

INFALLIBLE? AN INQUIRY CONSIDERED

JOHN JAY HUGHES

St. Louis University, School of Divinity

THEOLOGICAL BLOCKBUSTER, best seller, brilliantly written polemic, popular sensation, ecclesiastical bombshell—Hans Küng's new book, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, is all of these things, and more. From its publication on July 18, 1970 (one hundred years to the day after the definition of papal infallibility in the Constitution *Pastor aeternus* at the First Vatican Council) to year end, the book has sold over sixteen thousand copies in the German original alone and gone through two printings. The Italian translation, published even before the original for motives too obvious to require statement here, predictably caused the editor of *Osservatore romano* to explode like a rocket streaking across the Roman heavens: two lengthy articles in the semiofficial Vatican organ denounced the Swiss theologian and all his works, while failing to convey to readers even the barest summary of the book's contents. Demonstrating anew one of publishing's oldest laws, that a scathing review will sell a book quite as well as a laudatory one, Italian readers bought up within a few weeks all the four thousand copies originally printed. At this point an attempt was made at the highest ecclesiastical level to prevent further dissemination of a work which, it was felt in the Vatican, deserved if ever a book did the label *piis auribus offensivus*. Archbishop Carlo Colombo, a close associate of Pope Paul VI and head of a Vatican commission on Catholic publications, wrote a letter to Fr. Guido Lanfranci, superior of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Nazareth, owner of the Queriniana publishing house responsible for the book, informing him that "according to canon law, a publishing house which wants to be faithful to the Church cannot print works or magazines lacking the necessary imprimatur."¹ The father superior got the message . . . and promptly transferred his rights to the book to a group of Italian laymen, less susceptible than he to ecclesiastical sanctions and pressure, who arranged for the second printing—thus proving that in Italy too the Council has opened doors which not even the Curia can close.

Küng's book soon found praise from Protestant critics. Dr. Willem Visser 't Hooft, long-time General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, confessed to the feeling while reading the book that he had "an atom bomb in my hands. For if these ideas are taken up by Catholics, a completely new situation will arise. Then Protestantism will no longer

¹ Cited from the London *Tablet*, Dec. 19-26, 1970, p. 1260. The lack of an imprimatur is explained below.

have any important reason for its protest."² Catholic reactions, on the other hand, have ranged from reserved to hostile. Prof. Karl Lehmann, *Wunderkind* of the Mainz theological faculty and personally close to Küng, published two lengthy "yes-but" criticisms, one in the Catholic weekly *Publik*, the other in the secular *Welt*, which provoked Küng to reply in the latter paper with a biting sarcastic article crammed with direct quotations from Lehmann and challenging his erstwhile friend at the end to stop dodging and feinting and come out of his corner and fight, or else retire from the ring. In early November the German bishops, who like their colleagues elsewhere have manifested since the Council distinct symptoms of the transalpine syndrome (progressive at Rome, conservative at home), attempted to enter the lists. A meeting of the bishops' doctrinal commission, summoned to consider what action, if any, should be taken against what some of their excellencies held to be an open scandal, listened as the professors Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper, and Karl Lehmann criticized Küng's book (which, as part of its bitter indictment of the Church establishment, attacks the bishops for failing since the Council to make use of theologians' advice—a charge for which there is considerably more ground outside Germany than in it).

Despite their criticisms, the three professors urged the bishops not to issue any condemnation, but to permit the discussion of Küng's arguments to continue among the theologians. No sooner had this wise and mature advice been accepted by the doctrinal commission than word arrived from south of the Alps that the Italian bishops were proposing to condemn the book, and could not their German colleagues be persuaded to some joint action? This alarming message necessitated a hastily summoned meeting of the full conference of German bishops, who met on November 19 and 20 in secret session before deciding to issue no public statement—a policy which also seems to have been adopted by the Italian bishops, in whose counsels cooler heads ultimately prevailed.^{2a} In place

² Cited from *Der Spiegel*, Jan 4, 1971, p. 34. Küng has since disclosed that Dr Visser 't Hooft's comments were taken from a private letter to him (Küng). Cf. H. Küng, "Unfehlbare Sätze: Wer hat die Beweislast?" *Publik*, Jan. 29, 1971, pp. 19 f.

^{2a} On Feb. 3 and 4 the doctrinal commission of the Italian Bishops' Conference formulated a condemnation of Küng's book, but did not at first publish it. On February 13 *Osservatore romano* published the skilfully formulated and nuanced declaration of the German bishops, which stops short of condemnation. (See text and analysis at the end of this article.) Küng thereupon insisted that the Vatican newspaper publish his reply. This appeared in *Osservatore romano* for Feb. 19. The following day the doctrinal commission of the Italian bishops released their previously passed condemnation. This says in part: "The teachers of the various theological disciplines, true to their responsibility in the Church, will certainly not fail to investigate critically the author's individual claims, to give fitting scholarly answers to his difficulties, and to investigate more deeply the questions he has raised. But

of denunciations or disciplinary measures the German bishops decided to stage a confrontation between Küng and his fellow theologians. This took the form of a mammoth *Theologengespräch* behind closed doors in Frankfurt the last weekend in November, with Bishop Volk of Mainz, himself a former professor of dogma at the University of Münster, in the chair, and a dozen of the biggest guns of German Catholic theology confronting the forty-two-year-old Tübingen reformer. The result: agreement about the importance of the questions which Küng had raised, but not about his answers.

THE BOOK ITSELF

The book which has caused all this excitement is a work of just over two hundred pages. Published in soft covers, it is bound entirely in shiny black and displays on the front cover at the top in bold white letters the single word *Unfehlbar* ("Infallible"). Immediately below, occupying fully three quarters of the space remaining, is a large, thick, violet question mark. (At one point Lehmann and Küng were reduced to arguing in print about the color of this interrogative, Lehmann describing it as an "aggressive red," and Küng retorting that it was a "prelate's purple—the bright idea of a young layout artist.") Beneath, in smaller white letters, is the author's name, "Hans Küng." One reviewer has suggested that this layout could lead the unwary reader to suppose that the book discussed the question of *Küng's* infallibility—and sure enough, the book's spine displays at the top, in small white letters with hardly a break between them, the three words: "Hans Küng Infallible?" The back cover is blank except for the book's subtitle, likewise in white on shiny black, but in smaller type than that used on the front: *Eine Anfrage* ("An Inquiry"). The two end flaps are of the same shiny black as the cover and devoid of text, a measure of the confidence of both publisher and author that neither he nor his work would require introduction to a public already sufficiently alerted by the controversy sure to surround the book from the day of publication.

A skilfully selected quotation from Augustine following the title page

this theological commission would be remiss in its clear duty to the Christian people if it permitted the erroneous opinions of the author to be publicized without a public expression of regret. Especially regrettable is the opinion which denies infallibility in the strict sense of the word to the college of bishops in its ordinary universal and definitive magisterium, and especially to ecumenical councils and to the Roman pope speaking *ex cathedra*, and which reduces the Church's infallibility to its indefectibility. This commission is of the opinion that no one can consciously accept, support, or spread such opinions or theses without separating himself from full communion with the Church" (tr. from reports in *Deutsche Tagespost*, Feb. 23, 1971, and *Publik*, Feb. 26, 1971). Küng's reply: he had not the slightest intention of separating himself from full communion with the Catholic Church.

conveys to the reader the spirit in which the author wishes his book to be read: "Where the reader is as certain as I am, he may accompany me; where, like me, he hesitates, he may question me; when he sees himself in error, he may follow me; where I go wrong, he may lead me back."³ The Open Foreword which follows swiftly sets the tone for this inquiry. Five years after the close of Vatican II it cannot be overlooked that the great work of Church renewal which the Council initiated has come to a virtual standstill. The old ecclesiastical power structure is still intact, the Church's leaders refuse all too often to lead, and exercise their teaching office in a way which is essentially preconciliar. Paul VI, though a man of the highest motives who has repeatedly shown his desire to be a moderate progressive, open to the needs of the age, has all but thrown away the unprecedented new credibility which John XXIII gained for the Church, acting and allowing his Curia to act in a manner which gravely threatens the Church's unity. The fundamental question to be examined in the book is therefore that of the Church's teaching authority. This has not been sought out by the author; it has been forced on him by the exigencies of the hour.

To remove all misunderstanding, Küng states that he "is and remains despite all his criticisms a convinced Catholic theologian."⁴ But for this very reason he feels obliged by his duty to the Church and in full consciousness of his own limitations and fallibility to state publicly that in all the ways he has listed (and his examples of attempts to frustrate post-conciliar reform constitute a lengthy and searing indictment), and despite all subjective good intentions, the Church is being robbed of the fruits of the Council. His intention is not to create unrest and uncertainty, but to give voice to the widespread unrest and uncertainty already existing in the Church. The work's sharp tone is due not to aggressiveness but to concern. The book dispenses with an imprimatur, not because it does not wish to be Catholic, but because it is Catholic even without the imprimatur. This official stamp of ecclesiastical approval has not prevented his previous book, *The Church*, from being subjected to Roman inquisition; and more than one bishop has requested that for certain books the imprimatur be no longer requested, since it is misunderstood in Rome as an episcopal recommendation of the work in question. The whole system of ecclesiastical censorship is outdated and should be abolished. The Open Foreword closes on page 24 with two quotations which reveal the

³ *De trinitate* 1, 2, 5.

⁴ Hans Küng, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (Zurich, Einsiedeln, Cologne, 1970) p. 21. All references are to the original German edition. To facilitate reference to other versions, chapter and section numbers are given, where possible, following the page number of the German edition.

master publicist, keenly aware of the tastes of the audience for which he is writing: Cardinal Alfrink at the close of the Dutch pastoral council, and the "let us begin" passage from the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy.

Chapter 1 ("An Infallible Teaching Office?") opens with a long list of past errors on the part of the Church's magisterium. These can no longer be concealed, as in the past, or explained away with the pat formula: either it was not an error, or (when the error could no longer be denied) it was not an *ex-cathedra* decision and hence not infallible.⁵ The most recent example of an error on the part of the magisterium, according to Küng, is the Encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which has been rejected by a large majority of the people of God, including their episcopal leaders. Taking this alleged rejection as sufficient proof that the doctrine of the Encyclical is wrong, Küng concentrates on the strictly formal question: the authority of the magisterium. Why did Paul VI, who clearly desired to declare in favor of artificial methods of contraception, refuse to accept the arguments of the majority of his own commission in this sense? Because, Küng answers, the commission majority failed to offer the pope any real answer to the even stronger argument of the minority: that the prohibition of artificial methods of contraception, though never the subject of an *ex-cathedra* papal utterance, had been solemnly asserted by two popes in this century and by the morally unanimous world episcopate and the body of theologians up to the eve of Vatican II. Thus, according to the accepted principles of Roman-school theology, this doctrine, though not infallibly taught by the extraordinary magisterium (the pope speaking *ex cathedra*), *had* been infallibly taught by the Church's ordinary magisterium (pope and bishops, supported by the theologians). Hence Paul VI had no choice but to adopt the position of the commission minority, which in the crucial formal question (the Church's teaching authority) had the stronger arguments. The Encyclical, Küng maintains, has made a radical and fearless examination of the Church's teaching office both inescapable and imperative.

Chapter 2 ("Sure Foundations?") begins the investigation of the basis for the doctrine of the Church's infallible teaching office as found in the manuals of dogmatic theology. These define infallibility as "the impossibility of falling into error," and say that this is possessed both by the pope alone (under the narrowly defined conditions stated by Vatican I) and by the universal episcopate together with the pope. Though Vatican II attempted to supplement and correct Vatican I by emphasizing this second instance of infallibility, it never examined the basis for the doc-

⁵ Küng is here expressing a criticism made more than a decade previously by the Anglican theologian E. L. Mascall in his *Recovery of Unity* (London, 1958) p. 221.

trine, which it simply took over from Vatican I. Yet, according to Küng, the doctrine of episcopal infallibility rests on very shaky foundations indeed, since it assumes first that the bishops are in an exclusive sense the direct followers of the apostles, and second that the apostles claimed infallibility for themselves. Neither of these assumptions is justified. Not merely the bishops but the whole people of God inherits the apostolic commission to bear witness to Christ and His truth; and there is not a shred of evidence in Scripture that the apostles claimed infallibility for themselves either individually or collectively. On the contrary, they are presented to us in the New Testament as very human and fallible men.

Some twenty pages of this chapter are devoted to an examination of the definition of papal primacy and infallibility at Vatican I, which Küng argues (with extensive citations from Roger Aubert and Victor Conzemius, at present the two leading authorities on the history of Vatican I) was largely influenced in its actions by important nontheological factors favoring the magnification of papal power. The appeal to tradition is a two-edged sword, since it reveals at least in the first millennium almost as much resistance to papal power as support for it; and towards the end of this period "the monstrous forgeries of the pseudo-Isidorian Decretals in the ninth century (a total of 115 forged documents of Roman bishops from the first centuries beginning with Clement of Rome, plus 125 authentic documents with interpolations)" were used to support an aggressive policy of papal aggrandizement (p. 93; II 7 b). Küng's conclusion: "the traditional doctrine of the Church's infallibility, despite the strict limits placed upon it in the theology of the schools and at the two Vatican councils, rests upon foundations which can no longer be called certain and impregnable, if indeed they ever could" (p. 100; II end).

Chapter 3 ("The Central Problem") traces the negative and positive limits of this problem. Negatively, Küng points out that it is no answer to say that Vatican I was not free. Despite all attempts at manipulation and pressure on the part of Pius IX and the Curia, the Council's definition represented the mind of the overwhelming majority of the Council fathers. Nor can Vatican I's definitions of papal primacy and infallibility be treated together. While it is true that present discussions with the Old Catholics have shown the possibility of reaching an understanding about papal primacy, no such solution is in sight with regard to papal infallibility. It is no less an illusion to look for a solution to this problem in terms of the rights of the individual conscience. These are left intact by the definition of Vatican I, and indeed not the least of the benefits arising from the controversy over *Humanae vitae* has been the new and very clear emphasis of the rights of conscience, even when opposed to the infallible teaching of the ordinary magisterium. Nor can the problem of

papal infallibility be solved by emphasizing the strict limits placed on papal infallibility by the Vatican I definition (as was done at the Council itself by Bishop Gasser, the spokesman for the doctrinal commission responsible for the definition). It is enough, Küng writes, that a single pope should once in the course of two thousand years have made use of the prerogative of papal infallibility. This would inevitably raise the question: "a man, who is not God—free of error?" (p. 112; III d 2). Equally the problem cannot be solved by replacing the misleading term "infallibility" with a better one ("freedom from error," "reliability"), desirable though this is in itself. The question is not whether the pope does not in fact err in *ex-cathedra* decisions, but whether every possibility of error in such cases is excluded in advance. What is really at stake, Küng writes, is the Church's truth and authority. While the Church's truth may not be equated with that of God, the Church is empowered to witness to God's truth in an authoritative manner. But does the Church's infallibility (in this sense) depend on infallible propositions?

With this mention of "infallible propositions" (p. 116; III 2 beginning) Küng passes to his positive statement of the problem and with it the heart of his whole argument. Christian faith is not mute, and Küng grants that the Church is bound to express her faith in confessional statements, and that these inevitably consist of propositions. But the early credal statements were spontaneous expressions of faith and not laws limiting faith to one form of expression. He grants too the necessity under certain conditions of "defensive propositions" which define the boundary between truth and error in genuine emergency situations, where all attempts at dialogue with the proponents of error have broken down and the *status confessionis* has been reached. Such confessional statements must be clearly understood as temporary measures, however, valid and necessary only until the Church's peace shall be restored. But faith does not depend on propositions formulated merely to promote the development of dogma. The Church has never defined all that it could, but only what it had to. Departures from this tradition (in the two modern Mariological definitions, and at Vatican I) are problematical and have deepened the divisions between Christians. Furthermore, it is not proved, Küng maintains, that faith depends on infallible propositions: propositions which are not only *de facto* true (the existence of which Küng admits), but which are incapable of being untrue before they are uttered. No proof of such dependence was offered by either Vatican I or II. And the dogmatic textbooks claim merely that the promises made to the Church (that she will always be preserved in the truth) *presume* infallible propositions. Nowhere are we offered any solid reason for rejecting the opposite possibility: that the promises made to the Church could be fulfilled *without in-*

fallible propositions. Nor was this possibility discussed at either Vatican I or II.

In his final Chapter 4 ("An Answer") Küng proceeds to discuss this hitherto neglected possibility: that Christ's promises to His Church, which, he writes, we can neither doubt nor abandon, can be fulfilled without infallible propositions. He emphasizes that his is not the only possible answer (this is excluded by the complexity of the problem). It is merely one answer, spoken not *ex cathedra* (for "a single infallible pope would be preferable to many infallible theologian-popes") and motivated by a feeling of pastoral and theological responsibility (p. 128; IV 1 beginning). Küng prefaces his answer by pointing out some of the problems of all propositions, including those in the Church's credal statements and definitions. Propositions inevitably fall short of the truth which their author wishes to express; they are frequently subject to misunderstanding and only to a limited degree translatable from one language to another. The words of which they are composed are, like all language, not something static but dynamic, subtly but constantly changing in meaning. Moreover, propositions are liable to exploitation in the interests of ideology and propaganda: the proposition "God exists," for instance, may be used to strengthen the suffering or to justify a holy war. Nineteenth-century Catholic theology, and with it Vatican I, although ostensibly combating rationalism, betrayed in their desire for dogmatic definitions expressed in clear propositions a theory of perception and cognition which goes back ultimately to Descartes and owes far more than is generally admitted to the very rationalism which this tradition supposed it was rejecting.

Küng then applies what has already been said about the problems of propositions in general to the Church's dogmatic statements. These can be both true and false; and this possibility applies especially to polemical definitions formulated to condemn error. Thus, Trent's condemnation of a false idea of *sola fide* nowhere states in what sense the *sola fide* doctrine can be admitted as true. The result: the Catholic understands Trent's words as applying to a false doctrine and assents to the condemnation as true. But a Protestant who believes in justification by faith alone in a true sense not condemned by the Council reads Trent's words as applying to *his* doctrine and rejects the condemnation as false. We seem to be left, then, with a dilemma: either Christ's promises to His Church are not fulfilled (because of the undeniable errors in the Church's teaching, of which *Humanae vitae* is the most recent and obvious example)—and this is the view of unbelievers; or certain errors on the part of the magisterium must on no account be admitted—the answer of a triumphalistic church. Rejecting both of these solutions of the dilemma, Küng says it can be

resolved only by raising the whole problem to a higher level: "The Church is preserved in the truth *despite* all errors in particular" (p. 143; IV 4 b 3). This is the essence of Küng's thesis, and it is repeated in the pages which follow with slight variations: "the Church remains fundamentally in the truth, individual errors to the contrary notwithstanding" (p. 148; IV 6). Küng prefers to preserve what is meant by infallibility by substituting terms less open to misunderstanding: indefectibility or permanence in the truth. Traditionally indefectibility has been used in a broader sense, as designating the Church's divinely guaranteed faithfulness to its mission as the unique community of covenanted salvation, whereas infallibility is applied to the judgment of those who speak for this indefectible Church in an official capacity.⁶ But Küng argues that this distinction is artificial, for the Church would cease to *be* the Church (i.e., cease being indefectible) if it did not remain in the truth. The use of the term indefectibility for what is meant by infallibility offers the additional advantage of making it possible to reserve the term infallible for the only person to whom it applies in the strict and absolute sense: God, who alone cannot deceive or be deceived.⁷

Like the Old Testament people of God, the Church is "underway to truth." Yet there is a crucial difference: "The 'Word' of revelation given to the new people of God is no longer provisional; it is final and definitive. Hence no threats and dangers can ultimately overcome the new people of God; despite all weakness, salvation is assured" (p. 146; IV 5). To the objection that his understanding of infallibility reduces the Church to the level of all other human institutions, Küng replies that the distinguishing mark of the Church is not that it errs less than other institutions, but that despite all errors and because of the promised assistance of the Spirit the Church will never prove ultimately unfaithful to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Nor is his understanding of indefectibility, Küng writes, an unreal, verbal theory. The Church's indefectibility is a truth of faith; it cannot be proved with visible evidence, but is perceived only by the believer. In twenty centuries the Church has not in fact proved ultimately unfaithful to the gospel of Christ. And in the darkest periods of Church history, when error and unfaithfulness were most widespread in the Church, it was especially the humble folk in the people of God ("the poor" in biblical language) who manifested the Church's indefectibility through the faithfulness of their lives. Fortunately there were always at least a few theologians and members of the hierarchy in this company as well. Answering the objection that this understanding of infallibility as

⁶ Cf. Yves Congar, "Infaillibilité et indéfectibilité," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 54 (1970) 601-18.

⁷ Cf. *DS* 3008 (1789).

indefectibility removes all certainty, Küng argues that certainty comes only to him who believes in the person of Jesus Christ as presented in the Church's preaching of the gospel. Certainty is not given to us by the hierarchy or through infallible propositions—any more than in interpersonal relationships the certainty of being loved can be conveyed by declarations of love (infallible or not) on the part of the beloved, but only to the extent that one gives one's self to the other in loving trust.

In the pages following, Küng develops some of the ecumenical consequences of his explanation of infallibility. If accepted by Catholics, this explanation could provide a basis for ecumenical understanding. This statement is hardly open to dispute, for Küng's understanding of the Church's infallibility is indeed close to the views of numerous orthodox Protestants on this subject.⁸ The likelihood of his premise being fulfilled is more questionable, however; and although Küng offers evidence which he believes presages the acceptance of his position by Catholics, it is slender. This is a point to which we shall have to return later. To the extent that Orthodox theologians replace papal infallibility with that of ecumenical councils, their theories are open to all the objections already urged against infallible propositions. Councils can be expressions of the Church's infallibility or indefectibility. But they are not so a priori (in the sense that their definitions are preserved in advance from all possibility of error), but only to the extent that they are mouthpieces of the truth. The same must be said of all attempts to substitute for the infallible authority of pope, bishops, or councils the supposedly infallible word of Scripture. Not the least valuable pages in the book are those in which, under the subheading "The Truth of Scripture," Küng criticizes all theories of purely verbal inspiration or inerrancy, points out that the Holy Spirit makes use of the biblical writers with all their limitations and natural human errors, and reminds his readers that the Bible is not itself revelation but the primary witness to revelation (IV 10).

In an important final section of his fourth chapter Küng raises the question: Is there any legitimate basis for the claim that the Church possesses a teaching office, and that this office is limited to the hierarchy? Emphasizing that he can offer no more than stimuli for discussion and will welcome better answers than his book gives, Küng argues that the notion of a teaching office is quite recent and remains largely unclarified. It presumes the distinction, for which there is no scriptural basis, between the

⁸ A notable illustration is the brilliant essay by the Anglican theologian Austin Farrer, "Infallibility and Historical Revelation," in M. D. Goulder (ed.), *Infallibility in the Church: An Anglican-Catholic Dialogue* (London, 1968) pp. 9-23. Farrer's position is virtually identical with Küng's. Congar discerns a parallel between Küng's position and that of Karl Barth; cf. *art. cit.* (n. 6 above) p. 616. Cf. also the judgment of Visser 't Hooft cited at the outset of this article.

teaching and the learning Church. And it overlooks the fact that *all* Christians are called to proclaim the gospel; indeed, the rapid spread of Christianity in the ancient world was due to the faithfulness of the primitive Church to this universal vocation. The Church's leaders are not necessarily and exclusively her teachers. In the New Testament teachers and prophets were a separate group in the Church. Their functions may not be monopolized today by the hierarchy, who should respect the independent contribution of the theologians. Emergency situations may make it necessary for the hierarchy to lay down clear boundaries between truth and error; but similarly, theologians have a duty to bear constant witness to the truth vis-à-vis the hierarchy, in season and out.

There follow five pages which correspond to the Open Foreword which introduces the book. Taking as his point of departure the famous May 1969 interview of Cardinal Suenens, whom Küng places on a pedestal only slightly less elevated than the recurrent hero of his book, John XXIII, Küng sketches a picture of "The Pope as He Could Be" which is as beautiful and edifying as it is utopian. The work concludes with a long passage emphasizing that the book and its author remain open to correction and seek a dialogue. This is cleverly printed in the German original (yet another instance of the skilful attention to detail which characterizes this rhetorically and technically brilliant work), so that only upon turning the final page of the book does the reader discover that what he has been reading is the continuation of the opening passage from Augustine following the book's title page.

THE DEBATE

Probably no work of Catholic theology published since World War II has provoked controversy on the scale of this one. The reactions already reported at the beginning of this article, though representative, are far from exhaustive. A full account of the controversy to date would far transcend the bounds of this article, and would in any case be obsolete by the time of publication. We shall concentrate, therefore, on the critical reactions of two of the most eminent of living Catholic theologians: Yves Congar and Karl Rahner. The contributions of these two men to the great movement of liberation from the defensive and sometimes even paranoid posture which characterized Catholic theology almost until the eve of Vatican II are well known. Less familiar, or too often forgotten, is the fact that both Rahner and Congar experienced the heavy hand of Roman censure and discipline under Pius XII. The unjust attacks and secret as well as not-so-secret denunciations which have dogged Hans Küng ever since his first work, *Justification* (1957), was delated to the Holy Office (where the dossier on him has grown steadily ever since) are a sad tale, all too familiar to students of Church history in almost any age. This campaign of

vilification has left its mark upon Küng, producing in him a hypersensitivity to criticism and a distrustful spirit which can be clearly discerned in his response to critics of his latest book.

Yet, when all this has been said, it remains true that the record of Küng's injuries is modest compared with the injustices heaped on Congar and Rahner by the highest authorities in the Church in the decade following World War II. The tremendous contributions of these two men to the conciliar liberation merely serve to accentuate the wrongs they have had to endure. Their past role as mistrusted and even persecuted prophets certainly does not endow them with any kind of personal infallibility. But it does entitle them to be listened to with respect, and especially when they write of that which was responsible for their own past sufferings, and which is at the heart of Küng's book: the authority of the Roman pontiff and of his official representatives. Any serious assessment of Küng's position must take account of the fact that it has been rejected (though with varying degrees and qualifications) by both Yves Congar and Karl Rahner.

Congar's dissent takes on added significance from his eminence as an ecclesiologist. His appreciation of Küng's previous book, *The Church*, though tempered with constructive criticism, was both warm and generous.⁹ Yet Congar has written that in his latest book "Hans Küng, with a radicalism which verges on simplification and . . . a courage approaching rashness, questions the Catholicism we have received and lived, itself largely the product of the Middle Ages and the four centuries following the Council of Trent."¹⁰ Congar criticizes Küng for relying too exclusively here, as in *The Church*, on "Scripture alone," and for failing to do justice to such classical dogmatic statements as those of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Congar admits that the truth in which the people of God must always live means personal adhesion to Jesus Christ and not merely intellectual assent to propositions. But he calls Küng's criticism of all propositions "rather banal."¹¹ And though Congar concedes that

⁹ Cf. Congar, "L'Eglise de Hans Küng," *Rev. sc. phil. et théol.* 53 (1969) 693-706. Congar calls Küng's book "a sensational re-entry of Paulinism into Catholic thought" (p. 697), "even if this is too one-sided" (p. 705), and hails the book as a veritable milestone in ecclesiology: "it will no longer be possible to write about the Church as we have done before" (p. 705). At the same time, Congar criticizes Küng for practicing a kind of "scriptura sola" and ignoring tradition (pp. 697 ff.), for neglecting the relationship of the Church to the world (p. 704), and for achieving a *rapprochement* with Protestantism at the expense of alienation from orthodoxy (p. 706). Despite these and other criticisms, the strongly emphasized tenor of Congar's article is positive.

¹⁰ *Art. cit.* (n. 6 above) p. 613. Congar's criticisms of *Infallible?* are contained in an Addendum to this article, pp. 613-18.

¹¹ Charles Davis has made the same point in his review of Küng's book in *Commonweal*, Feb. 5, 1971, pp. 445 ff.: ". . . his treatment will seem elementary to those familiar with

apostolicity and hence the teaching office pertain to the whole people of God and not merely to the hierarchy, he charges that Küng fails to do justice to the special charism of teaching possessed by the Church's ordained pastors. While Küng's incisive criticisms are, in Congar's view, often too massive, he feels they will help to rectify the imbalance in ecclesiology resulting from the myth of papal authority which has been built up since Pius IX. At the same time, Congar says that the work of theological *aggiornamento* cannot proceed simply by replacing one exaggeration with another: substituting the Reformation for the Counter Reformation. It means rediscovering the authentic tradition *behind* the exaggerations. This involves criticism and inquiry; and it is here, Congar writes, that Küng's book has a contribution to make. In short, while Congar's criticisms are tempered by recognition and appreciation ("praise" would be too strong a word), it is clear that it is the objections which hold the balance, so that we are justified in speaking of a dissent, however qualified.

If Congar's dissent is muted and his recognition of the positive elements of Küng's book emphasized wherever possible, the position is exactly reversed in the case of Karl Rahner. In one of the sharpest pieces ever to have come from his typewriter, Rahner states flatly that "throughout his entire book Küng disputes something which has been hitherto an unquestioned assumption of all inner-Catholic theological discussion." Rahner charges Küng with adopting a position which makes it possible to debate with him "only as one would with a liberal Protestant" for whom councils and even Scripture are not absolutely binding, as they are for a Catholic theologian. Scripture and tradition must, of course, be properly understood and interpreted, and the Catholic theologian will take full account of the historical relativity of their statements. But he can never dismiss these statements simply by saying that "they are wrong and he knows better."¹² Rahner confesses that he finds Küng's style "overbearing" (p. 362) and maintains that, "viewed objectively, it is no longer possible to consider the discussion of Küng's thesis as an inner-Catholic controversy" (p. 365). Indeed, should Küng deny the existence of any propositions at all which command our absolute assent and which may therefore be termed absolutely true for the practical intellect, "one could dispute with him [only?] as one would with a sceptical philosopher."¹³

modern discussion of religious language" (p. 446). To be fair, we should point out that Küng himself admits the inadequacy of his argument at this point and refers the reader to the forthcoming work of one of his students, J. Nolte, *Dogma in Geschichte: Versuch einer Kritik des Dogmatismus in der Glaubensdarstellung*; cf. *Unfehlbar?*, pp. 128 f., n. 1.

¹² K. Rahner, "Kritik an Hans Küng," *Stimmen der Zeit* 186 (1970) 361-77, at 365.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 372. Rahner gives as an example of such a proposition the following: "Every single man is to be respected and loved as neighbor."

Rahner prescind from a discussion of the biblical evidence for papal infallibility and of the historical development of the papal primacy. He charges that Küng is guilty, however, of the very rationalism which he deplors in his opponents: when he is unable to discover the Church of today in the past, he denies any connection between past and present. Küng's use of the Encyclical *Humanae vitae* is oversimplified; for it is not really certain that the Encyclical has in fact been rejected by the majority of the Church (as Küng claims); and the mere fact that the minority of the papal commission held the teaching of the Encyclical to be infallible in virtue of the ordinary magisterium does not prove that it is infallible. "We can speak of an absolutely binding article of faith coming from the 'ordinary' magisterium only when that magisterium teaches the doctrine not only generally and without contradiction, but when the doctrine is clearly taught as something requiring the absolute assent of faith and as divinely revealed, so that there can be no serious doubt about the specific qualification of the doctrine" (p. 367). These conditions are not fulfilled with regard to the prohibition of artificial methods of contraception. The most that can be said, therefore, of the doctrine of *Humanae vitae* is that it may offer "an example of the fact that the Church's magisterium proposes many doctrines which later turn out to be erroneous" (p. 368).

In one passage at least, Rahner misrepresents Küng's argument. He charges that "Küng's rhetorically impressive arguments often convey the impression that for him all individual propositions are always true and false at the same time, though in varying degrees" (p. 369). (In his reply Küng points out that his book had clearly reckoned with the existence of true propositions in the statements of Scripture, councils, and popes; what he disputed was the possibility of propositions guaranteed to be free of error *in advance*.) Rahner's argument for the existence of such propositions in the Church is speculative. Man lives in the truth through true propositions: his basic decision *for* the truth must be expressed in a proposition of some kind. If this be true in the moral life of the individual, why not in the Church as well? If the Church remains indefectibly in the truth (as Küng admits), there must be some propositions which make this indefectibility concrete. If they are then false, the Church does not remain in the truth and is therefore not indefectible. Despite his disavowal of Protestantism, Küng is really repeating the Protestant thesis that every article of faith, no matter how absolute, is fallible, but that there is an invisible, indefectible Church, comparable to the synagogue which existed before Christ and before God's absolute and historical self-revelation in Christ.

Rahner concedes that there is far more error in Church teaching than

has generally been realized or admitted. He criticizes Küng, however, for failing to develop with the rigor demanded by his argument a really adequate theory of the difference between error and statements which, though inadequate and limited, are in the final analysis not wrong. He concludes by sketching the lines which he believes future discussion with Küng should follow if the impasse is to be resolved. (In his reply Küng indignantly rejects this ready-made scheme, cleverly calculated to rescue Rahner's theology, Küng says, but of no interest to him!)

Küng's reply to Rahner begins with a cry of anguished pain, sustained over three full pages of text. More in sorrow than in anger, Küng states that he "would give a great deal not to have to write this reply."¹⁴ There follows a summary of all that Rahner, "the tireless pioneer," has done for Küng's generation of young theologians: opening long-closed doors in theology, "breaking out of the grey prison of Neo-Scholasticism," giving young priests like himself courage to become professional theologians. All the more astonishing, then, to find Rahner, of all people, responsible for "the most negative response yet to my 'Inquiry'" (p. 44). The pathos mounts as Küng recounts his long personal association with Rahner, from the great man's first counsels to the young curate on the threshold of a university career in 1957 to their co-operation "only a few weeks ago at the International Theological Congress in Brussels, where we were peacefully united . . . and spoke on the same topic. . . . And now, suddenly, out of a blue sky—at any rate without warning, with no advance notice, without the slightest discussion oral or written—this bolt of lightning . . ." (p. 44 f.). Readers who reach this climax dry-eyed are made of stern stuff indeed; the more sensitive may find themselves fumbling for their handkerchiefs. After giving further vent to his pained astonishment that Rahner has "refused a personal conversation in so momentous a matter and decided instead to launch his unilateral and personally addressed 'Criticism of Hans Küng,'" Küng says that he will proceed to the work at hand, and that "without complaint" (p. 45). The present writer confesses to being forcibly reminded at this point of Erasmus' remark on hearing of Luther's marriage to a former nun: that what had begun as a tragedy was ending as a comedy. Küng swiftly recovers, however, by stating that he retracts nothing he has said in praise of Rahner, to whom Küng wishes to show his gratitude by taking Rahner's criticisms seriously. Küng's answer is conceived not in mere self-defense, but "in the interest of the issue" (the article's title).

Küng then proceeds to turn like a wounded boar upon his tormentor, charging at him repeatedly from all directions. Indeed, Küng's reply is

¹⁴H. Küng, "Im Interesse der Sache: Antwort an Karl Rahner," *Stimmen der Zeit* 187 (1971) 43-64, at 43.

so lengthy that it is divided into two parts, each one longer than Rahner's original criticism. The first part is heavy with rhetoric and sarcasm, much of it emotionally charged, and Küng scores a number of debating points, but without really furthering the argument substantively. He attempts to refute Rahner's criticism of his interpretation of *Humanae vitae* (unsuccessfully, in the view of this writer) by repeating over no less than eight pages the arguments of his book. The alert reader will not fail to note that at one point Küng executes a cautious and discreet retreat. It is now no longer simply the majority of the Church which has rejected the teaching of the Encyclical,¹⁵ but "the overwhelming majority of public opinion, Catholic and non-Catholic, in the informed and developed countries."¹⁶ Only towards the end of his first reply to Rahner does Küng turn to really substantive questions. He charges that, in an article published on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Vatican I, Rahner adopted a position far closer to his (Küng's) own than that represented by Rahner's attack on *Infallible?* And defending himself against Rahner's charge that he has abandoned an essential article of Catholic faith, Küng points out that in his book he carefully avoided saying that Vatican I erred. Rather he maintains that the Council was blind to the fundamental problem: neither majority nor minority ever considered the possibility that the Church could be indefectible *without* infallible propositions. Since this was simply assumed without proof or even consideration, no contradiction of faith was involved in arguing that this assumption was unjustified. Küng concludes by charging that Rahner's speculative argument for the necessity of infallible propositions, based on the practical intellect, is so radically different from the argumentation of Vatican I on infallibility as to amount to a tacit reformulation of the doctrine.

In the second installment of his reply Küng takes up the argument at this point, charging that in a previous work Rahner has admitted that the practical intellect can attain truth *despite* all error in the propositions which attempt to express that experience of truth.¹⁷ And if Rahner wishes to shift the argument from the speculative level to that of practical ethics, the truth of conscience is not a matter of propositions. His one example of such a proposition, "Every single man is to be respected and loved as neighbor," is unhappy; for in accordance with changing circumstances,

¹⁵ Cf. *Unfehlbar?* p. 26.

¹⁶ "Im Interesse der Sache," p. 51. This is a tacit recognition that the response to the Encyclical by the Catholic hierarchies in Communist countries and in the Third World has been more positive than elsewhere.

¹⁷ Cf. K. Rahner, *Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York, 1964) p. 148. The second installment of Küng's answer to Rahner will be found in *Stimmen der Zeit* for February, 1971, pp. 105-22. The passage referred to here is on p. 106.

this proposition could be used to support the rights of minority blacks or white blindness and the *status quo*.

Küng's heavy artillery is concentrated, however, on what he charges is Rahner's exclusively speculative and unhistorical approach to dogma. Though he rightly rejects the positivistic dogmatics of Neo-Scholasticism, Rahner's recognition of the historicity of dogmatic statements remains lip service. He does not *really* study these statements historically, but simply takes them as the starting point of his theology, which is concerned exclusively with the speculative interpretation of dogma according to the dialectical method. Rahner's contribution, which Küng admits to have been enormous, has been to make the dogmas theologically respectable. The intellectual contortions involved in this exercise are part of the explanation for Rahner's often tortured and unintelligible literary style. Valuable through this interpretation of dogma was in a day when this was the limit of freedom permitted to a Catholic theologian, Rahner's interpretations not infrequently made dogmas say something quite different from what those who first formulated them intended. This is intellectually dishonest. Rahner's allergic and violent reaction to *Infallible?* is due, Küng writes, to the fact that the book challenges Rahner's whole theological system at its most vulnerable point. Rahner builds on dogma and regards theology as the interpretation of dogma. Küng says that he himself builds on Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture (the *norma normativa* for all theology, for all councils, for the Church herself). Küng sees the essential task of theology not in the interpretation of dogma (necessary though that be), but in "translating with all the means and ways of biblical and theological hermeneutics the original Christian message from its setting in the past into terms intelligible to men today and tomorrow" (p. 115 f.).

The burden of proof, Küng maintains, rests upon him who asserts that the Church's indefectibility stands or falls with infallible propositions. Rahner's speculative argument in support of infallibility so conceived falls far short of proof; and in line with his whole theological method, he does not even attempt to offer biblical or historical proofs. To Rahner's question as to who has "the last word" in matters of faith, "the professor or the bishop,"¹⁸ Küng replies in the final sentence of his article: "Neither the professor nor the bishop will have the last word here, . . . but only He who alone is infallible and whose word will prevail in history and in the Church as a whole—which is more important than all bishops and all professors" (p. 122).

Rahner's concluding rebuttal¹⁹ is a ringing confession of personal faith

¹⁸ Cf. Rahner, "Kritik an Hans Küng," p. 376.

¹⁹ K. Rahner, "Replik. Bemerkungen zu: Hans Küng, Im Interesse der Sache," *Stimmen der Zeit* 187 (1971) 145-60.

that God, who alone is infallible in the strict sense, has given His Church a teaching office which, under certain carefully defined and strictly limited conditions, can make statements which are permanently binding for faith and for all theology, and are in this sense infallible. Such statements suffer inevitably from the limitations attaching to any human statement made in a given historical situation. They are often mixed up with fallible human opinions which may well remain unperceived at the time and which can frequently be separated from the essence of the statement (the dogma it defines or expresses) only by subsequent reflection and analysis. Hence such infallible statements must always be understood and interpreted afresh. But they cannot simply be dismissed by a Catholic theologian with the explanation that they are wrong.

Rahner sees an essential difference between himself and Küng on the level of theory: for himself (Rahner), there is all the difference in the world between a dogma on the one hand (no matter how inadequate, dangerous, or one-sided it may be), and on the other hand an erroneous doctrine which is taught by the magisterium demanding for it the absolute assent of faith. On what he calls the "operative" level, however, Rahner envisages, though with reservations and only under carefully specified conditions, the possibility of agreement with Küng. It is conceivable that in the end effect their positions may turn out to be the same, though their respective routes to such operative agreement are mutually contradictory.

No one familiar with Rahner will look for the kind of rhetoric in which Küng excels. Like most of his writings, Rahner's rebuttal contains sentences of mind-bombing complexity which have caused so many of his readers to despair, and which caused even Küng to write, in the second installment of his reply to Rahner, of the master's "tortured literary style." Yet Rahner's second article also contains rhetorical thrusts which are all the more devastating for being dry and low-keyed.²⁰ Substantively, Rahner rejects Küng's insistence that the burden of proof for infallible propositions rests on those who maintain their necessity. Rahner points out that Catholic theology proceeds in two ways. The *dogmatic* theologian, speaking *ad intra*, presumes the truth of the articles of belief given him by the Church's magisterium. He is, of course, obliged to demonstrate their agreement with tradition and especially with Scripture (and here Rahner emphasizes his agreement with Küng by saying that past tradition and the magisterium are indeed normative for the Catholic

²⁰ Space permits citation of one example only. Rahner writes that he wishes to pass over from the outset all personal elements in the controversy. "Hence I shall say nothing about either the praise or blame which Küng directs at me. Presumably both are somewhat exaggerated" (p. 146). Instinctively one feels that Küng is going to have to get up even earlier in the morning than he does to get the jump on Rahner.

believer and theologian, but that both are themselves subject to judgment and correction by Scripture, which is alone the *norma normans non normata*). However, an article of belief does not become binding for the dogmatic theologian only after this demonstration has been successfully proposed. It was, Rahner explains, Küng's contention that assent to infallible propositions was *not* binding for the Catholic theologian until the necessity of such propositions was first demonstrated which had caused him (Rahner) to suspect that Küng had abandoned an essential Catholic position. This was why he had written that the argument between him and Küng could no longer be considered an inner-Catholic controversy. And Küng's latest reply, insisting that Rahner had the burden of proof in the matter, confirmed the original charge.

Rahner goes on, however, to point out that in the second procedure followed by Catholic theology there *is* a burden of proof on him who asserts the necessity of infallible propositions. The *fundamental* theologian, speaking *ad extra*, is obliged to prove all the articles of faith. The proof for the Church's infallibility in fundamental theology is indeed difficult, Rahner admits. But he reminds Küng that it is hardly less difficult to prove the absolute authority of Jesus Christ (which Küng maintains). Küng has written that in disputing the necessity of infallible propositions he cannot be contradicting Vatican I, since no one at the Council considered the possibility that the Church's indefectibility could be preserved without such propositions. Rahner disputes this. Küng's position, so far as Rahner understands it, is tantamount to Calvin's. This view was not explicitly discussed at Vatican I; but is it therefore safe to assume that none of that Council's fathers or theologians were familiar with Calvin's position?

With no little ability and energy Rahner defends himself against the charge that his theology is overly speculative and neglects exegesis and history. His speculative argument for infallible propositions, based on man's practical intellect, was intended to supplement his previously published arguments for infallibility (with which Küng is familiar), not to supplant them. Rahner discloses that he is the first German theologian to have an exegete present at his lectures in Christology for the purpose of criticizing, correcting, or confirming his dogmatic presentation in the light of the biblical evidence. And if Küng says that it was from Rahner that he first learned to understand dogma historically, then his theology cannot be totally nonhistorical. Almost defiantly Rahner confesses that he has always theologized "within the system" (i.e., the dogmas given him by the magisterium), and that he has never desired to break out of this system. He has always fought against too narrow a conception of this system, and especially against the false notion of Roman-school theology that

all statements in Denzinger are more or less equally binding. But the living faith of the Church is, Rahner says, one of the norms for his theology. And his own interpretations of dogma are subject to the judgment of the magisterium. Admitting that to theologize thus "within the system" (Rahner coins the adjective "system-immanent" for his theology) means giving the magisterium a blank check, Rahner writes that he has never had cause to regret this free decision of faith, the responsibility for which is his alone. Far from limiting his freedom, his acceptance of a magisterium which is, under certain narrowly defined conditions, infallible delivers him from something even worse than the tyranny of the Roman system under which Küng suffers, often with reason: his own subjectivity. For, Rahner confesses, he has not yet encountered an ultimately binding dogma which he cannot accept as reconcilable with the evidence of Scripture. And it is part of his faith, based on the eschatological hope in the Church's indefectibility which he shares with Küng, that he never will encounter a dogma which is on the one hand finally binding and on the other hand erroneous.²¹ And when the Church's magisterium proposes doctrines which, though authentic, are not binding dogmas, then Catholic dogma itself gives him the right to protest—a right he has never hesitated to use freely.

A necessarily brief and incomplete summary can only indicate some of the main lines of Rahner's argument. Passages in the article are eloquent and even moving. One senses the quiet but deep fervor of the steadfast believer and veteran of a lifetime's battles. Indeed, it is tempting to cast him in the role of the revivalist preacher who, having issued the pulpit call to repentance, announces the hymn "Give me that old-time religion, it's good enough for me," to encourage the reluctant sinners in the back of the tent to hit the sawdust trail. Like most such encounters, the debate between Rahner and Küng is open-ended, and in this sense inconclusive. Küng's contributions nowhere go beyond the arguments of his book. And while opinions will inevitably differ about the value of Rahner's objections, some of them at least are weighty. And of this number more than one remain without an adequate answer.

SIC AUT NON?

In an argument so many-sided and complex a simple yes or no verdict would inevitably involve oversimplification. Already, however, it is possible to draw certain provisional conclusions, though parts of the battlefield remain shrouded in smoke. In Küng's favor it can be clearly discerned that on the level of the general public, even those with a certain

²¹ Rahner reiterates his charge that Küng has failed to prove that the doctrine of *Humanae vitae* has been infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium.

knowledge of some of the technicalities of theology, Küng is bound to win the argument. Indeed, he has already won. The power of his rhetoric, the dynamic eloquence with which he constructs his cumulative argument, cannot fail to impress. The reader who starts with even a portion of Küng's resentment against the ecclesiastical establishment (symbolized for Küng by the Roman Curia)—and the number of such readers is very large—will find it difficult indeed to avoid being swept off his feet by the force of Küng's eloquence. Congar sounds timid and tired in comparison with the freshness of Küng's powerfully expressed conviction. And Rahner soon makes such heavy demands on the reader that only the most stubbornly determined will stay the course.

Nor does Küng's achievement rest solely upon his unsurpassed ability as a theological popularizer presenting with unmatched eloquence an idea of dynamic power whose time has finally come. With deadly force, clarity, and precision he has revealed the inadequacy of the Roman-school theology of infallibility: the theology contained in almost every textbook of dogmatic theology in use in Catholic seminaries around the world until less than a decade ago; the theology which (in Rahner's apt description) "wants to be positively reconciled with just about everything in Denzinger;"²² the theology which inspired the recommendations of the minority report of Paul VI's commission on contraception, and which is represented by most of the comment on *Humanae vitae* published subsequently by *Osservatore romano*. Küng's attack on this theology is devastating. For this alone he deserves our gratitude. He has shown once and for all that this theology of infallibility has no claim to the title Catholic.

The question which remains to be answered, however, is whether the understanding of infallibility represented by this Roman-school theology is the only possible understanding of the subject; and if not, whether it is the authentically Catholic understanding. Küng himself is convinced that this Roman-school theology, against which he polemicizes so successfully, is the only possible understanding of the subject—or at least the only legitimate understanding; for he insists that all attempts to interpret the doctrine differently (save his own interpretation, which reduces infallibility to indefectibility) are dishonest attempts to evade the real issue. Yet paradoxically, in demonstrating with such deadly effect that the Roman-school theology of infallibility lacks all claim to the title Catholic, Küng opens the door to the very possibility he denies: that another understanding of infallibility than the now discredited Roman one is authentically

²² Rahner, "Replik . . .," p. 153.

Catholic. Affirmation of this possibility is at the heart of Rahner's attack on Küng.²³

Küng does not tell us how an indefectible Church ever came to accept the definition of Vatican I. Is it really a sufficient explanation to point to the Old Catholic schism and the dissent of other Christians and their churches? At the heart of the argument is the concrete form of God's way with man—what is usually called the incarnational or sacramental principle. The final sentence in Küng's reply to Rahner is an epitome of the splendors and the limitations of his achievement: neither the bishop nor the professor has the last word, but only Jesus Christ. This is true, and Küng states the truth beautifully and movingly. But this truth must "put shoes on." And it is part of the basic Catholic view of things that it *has*: that Christ's "last word" is given concrete form in history through His Church, and within the Church through the ministry of those to whom Christ's commission to teach men the truth is entrusted in a special way. Because these ministers, being men, are so obviously fallible, and because they have always made such liberal use of this fallibility, it is difficult indeed to believe that under certain narrowly defined and correspondingly rare circumstances their statements are preserved by God from error. Yet is this really any more difficult to believe than that God entrusts the sacramental body and blood of His Son to the hands of sinful priests, or that God comes to man in all the sacraments through the instrumentality of often utterly unworthy ministers?

Space prohibits further development of these criticisms. Yet we cannot conclude this consideration of Hans Küng's important and insistent inquiry without taking note of the statement of the German bishops, which, though not intending to say the last word in the debate, has at least brought its initial phase to a conclusion. In January 1971 Küng was invited by the German bishops to discuss his views with Bishops Volk of Mainz and Wetter of Speyer, both of them former university professors of dogma. Also participating in this discussion at the invitation of the bishops' conference were Professors Ratzinger (dogma) and Schlier (New Testament exegesis; a layman and former Protestant). This discussion revealed a fundamental divergence of view between Küng and his interlocutors, which caused the German Bishops' Conference to

²³ This affirmation has been given precise formulation by Karl Lehmann: "... I do not accept that Küng's interpretation of (a priori guaranteed) 'infallible propositions' is an exact account of what the magisterium means when it speaks of binding doctrinal decisions. (This is not to deny that Küng's interpretation squarely hits various statements of school theology as well as the abuse of infallibility in ecclesiastical politics. But *neither* of these things is identical with the dogma [of infallibility] interpreted according to the historical critical method!)." Cf. "Die Not des Widerspruchs" *Publik*, Jan. 29, 1971, p. 19; emphasis in original.

issue the following statement on February 8, 1971. Because of its importance the text is given here in full in English translation.

Hans Küng's book *Infallible? An Inquiry* raises basic questions as to whether there can be in the Church binding statements of faith. To some extent these questions touch on fundamental elements of the Catholic understanding of faith and of the Church. In the view of the German Bishops' Conference, some of these fundamental elements are not preserved in this book. Further statements by the author and a conference with him held at the request of the Bishops' Conference have not removed these reservations. It is not the task of the bishops to take a position on the points of technical theological controversy which the book has revived for discussion. The German Bishops' Conference does see it as its duty, however, to call to mind a few nonnegotiable items which a theology cannot deny if it is to continue to be called Catholic.

1. Belief in God's word, to which the Bible bears witness and which the Church confesses in the Creed, presupposes that, despite the ambiguity and historical mutability of human language, it is at least theoretically possible that there are statements in this area which (a) are true and recognizable as true and (b) in the fluctuation of historical modes of thought and expression keep the same meaning and remain irrevocably valid.

2. The binding character proper to God's word of revelation finds its concrete expression in the Church's Creed, with which she receives and answers the revelation testified to in the Bible. Although the Church's faith must continually be thought over afresh and thus remains to this extent unfinished till the end of history, it includes an unmistakable Yes and an unmistakable No which are not interchangeable. Otherwise the Church cannot remain in the truth of Jesus Christ.

3. When new questions emerge in succeeding historical situations, the Church has the right and duty to allow a thorough examination of the faith on the one hand, but on the other hand, when necessary, to express anew and in binding form faith's unmistakable Yes and No to these questions. Formulations which help to clarify the Creed and thus objectively to interpret the witness intended by Scripture, and which the Church proposes with truly final binding force, are called "dogma."

4. Dogma acquires its peculiar binding force not from the outcome of theological discussion or from the assent of a majority in the Church, but from the charism bestowed upon the Church [enabling her] in the power of its truth to hold fast to the word once uttered and to expound it without deception (*untrüglich*). Responsibility for the Church's remaining in the truth of the gospel through binding statements of faith is entrusted in a special way to Church office.—The reception (acceptance) of such a dogmatic statement in the Church can be important as a sign that the statement agrees with the normative source [of doctrine], but it is not the basis of either its truth or its authority.

5. According to the common and clear teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Eastern churches, the power to make such finally binding statements belongs first of all (*vorab*) to ecumenical councils, as representing the entire episcopate. With the first and second Vatican Councils and the tradition concre-

tized by them, the Catholic Church confesses in addition that this power can be exercised by the bishop of Rome as successor of St. Peter and head of the episcopal college. The conditions under which he is empowered to speak with such authority proceed from the tradition of the Church and are laid down by the two Vatican Councils.

In a press statement Küng at once claimed that the German bishops had avoided meeting the central affirmations of his book head on. Different interpretations of their statement were possible, Küng added, and the door was left open to his view. These comments failed to take account of a crucial fact, already stated: had the January conference between Küng and the representatives of the German bishops not revealed a fundamental divergence of view, a statement would hardly have been necessary, and certainly not a statement of this length. The bishops clearly imply this when they state, in the second sentence of their declaration, that in their view some of the "fundamental elements of the Catholic understanding of faith and of the Church . . . are not preserved in this book."

Yet in certain secondary but by no means unimportant matters the German bishops move cautiously in the direction of Küng's position. This is evident at four points.²⁴

1) In stating that "it is not the task of the bishops to take a position on points of technical theological controversy," the bishops imply tacit recognition of Küng's argument that theologians have a unique teaching function in the Church which is different from that possessed by the hierarchy.

2) The bishops' language in points 1 and 2 of their statement clearly implies acceptance of Küng's position that revelation is not identical with Scripture, but that Scripture *bears witness* to revelation.²⁵

3) The bishops' fifth point, which states that the defining power belongs "first of all" (*vorab*) to ecumenical councils, but that this power may be exercised "in addition" (*darüber hinaus*) by the pope, is in strict accord with the definition of Vatican I, according to which the pope (under the narrowly defined conditions laid down) exercises the *Church's* infallibility and not some personal infallibility of his own. But the bishops' fifth point falls far short of the Roman-school theology, of which the *Nota praevia* to the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II is a particularly good recent example. To this extent the bishops may be said to have moved, however cautiously, in Küng's direction.

4) It is especially noteworthy that the word "infallible" nowhere occurs in the bishops' statement. Nor is this omission due merely to the impossibility of defining a word by itself; for the word "dogma" is defined in the

²⁴ These do not correspond to the five numbered points in the bishops' statement, and no correlation is implied between the two lists.

²⁵ Cf. *Unfehlbar?* pp. 177 f.; IV 10.

statement, but then explicitly mentioned as well. The bishops speak about "an unmistakable Yes and No" which are "not interchangeable." And for the word "infallible" they substitute an adjective which is not identical in meaning and which cannot be directly translated into English: *untrüglich* (literally: "incapable of deceiving"). By implication the bishops recognize that the criticisms of the term "infallible" which have been made by Küng²⁶ and by other Catholic theologians²⁷ are justified. This recognition suggests that the term "infallible" may disappear from the vocabulary of Catholic theology.

Meanwhile Rahner has announced forthcoming publication of a collective work on infallibility edited by himself. And Küng is working on a major study of sacramental doctrine at the Council of Trent.²⁸ We shall not lack for things to read. Judging by what has been published to date, they promise to be interesting.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 112 ff.; III 1 e.

²⁷ Cf. *inter alia* Paul de Vooght, "Les dimensions réelles de l'infaillibilité papale," in Enrico Castelli (ed.), *L'Infaillibilité: Son aspect philosophique et théologique* (Paris, 1970) pp. 131-58, esp. 154 f.

²⁸ Cf. Küng, "Im Interesse der Sache," p. 51, n. 5.