

Till thou shalt grow and fold and be unfurled
Literally between me and the world.
Then I shall drink from in beneath a spring,
And from a poet's side shall read his book.
O daisy mine, what will it be to look
From God's side even of such a simple thing?

Shall we not understand even better the lovableness of the animals we have comforted in the present world and grasp the mystery of the wild glare in the eyes of those we could not tame? If we are to see the tiger's Creator, shall we not also penetrate the distant deeps and skies, the forests of the night, and face without fear the burning eyes of the creature now forever free?

Küng's Case for God

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People would like to have reasons for believing that God exists. With its appearance in attractive paperback format Hans Küng's *Does God Exist?* certainly looks like the most thorough and scholarly treatment of the subject¹. For one thing, at seventeen ounces, clearly printed on decent paper, and sturdily enough bound to survive several readings, it is a fine example of modern book-production. The translation by Edward Quinn, is, needless to say, almost faultless. Some of the reviews which the hardback version received were very destructive—Alasdair MacIntyre's page-long diatribe in *The London Review of Books* (5—18 February, 1981) comes to mind: "Whenever in future I try to imagine what Purgatory will be like, the thought of having to read Dr. Küng's book will recur". Judgements in some of the theological periodicals were rather more respectful. To give only two examples: in *Theology* (September 1981), after some gently expressed but actually quite devastating criticisms, Brian Hebblethwaite concludes as follows: "So it can hardly be said that this is a great book. But as an attempt to set the scene for a serious engagement with atheism, it serves a very useful purpose". In *The Month* (March 1981), while describing Hans Küng as "a sort of Dale Carnegie of modern theology, building confidence, edifying in the best sense of the word", Paul Lakeland's judgment of the book runs

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thus: “He has two ostensible purposes, to present the history of thinking about the problem of God since the time of Descartes, and to define a new concept of God. The former he does with great brilliance, the latter competently and clearly, but without any great originality”. This reviewer’s point is, in fact, that Küng’s argument for God’s existence is boringly orthodox— “there is really nothing here to bring even the suggestion of a blush to the cheek of the most demurely Roman theologian”.

That may well be the case: Küng’s theology and recent Holy Office declarations feed off each other in a way that suggests that these great adversaries are equally indebted to the ultramontane neo-scholastic tradition. Brian Hebblethwaite refers to Küng’s “remarkable communicational and apologetic success.” No doubt the Küngian shenanigans have greatly increased sales—he must be the most widely read theologian alive. His publishers certainly exploit his reputation: “one of the most brilliant, controversial and outspoken priests in the Roman Catholic Church this century”. But beyond the ecclesiastical showbiz there remains something in Küng’s apologetics for Christianity that makes sense to many thoughtful Catholics. Partly, it must be the element of liberal Protestantism in his work that attracts them (and makes Alasdair MacIntyre very angry: “the simple fact, albeit one that he himself has not yet noticed, is that Dr. Küng... is quite clearly a Protestant”). Even more deeply, however, it is perhaps the Cartesian philosophy that confuses people. That is at least one possible reason for the success of *Does God Exist?* that deserves a little exploration.

The book falls into seven sections. In the first, Descartes and Pascal are presented with detailed attention to their setting in seventeenth-century Catholicism. As everyone knows, Descartes was soldiering on the Danube in 1619 when he had his vision of mathematically certain systematization of knowledge, both of nature and of mind. Fewer know that he immediately vowed to make a pilgrimage to Loreto—and that he actually made it. Everybody knows that Pascal hated the Jesuits—Küng says that the *Lettres Provinciales* prepared the way for the papal dissolution of the Society a century later. What is less familiar is the interplay between Descartes and the much younger Pascal. They met in 1647, over a few days, but did not become friends. Pascal, according to Küng, was so much more critical and sceptical than Descartes that he could not rest with the notion that the rational self-certainty of the human subject alone provided the firm, unshakeable foundation on which all certainty—including the certainty of God’s existence—might be built. Küng’s thesis is that Pascal’s existential sense of the radical insecurity of human life is far more troublesome than Cartesian anxieties about locating secure foundations for human knowledge. Scepticism about the reality of

anything, inside or outside human consciousness, becomes the baseline for Küng's whole enterprise. He insists that, while we cannot go back on Cartesian rationality, we have to acknowledge, with Pascal, the need for feeling and choice—“*Il faut parler*”, you have to wager.

The second section of the book introduces Hegel. It culminates with Teilhard de Chardin and the so-called “process theology” of A.N. Whitehead. There is no going back on the Hegelian insight either—which is, apparently, that God “is alive and active in history”, not one who “persists unmoving and unchanging in an unhistorical or suprahistorical sphere” (page 188). The third section, accordingly, deals with *one* result of putting God firmly into history: the atheism of Feuerbach, Marx, and then Freud. But the key move in Küng's book come in the fourth section, which is entirely devoted to Nietzsche.

“It is certain”, wrote Bernard Williams recently (*The London Review of Books*, 4—17 June 1981), “even if not everyone has yet come to see it, that Nietzsche was the greatest moral philosopher of the past century”. His reason is as follows: “This was, above all, because he saw how totally problematical morality, as understood over many centuries, has become, and how complex a reaction that fact, when fully understood, requires”. He goes on to give this fine summary of Nietzsche's whole work: “To help himself to understand it, he resourcefully explored, in twenty years of increasingly hectic activity, our feelings about art, guilt, violence, honesty, and indeed every element of that moral consciousness which the Greeks helped to invent”. *That* is the Nietzsche, then, whom an Anglo-Saxon philosopher finds worth reading. The coherence of the moral sensibility which we have inherited may depend on certain “theological” conceptions which Nietzsche's gift for suspicion detected. But, although Küng insists on how much Christians have to learn from Nietzsche, his main emphasis is on the grandiloquent nihilism rather than on the detailed psychological and social-anthropological probings. He presents Nietzsche's nihilism as *the* great alternative to the modern theism for which he is arguing. In fact, it is very much the picture that those who know little or nothing about Nietzsche would expect. It is a serious possibility that reality *is* lacking in reality: “It is indeed at least possible that this human life, in the last resort, is meaningless, that chance, blind fate, chaos, absurdity, and illusion rule the world, that, in the last resort, everything is contradictory, meaningless, worthless, null” (page 423). This is a serious possibility, so Küng says, because of the *Zweifelhaftigkeit* of reality—“the utter dubiousness of all that exists”. Thus we turn to the radical scepticism introduced by Descartes and Pascal.

In the fifth section, then, we seem all poised to deflect Nietzsche's

nihilism. At this point, anyone familiar with Wittgenstein's endlessly imaginative explorations of the allurements of scepticism would expect K ung to cut straight through the absurdities of the Cartesian-Pascalian line. The passage would not be swift. A first-year student could trot out the arguments against Cartesianism, but it takes time to free oneself from the inveterate desire to found everything upon self-evident principles, atomic propositions, protocol statements, or anything you like *so long as it is in our minds*. After all, even the much-revered Donald Davidson thinks that we can make sense of things only against a background of *beliefs*.² It is going to be *decisions* that K ung will favour. We have to *choose* the "basic attitude" which it is up to the individual to "adopt" vis- -vis this utterly dubious reality with which one is surrounded. He explicitly distances himself from Sartrean existentialism but writes as follows all the same: "Every human being decides for himself his *fundamental attitude* to reality: that basic approach which embraces, colours, characterizes his whole experience, behaviour, action" (page 432). One option is Nietzsche's nihilism—you just *decide* that reality is senseless. The alternative, the only other possibility, is *Grundvertrauen*: fundamental trust in the reality of the world around me. I *choose* to be confident of the reality of other people and all the rest of the furniture on the stage of life. It is a "radical decision" that I have to make "about my life in the world". Allusion is made to Kierkegaard's "Either/Or" as well as to St. Ignatius of Loyola's *electio* (page 348); but this liberty to choose one's reaction to reality is expounded mainly with reference to Popper, Carnap, T.S. Kuhn, and others who have encouraged K ung to think that it is all a matter of our *decision*. From Popper he has learnt that "all rational thinking rests on a choice, a resolution, a decision, an attitude" (page 461). From Carnap he has learnt that the principles and rules of argument in an artificial language are a matter of "free choice" (ibid). From Wittgenstein (via Carnap, citing Schlick) he has learnt, even more amazingly, "that the rules of language may be chosen with complete freedom" (ibid). From Kuhn, finally, he has learnt that there can be no science but for prior "commitments"—"beliefs in particular models" (ibid). All along the line, the suggestion is that we are free to choose our beliefs about the intelligibility and even the reality of the world around us. This is surely where the charm of K ung's argument lies.

In the sixth section the argument comes to a head—"as there is no logically conclusive proof for the reality of reality, neither is there one for the reality of God" (page 574). Belief in the existence of God is a "basic decision"—indeed it is an *Urentscheidung* (that sounds a lot more impressive)—on analogy with the "basic decision for the reality of reality as a whole" (*sic*). In other words, there is nothing irrational about believing in the reality of God—after all, we have

nothing better than belief to go on vis-à-vis the reality of the world around us. It is not very odd for us to have nothing better than trust upon which to found our belief in the existence of God—for we have nothing better than trust at the basis of our belief in the reality of the external world!

In the final section of this exceedingly long and prolix book this God whose reality has thus been less than conclusively proved turns out, after a detour through the many names of God in Chinese religion etc., to be the Christian God. Here Küng rejoins *On Being a Christian*, his earlier book, large chunks of which are indeed recycled.

There is much interesting matter in the book: how could there fail to be? One is grateful for the reference to Hoimar von Ditfurth's "widely read book", *Im Anfang war der Wasserstoff* (page 638). It appears that H. Reiner showed some thirty years ago that the usual tale about the appearance of the word "metaphysics" is a legend (page 775). It is valuable to be reminded of Karl Barth's discussion of Descartes (in CD III/1). It is surprising to hear that he very seldom mentions Pascal. It is even more valuable to learn of Barth's silent retraction on the subject of natural theology (CD IV/3). There are interesting pages on how fundamental trust in the reality of the world depends on certain psychosomatic conditions, and indeed begins in the womb (page 454 ff). In fact, it is surely because so many people, in our society at least, have such deep misgivings about the reality of the world around them, and particularly about the reliability of other people, that the anxieties so powerfully articulated by Descartes and Pascal remain at the centre of philosophical attention. But it is just as clear that it does not lie in anyone's power simply to *decide* to trust in the reality of the world—which means, in turn, that we have to find some other model for belief in the existence of God. The analogy on which Küng's argument depends—that we decide to trust the reality of the external world—is a piece of nonsense. But the question remains—why should anyone be tempted by the idea that we *believe* in the existence of the world around us? Why should a perfectly literate and intelligent reviewer in *The Month* conclude that Küng's case for the existence of God is so orthodox as to be boring?

The panoply of references only displays Hans Küng's unfamiliarity with good philosophy. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted, he knows nothing of the work on the question of God's existence by a generation of Anglo-Saxon philosophers of religion³. Much more serious, however, is his ignorance of the anti-Cartesianism which they take for granted. But this is where he is joined by many thoughtful Catholics (and others). The idea that it is up to us to decide how to take the world has great plausibility. It is easy to fill out the picture of the Self, or even of the whole huddled tribe, confronting that which surrounds it and judging whether it is as it seems, or even whether it

is there at all. There seems to be a standpoint from which we survey the passing show and impose a pattern upon it. More sophisticatedly, mathematics seems a free creation; language only a matter of convention; and so on. All along the line, it looks as if our experience of reality depends on our interpretation—and our interpretation is supposed to be, in the last resort, our decision. It is what happens *inside our heads* that matters. And then delusions occur. Many people are schizophrenic. Some people inhabit their own private world. Nietzsche thought that truth is the fiction that the race needs, biologically, to make this alien planet habitable. People do lose confidence in one another. As babies people do have their belief in other people's reliability irreparably undermined. People have to be drilled and drugged to get back into relationships with others. And so on. That, and much else, is the sort of thing that sustains the thought that it is finally up to us to decide how to react to reality. Once the ramifications of this thought begin to surface its power becomes intelligible.

According to Hans Küng, we cannot *prove* that the external world exists, has meaning, etc., we just have to make an act of faith that it does. On the whole, this act of faith will prove worth it. The gamble will pay off in interesting ways. But it is always possible to go the allegedly Nietzschean way and to take things for the chaotic mess they often seem to be. This will have bleak effects—but Küng thinks it is always *possible*. He is held captive by the picture of the man who is free to put what construction he wills upon the surrounding world. Of course there is room for deciding to trust a man who has let one down—but there is no option about his being a human being. In innumerable situations human beings react to one another in that collaborative enterprise which is any community or culture—and there is no room for doubt about what they are at. It has nothing to do with decisions or conventions or beliefs, shared and communicable or otherwise—it is “a consensus of *action*: a consensus of doing the same thing, reacting in the same way. ... We all act the same way, walk the same way, count the same way”⁴. But that directs our attention to certain very general facts of nature, psychological and physical—to exigencies of conduct and feeling which human beings share. Wittgenstein's discovery (it has been well said) is “of the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of human society but, we could say, on the conventionality of human nature itself”⁵. But Hans Küng is not the only theologian who would avoid Wittgenstein's writings.

1 *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* by Hans Küng. Collins Fount Paperbacks 1983 pp xxiv + 839 £5.95.

2 See “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, II, 1977, page 244.

3 MacIntyre lists Robert M. Adams, Peter Geach, Anthony Kenny, Terence Penelhum, Alvin Plantinga, James Ross and Richard Swinburne.

4 See *Wittgenstein's Lectures*, edited by Cora Diamond, page 184.

5 See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, page 111.