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Book Review for *The Tablet*, London:

Hans Küng

Islam: Past, Present & Future

Oneworld, Oxford, Hardback, 800 pp, £29.99

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With the present volume, Hans Küng completes his wide-ranging analysis of “the spiritual forces of the millennia-old history of the three religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam”. Throughout the trilogy his aim has been “to give a systematic historical diagnosis and from it to offer perspectives on the different options for the future and with them practical and ecumenical approaches towards a resolution of problems”. He is interested in the past only insofar as it throws light on the present, and the leading question he wants to answer in this monograph is: “How Islam has become what it is today – with a view to what it could be.”

The work constitutes neither a neutral description of the history of Islam nor a systematic-theological analysis of Islam’s teaching but rather “a synthesis of both its historical and systematic dimensions”. Küng wants to foster a multi-dimensional vision of Islam in order to stimulate Muslims, Christians and Jews to understand one another and to engage in dialogue “in this decisive transitional phase towards a new relationship between the civilisations, religions and nations so that ... they may be able to assess the world situation better and react to it better”.

The author’s creative organisational skills as well as the energy displayed in pressing the immense mass of data chosen from judiciously selected secondary literature into a clear structure is admirable. Küng, as we know from his earlier works, thinks in paradigms. Thus he not only depicts the dominant structures of Islamic history but also tries to explain how the various overall constellations of Islam came into being, matured and fossilised, and how paradigms which have ossified into tradition live on in the present. He believes a new paradigm is emerging and he points out its features with a prophet-like assurance, untroubled by doubts or hesitation.

This volume, which regrettably lacks any glossary and index, constitutes a kind of “shorter” encyclopaedia of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations in the past, present and future. The author is, however, a Christian theologian, not an Islamologist. He has come to the study of Islam relatively late. He is not familiar with the language of the Qur’an, nor has he entered deeper into the rich heritage of Islamic religious literature.

For example, in the more than 30 pages on Muhammad, the contrast between the Meccan and Medinan period finds due mention. Küng describes Muhammad’s position thus: “The former outsider now saw himself suddenly in charge, leader of the community, and the minority which had been hardly tolerated in Mecca now became the controlling majority”. But this way of depicting the Hijrah suggests that Muhammad was lifted by the hand of a God-sent angel, completely unawares and possibly against his will, away from Mecca to a Medina and almost “pressed” into his new function as political-military leader. This new task is almost made to look ultimately alien to his real, religious vocation.

Küng remains silent about the fact that the emigration from Mecca to Medina, with the opportunities that it offered Muhammad and his community to establish the dominance of Allah and his messenger and thus of Islam, had been planned and prepared by Muhammad in Mecca for some time. For Muslims the history of Islam begins with the Hijrah and the moment when Islam and its Prophet were empowered to perform the political, military and religious deeds, which Muslims have subsequently not ceased to admire and to take as their model and motivation. These “great deeds” according to the Muslim faith were the result of special divine favour and thus constitute the main proof for the authenticity of Muhammad’s divine vocation.

Although well aware of questionable, or at least all too human, aspects of Muhammad’s life, Küng demands categorically that Christian theology and the Christian Churches should recognise “without reservation” that: “Through the Qur’an the Prophet gave countless people in his century and in the centuries that followed infinite inspiration, courage and power to make a new religious beginning: a move towards greater truth and deeper knowledge and a breakthrough towards enlivening and renewing traditional religion. Islam was the great help in life”.

But the Christian believer and theologian cannot but judge this statement about the person of Muhammad and of the Qur’an as unqualified and undifferentiated, not least in the light of the absolutely central Christian theological question at issue here: in the light of the life and teaching of the great biblical prophets Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah and especially and finally of Jesus of Nazareth and his Gospel, what are the adequate and God-pleasing “means” and ways of acting, which the true messenger of God is to employ to further the cause of God? Does not the way Muhammad opted for, namely, political and military means in furthering the cause of Islam, need

to be viewed as objectively irreconcilable with the life, example and teaching of the non-violent, suffering “servant of Yahweh”?

Concerning dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims, Küng argues that only a reduction of the Christological pronouncements of the great councils to a Christology that would be decidedly “Jewish-Christian in character” would make this possible. Küng presupposes here that, for instance, the doctrinal pronouncements of the councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Chalcedon (AD 451) have “altered the message of the New Testament”. In Küng’s view the “high Christology of the Hellenistic councils” as well as the Latin theologies of the Holy Trinity, for example, should be kept out of dialogue with Jews and Muslims: the “New Testament message of Christ” alone should be the issue.

It goes without saying that Christians in dialogue with Muslims always point to the essence and centre of the Christian message in such a way as to keep misunderstandings to a minimum. A Christian would first have to explain the New Testament message of God becoming man in Jesus Christ who through his obedient suffering redeemed the world from sin and now through the power of the Holy Spirit is alive as the Risen Lord. He would then have to explain how this message through the centuries – in response to constant misunderstandings and errors – had to be articulated afresh, authentically and bindingly, for all Christians in each epoch and culture. The God of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, whether in the language of Paul of Tarsus or in that of the council of Chalcedon, is the “scandalous and foolish” God, to whom countless people, including those coming from Islam, have converted.

This comprehensively researched, clearly structured and thought-provoking work is in many ways truly remarkable. And yet, it would seem that the Küngian versions of Islam and Christianity, shaped to fit into the vision of a peacefully dialoguing and collaborating world of religions and cultures, misses in some essential points the true and distinctive character of both religions. Christians and Muslims adhere to eternally different and in some ways mutually contradicting world-views. They will retain their separate identities and these have to be respected. At the same time, they are called, today more urgently than ever, to engage in authentic and honest dialogue, dealing with one another in fairness, for the good of all humankind.