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Küng's disagreements with Vatican spark comparison with Protestant views

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

For several decades now, I've been intrigued by the work and thinking of Hans Küng, the Swiss-born Catholic theologian whose authority to teach Catholic theology has been removed by the Vatican.

So naturally, I was attracted to Jason Berry's recent *NCR* story about Küng and his continuing disagreements with the Vatican, particularly with Pope Benedict XVI, who once was Küng's theology department colleague at the University of Tübingen.

Let me remind you of a few things Küng was quoted as saying in that piece:

"You cannot deny that Joseph Ratzinger has faith. But he is absolutely against freedom. He wants obedience. He is against the paradigm of Vatican II. He has a medieval idea of the papacy."

Then Berry reported that Küng believes the sexual abuse scandal in the church and the crackdown on American nuns' leadership group "is a crisis rivaling the Protestant Reformation."

In some ways, what Küng said and is reported to believe is in harmony with my own observation in a July 2012 *NCR* column: "... it looks as if the current hierarchical institutional expression of the Catholic church is dying and will be essentially gone in a few generations -- certainly in the U.S." (I hope I'm not misquoting myself.)

What especially strikes me about all of this is that both the Catholic church today and the modern world of Protestantism seem incapable of getting in front of the currents of change. The very hierarchical structure to which Küng points with some disdain often seems to result in the church having to react to

crises once they break rather than being in a position to prevent them by agile thinking and actions. (Vatican II can be viewed as an exception.) The sexual abuse scandal is but one example of this kind of failure.

By contrast, we Protestants seem incapable of a unified response to cultural, social and theological trends because we are the opposite of hierarchical, which is to say that we are atomized into speaking with hundreds if not thousands of voices.

Here and there, of course, at the congregational level or even at times the denominational level Protestants can and do muster a reasonable, biblical response to fast-moving trends, though in such matters as ordaining women as pastors or allowing the ordination of otherwise-qualified gays and lesbians, our systems clunk along with agonizing slowness rather than allowing us to be leaders in liberation.

Something else about Küng's reaction puzzled me: Does the Catholic church continue to view the Protestant Reformation as a crisis?

It certainly had that character in the early 16th century, when Martin Luther was driving Vatican leaders crazy, resulting, ultimately, in a split church. But when religious leaders view (or continue to view) fast-moving developments as crises instead of as opportunities, their reactions almost certainly do more damage than good.

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In many ways, the Protestant Reformation was an unnecessary result of what could have been a healthy internal reform movement. And now, 500 years later, if even flexible Catholics such as Küng continue to see it as a crisis (though that was Berry's word, perhaps not Küng's), there's not much hope that the modern church is prepared to react quickly and constructively to internal reform movements.

Sometimes segments of the Protestant world seem to come untethered from their theological core and go running off into anarchistic streets. That's what can happen when they toss off the kind of central authority represented by the Vatican.

But on the whole, the thousands of blooming Protestant flowers strike me as a more healthy way of being disciples of Jesus Christ than relying on one man and his deputies for direction and approval.

Still, even in such a hierarchical system, it's a sign of health and dynamism that some people, such as Hans Küng, are willing to challenge the center, even when that center may be hearing but no longer listening.

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