

The Catholic Church, by Hans Küng. Translated by John Bowden.

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

A growing number of works by Catholic authors such as Garry Wills, Eugene Kennedy and Donald Cozzens, as well as books by numerous feminist writers, call for greater honesty regarding the problems within the Catholic Church. One of the most familiar and insistent of these voices calling for church reform is Hans Küng's. Küng launched his theological career in the late 1950s by boldly arguing that the teaching of Karl Barth on justification could be reconciled with the doctrine of the Council of Trent.

Serving as a consultant to Vatican II during the 1960s, Küng wrote important works on ecclesiology, works which led him directly to challenge papal infallibility. This in turn led to the Vatican's declaration that he was no longer officially a Catholic theologian. Since then, Küng has continued to function as a Catholic priest. He teaches at the ecumenical institute in Tübingen and has turned his attention to dialogue among the world's religions and to developing a global ethic. He has also applied Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm shifts to church history.

Küng's latest book is a very personal and engaged history of the Catholic Church, told from the perspective of his own struggles in the service of his vision of reform. Though he begins by noting his experience of "how merciless the Roman system can be," he insists that the Catholic Church nonetheless remains his spiritual home. He concludes by accusing Pope John Paul II of betraying Vatican II and calling him "the most contradictory" pope of the 20th century. Küng hopes there will be a future Pope John XXIV who will lead a major reconstruction effort.

In between, Küng recounts the main institutional developments of Catholic church history, at a rapid pace and with a polemical edge. His pace leaves little room for the kind of serious, original reflection that marked his earlier, more focused research in ecclesiology.

This book's vantage point is modern Europe and its values, and the discussion focuses very strongly on the development of the papacy, especially detailing its abuses of power and its conflicts with the Eastern Orthodox, the Reformation, Jews and modernity. Though the Catholic Church is one of the most internally diverse communities in the world, there is little mention of the diversity of the grass-roots experiences of Catholics in Latin American, Africa or Asia, and little attention to the experience of women within the church, other than their exclusion from ordained ministry.

Readers of Küng's earlier works will find little here that is new or surprising. For those supportive of his agenda, this is a moving lament for past ecclesial failings and a stirring call to renewed commitment to Catholic reform. Reform is presented as hinging largely on the hope for a new pope and a new council. But important as magisterial structures are for Catholics, the broader and deeper transformation of Catholicism that is currently under way in Latin America, Africa and Asia may well shape a future Catholic Church that neither the Vatican nor Küng can predict or control.