

# Reviews

**GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY: IN SEARCH OF A NEW WORLD ETHIC** by Hans Küng, translated by John Bowden. *SCM Press*, 1991. xx + 158 pp. £12.95 h/b

For the humble bourgeois, reading the 'quality press' over breakfast, the world can seem a frightful mess. It is, but the orderliness of the newspaper, from catastrophe on the front page to cricket commentary on the back, by way of measured editorial and concerned 'woman's page', makes it seem less so: frightful but not truly terrifying. Journalism is like an inoculation against the world. So also this book if taken seriously.

The world is a mess and Hans Küng has set himself the task of putting it to rights. Against impending global catastrophe he pontificates imperatives and theses, the 'programme—the dust-jacket informs—which Küng 'will be pursuing for the rest of his life'. At its core are three slogans: no world community without a world ethic; no world peace without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without religious dialogue.

The book has three parts. The first charts the mess which the world has got itself into and the new 'epoch' in which we now live. The second turns to the religions for help, and the third indicates how they can begin to do so. It's a clean and simple story. The world needs help; the religions can help it; Küng can help the religions. But it's a little too simple.

Küng can never forget that he read Hegel; he cannot resist mapping out history. At the 'end of the second millennium' there can be no question of an historical determinism 'à la Hegel, Marx or Spengler' (p.12); and yet, 'we can see' (who can see?) 'the beginning of a shift to a new world epoch after the modern period' (p.3). After the old ideologies—'state socialism', 'neocapitalism', 'Japanism'—comes the new epochal paradigm: 'postmodernity'. (Küng can never forget that he read Thomas Kuhn - witness the paranoid attack on Dorothee Sölle in footnote 35—whose notion of a 'paradigm' he treats as a periodisation, ignoring the radically anti-realist thrust of Kuhn's polemic.)

Küng has the latest slang, but his use of it is idiosyncratic. 'Postmodernism' is generally taken to be a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations; delighting in difference and polyvalence, and seeking to think through the radical 'situatedness' of all human thought and practice. But Küng is too much of an Enlightenment thinker (despite having read Alasdair MacIntyre) to accept that. His 'postmodernism' is a 'world view' (which one might

think a contradiction in terms), a liberal revisionism (endorsed by the equally bizarre conceptuality of David R. Griffin) which looks, without contextual mediation, for freedom and justice, equality and plurality, brotherhood and sisterhood, coexistence and peace, productivity and ecological solidarity, toleration and ecumenism (pp.67-9). In short Kūng's 'postmodern' society is what one might call capitalism with a (green) human face; a 'new world-order'.

It is no great surprise that while Kūng affirms the failure of the 'Enlightenment project' to found morality in reason (the ethical problem for 'postmodernism'), he looks for just such a foundation in reasonable religion (Kūng's proposed solution). 'Religion can guarantee supreme values, unconditional norms, the deepest motivations and the highest ideals; the why and wherefore of our responsibility' (p.54). But in the face of modernist (and postmodernist) critiques of religion (to which Kūng can only say: 'Well yes, but not necessarily' - see *Does God Exist?*) the worth of this 'guarantee' is never made clear. (Can religion ever be other than a persuasive rhetoric without guarantees?)

Of course the religions don't speak with a single voice and furnish rather poor models for peaceful living, but Kūng is undaunted and argues that one can (who can?) find certain basic values underwritten by the religions. These centre around the idea of the *humanum*, the desiderata of what is 'truly human' (p.90). Of course the religions haven't agreed on what this is exactly (not even in a single one let alone between them all), but Kūng is sure that it will have to involve the 'preservation of human rights', the 'emancipation of women', the 'realization of social justice', and the 'immorality of war' (p.88). It is the purpose of inter-religious dialogue to help the religions reach a common mind, and the latter part of Kūng's book is devoted to legitimising such dialogue and indicating how Kūng will further it over the next five years by writing many more books on the 'world religions'. Inspired by Tillich, he seems to envision a multi-religious systematic theology (p.122).

It doesn't seem right that one should criticise this book. It is dedicated to the President Emeritus of the Bundesbank and prefaced by the Duke of Edinburgh, and is written, no doubt, with the best of intentions. It locates the right problem: imagining social existence 'after foundationalism' and the ubiquitous triumph of consumerist and managerial values. It is a problem recently presented in James Cameron's stunning and horrific film *Terminator 2* (1991), though there hardly answered because the film - and Hollywood generally - cannot imagine 'communal', but only 'individual', or at best 'familial' existence. Likewise, Kūng's book cannot think the problematic through and doesn't know how to situate an 'answer' in the Christian project of imagining and making a community under God. All it can offer is a conception of human wellbeing supposedly derived from the religions (pp.85-8), and issuing in a bill of universal 'human rights'. Kūng's global society is still a world of competing factions, oppositions

and contestations. Kūng's book is hampered by the attempt to make palatable to all religious traditions the finally liberalised Christian values Kūng espouses (values which uniquely derive from secular Christian culture). It is possibly the worst book Kūng has ever written. One is tempted to say that it is not theology, but 'pie in the sky' liberalism; not ethics, but a parade of unquestioned Western values. Most seriously, Kūng doesn't seem to realise that one can't dream up an ethic for a world that doesn't exist, but must make the world as one makes the ethic, and that requires making certain sorts of community; and that already—is the project of Christ's Church.

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**THE TEMPTATION AND THE PASSION: THE MARKAN SOTERIOLOGY.** Society for New Testament Study Monograph Series 2 by Ernest Best. *Cambridge University Press*. Second Edition 1990. Pp. lxxx + 222. £30.00.

During this century the common understanding of Mark's Gospel has been greatly transformed. From being a naive, untutored biographer Mark became first the impassive collector of early tradition and then the adapter of existing material, so arranged as to controvert misleading views and substitute safer ones. One of the pioneers of that last stage was Professor Best who in 1965 produced a detailed study of the Markan soteriology. Since then he has written *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (1981); *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (1983), and *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel according to Mark* (1986). Now comes this second edition, in which the earliest Markan book is reprinted and supplemented by sixty-two pages of additional preface. All these writings draw upon or take issue with the numerous scholars working in this field; this second edition lists forty works of some importance.

What did Mark think was achieved by the life, death and resurrection of Christ? In his original book Dr Best examined and rejected the view that the cross was the defeat of Satan. That defeat took place at the Temptation: thereafter Satan virtually disappeared from the Gospel. By examining the Markan seams and the arrangement of the material, by studying the witness of Jesus to himself and the titles used of him, and by observing the significance of the Christian community, Dr Best sought to show that the cross is judgement, borne by Jesus, to bring people into the new community formed out of those who are saved, enjoy the forgiveness of their sin, and themselves go out to seek others (p. 191).

In this second edition, Dr Best moves away from redaction criticism to reading the Gospel as a whole, with much attention to the continuity of the narrative. He sharpens and re-affirms his previous view of the Temptation. He no longer thinks that Mark was using an existing passion narrative. Mark's use of the Temple theme indicated the end of some aspect of Judaism (law and cultus were no longer

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