

Küng and Ratzinger: opposite, but complementary paths to Jesus



For decades Joseph Ratzinger and his former colleague Hans Küng were symbolically placed opposite each other within Roman Catholic theology. In the media, the focus was on Küng's ideas about inner-Church reform and Ratzinger's opposition to them. But the differences in their "avenues of approach" for talking meaningfully about Jesus of Nazareth are much more substantial.

They were considered the two most prominent Catholic signposts of twentieth century all-dominant German theology: Hans Küng and Josef Ratzinger. The former died on April 6 at age 93. The latter is to turn 94 on April 16.

As young professors, both taught together at the prestigious theological faculty of Tübingen - which, incidentally, Ratzinger soon traded for the less tumultuous Regensburg. Both were active and influential as a peritus (theological expert) at an early age during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) that would update Catholic doctrine and Church organization. On the opposite ends of John Paul II Their paths diverged soon afterwards. Küng and Ratzinger became opposites. Küng was stripped of his teaching qualifications as a Roman Catholic theologian by John Paul II in 1979 for sawing at the legs of the dogma of papal infallibility in one of his best-selling books. Ratzinger, who had already been elevated to archbishop and cardinal by Paul VI, would then be named the Vatican's "guardian of doctrine" by the same John Paul. And, of course, Ratzinger would go on to be the Polish pope's successor as Bishop of Rome.

Küng and Ratzinger were probably not the most creative Catholic theologians in the German-speaking world. In the end, their theological contributions lagged behind those two other opposites, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. But Küng and Ratzinger were able to attract much more attention, thanks to the media's fascination with the intra-Church struggle of which they were the leading symbols.

Küng's real breakthrough occurred in 1974 when he published his Christological study, *On Being a Christian* (released in English in 1977). The title of the book is misleading. The text is not so much about following Christ, but about who Jesus really is in his relationship to God and humanity. "Theology from above" vs. "theology from below" That same year, 1974, other Catholic theologians -- including the Dutch Dominican, Edward Schillebeeckx -- also published Christological works. They signaled a revolutionary tipping point in Catholic theology. In addition to the traditional "Christology from above," these theologians developed a "Christology from below".

The German Protestant exegete Ernst Käsemann had come to the conclusion in 1953 that, from scientific historical research, it was possible to say something meaningful about the historical Jesus. This greatly disappointed his teacher Rudolf Bultmann, who had claimed the opposite all his life. Käsemann, who taught scripture at Tübingen, felt that one could go back behind the Bible texts, which were written as proclamations of faith, to better understand their historical context.

Küng and other theologians picked up these results and began to work with them theologically.

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