Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 3 | Issue 2

Article 4

4-1-1986

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Gregory P. Rocca

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Recommended Citation

Rocca, Gregory P. (1986) "The Existence of God in Hans Küng's Does God Exist?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19863214

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol3/iss2/4>

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THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IN HANS KÜNG'S *DOES GOD EXIST*

Gregory Rocca

This paper examines Küng's procedure in justifying God at the bar of reason. He first counters nihilism by fundamental trust in reality, which affirms reality as coherent and meaningful. He then builds his case for theism upon trust in God, which is itself the condition of the possibility of fundamental trust in reality. Although claiming an intrinsic rationality for both these acts of trust, his position is ultimately reducible to the fideistic answer to the question of God and thus not justifiable at the bar of reason. A philosophical theology, however, should employ reason in favor of the decision for God.

In his recent book, *Does God Exist*, Hans Küng has given us a thoughtful treatment of the question of God's existence that purports to be a rational justification of God supportable at the bar of reason.¹ Reviewers have had much to say in praise of his book, hailing it as a provocative and gripping discussion of the problem of God. The book gathers together a comprehensive display of erudition and is tremendously interesting and challenging to read; it has been acclaimed as rhetorically brilliant and apologetically successful.² However, several reviewers have also discerned a weakness in Küng's philosophical theism attributable to a speculative development that is somewhat defective.³ This paper will analyze the reasons Küng gives in justification of our belief in God, an analysis which requires, first of all, that we understand how he pits fundamental trust in reality against the threat of nihilism.

Nihilism and Fundamental Trust in Reality

For Küng, nihilism is the most imposing hurdle that must be surmounted before one can believe in God. Nietzsche must be taken seriously, for we can no longer go back before his time and pretend that he and his nihilism never happened to the world. Moreover, since nihilism and atheism do not always exist simultaneously in the atheist, it behooves us to treat the two separately. What is nihilism? Küng treats the question at length. For Nietzsche, "an immediate certainty is a contradiction in terms."⁴ He continually raises the question of truth and declares it a null value. For Nietzsche, beyond good and evil "means in the first place beyond true and false."⁵ The point of nihilism here seems to be a

rather thoroughgoing skepticism. Furthermore, not even morality can serve any longer as a sure and safe refuge (as it was for Kant) from which one may postulate certitude, or God, or anything else. Kng quotes Nietzsche: "Radical nihilism is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be "divine" or morality incarnate."⁶ In Nietzsche's view, says Kng, "nihilism means the conviction of the nullity, of the internal contradiction, futility and worthlessness of reality."⁷ Nihilism contains an element of skepticism united to an element of futility about existence, and the element of futility is closely connected with an atheistic mindset which precludes the right to posit a divine "beyond."

Nihilism, in its skeptical component, proclaims that nothing is certain. This sort of nihilism affects objective certainty and thus throws into doubt what an older philosophy called self-evident principles—*principia per se nota*. "The doubt about the validity of particular certainties is radicalized: it has now become a doubt about the possibility of being certain at all."⁸ But then nihilism takes a turn for the worse and is radicalized even farther:

Even the nihilist obviously does not deny that this sheet of paper is a sheet of paper and this book in my hand is a book; he does not deny that it *is*. For him, too, this is simply given, a datum, a fact, an actuality, a true state of affairs: an unquestionable reality. But, admitting this unquestionable facticity, it is only at this point that the radical questions of the nihilist begin. For if he begins to ask, to inquire what is behind it all, this facticity—of the world, of others, of myself—which seems so unquestionable, is by no means so self-evident. To the nihilist, it is the totality that is suspect; reality as a whole and especially his own life seem to him profoundly unstable, fragile and ephemeral: fleeting, empty, ineffective, discordant, in the last resort useless, pointless, worthless—in a word, null.... This nullity continuously puts reality profoundly in question. It constitutes the basic questionability of reality.

However unquestionable as a fact the individual thing may be even for the nihilist, what is questionable for him is the totality: the wholeness of reality and that of his own life.⁹

Thus there are two levels to nihilism, although they are not always plainly distinguished. One facet of nihilism simply calls into question the certainty of our knowledge: we might call it "skeptical nihilism." The other grade of nihilism, by far the more pernicious, calls into question the total *meaning* of reality as a whole. It comes from not having an answer to the question "What is behind it all?": a question which is obviously searching for some sort of ground or support for reality, a question about God or about some overarching source or principle

for the whole of reality. This level of nihilism is really the reverse side of the negative response to the question about God, for it is intimately connected with either the agnostic or atheistic answer to that question. We might call it "futilitarian nihilism." Küng seems to be referring to skeptical nihilism when he asks about the "alleged first principles of being," and answers, "all *principia per se nota* are abstract and in the concrete can be *principia ignota* or *negata*."¹⁰ But futilitarian nihilism is uppermost in his mind when he declares: "Reality—all that is—is threatened by the nullity that is present everywhere, the possibility of not being, transitoriness, corruptibility, finiteness."¹¹ Whenever he speaks of nihilism without further qualification and especially when he speaks of the nihilism that fundamental trust in reality is supposed to counter, he has in mind primarily futilitarian nihilism, which of course already includes the element of skeptical nihilism.

Küng then lays out his final theses concerning nihilism. Nihilism is *possible*: it is possible that the unity, truth and goodness of reality do not exist; "factual existence can be meaningless existence." Nihilism is *irrefutable*: "There is no rationally conclusive argument against the possibility of nihilism." Not even the seeming self-contradiction of the nihilist's statement that all is contradictory is really an argument against nihilism, "for the very fact that this statement is made about the nullity of all being, for the nihilist is itself meaningless and worthless." Finally, nihilism is also *unprovable*: "There is no rational argument for the necessity of accepting nihilism." "This, then, is the outcome of the controversy. Nihilism is unprovable, but so is its opposite. A very desperate stalemate situation? Perhaps."¹²

Is there really such a perfectly balanced stalemate situation, at least as far as skeptical nihilism is concerned?¹³ Is the mind so equally convinced by the reasons both for skeptical nihilism and for knowledge and cognitive meaning in the world that it actually is totally agnostic, totally unable to judge in any fashion? When Küng is arguing that nihilism is unprovable, he brings forth arguments which show how contradictory the nihilist position is and how being must be asserted even in order to be denied.¹⁴ These arguments actually do show, in a dialectical fashion, that skeptical nihilism is untenable at its very core. However, when he is arguing that nihilism is irrefutable, he only offers the nihilist's retort to the charge that the system of nihilism is inherently contradictory: no statement of the nihilist should be assessed for meaning, for it is itself meaningless and worthless. Rather persuasive arguments against nihilism are dismissed, therefore, by a simple fiat of the will (not by argument) that even statements denying meaning are themselves meaningless; by such a fiat, Küng's nihilist appears to claim a special prerogative to speak without intending to mean.¹⁵ Küng does not seem to realize that he has not left us with such a bleak stalemate as he describes.¹⁶ In any case, he feels the need to tip the scales against nihilism and does so by

recourse to fundamental trust in reality.

To the fundamental question—to be or not to be—Küng will offer, not any sort of reason or argument, but a fundamental, basic trust (*Grundvertrauen* in the original German) in reality, an act of the will, of decision, which carries its own intrinsic rationality and justification but is not in any degree based on a reasonableness or rationality that might come before it or accompany it without being already a part of its own intrinsic constitution.

Basic trust in reality is an act of freedom, a voluntary decision.¹⁷ Küng speaks approvingly of how Kierkegaard philosophically honed the concepts of choice, decision, and freedom and used them to characterize human existence. “A free reaction to reality as a whole, in the fundamental question of being or not-being: this we call the fundamental decision.”¹⁸ The tenor and direction of Küng’s voluntaristic answer to nihilism is determined from the very beginning by a quote from Wolfgang Stegmüller that serves as a kind of preface to the whole section on fundamental trust:

...The metaphysician does not like to be told that his mental activity rests on a prerational, primordial decision; philosophers of all types—apart from skeptics—do not like to be told that the kinds of skepticism that are to be taken seriously are irrefutable; and skeptics themselves, of all shades, do not like to admit that they cannot prove their standpoint. Such a complex assessment more or less provokes the indignant protest: “This cannot possibly be your last word. One way or another, there must be a solution of some kind.” To which I can only reply: “The solution is in your hands, at any time. Make up your mind. Decide.”¹⁹

Fundamental trust, so far, seems to be the response to skeptical nihilism, for it permits one to decide that reality is real and gives one the freedom to be certain of being, in the “question of being or not-being.” But this is not all. As we have seen, the mere facticity of reality is not so much a problem as is the question of its meaninglessness or meaningfulness. The nihilist’s real difficulty is with the meaning and worth of reality as a whole. Fundamental trust, therefore, since it is meant to break the stalemate between nihilism and antinihilism in the question about the meaning and worth of reality as a whole and not just about the fact of reality, is also the answer to futilitarian nihilism. Fundamental trust is also a free decision about the *meaningfulness* of the totality of reality, for it is a “fundamentally positive attitude to reality.”²⁰

Fundamental trust means that a person, in principle, says Yes to the uncertain reality of himself and the world,...This positive fundamental attitude implies an antinihilistic fundamental certainty in regard to all human experience and behavior, despite persistent, menacing uncer-

tainty.²¹

Moreover, fundamental trust is also a decision for a fiducial, trusting reliance upon reality as supporting and sustaining. Explaining how fundamental trust is a genuine trusting, Küng writes:

We may paraphrase the verb “to trust” in a variety of ways: either I believe that reality sustains me and I trust it—or not; either I commit myself in principle to reality and rely on it—or not; either I regard reality therefore as trustworthy and reliable—or not; either I express my trust in reality—or not.²²

Fundamental trust is a complex affair that includes a cognitive moment about the facticity of reality, an existential moment about the meaningfulness of the totality of reality, and finally a fiducial moment of reliance upon that reality.

Küng takes pains to show that the decision of fundamental trust, although a voluntary act of freedom, is not irrational or capricious.

It has now become clear that the fundamental decision is a venture of freedom. But freedom does not mean irrational, random choice. Because the fundamental reaction is free, it by no means follows that it is a matter of indifference what choice is made.²³

Indeed, “there is no question of replacing knowledge by sheer decision or of defending irrational decisions.”²⁴ Moreover, there are four reasons why fundamental trust breaks the stalemate and proves itself more reasonable and enduring than nihilism’s mistrust. First, basic trust says Yes to reality, which is what the human by nature is inclined to say, whereas nihilistic mistrust, being against nature, says No to reality. Second, fundamental trust opens us up to reality, whereas fundamental mistrust closes us to reality. Third, our Yes can be maintained in practice, whereas the No of mistrust cannot be upheld from day to day. Finally, fundamental mistrust only possesses a “feigned rationality,” whereas basic trust has an “essential rationality.”²⁵ Thus, “we cannot speak of a stalemate between Yes and No, fundamental trust and fundamental mistrust.”²⁶

What is this essential rationality of which Küng speaks? First of all, it depends upon fundamental trust and is realized only within that trust. Essential rationality exists neither before nor after but *in and through* the very act of trust itself. Fundamental trust is not supported by any “external rationality” but in fact engenders and supports an intrinsic rationality which in turn “justifies” the engendering act of trust.

The trustful Yes in principle to uncertain reality is distinguished by an intrinsic rationality. I can experience the firm foundation of my fundamentally positive attitude to reality.... In other words, in my very trust

in being—which is not mere credulity—in the midst of all the real menace of the nullity of being, I experience being and with it the fundamental justification of my trust.²⁷

It is fair to Küng's thought to say that fundamental trust, through the essential, intrinsic rationality it gives rise to, justifies itself. In addition, fundamental trust is a gift from reality itself, for only reality itself can make trust possible, despite all uncertainty. Küng argues that the initiative lies with reality to manifest its concealed meaningfulness and value. "Fundamental trust is a gift. Reality is given to me from the start: if I commit myself trustingly to it, I get it back filled with meaning and value."²⁸

What might be said about Küng's theory of fundamental trust in reality? I would offer three critical comments. First, despite his protestations to the contrary, it appears that fundamental trust is too one-sidedly an act of pure freedom and decision. Rationality is entirely a consequent residue or property of freedom. Coreth, however, writes that one ought not shift basic trust "solely into the free decision of the individual, as if he were standing in the same way before the alternative of Yes or No."²⁹ If one makes rationality and meaning the functional consequence of the act of subjective freedom, then one is always open to the charge of projection, namely, that the path to being and meaning is now a matter of eisegesis without a trace of exegesis. If one ultimately justifies the breaking of the stalemate between nihilism and antinihilism on the grounds of a choice for this rather than for that, then what we have is not justification, but legislation. In order to justify, one must give reasons. And Küng does give reasons, as we have seen. But in order to protect himself from what he terms "objective and external reason," he comes up with the category of "intrinsic, essential reason." But essential reason is itself something of an ambiguous and gratuitous assumption: on the one hand it is, according to his position, the result of a free act of will, and something more than reason, "superreason" if you will, acting mysteriously and inwardly; yet it also seems to behave somewhat like the common, ordinary reason we all know and use, for it responds, as an interior component of fundamental trust, to a reality already given and is receptive of reality's self-gift. Although Küng speaks of fundamental trust with its essential rationality as responding to reality's initiative and as receiving reality's self-gift, it seems the inherent logic of his whole position would disallow such speech: if fundamental trust receives no important information or influence from the various certitudes of "objective, external reason," and if "essential rationality" itself is the product (posterior at least in nature if not in time) of the act of fundamental trust, then essential rationality only "receives" the already-given initiative—the self-gift—of reality insofar as this reality is the already-given reality of human subjectivity. Thus "reality" is somehow equated, in Küng's position, with human-

subjectivity-in-decision, and the essential rationality that is supposed to “justify” the act of trust fails to do so, never really leaving the realm of pure subjectivity.

Second, it is doubtful whether Küng, given his own premises and description of nihilism, has succeeded in breaking the stalemate between nihilism and anti-nihilism. A nihilist could very plausibly make the following response to the four justifying reasons Küng gives in support of fundamental trust (he himself has with approval put very similar arguments into the mouth of his nihilist before):

What if fundamental trust agrees with human nature’s inclination to say Yes? What is this inclination itself but a nullity, a contradiction, a delusion? There is no such thing as human nature; we construct abstract wholes. What if trust opens you to reality? You want to believe in reality, but nihilism knows that reality is not. In my mistrust of reality I see the true truth, the lie of lies. The “reality” to which you open yourself is only worthlessness and illusion. What if you are constant in practice? Do you not know that delusion itself can be consistent, that the world is *consistently* null and void? Consistency proves nothing but the utter futility of it all. You make your choice and I’ll make mine; and do not try to pretend that your choice has more intrinsic rationality than mine. You simply *want* reasonableness and meaning to begin with; so you choose them and then *project* them “out there” upon reality and delude yourself into thinking that you have thereby justified your trust. And this “feigned rationality” you reproach me with—how condescending! How could you know the reason-destroying reason, the meaning-against-meaning that I experience in my mistrust of reality? Your “essential rationality” is, I’m afraid, nothing more or less than the flimsy projection of your own misleading desires.

Küng cannot answer these objections on the grounds of his voluntaristic premises. He and the nihilist can only oppose will to will, freedom to freedom. Therefore, fundamental trust cannot break the stalemate between nihilism and antinihilism.

Third, fundamental trust is not actually capable of exercising its fiducial role towards reality. What does it mean to “trust” reality, to rely and depend upon it? We must remember that Küng’s fundamental trust does not primarily consist of individual acts of trust among human beings, such as occur when the child trusts the parent, the woman her husband, or the pedestrian the crossing guard. Fundamental trust is a reliance upon reality as a whole, upon the totality of being. Does it make sense to trust “all humanity” or “all reality”? Has Küng hypostatized reality illegitimately, so that it becomes a kind of person or thing to be trusted? For we do not trust abstractions or universals or conglomerate wholes; we trust concrete existents, primarily people. Furthermore, Küng holds that uncertain reality itself initiates and creates the basis for trust: uncertain

reality itself encounters us as trustworthy. But does it? Is reality itself as a whole truly trustworthy? Has Kng taken the evil aspects of reality seriously enough in his explanation of fundamental trust?³⁰ Can a basic trust in reality actually coexist with all the pains, sorrows, and individual catastrophes dealt out to humans by reality? Does not our wanting reality to be trustworthy fly in the face of all those contrast experiences of suffering which reveal to us the dark and all-too-often meaningless side of reality? Is not trust in reality blatantly contraindicated by the manifest evil that is everywhere, that gets into the very marrow of reality and constantly corrupts it from within, that makes reality as a whole inherently and fundamentally untrustworthy and unreliable? How can we profoundly trust that reality which is waiting, at the end, to deal us death and destruction and which fills our intervening days with distress and anguish?³¹ If family or friends treated us with as much disrespect and unconcern as we frequently receive from reality, we would soon learn to mistrust them. Why should it be any different for reality? If reality can all too easily reveal its capriciously destructive side, why should we not suppose that reality itself as a whole is unstable and flawed at its core, as ready to harm as to help? Why should we not take back our trust? Indeed, to do otherwise, actually to continue trusting reality as a whole, seems to be a matter of imprudence or credulity. Unless—unless we only trust reality at all because what we are really trusting all along is the creator, ground, and support of reality, God himself. But this brings us to the next section.

Fundamental Trust in Reality and Faith in God

Kng builds his case for God upon the premise of fundamental trust in reality.³² He realizes that Kant never spoke of a fundamental trust in reality but maintained that God, unable to be known in himself, was asserted in faith as a postulate of practical reason and moral obligation. So Kant was an objective agnostic and a subjective believer. God's existence is believed, in practice, as the condition for the possibility of morality and happiness. For Kant, God is the supreme moral being and originator of the world, and is postulated as the necessary condition for realities he took to be self-evidently existent, worthy, and possible of fulfillment: the moral life, the categorical imperative, and human striving for happiness. But nihilism has challenged and questioned the existence and worth of such realities. Kng asks:

Does not the assumption of an apodictically certain moral law within us, as expressed in the categorical imperative, itself presuppose the moral impetus, the question of morality or even the resolution to live a moral life, which—as Nietzsche's immoralism, beyond good and evil,

has shown—can take a very different form? Has good really an advantage over evil?...Unlike Kant, must we not today take nihilism of values seriously?

The second buttress of his [Kant's] reasoning is the striving for happiness, which is certainly peculiar to all men. But, on what basis can we assume that it is fulfilled?...Might not man's quest for happiness turn out to be in vain, an expression of the absurdity of human existence, as Camus, for instance, so insistently declares?³³

Nihilism shows that even moral activity is no longer "given" as valid and worthy. Küng, therefore, first counters nihilism by fundamental trust in reality and then establishes God as the necessary postulate for the full exercise of fundamental trust. God is not the postulate of a practical morality which is given but the postulate of a fundamental trust which is itself at its own level already a decision of absolute freedom in the face of uncertain reality. Kant needs only one faith-postulate to arrive at God, for morality is given; Küng has gone one step deeper in his use of faith, for he needs two faith-postulates: one to counter a nihilism that puts everything into doubt, and the other to verify God as the only condition of the possibility for the exercise of the first decision of fundamental trust.

As Küng himself acknowledges, there are many formal structural analogies between fundamental trust in reality and faith in God, although he claims that the two remain materially distinct.³⁴ However, when one realizes just how similar they are in essence, characteristics, and effects, one suspects that they have become so intimately coalesced that Küng's codicil that they are materially distinct does not effectively differentiate them.³⁵

How does Küng correlate fundamental trust in reality and faith in God in order to break the stalemate between atheism and theism? He shows us in the section where he defines belief in God as *ultimately justified fundamental trust*:

Denial of God implies an ultimately unjustified fundamental trust in reality. Atheism cannot suggest any condition for the possibility of uncertain reality. If someone denies God, he does not know why he ultimately trusts in reality....

Affirmation of God implies an ultimately justified fundamental trust in reality. As radical fundamental trust, belief in God can suggest the condition for the possibility of uncertain reality. If someone affirms God, he knows why he can trust reality.³⁶

This is his most clear-cut, definitive reason why belief in God is more cogent and powerful than atheism: faith in God ultimately justifies fundamental trust—indeed, it is "radical trust"—whereas denial of God renders even fundamental trust meaningless. Fundamental trust in reality must be grounded in belief in

God—or it is itself vain.

Note the dialectical quality of Küng's argument. His dialogue partners are primarily those atheists who possess fundamental trust in reality and presumably want to keep it. He is not directly arguing at this stage against those atheists who are nihilists. However, a non-nihilistic atheist might *either* agree with Küng that he should become a theist in order to remain faithful to his fundamental trust, *or* he might come to realize that his fundamental trust is at base a charade and a delusion, that his continued atheism really demands a radical nihilism, and that he should never have pretended to possess fundamental trust in the first place. Küng's argument clarifies that one's genuine (as opposed to spurious and flawed) trust in reality is only as strong and secure as one's belief in God. His argument really does illumine the situation to such a degree that the honest non-nihilistic atheist cannot remain the same.³⁷ Once illumined, however, this same atheist can still take one of two paths: he can become a non-nihilistic theist or a nihilistic atheist. Küng *still* cannot give the reasonable motive to help the atheist become a non-nihilistic theist instead of a nihilistic atheist; he still cannot break the stalemate between theism and the nihilism always lurking in the atheist's atheism—his dialogue is still with nihilism. To break the stalemate, he would have to offer an answer to the nihilist critique against the validity and feasibility of fundamental trust in reality, for only when the nihilist critique is thwarted can the path to nihilistic atheism be blocked and the atheist be directed along the one remaining path towards non-nihilistic theism. But Küng's affirmation of God falls prey to the same nihilistic criticisms that were leveled successfully against fundamental trust in reality. If fundamental trust itself is already a weak and illusory thing, an affair of human projection, then what can this "faith" in God which "justifies" fundamental trust be, other than the most flagrant and egregious projection of them all?

Moreover, Küng's whole program of correlating fundamental trust and faith in God seems to involve a *petitio principii*.³⁸ For a genuine, absolute, and justifiable trust in reality is actually only possible if one already believes in God, however implicitly or confusedly. One cannot authentically rely on reality apart from God, for reality apart from God, as we have seen, is inherently and fundamentally ambiguous, unreliable, and untrustworthy—as easily capable of evil as of good. Trust in reality cannot bestow any genuine security if, as Küng asserts, this security appears to be "profoundly problematic and threatened,"³⁹ or if reality is discovered to be "founding but itself unfounded, supporting but itself unsupported."⁴⁰ How can we rely for support upon that which is itself radically unsupported?

Küng also writes: "Nihilism is factually overcome by fundamental trust.... But, despite fundamental trust, nihilism is not overcome in principle."⁴¹ Here, in a nutshell, is Küng's procedure: fundamental trust factually overcomes nihilism,

and then faith in God, coming later and building on fundamental trust, overcomes nihilism in principle. But the distinction between overcoming nihilism in fact and in principle is merely an imaginary construct. If nihilism is not overcome fundamentally and in principle, then what meaning is there in saying that it is overcome in fact? If death (or evil, or the meaninglessness of our lives, or any other surd) is not really overcome in principle, then what does it matter if we presume to overcome it in fact from day to day by not having died (or not having experienced the depths of evil or meaninglessness or absurdity)—yet? Only God can overcome chaos and destruction, victorious over them factually because he is their overthrewer *in principle*; and only faith in and knowledge of God can truly assure one that nihilism does not have the last word.⁴² Küng, therefore, in his discussion of fundamental trust in reality, seems to assume God as the *Urgrund* for his *Grundvertrauen*. Obviously, then, the *Grundvertrauen* cannot in its turn be used as a means for arriving at the *Urgrund*, for this is begging the question. Küng really uses God, then, to answer both the nihilist and the atheist. But since he gratuitously and without argument assumes God (hidden in fundamental trust) against the nihilist and bets the question in his argumentation with the atheist, the basic question of the book, the question of God's justification at the bar of reason, has not received its full and adequate discussion.⁴³

Conclusion

Does God Exist?, despite much learning, eloquence, and apologetic success, fails in the end to justify God at the bar of reason. Küng's verification of God, finding its natural home within the fideistic, voluntaristic tradition of Kant, probes even more radically than that tradition the will to believe. For the rationality of faith in God occurs in, through, and because of the free act of decision itself, and this faith is a postulate of a postulate, a free decision based on a previous free decision. To desert the field of reason (under pressure from the nihilist critique to justify God on its own chosen battlefield of subjectivity) in hopes of salvaging God by an act of pure freedom is illusory, for simply to invoke freedom's subjectivity (even if one continues to talk about "essential rationality") in one's defense of God is the abandonment, in principle, of the possibility of saying anything challenging to the nihilist critique, and the battle is lost from the outset. The defense of God's existence then becomes a matter of will against will, and in any case God is not justified at the bar of reason. A genuinely *philosophical* theology, however, ought to employ freedom and reason together in order to arrive at God. The Yes of freedom needs to be helped by reason in such manner that faith in God's existence is not *merely* a pure decision of freedom's subjectivity. One's reasons for God will surely be disputed, criticized, and perhaps even ridiculed, but at least one has preserved in principle the right

to debate the nihilist or atheist on grounds of reason as well as of freedom, thereby avoiding the otherwise inevitable stalemate of will opposed to will.

Therefore, in order to counter the position of skeptical nihilism, it is better not to retreat into freedom's privileged preserve of fundamental trust but to offer the reasoned, dialectical defense of the reality and coherence of being. Furthermore, it is better to respond to atheism and futilitarian nihilism simultaneously, for one cannot gain purchase against the latter without having first settled in some way the questions of the former. Reason can discover various traces of and paths to God which, while perhaps not overpoweringly persuasive all alone, do inform and strengthen freedom's choice of God. A philosophical theology, therefore, can and should exert the weight of reason in favor of the decision for God.

Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C.

NOTES

1. H. Küng, *Does God Exist?*, tr. E. Quinn (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1980). For reviews, see the following: J. Buckley, *Thomist* 45 (1981) 623-26; R. McBrien, *Theology Today* 38 (1981) 250-53; B. Hebblethwaite, *Theology* 84 (1981) 367-69; J. Coventry, *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1981) 570-73; P. Corcoran, *The Furrow* 32 (1981) 478-80; *Expository Times* 92 (1980-81) 353-54; J. Teske, *Cross Currents* 30 (1980-81) 455-59; L. Swidler, *Commonweal* (7 November 1980) 626-27; R. Burke, *Theological Studies* 42 (1981) 301-3. The following are review or discussion articles: F. Fiorenza, A. Carr, E. Braxton, L. Ford, and H. Küng, "Review Symposium of *Does God Exist*," *Horizons* 7 (1980) 299-320; D. Lane, "Hans Küng on God's Existence," *Doctrine and Life* 31 (1981) 496-510; P. E. Devenish, "Christianity Confronts Modernity," *Journal of Religion* 60 (1980) 72-81; E. Coreth, "Existiert Gott?" *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 101 (1979) 6-27; J. D. Robert, "Questions à Hans Küng sur son Dieu existe-t-il?" *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 80 (1982) 500-505; G. L. Goodwin, "Nihilism Overcome?" *Religious Studies Review* 8 (1982) 143-46; G. Van Riet, "Le problème de Dieu d'après Hans Küng," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 13 (1982) 425-41.

2. For Swidler, this is Küng's "best book" to date. Lane writes: "This book by Küng is an outstanding contribution to the ongoing reflection of theology on the mystery of God.... *Does God Exist* will take over the place held by C. Fabro's *God in Exile* and J. Collins's *God in Modern Philosophy*" (506-7).

3. Hebblethwaite, for example, states: "But for all his command of the literature and breadth of vision, Küng is no philosopher. In place of sustained argument, we often find strings of questions and lots of theses" (369).

4. Küng, *Does God Exist*, 382. Quoting Nietzsche, he continues: "...but the philosopher must say to himself: when I analyze the event expressed in the sentence 'I think,' I acquire a series of rash assertions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove—for example, that it is I who think,

that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of an entity thought of as a cause, that an "I" exists, finally that what is designated by "thinking" has already been determined—that I know what thinking is" (*ibid.*).

5. *Ibid.*, 384. According to Küng's reading of Nietzsche, the followers of Descartes did not doubt deeply enough, since they still continued to hold by "faith" the basic antitheses between good and evil, truth and falsity. Nietzsche is more skeptical than the Cartesian doubters by even calling into question such basic antitheses (383).

6. *Ibid.*, 388.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 418. "Nietzsche, for his part, casts doubts not only on "immediate certainties" of the subject, like the *cogito* and the *credo*, but also on the "immediate certainty" of being and the supposedly evident first principles of being" (*ibid.*).

9. *Ibid.*, 419. Küng is inconsistent here, for he grants to nihilism an acknowledgment of some certainty, whereas in several other places he has already claimed that nihilism is a doubt about the possibility of being certain at all. He has in this quote implicitly accepted the *principia per se nota* which he says nihilism denies.

10. *Ibid.*, 422-23.

11. *Ibid.*, 422.

12. *Ibid.*, 423-24.

13. For Küng, Nietzsche concluded to fundamental uncertainty because "he passionately rejected the *credo* of Christian faith and buried in skepticism the *cogito* of human reason" (*ibid.* 417).

14. "If it has to be admitted that reality is uncertain and that the being of the existent can be denied, then it must be admitted that what can be denied is also in fact being. It is indeed uncertain, but is it for that reason *a priori* nothing? If being were *a priori* nothing, the nihilist would not need to deny it and to keep on denying it. If being were simply nothing, it would not endure denial at all but would dissolve into nothing. But language itself betrays the nihilist: "Being *is* not being" or "I *am* not."...being, despite all the menace of nothingness, continually puts up fresh resistance to any kind of absolute denial, any total reduction to nothing, by man" (*ibid.*, 424, his emphases).

15. *Ibid.*, 423.

16. Some authors sharply contest Küng's affirmation that there is a stalemate on the question of being and assert, in effect, that the arguments for skeptical nihilism are not as cogent or convincing as the arguments against it. Devenish thinks Küng does not realize that nihilism is not a genuine alternative to be confronted: "To deny nihilism as a genuine alternative by no means implies shallow optimism or a naive appeal to *principia per se nota*,...It implies merely that one acknowledge that no one can act as if his action were absolutely without meaning.... Is "fundamental nihilism" possible then? There are decisive reasons for regarding it as merely verbally possible, and no more" (74). Teske writes: "The upshot of taking nihilism seriously is that one can take a positive or a negative attitude toward uncertain reality; one can regard reality as real or unreal. (It is this sort of claim that the loss of a philosophy of being makes possible, though scarcely intelligible)" (457).

17. On pages 416-17, Küng is still debating the question: Is our fundamental certainty in reality a matter of knowledge or a matter of faith? His *Grundvertrauen* settles on faith/trust as the basis for certainty (*credo ut intelligam*), although he asserts that fundamental trust has its own intrinsic rationality.

18. *Ibid.*, 434.

19. *Ibid.*, 425.

20. *Ibid.*, 449.

21. *Ibid.*, 445.

22. *Ibid.*, 438.

23. *Ibid.*, 441.

24. *Ibid.*, 450. Küng says he is not advocating a sheer, irrational (arational?) decision, but one wonders. Reason has no essential input to offer to the decision but appears to be entirely a precipitate of the decision itself. More on this below.

25. *Ibid.*, 443-49.

26. *Ibid.*, 446.

27. *Ibid.*, 449. This fundamental trust in reality is neither demonstrable nor positively unverifiable but is "more than reasonable—that is, superrational," and it "turns out to be a trust based on reality itself and thus justified at the bar of reason" (450).

28. *Ibid.*, 451-52.

29. Coreth, 18.

30. R. McBrien faults Küng on this score in his review.

31. Küng, of course, believes in life after death, but only because of the existence of a loving God, who cannot without our begging of the question enter the argument at this stage in the book. Moreover, reality produces the conditions that will lead to our death, even if God is the one who ultimately saves.

32. His correlations of basic trust and faith in God occur primarily at pp. 473-77; 568-76. Coreth (19-23) gives a good account of section F, "Yes to God," and is enlightening on what Küng means by *beweisen* versus *bewahrheiten* (prove versus verify) since Küng allows the latter process but not the former to be used in coming to a knowledge of God. As usual, Küng proceeds through a dialectical process: God cannot be proved, nor is asserting his existence a matter of pure faith; atheism is irrefutable but is also unprovable. Heavily under the influence of Kant, he gives short shrift to the traditional proofs for God's existence, dismissing their validity in only five pages. One element in his positive argument for God is a whole series of hypotheses beginning "if God existed," with the overall conclusion amounting to "how wonderful things would be" (562-68). This hypothetical element together with his debt to the Kantian voluntarist tradition leads Teske to state: "The core of Küng's argument has much in common with Pascal's wager and with James' argument in *The Will to Believe*" (458).

33. Küng, 545.

34. *Ibid.*, 473-74, 574. They are "materially distinct" inasmuch as basic trust relates to reality as such, whereas faith in God relates to the ground of reality. But one wonders if this distinction is not merely a formal one, since frequently all one need do, in order for the theses about fundamental trust to become theses about faith in God, is substitute, in any predication, the subject "faith in God" for the subject "fundamental trust in reality." For the predicates assigned to both these subjects are often exactly the same: both break a stalemate; both are superrational but not irrational; both are decisions which are neither provable nor refutable; both are rooted in reality and come as gift from enigmatic reality itself; and both have an essential, intrinsic rationality which occurs in the very act of decision (573-76). How much force does "materially distinct" have in such a situation?

35. This is something perceived by several of the reviewers. Devenish states that the difference

between basic trust and faith in God remains unclear in the book (76), and Lane asserts the same (509). Coventry writes: "Küng sees a basis for religious faith in fundamental trust in uncertain reality. But at the end of the day it is not clear whether religious faith is simply an extension of this philosophically grounded trust" (573).

36. Küng, 571-72.

37. Küng realizes that today not all atheists are thoroughgoing nihilists and he can therefore separate his answers to atheism and nihilism, responding with fundamental trust to the latter and with faith in God to the former. His argument is clarificatory for the non-nihilistic atheist, since he begins from this person's position of fundamental trust and then transcendently analyzes what is logically and reasonably entailed in such a position.

38. This criticism admittedly views his reasoning not in its dialectical ability to engage the non-nihilistic atheist but rather analyzes the structure of his argument inasmuch as it speaks to us about reality itself. What may be apologetically convincing to some is not necessarily a convincing answer to the atheist-nihilist critique in itself.

39. Küng, 475.

40. *Ibid.*, 476.

41. *Ibid.*, 476-77.

42. Just as, historically, nihilism only arose after atheism has already proclaimed the demise of God, so today the answer to *both* nihilism and atheism is the reasoned defense of God's existence. Coreth agrees: "Certainly one can neither dispute nor annul the real possibility of a nihilistic outlook. However, nihilism—just as atheism—is basically able to be contradicted to the precise degree that it is possible, if not to "prove" [*beweisen*], then to establish convincingly or, as Küng prefers to say, to "verify" [*bewahrheiten*] God as the ultimate ground of meaning for reality" (17).

43. J. L. Mackie offers us the interesting case of a non-nihilistic atheist who is content to remain so after reading Küng. In his book, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon [1982] 240-51), which I unfortunately did not discover until this paper was already completed, he offers us his appraisal of Küng. He dismisses Küng's self-verifying act of belief in God as "purely subjective," or even perhaps as a disguised form of the discredited ontological argument (248). Küng's indeterminate "God-hypothesis" is simply unnecessary. Mackie thinks what Küng has really shown is that "the challenge of both intellectual and moral or practical nihilism can be met in purely human terms, by what Küng calls a "fundamental trust" which is reasonable in its own right...The further postulation of a God, even as indeterminate and mysterious a God as Küng's, is a gratuitous addition to this solution, an attempted underpinning which is as needless as it is incomprehensible" (251). If we take (1) the fact of God, and (2) the use of the fact of God in an argument against nihilism, then: A) I assert that both (1) and (2) are necessary in order to counter effectively the nihilistic position, inasmuch as nihilism is the child of atheism, not its parent; B) Küng, while admitting (1) all along, wants to counter nihilism, in a first stage of argumentation, without (2)—which as I have explained, really amounts to assuming God against the nihilist and begging the question against the atheist; C) Mackie answers nihilism by fundamental trust alone, which accomplishes its task quite well without either (1) or (2). Perhaps fundamental trust in reality (without explicit reference to God) has been praised beyond its due, if an atheist can recognize in it his own sufficient answer to nihilism.