics—in the case of Pius XII, the narrative regrettably devolves into a diatribe. Still, this book has a definite place in the university classroom, in church groups focusing on Vatican II reforms, and in the libraries of bishops around the globe.