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# Hans Küng

**Hans Küng** (pronounced [ˈhans ˈkʏŋ]; born 19 March 1928) is a Swiss Catholic priest, theologian, and author. Since 1995 he has been President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic (*Stiftung Weltethos*). He is notable for his rejection of the doctrine of papal infallibility.<sup>[1]</sup> Although Küng is not officially allowed to teach Catholic theology,<sup>[2]</sup> his priestly faculties have not been revoked.<sup>[3]</sup> In 1979, he had to leave the Catholic faculty, but remained at the University of Tübingen as a professor of ecumenical theology, serving as an emeritus professor since 1996.

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## Life and work

Küng was born in Sursee, Canton of Lucerne. He studied philosophy and theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and was ordained in 1954. He continued his education in various European cities, including the Sorbonne.

In 1960, he was appointed professor of theology at Eberhard Karls university, Tübingen, Germany. Like his colleague Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), in 1962 he was appointed *peritus* by Pope John XXIII, serving as an expert theological advisor to members of the Second Vatican Council until its conclusion in 1965. At Küng's instigation, the Catholic faculty at Tübingen appointed Ratzinger as professor of dogmatic theology.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Hans Küng**



Küng in 2009

### Orders

**Ordination** 1954

### Personal details

**Born** March 19, 1928  
Sursee, Switzerland

**Nationality** Swiss

**Denomination** Roman Catholic

**Occupation** Professor of Theology, author

**Alma mater** Pontifical Gregorian University

**Signature**



In a 1963 tour of the United States, Küng gave the lecture "The Church and Freedom", receiving an interdict from The Catholic University of America, but an honorary doctorate from St. Louis University. He accepted an invitation to visit John F. Kennedy at the White House.<sup>[5]</sup>

Küng's doctoral thesis, "*Justification. La doctrine de Karl Barth et une réflexion catholique*", was finally published in English in 1964 as *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth*. It located a number of areas of agreement between Barthian and Catholic theologies of justification, concluding that the differences were not fundamental and did not warrant a division in the Church. (The book included a letter from Karl Barth attesting that he agreed with Küng's representation of his theology.) In this book Küng argued that Barth, like Martin Luther, overreacted against the Catholic Church which, despite its imperfections, has been and remains the body of Christ.<sup>[6]</sup>

In the late 1960s, he became the first major Roman Catholic theologian since the late 19th century Old Catholic Church schism to publicly reject the doctrine of papal infallibility, in particular in his book *Infallible? An Inquiry* (1971). Consequently, on 18 December 1979, he was stripped of his *missio canonica*, his licence to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian,<sup>[2]</sup> but carried on teaching as a tenured professor of ecumenical theology at the University of Tübingen until his retirement (*Emeritierung*) in 1996.

For three months in 1981, he was guest professor at the University of Chicago. During this visit to America he was invited to only one Catholic institution, the University of Notre Dame. He appeared on the Phil Donahue Show.<sup>[7]</sup> In October 1986, he participated in the Third Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter held at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.<sup>[8]</sup>

In the early 1990s, Küng initiated a project called *Weltethos* ("Global Ethic"), which is an attempt at describing what the world's religions have in common (rather than what separates them) and at drawing up a minimal code of rules of behaviour everyone can accept. His vision of a global ethic was embodied in the document for which he wrote the initial draft, *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*. This Declaration was signed at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions by religious and spiritual leaders from around the world. Later Küng's project would culminate in the UN's *Dialogue Among Civilizations* to which Küng was assigned as one of 19 "eminent persons." Even though it was completed shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (in September 2001), it was not covered in the U.S. media, about which Küng complained.<sup>[9][10][11]</sup>

In March 1991, he gave a talk titled "No Peace Among Nations until Peace Among the Religions" at UCSD's Price Center. He visited the nearby Beth El synagogue and spoke there on modern German-Jewish relations.<sup>[12]</sup>

In 1998, he published *Dying with Dignity*, co-written with Walter Jens, in which he affirms acceptance of euthanasia from a Christian viewpoint.

In 2003, Küng saw the beatification of Pope Pius IX as evidence of the degeneration of canonizations to "gestures of church politics".<sup>[13]</sup>

In 2005, Küng published a critical article in Italy and Germany on "The failures of Pope Wojtyła" in which he argued that the world had expected a period of conversion, reform, and dialogue but, instead, John Paul II offered a restoration of the pre-Vatican II status quo—thus blocking reform and inter-church dialogue and reasserting the absolute dominion of Rome.

On 26 September 2005, he had a friendly discussion about Catholic theology over dinner with Pope Benedict XVI, surprising some observers.<sup>[14]</sup>

Nevertheless, in a 2009 interview with *Le Monde*, Küng deeply criticised the lifting of the excommunications on the bishops of the Society of Saint Pius X. The interview drew a rebuke from Cardinal Angelo Sodano.<sup>[15]</sup>

Based on *Studium Generale* lectures at Tübingen University, his latest publication, *Der Anfang aller Dinge* (*The beginning of all things*), discusses the relationship between science and religion. In an analysis spanning from quantum physics to neuroscience, he comments on the current debate about evolution in the United States, dismissing those opposed to the teaching of evolution as "naive [and] un-enlightened."

In his 2010 book *Was ich glaube*, he describes his own personal relationship with nature, how he learned to observe correctly, drawing strength from God's creation without falling victim to a false and fanatic love of nature.

In April 2010, he published in several newspapers an open letter<sup>[16]</sup> to all Catholic bishops. In the letter he criticized Pope Benedict's handling of liturgical, collegial and inter-religious issues and also the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. In the letter, he called on bishops to consider six proposals, ranging from speaking up and working on regional solutions to calling for another Vatican council.

He is a signatory of Church 2011, a German-language memorandum demanding reform of the Catholic Church that was promulgated by Catholic theology professors.<sup>[17]</sup>

In 2013, Küng wrote in *Erlebte Menschlichkeit* ("Experienced Humanity") that he believed people had the right to end their own lives if physical illness, pain, or dementia made living unbearable. He further wrote that he was considering the option of assisted suicide for himself as he was suffering from Parkinson's Disease and was losing the ability to see and write with his hands. Küng wrote that he did not wish to follow the example of John Paul II in this case.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Awards

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- 1991 Swiss culture prize;
- 1992 Karl Barth prize;
- 1998 Theodor Heuss Foundation prize;
- 1998 Interfaith gold medallion from the International Council of Christianity and Judaism, London;
- 1999 Federation of Lutheran cities prize;
- 2000 GLOBArt Award;
- 2001 Planetary Consciousness Prize from the Club of Budapest;
- 2003 Grand Order of Merit with star
- 2004 German Druiden medal from the Weltethos Foundation
- 2005 Niwano Peace Prize
- 2005 Baden-Wuerttemberg medal
- 2006 Lew Kopelew prize
- 2007 German freemasonry cultural prize
- 2007 Honorary Citizen of City of Tübingen
- 2008 Honour for civil courage by the circle of friends Heinrich Heine (Düsseldorf)
- 2008 Otto Hahn Peace Medal in Gold from the United Nations Association of Germany (DGVN) in Berlin, for "*outstanding services to peace and international understanding, especially for his exemplary employment for humanity, tolerance and the dialogue between the great world religions*".

- 2009 Abraham Geiger prize from the Abraham-Geiger-Kolleg at the University of Potsdam.
- 2011 Doctor Honoris Causa by the U.N.E.D.(Universidad de Educación a Distancia) Madrid

## See also

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- Parliament of the World's Religions
- Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration

## Writings

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### English translations

- *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, (org. 1964), (40th Ann. Ed. 2004), Westminster John Knox Press, ISBN 0-664-22446-6
- *The Council and Reunion* (1960), London: Sheed and Ward
- *Structures of the Church* (1962), New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons
- *That the World May Believe* (1963), New York: Sheed and Ward
- *The Living Church: Reflections on the Second Vatican Council* (1963), London: Sheed and Ward
- *The Church* (1967), London: Burns and Oates
- *Infallible? An Inquiry* (1971), ISBN 0-385-18483-2
- *Why Priests?* (1971)
- *What must remain in the Church* (1973), London: Collins
- *On Being a Christian* (1974)
- *Signposts for the Future: Contemporary Issues facing the Church* (1978), (ISBN 0-3851-3151-8), 204 pages
- *Freud and the Problem of God: Enlarged Edition*, Edward Quinn (translator), (ISBN 0-3000-4723-1), 126 pages, Yale University Press
- *Does God Exist? An Answer For Today* (1980) (ISBN 0-8245-1119-0)
- *Christianity and the world religions: paths of dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (1986) ISBN 0-385-19471-4
- *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (with Julia Ching, 1988) (ISBN 0-334-02545-1)
- *Art and the question of Meaning* (1980, translated 1981) E. Quinn, Crossroads New York (ISBN 0-8245-0016-4)
- *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology*, J. R. Stephenson (translator), (ISBN 0567093522), 601 pages, Crossroad Publishing Company
- *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (1990) (Translated by Peter Heinegg) (ISBN 0-3854-1125-1)
- *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (1991), New York: Crossroad.
- *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (1992), New York: Crossroad (ISBN 0-8264-0788-9)
- *Great Christian Thinkers* (1994) ISBN 0-8264-0848-6
- *Christianity : Its Essence and History* (1995) (ISBN 0334025710)
- *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (1997) (ISBN 0-334-02686-5)
- *Dying with Dignity: A Plea for Personal Responsibility* (1996, 1998), co-written with Walter Jens (ISBN 0-826-40885-0, ISBN 0-826-41042-1)
- *The Catholic Church: A Short History*. New York: Modern Library Chronicles. 2001. ISBN 0-679-64092-4.
- *My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs* (2003), New York, London: Continuum (ISBN 0-8264-7021-1)
- *Why I Am Still a Christian* (2006) (ISBN 978-0826476982)

- *The Beginning of All Things – Science and Religion* (2007) (ISBN 978-0802807632)
- *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (2007) (ISBN 978-1-85168-377-2)
- *Disputed Truth: Memoirs II* (2008) New York: Continuum (ISBN 9780826499103)

## About

- *Hans Küng his work and his way*, Hans Küng, Hermann Häring, Karl-Josef Kuschel, Robert Nowell, Margret Gentner (1979) (ISBN 0-3851-5852-1)
- *The New Inquisition?: The Case of Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng*, Peter Hebblethwaite, (ISBN 0-0606-3795-1)
- *Hans Küng* (Makers of the Modern Theological Mind Series), John J. Kiwiet, Bob E. Patterson (Series Ed.) (1985) (ISBN 0-8499-2954-7)

## References in popular culture

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- In "The Nonborn King" by Julian May, the third book in the *Saga of Pliocene Exile*, a minor character, Sullivan-Tonn, is referred to as having once been "Küng Professor of Moral Theology at Fordham University"<sup>[19]</sup>

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1. Hans Kung, Daniel T. Spotswood (<http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/kung.htm>)
2. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration", (15 December 1979) [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19791215\\_christi-ecclesia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19791215_christi-ecclesia_en.html)
3. Küng, *The Catholic Church: A Short History* (2002), Introduction, p. xviii: "In 1979 I then had personal experience of the Inquisition under another pope. My permission to teach was withdrawn by the church, but nevertheless I retained my chair and my institute (which was separated from the Catholic faculty). For two further decades I remained unwaveringly faithful to my church in critical loyalty, and to the present day I have remained professor of ecumenical theology and a Catholic priest in good standing. I affirm the papacy for the Catholic Church, but at the same time indefatigably call for a radical reform of it in accordance with the criterion of the gospel."
4. George Ratzinger, *My Brother the Pope*, Ignatius Press (2011), p. 201. "the University of Tübingen offered him (Joseph Ratzinger) in 1966 a newly created chair in dogmatic theology. One theologian in Tübingen who had strongly advocated recruiting Ratzinger was Hans Kung."
5. *Hans Küng*, "Makers of the Modern Theological Mind Series", John J. Kiwiet, 1985.
6. Hans Küng *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth*, 1964, p. 200
7. Briggs, Kenneth A., *New York Times*, (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: 13 December 1981. p. A.29.
8. "Emptiness, Kenosis, History, and Dialogue: The Christian Response to Masao Abe's Notion of 'Dynamic Sunyata' in the Early Years of the Abe-Cobb Buddhist-Christian Dialogue", *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 24, 2004.
9. Global Ethic Foundation ([http://weltethos.org/dat\\_eng/index\\_e.htm](http://weltethos.org/dat_eng/index_e.htm)) Archived ([https://web.archive.org/web/20050826173138/http://www.weltethos.org/dat\\_eng/index\\_e.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20050826173138/http://www.weltethos.org/dat_eng/index_e.htm)) 26 August 2005 at the [Wayback Machine](#)
10. UN – Short Biography (<https://www.un.org/Dialogue/Kung.html>)
11. Hans Küng Interview (Revue Lexnews) (<http://lexnews.free.fr>)

12. "Noted theologian Hans Kung to speak at USCD, synagogue", Rita Gillmon. The San Diego Union San Diego, Calif.: 9 March 1991. pg. B.11
13. Küng, Hans (2003). *The Catholic Church: a short history* ([https://books.google.com/?id=amtEJd\\_4Y9wC&pg=PA173](https://books.google.com/?id=amtEJd_4Y9wC&pg=PA173)). Random House. p. 173. ISBN 978-0-8129-6762-3.
14. "Pope's September surprise" [home edition] John L. Allen Jr., Los Angeles Times, 30 October 2005, pg. M.5
15. Theologian's criticism of pope draws Vatican response (<http://web.archive.loc.gov/all/20090310223518/http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0900892.htm>) at the Library of Congress Web Archives (archived 2009-03-10)
16. "Open letter to Catholic bishops" ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ni/2010/04/hans\\_kung\\_points\\_finger\\_at\\_the.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ni/2010/04/hans_kung_points_finger_at_the.html)), BBC website.
17. "Unterzeichner" (<http://www.memorandum-freiheit.de/unterzeichner/>). *Kirche 2011: Ein notwendiger Aufbruch* (in German). Retrieved 30 October 2017.
18. Heneghan, Thomas (3 October 2013), *Catholic rebel Kueng, 85, considers assisted suicide* (<https://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/03/us-religion-kueng-suicide-idUSBRE9920HX20131003>), Reuters, retrieved 5 October 2013
19. "The Nonborn King", [Tor, 2013], p. 100

## External links

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- Publications by and about Hans Küng ([https://nb-helvetica.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?query=any,contains,%22Hans+K%C3%BCng%22&tab=LibraryCatalog&search\\_scope=MyInstitution&vid=41SNL\\_51\\_INST:helvetica&lang=de&offset=0](https://nb-helvetica.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?query=any,contains,%22Hans+K%C3%BCng%22&tab=LibraryCatalog&search_scope=MyInstitution&vid=41SNL_51_INST:helvetica&lang=de&offset=0)) in the catalogue Helveticat of the Swiss National Library
  - Works by or about Hans Küng (<https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n79-22114>) in libraries (WorldCat catalog)
  - Videos: Lectures from Hans Küng ([https://web.archive.org/web/20110928114442/http://timms.uni-tuebingen.de/List/List01.aspx?rpattern=UT\\_20090\\_\\_0\\_\\_rvzeitspirit\\_000\\_](https://web.archive.org/web/20110928114442/http://timms.uni-tuebingen.de/List/List01.aspx?rpattern=UT_20090__0__rvzeitspirit_000_)), University Tuebingen, (German)
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