Islam: Past, Present and Future

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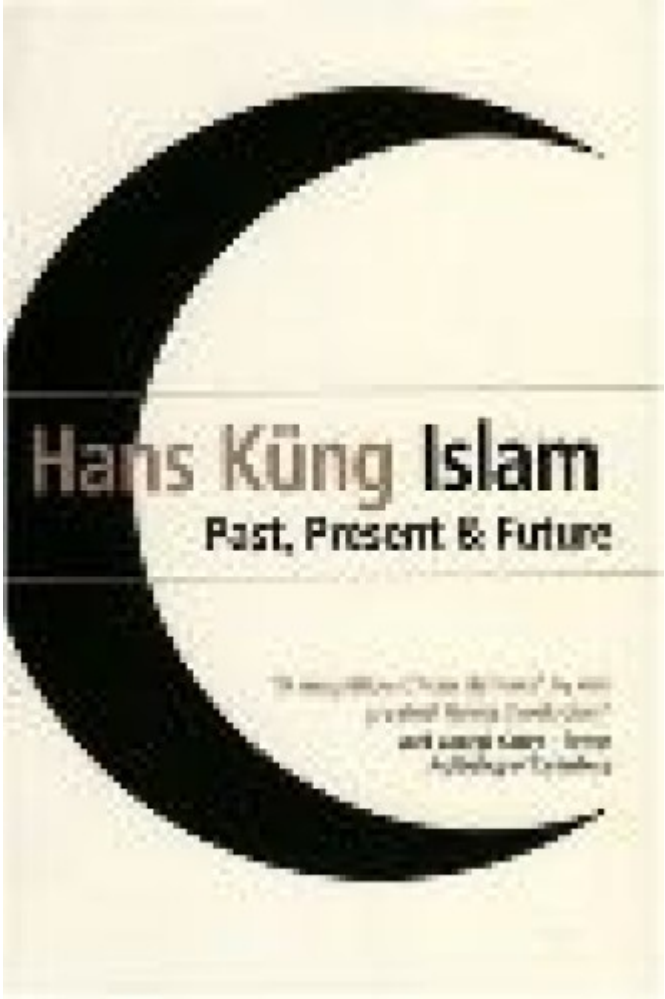
In Review



Islam: Past, Present and Future

Hans Küng
Oneworld

Shortly after the attacks of September 11, President Bush declared that the perpetrators had “violated the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith” and that

“Islam is peace.” On what basis did Bush make this declaration? The terrorists certainly thought they were being obedient to the tenets of the Islamic faith. Does George Bush, who isn’t a Muslim, know something about Islam those Muslims didn’t?

For centuries the West has encountered Islam either through uninformed invective or equally ignorant glorification. It behooves us to know all we can about Islam as it is, has been and may become. *Islam*: *Past*, *Present and Future* is a huge book that gives a sweeping overview of Islam similar to Hans Küng’s earlier treatments of Judaism (1991) and Christianity (1994).

One of the reasons that Küng’s book is so long is that he tries to be fair to Islam. “Christians must understand Islam as Muslims understand themselves,” says Küng. His commitment to evenhandedness requires him to qualify almost every historical judgment, to mention everyone who had the slightest moderating influence on the major trajectories of Islam, and to tell the story of Islam in enough detail to convince everyone that he really knows what he is talking about. Küng ends most of his discussions of various topics in Islam with a series of pointed but respectful questions for Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

While he occasionally mentions Judaism as one of the “great monotheistic faiths,” Küng is mostly concerned with Islam as approached from a Christian perspective. He claims that monotheism is the supreme achievement of Muhammad and the best basis for potential linkages with Judaism and Christianity. Curiously, he seems not to differentiate between monotheism as it is embodied in Judaism and Christianity and monotheism as it is expressed in Islam, as if when these three faiths say “one God” they’re saying much the same thing.

At the beginning Küng states his position: that there will be “no world peace without religious peace.” While I doubt that religious people bear as much responsibility for war and violence as Küng suggests, it is a good thing for us to better understand one another. Küng gives us a history of Islamic conquest in great detail, but as I read, I had the nagging suspicion that despite his intentions, Küng has pressed Islam through the filter of a European academic who is a liberal, disgruntled Catholic. While I can’t say whether Küng is completely fair to Islam, I do question his representation of Christianity.

Islam: *Past*, *Present and Future* is at its best as a sweeping history and interpretation of Islam; it is least satisfying as a theological work. Perhaps this is partly due to its

subject: Küng says that in Islam, “religious law, which shows people the right way of obeying God in all things, is more important than theology.” He credits the rise and survival of Islam to a series of paradigms whereby Muslims have lived into the central Islamic affirmation, “No God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet.” In his use of charts and paradigms to organize the epics and ages of Islam, Küng may be oversimplifying a very complex historical reality. However, as someone who has previously tried unsuccessfully to wade through the history of Islam, I deeply appreciate Küng’s powers of schematization and typology. Islam is not, as many within and outside the faith think, an unchanging, unchangeable religion. Islam has adapted to a variety of challenges and is even now adapting, though Küng says that nobody can predict what Islam will do with the challenges of modernity.

Küng reminds us that Christianity has faced many of the same intellectual threats and has responded in the same reactionary, violent ways that Islam sometimes has. The story of Christianity and its stance on science, justice for women and democracy is not simple either. Behind his complex charts of paradigms is Küng’s assumption of a kind of progress in Islam toward more secular, democratic, modern ways of thinking and of ordering society. I wonder, though, whether Islam might fail to develop according to Western ideals of accommodation and adaptation that have characterized much of the Jewish and Christian response to modernity. Are Küng’s Western prejudices showing in his implicit assumption that the best hope for Islam is submission to the Enlightenment?

His section on how “God’s word has become a book” and on the unified, rapid 22-year composition of the Qur’an is revealing. Much that we Christians claim from Christ, Islam receives from the Qur’an. I also learned much from Küng’s discussion of Sufism. I wondered why he did not seem to think that the more mystical Sufism could be an alternative to the militant Wahhabism that currently causes so much mischief. Are there no resources within Islam that could lead to Islam’s postmodern renewal?

Given what Küng says, those who attempt to characterize Islam as a religion of peace have their work cut out for them. Muhammad made explicit declarations of war against both Jews and Christians, whom he called wretched infidels who don’t believe in either “God or the Last Day.” Triumphalism and conquest permeated the faith of Islam from the first. Muhammad is revered as a spectacularly successful warrior, particularly during his Medinan phase. In Islam, no separation is made between religion and politics; in fact, part of the internal validation of Islam’s

veracity is its ability to conquer and to establish itself in holy statecraft. *Jihad* —struggle and effort for God—is required of every believer; heavenly rewards in paradise are promised for those who struggle well.

“In the history of the religions did any religion pursue a victorious course as rapid, far-reaching, tenacious and permanent as that of Islam?” Küng asks rhetorically. This triumphalist history has rendered Islam a “religion of victory.” For Küng this helps to explain its militant spirit and Muslims’ deep resentment of colonization and repression by the West, as well as their shame that the Islamic world has lagged in economic development and political power. (This resentment is well chronicled in Benjamin Barber’s 1996 book *Jihad vs*. *McWorld*.)

Muhammad’s consistent teaching on the nobility of recompense for wrong provides a convincing rationale for reciprocal violence and a mythology of conquest. As Küng says, “The apologetic argument often advanced by Muslims that armed *jihad* refers only to wars of defense cannot be maintained. . . . It is hard to imagine a more effective motivation for a war than the ‘struggle’ . . . which furthers God’s cause against the unbelievers.” I assume that this triumphalist stress on the ultimate victory of Islam accounts for Islam’s rejection of Jesus’ crucifixion; it is inconceivable that a true prophet could so miserably fail.

While Küng knows more about Islam than I’ll ever know, I’m suspicious of his characterization of Islam as mainly a political struggle with one or two good religious ideas. I suspect that Küng’s intellectualized view of Christianity as a desiccated faith affects his characterization of Islam. I wonder how many Muslims would recognize themselves and their passionate love of Islam in Küng’s sterile exposition of their religion?

At the end of the book, when Küng finally becomes constructive and suggests how Christians and Muslims should think about one another, we find that in order to talk to Muslims, we Christians must adhere to what Küng calls “an original New Testament perspective”—that is, we should follow the simple Jesus whom later “Hellenistic” speculation made complicated and “unbiblical” with doctrines like the two natures of Christ and the Trinity. One infers from Küng that Muslims think the world of Jesus; they just don’t think he was who classical Christianity has always claimed him to be. I was disheartened to learn that Küng’s desire for interfaith conversation would require us to forsake our theological claims “for the sake of belief in the one God of Abraham.” Like many would-be conversation partners with

Islam, Küng is a bit too confident in the centrality of Abraham. He admits that “Abraham is not the ideal starting point for dialogue,” but he trots him out anyhow.

Küng says that if we pare Christianity down to its earliest, most essential essence, if we build upon the Qur’an’s mention of Mary and Jesus as well as the (to my mind equally marginal) reference to Abraham in the New Testament, we will find common ground and a basis for fruitful conversation. In other words, there are no serious impediments to Christian-Muslim agreement if we Christians all become 19th-century German liberal Christians. Küng makes me thankful that the Muslims I’m currently trying to talk with do not demand that I jettison the most interesting aspects of the Christian faith before we can have a conversation.