

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## HANS KÜNG: DOES GOD EXIST?

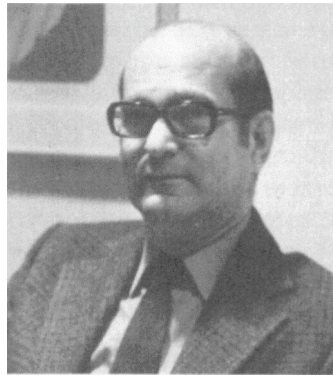
**Book Review**

by

Mortimer J. Adler and Wayne F. Moquin



**Mortimer Adler** has devoted a lifetime to the teaching and practice of philosophy, which he regards not as an academic specialty but as everybody's business, and to the cause of education through the study of great books. Among numerous books he has written is *How to Think about God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan* (1980), in which he endeavors to set forth what can be said about God by the mind without the aid of revelation. For many years an associate at the University of Chicago of Robert Maynard Hutchins, with whom he edited *Great Books of the Western World*, he has since 1952 been director of the Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago, and, since 1974, chairman of the Board of Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. His latest book is *Six Great Ideas*, in which he distinguishes the ideas we judge by from those we act upon. He is editor in chief of *The Great Ideas Today*.



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## I. Exposition of the book

Hans Küng's *Does God Exist?* is a formidable exercise in apologetics, that branch of theology which seeks to defend and assert the message of the churches in the face of contemporary ideologies. Apologetics differs from theological squabbles among the churches, in that, while all the Christian churches share the message of the New Testament, with ideologies of the twentieth century, they do not necessarily have common ground.

Küng's premise in writing this book is that there is in our time a multiplicity of worldviews, of which some are ideological and some not, but which taken together deny, doubt, or derogate the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses and the prophets, the God whom the churches see fully and finally revealed in the Jesus of the New Testament.

The aim of the book is simple: to affirm "by a clear, convinced Yes, justifiable at the bar of critical reason" that God exists. But the journey of more than 700 pages to get to this affirmation is far from simple and involves some serious problems for philosophy and theology. Although *Does God Exist?* is divided into seven sections, A through G, the book is basically in two parts.

The first part, sections A through D, traces the course of modern philosophical/scientific thought from the rationalism of the Enlightenment to the nihilism of Nietzsche, with several detours into the twentieth century. It is here that all the cases against belief in God are made.

The second part, sections E through G, is developed thematically rather than historically, although quite a few historical summaries of philosophical, theological, and scientific positions are outlined. The presentation in the second part begins with an argument for an affirmation of reality (in response to Nietzsche) and proceeds to an affirmation of belief in God in sections F and G.

In section A, Küng "looks back over the dramatic history of reason and faith in modern times, which led to the elimination of God from politics and science." The two thinkers primarily at issue are Descartes and Pascal. It was Descartes who found in reason the basis on which to measure and quantify the whole of empirical reality. Beyond this, he was able to derive the idea of God from the certainty of this same reason.

Pascal, also devoted to reason and faith, rendered an opposite con-

clusion. His focus was, however, on man *in* the universe, “out of which no Creator’s voice can be heard.” He impugns the certainty of reason yet denies that fundamental uncertainty is inevitable. He challenges man “to take the risk of believing in God.” For Pascal, faith becomes the foundation on which reason can operate, for purely rational self-certainty (Descartes’s *Cogito, ergo sum*) cannot serve as a basis on which all other certainty can be built.

Section A of Küng’s book then goes on to describe the divergence of theology from natural science since the Enlightenment. The blame for this divergence is laid mostly at the doors of the churches, which, in one rear-guard action after another, attempted to preserve the ancient/medieval worldview.

As Paul Tillich has noted: the churches “tried to discover gaps in our scientific and historical knowledge in order to find a place for God and his actions within an otherwise completely calculable and ‘immanent’ world. Whenever our knowledge advanced, another defense position had to be given up.” But, in the face of ecclesiastical dogmatizing, natural science fought back, asserting its own claims by virtue of experiment and observation, to the end that God as explanation of anything became less and less necessary.

This, at first only implicit, denial of God receives its corrective by Küng in Section B. With a new scientific view of the world, it was no longer possible, he notes, to stick “to a philosophically obsolete image of God.” In the Newtonian world, God became the machine-maker, the God who made the world and put it in operation according to its own natural laws.

With Spinoza comes a departure from this deism to pantheism: God “the one and only divine substance,” of which the individual self and all finite things are only modifications. In Spinoza and those influenced by him, there took place a “restoration of the divinity of nature” which had been neglected by the Enlightenment.

This led, perhaps inevitably, to a subjectivizing of God. For Fichte, God became an immediate, original certainty that is rooted in feeling.” When the objectifying of God out of the world by way of deism is set alongside the subjectivizing of God into the “inwardness of emotion, of feeling,” one may ask (as many did), why bother with a concept of God at all? He is so removed as to be irrelevant or so interiorized that “faith surrenders objective reality.” It was Hegel, Küng says, who saw this possibility clearly. And it is Hegel whose thought, and the reactions to it, forms the bulk of Sections B, C, and D of Küng’s book. Hegel is, indeed, the pivotal

philosopher for Küng. It was Hegel, after all, who took completely seriously the modern worldview vis-à-vis the problem of God. He saw the potential for atheism and “perceived exactly the historical context in which must be seen this basic feeling of the religion of modern times that God is dead.” And it was Hegel who in his great synthesis sought “a reconciliation of faith and knowledge, of a philosophical and a biblical God.”

The synthesis is so impressive to Küng that he seems to wish that it could serve as a modern counterpart to the work of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. “Hegel—this genius of dialectical synthesis—created a system containing an amazing abundance of material ... on a scale never before offered to Christianity: a *summa universalis*, and—for that very reason—supremely a *summa theologica* ... a miracle in the age of an unbelieving philosophy.”

The Hegelian synthesis, unlike the Thomistic one, did not break down because of a new worldview. The world simply passed it by in the way of reaction and challenge. In any case, as Küng points out, the possibility of maintaining it was demolished in the course of the nineteenth century. Yet even in the twentieth century, he argues, “important thinkers particularly in the fields of mathematics and natural science [Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin] are working out alternatives to science without religion and progress without God.”

It is in Sections C and D that the decisive challenge to Hegel comes, and the curtain is finally rung up on full-blown and unembarrassed atheism. Section C deals with the thought of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. In the matter of atheism, Feuerbach is clearly the leading thinker, for it was he who first published a serious intellectual formulation of the denial of God. And Küng suggests, in his remarks on Marx and Freud that these two writers never really improved on the groundwork laid by Feuerbach in his *Essence of Christianity*: “Anthropology is the mystery of religion.” God is a reflection, a projection, the infinitely lengthened shadow, of mankind. Parenthetically it must be said that Küng mentions but does not explore the tremendous impetus given to atheism and other worldly faiths by the French Revolution.

From rationalism to atheism, all modern intellectual meanderings are seen by Küng as leading inexorably to Nietzsche, “the most dangerous diagnostician of modern man.” “Does atheism, thought out to the very end and consistently realized, not finally lead to the reassessment of all values, to the destruction of existing morality

and thus to nihilism?" Küng asks. This is the subject of Section D.

It is fitting to end the first part of the book with Nietzsche, for it is impossible to go beyond him in the transformation of thought he ushered in and in the radical denial he made of even basic empirical reality. Preparatory to a full-scale discussion of Nietzsche, Küng describes the work of Darwin, David Friedrich Strauss, and the stern pessimism of Schopenhauer.

Interpreting Nietzsche is not an easy matter, since it is often difficult to delineate between what he is reporting and what he is innovating. But his singular importance for the twentieth century is undeniable. Reminiscent of the opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Nietzsche announced in *The Gay Science* (1882): "The greatest recent event—that 'God is dead,' that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe."

For Küng, that is Nietzsche's most significant contribution: he was willing to announce the consequences of atheism for modern society: "This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending." No one would have had more right to say, "I told you so," than Nietzsche, had he lived to observe the events of the twentieth century (he died in 1900).

The consequences of this announcement of the death of God had to be a "meaninglessness which threatens everything," Küng concludes. It has led the world to a point where "all the consequences of belief in God must be overcome." Further, "all previous foundations of human knowledge are to be undermined by depicting them as prejudices of faith." This is the end of any fundamental certainty, the beginning of nihilism, "the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes," in sum, "the conviction of the nullity, of the internal contradiction, futility and worthlessness of reality." (Nietzsche himself apparently wanted to put nihilism behind him and move on to something positive: "I want to create something new," he said. But the breakdown of his health prevented him.)

In the first four sections of *Does God Exist?*, Küng is not content to present a "systematic clarification of the problem of God as it has developed in the course of history." Each section also contains a critique: of rationalism, of the Hegelian synthesis, of atheism, and of nihilism.

These subsections, entitled "Interim Results," perform at least two

functions. They subject the issues raised to a critical analysis and a “correcting course,” and they serve as building blocks for the affirmations the author makes in part II, Sections E through G.

In these subsections, Kūng’s approach is one of overwhelming fairness: he is not a fanatical polemicist on behalf of church or dogma. He notes carefully the failures of the churches over the past few centuries in dealing with the advances of scientific knowledge as well as with social, economic, and political issues.

For instance, in the “theses on modern rationality,” he states: “Obviously, not only philosophy and theology but also the natural sciences have great difficulties with changes in the world picture. Neither natural science alone nor philosophy and theology alone can solve these difficulties.”

There must be a “radical course correction of Church and theology.” Even in the theses on atheism and nihilism, he insists on this “course correction” for the sake of truth.

Kūng assesses the results of the first four sections thus: “We did not want to leave anything unquestioned, to conceal anything apologetically, to appeal to any authority beyond further appeal. We tried to think critically and self-critically in order to perceive and to be certain of the foundation of our knowledge and faith.”

Having traced the development of modern atheism and nihilism and found them both “possible, irrefutable but unproved,” Kūng is ready to make a case for saying Yes to reality and to God.

In Section E, two attitudes to reality are explained: fundamental mistrust and fundamental trust. “Fundamental mistrust means that a person in principle says No to the uncertain reality of himself and the world,” Kūng writes. But he himself prefers the other attitude. Man is by nature inclined to say Yes, he argues: fundamental trust makes us open to reality, and the Yes can be consistently maintained in practice. The implications of fundamental trust are then explored for the individual, for science, and for ethics and religion.

Having provided a basis for saying Yes to reality, Kūng nevertheless acknowledges that fundamental trust is inadequate because: “nihilism is not overcome in principle. The reality on which fundamental trust is based seems itself to be without foundation.” The uncertainty of reality remains. Hence “the basic riddle of human life can scarcely be solved if the central question, the question of God, is not faced.” It is pointless to reject nihilism unless atheism

is also rejected.

This is the task of Section F of the K ung book, a long and complicated treatise in which all the major discussions on the problem of God in modern times are analyzed, not necessarily in chronological order. The main issues and thinkers covered are: transcendence (Ernst Bloch, Max Horkheimer, Heidegger, Sartre, and Wittgenstein); the natural theology controversy (Roman Catholic theology versus Karl Barth); and Kant’s critiques of the proofs of God’s existence.

K ung concludes his preliminary arguments by admitting that God cannot be proved but goes on to declare that “God as the supposedly all-determining reality will be verified by the experienced reality of man and the world.” This is an “indirect verification” by which “it should be possible to give an account of belief in God that will stand up to any kind of criticism and to make clear the relevance of belief in God to the reality of man and the world.”

Consequent to this argument, K ung states: “If someone denies God, he does not know why he ultimately trusts in reality.” Belief in God therefore is “rationally justified.” But this is not “an outward rationality ... not first a rational knowledge and then confident acknowledgement of God ... . It is an inward rationality which can offer fundamental certainty.” In “boldly trusting God’s reality, despite all temptations to doubt, man experiences the reasonableness of his trust.”

Lest K ung be accused of rationalism here, he goes on to say that “belief in God, too, is a matter not only of human reason but of the whole concrete, living man, with mind and body, reason and instinct, in his quite particular historical situation.” It is a “superrational,” but not irrational, trust, a decision “grounded in and related to reality and rationally justified in concrete life ... realized in a concrete relationship with our fellow men: without the experience of being accepted by men. It seems difficult to experience acceptance by God.”

Hence such trust is “constantly to be freshly realized.” Most of all, it is a gift from God “who reveals himself as primal source, primal meaning, and primal value.”

Having come this far in his Yes to God, K ung pauses to assess the meaning of his Yes for ethics. His conclusion is that absolute moral norms cannot be justified except by fundamental trust in God. “The unconditionality of the ethical claim ... can be justified



only in the light of an unconditioned ... God himself.”

Finally we arrive, in Section G, at the God of the Bible, after a discussion of the several non-Christian religions. The God of the philosophers is left behind, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appears. It seems fair to state that Kūng’s thesis here is that the Bible reveals to us a God about whom our information thus far was inadequate, but on the right track.

Section F had given us the God in whom we could trust on the basis of an “indirect verification,” the God whom it is reasonable to trust if we want an underpinning for contingent and uncertain reality. It is the God who is revealed (the means of revelation are not discussed) as primal source, meaning, and value.

Now the mask is pulled away, and we learn that the God in whom we trusted was the God of the Bible all the time. While we might have been satisfied with the God of the philosophers, the God-in-general, we realize that such a God, even in the other religions, has no name, no concreteness.

Belief in the God of the Bible, Yahweh, “is also rationally justifiable and has proved itself historically over many thousands of years,” Kūng writes. This is the God of the cosmos, the Creator, who can yet be addressed as a person by humans. This is the God “who does not operate above the world process, but in the world process ... . He is himself the all-embracing and all-controlling meaning and ground of the world process, who can of course be accepted only in faith.”

What, then, is the relation between the God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible? In Kūng’s mind they are quite the same, in that we move from one to the other in a direct line of reasoning and clarification. The process involves a deepening of understanding, and hence of trust, that is involved.

First it is affirmed that God is also for the Bible “the primal ground of all reality,” and “the primal goal of all reality.” Then there is a final assessment that must be quoted in full:

We have been reflecting once more, then, on the God of the Bible without adopting a biblicist attitude and ignoring the conclusions of philosophy. And we have reflected again on the God of the philosophers without stopping at metaphysics:

\*It proved to be an overhasty reaction simply to dissociate the God of the philosophers from the God of the Bible, as “dialectical theology” attempted to do.

\*It proved to be superficial simply to harmonize the God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible, as natural theology did.

\*The important thing was and is to see the relationship in a truly dialectical way. In the God of the Bible, the God of the philosophers is in the best, three-fold sense of the Hegelian term “sublated”—at one and the same time affirmed, negated, and transcended.

This is the more divine God, before whom modern man, now grown so critical—without ever having to give up his reason—“can pray and offer sacrifice, again fall on his knees in awe and sing and dance before him.”

Finally, at the end of Section G, the God of the Bible is revealed as the God of Jesus: “God himself encounters us in a unique and definitive way in the activity and the person of Jesus.” But not just Jesus; it is the crucified Christ who, as the living one, “is the ground of faith, the criterion of freedom. He is the center and norm of what is Christian.” Again, “this Christ Jesus is in person the living, authoritative embodiment of his cause: embodiment of a new attitude to life and a new life-style.” For K ung, this is God in the world for us, who makes it possible to cope with suffering and to face the final enemy, death.

The agency in us for trust and obedience to this God is the Holy Spirit, “never my own possibility, but always the force, power and gift of God.” One receives this Spirit by “opening myself inwardly to the message and thus to God and his crucified Christ,” K ung maintains.

## II. Philosophical critique of the argument

So much for K ung’s argument. Now let us see what it all adds up to and what it is worth. Let us first examine it from the point of view of philosophy; and, after that, from the point of view of religious faith as well as from that of dogmatic or sacred theology.

In the judgment of the authors of this review, one a philosopher and the other a theologian, K ung’s whole approach to the question of God’s existence is unsound and misguided, both philosophically

and theologically. It fails because, with respect to God's existence, it fails to understand the proper scope and limits of philosophy, on the one hand, and of theology, on the other. It has all the faults of that queer discipline known as "natural theology," which is neither a purely philosophical theology nor a dogmatic theology that draws its inspiration from articles of religious faith and uses reason, not to prove anything, but only to help faith seek an understanding of itself.

Philosophical theology begins and ends with what is wholly within the grasp of reason, with no enlightenment or influence from religious faith. To whatever extent and with whatever degree of assurance philosophical theology is able to construct arguments affirming the existence of a supreme being, it necessarily falls short of providing reasons for affirming the existence of the God believed in by men of faith and worshiped by religious Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

I will return presently to the gap that separates the God of the philosophers from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. On the unbridgeability of this chasm, except by an act of faith, Pascal is completely right and K ung, relying on Hegel, is completely wrong.

Dogmatic theology (also denominated "sacred theology" because it has its ultimate source in Sacred Scriptures) begins and ends with what God has revealed to mankind about Himself and about His creatures in relation to Himself. In the development of dogmatic or sacred theology, reason plays a subordinate and ancillary role, not the principal and exclusive role it plays in philosophical theology.

In philosophical theology, reason operates inquisitively and probatively as it operates in metaphysics and in the philosophy of nature. In dogmatic theology, reason does no more than serve faith in its effort to understand what is believed—believed without rational grounds for such belief.

The absence of rational grounds does not make religious belief insecure or uncertain. On the contrary, faith has a certainty greater than any certitude that reason can achieve, because when faith is understood as a gift bestowed upon man by God's grace, the truths it holds, though beyond rational proof, have their security and warranty in the source from which they come.

In the modern world beginning with Descartes and Leibniz, what came to be called "natural theology" is an effort on the part of

philosophers who are also men of faith to reach by reason the God that is the object of their religious belief.

Modern philosophers who criticized and rejected the efforts of natural theology were justified in doing so; but K ung, who pays undue attention to all the pros and cons of the modern controversy about the merits of arguments for and against God's existence, fails signally to recognize that none of the views expressed, whether favorable or adverse, have any bearing whatsoever either on orthodox religious faith and its dogmatic theology or on a truly philosophical theology which acknowledges that the God it is able to think about and even affirm is not the God believed in and worshiped by religious Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The discoveries and methods of modern science, especially in the twentieth century, make much of traditional natural theology untenable: but, on the contrary, a truly philosophical theology profits from attention to modern science.

This can be made crystal clear by considering K ung's question: Does God exist?

"Yes" say religious Jews, Christians, and Muslims, not on the basis of any natural knowledge that they have or can acquire and not on the basis of any rational arguments, but solely as an act of faith on their part, which is to be understood not as an exercise of their human will to believe but rather as a supernatural gift bestowed upon them by God's grace. To this affirmation on their part, modern science and philosophy make no contribution and present no obstacles or impediments.

K ung vacillates from one page to another in viewing religious faith, on the one hand, as an exercise of the human will to believe, for whatever motive, emotional or pragmatic, and viewing religious faith, on the other hand, as a supernatural gift, an act of the will not naturally motivated but moved solely by God's grace.

On the former view of faith, the apologetic efforts in which K ung engages for hundreds of pages may be justified by a desire to bolster up the merely human will to believe in God against countervailing motivations to will a disbelief in God. But on the latter view of faith as a supernatural act of the will moved by God's grace, all of K ung's elaborate apologetics are at best nugatory. Why this is so will be made clear in the third and concluding section of this review.

Let us return to Kūng's question: Does God exist? When that question is answered affirmatively, without hesitation and with complete assurance, by religious persons, the God about whom the question is asked is the God who has revealed Himself in Holy Writ. The first article of faith is belief in the Divine revelation itself—belief in the supernatural source of the Old Testament and the New, or the Old Testament and the Koran. That these books contain the revealed word of God is both unprovable and irrefutable. That is why the acceptance of them as the revealed word of God must be an act of belief, whether that belief results from our merely human will to believe or consists in the supernatural faith that God's grace bestows.

However, when the question, Does God exist? is answered affirmatively by nonreligious persons who think that they have found philosophical reasons for such affirmation, the God about whom the question is asked is not the God who, according to religious faith, has revealed himself in Holy Writ. The question only appears to be the same question because the same three words are used.

Of those three words, the crucial word is "God" When the question is asked and answered by religious persons, the word "God" signifies not only a supreme being, having aseity and acting as the uncaused cause of the cosmos, without which action the cosmos would not now exist. The word "God" also signifies for them a morally perfect being, benevolent, just, and merciful, providential and caring, concerned with man's salvation, a divinity to be worshiped and trusted, an object of prayer and supplication.

There is only one thin thread of common meaning in the two connotations of the word "God," Both include the note of aseity, a property of the supreme being which has in itself the sufficient reason for its own existence and is, therefore, independent, unconditioned, and infinite in its existence. It is that one thin thread that relates the God of the philosophers to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. An unbridgeable chasm of difference remains between a God conceived exclusively in metaphysical terms, which are the terms appropriate to philosophical thinking about God, and a God conceived in moral terms, which are the terms appropriate to religious thinking about God.

It is, of course, possible to leap across the chasm, but that one thin thread of connection will not by itself support the leap. The leap requires an act of belief unsupported by reason, either an exercise of the will to believe or an act of supernatural faith.

In either case, the leap must not be misunderstood, as it usually is, as a process of going from no grounds whatsoever for affirming the existence of God to the affirmation of God's existence. Properly understood, it consists in going from a philosophical affirmation of the supreme being's existence to the religious belief that the God whose existence has been affirmed on rational grounds is benevolent, just, merciful, providential, a God to be relied on and prayed to, a God through whose grace man gains salvation.

In a recently published book that is strictly a work in philosophical theology for twentieth-century readers (*How to Think About God*), I have reviewed the major arguments for the existence of God as supreme being and uncaused cause of whatever else exists, and I have also considered the main criticisms of such arguments raised by modern philosophers.

Twentieth-century cosmology and nuclear physics confirm the rationale of philosophical theology in dealing with the question of God's existence. But, with one exception, modern philosophy raises no insuperable difficulties and makes no indispensable contributions.

That one exception is Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions, which is useful in explaining how Anselm's understanding of God as the being than which no greater can be thought leads to a definite description of God that gives connotative meaning to the word "God" when it is used as the proper name of an object with which we can have no direct acquaintance.

I am not saying that there are no difficulties with even the very best philosophical argument for the existence of the supreme being. There are. The best argument hangs on a premise that is not self-evident, cannot be proved, and yet is more credible than its opposite. Hence the conclusion of the best argument cannot be affirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt, but only beyond a reasonable doubt, or even just by a preponderance of reasons in its favor rather than against it.

What I am saying is that I have found nothing in the thought of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, twentieth-century existentialists, and twentieth-century linguistic and analytical philosophers, which presents genuine difficulties to be surmounted. On the contrary, the critical points raised can all be dismissed because they stem from ignorance or misunderstanding of the metaphysical principles on which a sound philosophical argument for God's existence rests; or they can be disregarded because they apply only to the unsound

reasoning that is to be found in the efforts of modern natural theology to prove what cannot be proved—the existence of the God who has revealed Himself in Sacred Scriptures.

Only Kūng's complete failure to understand the difference between such unsound natural theology and a sound philosophical theology can explain why he devoted so many hundreds of pages to modern philosophical thought, from the onslaughts of which neither a truly philosophical theology nor a truly dogmatic theology needs to be defended.

It is even more important to point out that orthodox religious beliefs—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—do not need to be rescued from the nihilistic and atheistic attacks of modern thought. Yet Kūng spends an inordinate amount of time and effort in trying to save orthodox religion from Nietzsche's nihilistic proclamation that God is dead or that the Christian God has become unbelievable.

This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that Kūng explicitly acknowledges that Nietzsche's nihilism is both unprovable and irrefutable. The articles of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith are also unprovable and irrefutable. If they were either provable or refutable they would belong to the domain of reason and of knowledge, not to the domain of faith and of belief. In short, they belong in exactly the same domain as Nietzsche's nihilistic proclamations.

Where does that leave us? Whatever is unprovable and irrefutable must be either (1) a self-evident truth, or (2) a belief voluntarily adopted for whatever human motive, emotional or pragmatic, or (3) a belief that is an act of religious faith, supernaturally caused by God's grace.

It is not because what is believed or disbelieved is self-evidently true or false that orthodox religious belief, on the one hand, and Nietzsche's nihilistic disbelief, on the other hand, belong in the sphere of the unprovable and irrefutable. Nietzsche can hardly claim that his nihilism is an act of religious faith on his part. On the contrary, his disbelief in God, his immoderate skepticism about being able to attain any truth, and his total distrust of reality represent nothing but a purely voluntary exercise of his will to disbelieve. It is no better than a personal prejudice without foundation.

When we exercise the will to believe or disbelieve, in the realm of matters that are beyond the reach of reason and evidence, our motivation, as William James pointed out, must be either emotional or

pragmatic. James himself advanced good pragmatic reasons for exercising a will to believe that was opposite in tenor to Nietzsche's nihilism. That some pragmatic motivation might be found for such nihilism is difficult if not impossible to imagine. It must, therefore, represent nothing but emotional distemper on Nietzsche's part, and that is certainly not worth paying attention to, especially in view of the fact that Nietzsche himself, like Hume before him, found good pragmatic reasons for abandoning his extreme or immoderate skepticism when it came to the affairs of daily life.

In any case, orthodox religious belief, when it is not mistaken as the exercise of a humanly motivated will to believe, does not operate on the same plane as Nietzsche's nihilistic disbelief. Though it, too, is unprovable and irrefutable, it does not spring from emotional or pragmatic motivations. If it did, all that could be said for religious belief is that, for many persons, it is emotionally more satisfying than Nietzsche's disbelief and that, for most persons, it is pragmatically more justifiable. However, when religious belief is taken as a supernatural act of the will, moved by God's grace, its certainty for those who have such faith is incommensurable with whatever probability is assigned to their beliefs or disbeliefs by persons who allow emotional or pragmatic motives to elicit a will to believe or disbelieve on their part.

Here and there, Küng adopts the orthodox view of faith as a supernatural gift. If this view had completely controlled his thought, he would have written a totally different book or, better still, no book at all on this subject.

Since he lacks the philosophical, and especially the metaphysical, acumen needed to cope with the fundamental errors of modern thought and since he has no contribution at all to make to philosophical thinking about God, Küng's reputation as a theologian, based on the positions he has taken in controversies about certain dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, might have been preserved by his not having attempted to deal with the question of God's existence.

### III. Theological critique of the argument

The theological assessment is in response to two questions. First, is the book viable as an apologetic? Second, on the basis of the most fundamental assumption of the churches about their own message, has Küng succeeded in making a valid case for God?



I say fundamental assumption, because it is not my purpose to pick apart his treatment of single doctrines, such as virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, etc. We must go beyond these to the one belief all the churches share about the God of the Bible: that He reveals Himself. This is the issue that underlies the problem of any apologetic effort.

Apologetics, according to Paul Tillich, is “‘answering theology’. It answers the questions implied in the ‘situation’ [the scientific, artistic, economic, political, ethical, and social complexities of any era] in the power of the eternal message and with the means provided by the situation whose questions it answers.”

This means that apologetics is a theology for the world. But can there be a theology for the world? The churches have never been in agreement on this problem, although apologetic endeavors have been around nearly as long as the churches themselves.

Note that theology and message (preaching the gospel) are not identical. The churches would all agree that they have a message to address to the world in all of its situations. But, to quote Tillich again: “Can the Christian message be adapted to the modern mind without losing its essential and unique character?”

Tillich thinks it can. Others in our time, most notably Karl Barth, have disagreed. According to Barth: “We must treat unbelief [the world] seriously .... But faith itself ... must be taken so seriously that there is no place at all for even an apparent transposition to the standpoint of unbelief, for the pedagogic and playful self-lowering into the sphere of its possibilities.” This is to say that it is impossible for the churches to walk hand in hand with the unbelieving world, granting the validity of its premises, concepts, and definitions, yet hoping by clear and rational exposition to lead it into the arena of faith.

In this conflict over apologetics, K ung has chosen to align himself with Tillich. He seems to assume that an unbelieving world can understand the message, if it is explained clearly and cogently enough.

But the Tillich-Barth debate is not either the whole or the final word on the issue of apologetics. First, we must have a clearer understanding of the apologetic task as the churches have understood it, before giving a final assessment of K ung’s success or failure. Alan Richardson, in his book, *Christian Apologetics* (1947), has explained the work of apologetics as two-fold. First, it is a task that

takes place within and for the churches themselves: “Christian apologetics . . . compels us to examine the methods and conclusions of theological enquiry in the light of our general knowledge of the world around us and of ourselves in relation to that world.” In that sense apologetics is a self-clarifying theological effort. Theologians and preachers, in order to formulate their message (ever within the framework of the biblical message), have always had to take stock of the assumptions, beliefs, and opinions commonly at work in the world. This is no more than to say that the churches in every age have lived in specific historical contexts. The churches must be in touch with the time.

Secondly, the churches often have to assume a defensive position against attacks from without, as they do today in lands utterly uncongenial to their message. Here we are back at the heart of the Tillich-Barth debate, and here the whole apologetic endeavor becomes a bit murky. No matter how the churches are in contact with the spirit of the time, the fact is that the churches and the world at large do not operate on congruent sets of assumptions. Thus, the apologetic effort can only succeed up to a point. If the world, through error or misunderstanding, accuses the churches wrongfully, the answer from the churches may help clarify and convince on specific issues. But can apologetics do more? Küng, by his writing of *Does God Exist?*, testifies that he thinks it can. And let it be acknowledged that there is an age-old tradition which agrees with Küng. The tradition stretches from the Acts of the Apostles to Justin Martyr to St. Augustine to St. Anselm to St. Thomas to Tillich and Küng. It is hard to think of any success that it has had. In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Stephen and his hearers certainly shared very common ground in their understanding of the acts of God in the Old Testament, but all Stephen got for his effort was death by stoning. St. Paul did not regard his address to the men of Athens as an unqualified success, in fact, he never again tried to make such common cause with unbelief. And so forth.

Note—unbelief, not reason. For faith is not set by apologetics in opposition to reason or any other intellectual faculty. Faith is always set over against unfaith. The assumption is that the world of unbelief has a light of truth of its own and can therefore more easily be led directly to the greater light of God’s truth by critical reason. But that is very hard to accept. As Mr. Adler has correctly noted in the previous section, faith is not the will to believe what reason is able to posit. Faith is always and only the gift of God for those to whom He will give it. What apologetic can move in an unbroken line from unbelief to the God of the Bible, saying Yes at every stage of the argument, and arriving finally at the New Tes-

tament faith? Those who think such a reasonable progression is possible should examine carefully the first nine chapters of John's gospel. It is there made very clear that coming to faith is a crisis encounter between humanity and its Lord. The eyes of the blind are not opened by the blind, nor are the "spiritual" leaders of the time convinced by reasonable discourse.

If K ung's apologetic fails, it is for the reason that, according to the churches, God reveals Himself—He is not willed or reasoned to exist. K ung's book, and any other such apologetic, runs aground on the rock of revelation. All the while that he has been saying Yes and Yes and Yes to God, K ung has never noted God's No to humankind. This No is most succinctly stated by St. Paul in Romans 11:32: "For in making all mankind prisoners to disobedience, God's purpose was to show mercy to all mankind." This verse is the concluding statement of an argument St. Paul makes in the first eleven chapters of Romans. First, the case is made against the Gentiles: in their ignorance of God they have turned to worship that which is not God. In other words, their seeking after God is a useless enterprise that leads them to fashion gods after their own understanding (precisely the point that Feuerbach made). Secondly, Paul states that those who, having the Law of God, propose to make themselves just by observance of the Law also fail. They are also under the judgment of God, or as Romans 3:9 puts it: "All men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin." Hence all approaches to God from humanity's side are closed off. This is made clearer in chapter 4: everything depends on faith "in order that the promise may rest on grace," so that no one may boast either in the pursuit of wisdom or in obedience to Law. In sum, the God of the Bible has caught all mankind in its utter ignorance of Him and in its unavailing striving after a god in its own image. And He has said No to the whole enterprise.


The churches have affirmed from the beginning that without faith there is no reaching God from the direction of humanity. On the contrary, it is God who comes to the world by his actions in the history of Israel and finally in Jesus.

In this revelation, in this progressive salvation-history, He reveals us to ourselves (that we do not know Him and cannot find Him) and He shows Himself as God-for-us in one man at one time in history. He does not reveal Himself as "ground of being," Supreme Being, unmoved mover. Faith and philosophy may meet and agree in these terms, but faith apprehends first the conviction that it is God who acts, who comes among people as a presence in a person. Having first affirmed this, then faith may try to perceive the activ-

ity of God behind His masks in nature and history.

There is always a hiddenness of God in His revelation. Granted, reason may have wished God to stand at the top of a heavenly staircase and announce His presence for all to see. But the deeds and word of God find a response only in faith: the God-given ability to see, hear, and perceive; a faith which is not the will to belief, but which will bend the will to obedience in faith. Unfaith, on the other hand, can perfectly well insist that the whole history of Israel and ministry of Jesus bear within themselves the possibility of being interpreted solely as one more religious contrivance of a misguided few. Both Feuerbach and Freud came to just such a conclusion.

The New Testament is emphatic on the matter of revelation and faith. After St. Peter's great confession ("You are the Christ.") in Matthew 16, Jesus says: "You did not learn that from mortal man; it was revealed to you by my heavenly Father." St. Paul is just as unequivocal in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." (1:21-22) And again: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit." (2:9-10)

The churches therefore insist, on the basis of this conviction about revelation and faith, that between this God of the Bible and the humanity that hears no voice in the silence of the universe, there is a chasm only God can overcome. The churches have also insisted that it is to this humanity that a *message*, not an apologetic, has come. And this God makes possible the believing of His own message, to urge that wager (Pascal), or that leap of faith (Kierkegaard), to risk believing in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Such being so, K ung's assertion that critical reason, having examined all the evidence and pursued a logical course, must conclude, "Yes, the God of the Bible exists," is senseless. If critical reason could reach the end K ung says it can, why would it not long since have done so? Why would there be any bother about revelation and faith? It is not easy to say why K ung has written as if he thought he could sidestep such questions. 

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

We are pleased to announce the appointment of Jonathan Dolhenty, Ph.D., President & Webmaster of The Radical Academy--a project of the Center for Applied Philosophy as a Senior Fellow and Dave Peterson as the Center's Webmeister.

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Charles Aggrey - Legon, Ghana**

**Richard Kim**

**Mark Rew**

**Robert Wiley**

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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