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Book Review: Eternal Life: Life As A Medical Philosophical And Theological Problem

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BOOK REVIEWS

Eternal Life?: Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem, by **Hans Küng**. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984. Pp. xvi, 272. Cloth, \$15.95.

Reviewed by FREDERICK SONTAG, Pomona College.

A. Questions

For philosophers, good books raise as many questions as they answer. Such is the case with Hans Küng's book on *Eternal Life?* Among the questions to be considered are: (1) How does the book stand in a Roman Catholic context *vs.* the Protestant appraisal offered here? (2) How should theology deal with the question of eternal life? Like philosophy, theologians must always start with the question: What is theology, and how should it proceed with its task? (3) How much rehearsal of related material should one give *vs.* a direct attempt to offer a systematic answer? (4) How bound should the theologian be to offer a contemporary solution to a traditional question, in such a way that it conforms to what we recognize as a "traditional Christian" answer or doctrine? Küng's book is multifaceted and raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps, of course, that is what he intended by the question mark in the title.

Quoting a comment by Hermann Lübbe on Heinrich Heine, Küng states his own theme and also the chief problem with the book: "The work of Heinrich Heine enables us to see how religion survives its criticism and how piety can be compatible with complete enlightenment." (p. 202) The Catholic tradition was so long kept from the Enlightenment, that once Vatican II had "thrown open the windows," led by Küng Roman Catholic theologians raced to catch up at double speed. Küng says: "The meaning of Christian existence is not only God and the divine, but also man himself, encompassing all that is human. Not only heaven, but also earth and earthly happiness." (p. 176) Küng wants to stress 'self-realization' and 'self-development' like any good humanist. After stressing aestheticism and spirituality and self-denial for centuries, this change is abrupt to say the least.

Like some of his Protestant counterparts who began a century or two earlier, Küng wants to endorse every humanistic, scientific goal of the modern world *and* every traditional Catholic goal. After so many years of demanding an "oath against modernism," the issue is: will oil and water mix? Küng begins (p. xiii) by saying that theologians are embarrassed by the question: "Do you believe in life after death?" But the prior question is, "Why should they be?" Saint Paul

was clear that Christian assertions would be “foolishness to the Greeks.” How far, then, should theologians accept the strictures of conformity to secular thought? The turning point of the modern age away from God toward human beings, Küng tells us, “has to be taken seriously.” (p. 60) True, but how seriously, so much so that humanistic criteria set the limits for theological response? The postulate of the Enlightenment has penetrated everywhere (*Ibid.*), but does that mean that it must control religious affirmations?

Küng documents the fact that modern atheism “went hand in hand with the utopia of earthly immortality” (p. 8) and also that our disillusionment over the possibility of establishing such a utopia is now almost complete. The first portion of his book is devoted to rehearsing recent medical experience with the dying and documents the new medical willingness to consider evidence other than the purely physical. (A-1) Küng rejects the “last minute” experience of the dying as proof for life after death. Interesting as they may be, as far as ‘proof’ is concerned he is probably right. Atheism always draws on Feuerbach, as Küng points out, but the issue is how much we are now prepared to accept his shift from God to man. Küng states that “the time of metaphysics is past” (p. 34), which is rather ironic since his every page raises a question of ‘first principles’ or basic assumptions. The rejection of metaphysics has become a modern dogma, replacing theological dogma, because the moderns thought science would yield us the one true set of first principles. But since this has not been the case, metaphysics resurfaces.

Küng shares the current fad of prefacing the consideration of every issue with a brief excursion into comparative religions. (A-3) He also shares the happy (Hegelian?) thought that religions are somehow today “open to a dialectical reconciliation” (p. 60), all the while our history up to the present moment is one of bitter infighting and warfare among religions. He considers ‘reincarnation’ and then argues, like Kant, that “A truly moral world necessarily presupposes the idea of a life after this life.” (p. 62) That assertion, of course, does not stand on its own but depends on what ‘truly moral’ means and what ‘God’ is like. Küng ultimately sides with modern rationalism when he states “theology cannot avoid the demand for verification of belief in eternity.” (p. 73) There is to be no intellectual sacrifice, he says. But what could ‘verification’ mean where belief in eternity is concerned? He tells us that, even if belief in eternity cannot be proved, “it can be shown to be well founded.” (p. 75)

Küng proposes an “indirect verification criterion.” (p. 76) But his explanation of what this means dissolves into jargon and is little likely to please the verification philosophers he claims to want to satisfy. He wants eternal life to be an absolutely reasonable trust rooted in reality, similar to love. (p. 78) But we must reply that many reasonable trusts and many loves prove ultimately futile. Küng recognized that Jesus’ outlook was clearly apocalyptic. He demythologizes this by saying

that Jesus was “mistaken” (p. 92) and the apocalyptic horizon cannot be revived today. At this point it is clear that Küng accepts certain forms of modern metaphysics as dominant over the way in which Scripture and traditional beliefs can be accepted. Likewise, he claims the Easter testimonies are meant not as evidence for an event but as testimonies “to the risen one as person” (p. 100), whatever that can mean.

The Easter stories “make concrete and defend the reality of the new life of the risen Christ.” (p. 103) Küng believes in the “truth of Easter,” he says, “without having to accept as literally true each and every one of the Easter stories” (*Ibid.*), which certainly leaves Küng free to pick and choose. The resurrection “is not a historical but nevertheless a real event.” (p. 105) He continues: “The resurrection is not an event in space and time. It is not a miracle, breaking through the laws of nature...” (*Ibid.*) It is a miracle of the new creation of life out of death, he concludes. Küng speaks of a “wholly new mode of existence.” But if there is no miracle, how does new life emerge? This is more of a mystery than a physical resurrection. “The miracle is the new creation of life out of death,” Küng reports (*Ibid.*), but how does this transpire? “Jesus lives again through God” (p. 106), he says, but how?

If “the Crucified lives forever with God” (p. 107), how does this differ from Process Theology’s notion of our absorption into the divine process? “Death is a passing into God” (p. 113); it means a wholly new relationship. But what of the continuance of personal identity and individuality? Belief in the resurrection “means taking up the side of life” (p. 116), Küng says in an echo of the Social Gospel. He is next diverted into an inquiry into the meaning of “descended into hell,” which is important to traditional creeds but hardly central to the issue of resurrection. Küng again resorts to demythologizing and tells us we may believe in Christ without having to accept his “time-conditioned apocalyptic world view.” (p. 140) But what criterion lets us pick and choose the parts of traditional belief we will accept and what we will reject? Some contemporary world view? Küng does not establish this.

B. *Confessions*

Küng hedges his conclusion by saying, “There is nothing to be known here, but everything to be hoped.” (p. 141) But if our ability to conclude is so limited, why exclude any traditional belief on the grounds of incredibility? He returns to his modernism: “We are asking about an ultimate...reality in which we of the twentieth-century can believe and in which we can trust.” (p. 143) The heaven of faith is not heaven in a physical sense: “The heaven of faith is not a place but a mode of being.” (p. 144) It is the hidden, invisible sphere of God, we are told. Heaven is the future of the world and man which is God himself, Küng

concludes. But does this mean we are all absorbed into the divine life in a final pantheism? On the basis of modern credibility, is such a romantic notion any more credible, really, than a physical heaven or a literal resurrection? Why?

Halfway through the book, one is struck by a startling fact: Dr Küng has not been struggling with the great weight of the Roman Catholic tradition, except possibly for a brief side trip into hell. No papal encyclicals are cited, few Councils are mentioned. Those whom he quotes or struggles with are a cross section of primarily contemporary or recent intellectual figures, mostly non-Catholic and in some cases non-Christian. To note this is not to try to condemn Catholic theologians to a ghetto existence again. But it is interesting how noticeable is the absence of any struggle with the great weight of the Roman Church and its tradition. This is not said to prejudice how theologians, Roman or otherwise, should proceed or how they should select their sources. But it does underline the opening statement of this review that the book raises many questions. How, then, should a Roman Catholic theologian proceed to treat a dogmatic question in relation to the church's teaching and tradition?

Küng takes an excursion into medical ethics in Chapter VII and then relates belief in eternal life with our acceptance of death. "If there is this eternal life in God, a new approach to dying is possible." (p. 164) Küng denies that he can support any "definitive, irreformable doctrine." (p. 170) Following the route of the philosophers, he puts forward for our reflection "a few justifiable questions." It would seem that Küng wants to endorse every humanistic, scientific goal of the modern world *and* all traditional Roman Catholic goals—a large order. "Not only heaven but also earth and earthly happiness. Not only 'to know God'...but also self-realization, self-development, humanization." (pp. 176-77) He acknowledges that "for the first time a generation is growing up in Germany which can no longer be regarded as a part of Christian society. (p. 189) Yet he somehow does not see this as connected to the increasing secularization of society and the pursuit of secular goals.

Küng again embraces every humanistic value and yet somehow sees it as "Christian" at the same time: "We are on earth to live on earth and that means here and now to live in a human, in a truly human, a Christian way." (p. 197) That is the issue: Are the two as compatible as Küng would like them to be? He bases his hope for eternal life on a love of life here. Because we experience happiness here, he says, we hope for a continuation of happiness in heaven. (p. 198) Heaven based on earth, not earth on heaven. "Hope of heaven must be rooted in earth if it is to remain human." (p. 200) This world, Küng insists, "has an ultimate uncontrollable meaning not derived from itself." (p. 208) Possibly, but certainly this cannot be supported by the demands for 'proof' which Küng insisted on earlier. He concludes: "The ambiguity of life and all that is negative are overcome definitively only by God himself." (p. 211)

That may be, but has Küng provided a basis for such hope, which he impulsively proclaims, by his earlier insistence on humanistic and scientific foundations? Has his analysis left God without the transcendent power necessary to accomplish such a hope? Küng clearly wants “both/and.” He wants to leave salvation open to all and yet warn everyone that salvation is not guaranteed. The Last Judgment is for him not the ultimate reality but “God’s kingdom is the consummation,” (p. 213)—whatever that can mean. It will come, he tells us, through God’s “unforeseeable, unextrapolatable action” (*Ibid.*)—surely a dark phrase. “In the consummation of man and the world it is a question of a new life in the nonvisual dimensions of God beyond our time and our space,” (p. 220) Küng reports in an expansive bit of mysticism. But he advises us: “We are not required to cope intellectually with the problem...of eternal life” (p. 222), thus letting us off the hook.

Küng ends in a burst of pragmatism: “What matters is to work together with others who are living with us...for a practical life at the present time...” (*Ibid.*) But he reverses himself and closes “with a plea for a belief in an eternal life...” (*Ibid.*) But why does he, and what basis has he provided? He says: “This is a certainty of the future” (p. 223), evidently a kind of ultimate fideism. What is the point of all the rationalizing and posturing about science, then? “Natural science cannot give this answer about the ultimate meaning, only an—absolutely reasonable—trust can do this.” (p. 226) But what can this “reasonable” mean? We are left with the “great mixture of reality..., which cannot be grasped by any concept, cannot be fully expressed by any statement.” (pp. 227-28) If so, why not note that mystery at the beginning and be done with it?

Küng does not leave it there. He goes back to speak of a “realistic enlightenment,” “a purified, responsible religion.” (p. 229) Is this a return to the ‘natural religion’ of the Enlightenment, which Hume rejected, after having just pronounced it all an ultimate mystery? Which is it to be, Dr. Küng? He says: “If I believe in an eternal life, I know this world is not the ultimate reality.” (p. 232) Then its standards need not govern our judgments. One can only see Küng’s conclusions as a burst of inconsistencies, an attempt to put all sides together by means of words, to have the world and every secular hope and heaven too. Küng wants ‘reasonable,’ ‘justifiable’ conclusions and yet he endorses an ultimate mystery. The humanism of Enlightenment should force him to give up eternal life. But he cannot, so he proclaims it in a burst of proclamations.

C. *Martin Luther Küng?*

Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic seminary professor who also came to hold views at odds with his hierarchy. Is Hans Küng likely to be forced out of his church and then “Küngianism” become a new world-wide religious move-

ment? Hardly. The monolithic nature of the Roman church has been broken. More important, the ways of the Roman church today are less militant and more flexible. There is room for pluralism within the church. Ironically, Martin Luther was far more conservative theologically than Hans Küng.

In ages to come will Hans Küng find that his views, like Luther's, are accepted as commonplace? In Hans Küng's case, the issue is not so simple. Luther pressed for reforms he felt would liberate the church from aberrations in its practice. Küng appeals to standards of truth more akin to the Enlightenment which are outside the notion of how change takes place by an ecumenical council such as Vatican II. How shall the Roman church engage in discussions and decide on reforms in its practice and its doctrine? That is the question which Küng raises for Catholic theologians.

Here lies the issue: Are church decisions to be made individually by reflection, by scholarly exploration and by mutual dialogue with other interested persons, clerical or lay? Martin Luther never came close to endorsing such a spirit of individualism in doctrine, as the ultra conservative position of the church that bears his name indicates. But the Enlightenment believes firmly in individual reflection and public debate, and it uses the tools of modern scholarship as an unquestioned standard of evaluation.

How can two parties who are so far apart ever reconcile their differences, particularly if they disagree about the stage on which the debate is to take place and if each holds different views on how truth in religion is to be determined? Hans Küng is the child of the Enlightenment and of several centuries of Protestantism rapidly distilled. The Pope, the Cardinals, the Curia, and the Bishops are the upholders of an ancient tradition which, right or wrong, does not see itself as changed by public debate. The symposium of Plato is not their forum, and the method of dialogue does not seem to be the way to truth.

Hans Küng's spiritual home is not even with Martin Luther but with Liberal Protestantism. Luther was a biblically based conservative, but I hear no echo of "sola scriptura" in Küng's statements. Yet even if dialogue does establish truth and is the preferred means for philosophical reflection, is it an avenue which large hierarchical churches should use, or even can use, to determine doctrine? We in America cheer the individual who is strong enough to stand up to authority and assert his own position. This is democracy. But the Roman church is not a democratic institution, and it is not likely ever to become one.

To what standard for determining truth in doctrine does Professor Küng appeal? It is easy to establish a wide variety of individual beliefs. These emerge in every professor's classroom everyday. But how are official changes in institutions and their doctrines brought about? This is a particularly thorny issue if the institution and the challenger do not accept the same means to determine truth. And what is the role of the individual theologian-teacher in this process? I know many

who think we professors decide the truth of religion in the classroom. But there are more graduates of those classrooms who know that “in the real world” institutional change is not so easily brought about by individual intellectual debate. In most churches practical-minded clergy control the reins of power, not professors.

Nevertheless, can university professors become so powerful that they can induce institutional change? Plato wanted philosophers to become kings in order to overcome this split between the yogi and the commissar. Surely Hans Küng must ask himself this question. Should theology professors become popes or should popes become revisionary theologians? To accomplish doctrinal and institutional change it is not enough to publish books or even to travel on the lecture circuit. That has been done before. Quakers, Congregationalists, and Baptists have long worked out doctrinal truth each for himself or herself. But is that avenue open to a Roman Catholic even in this day?

Metaphysics: Constructing a World View, by **William Hasker**. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1983, pp. 132. Paper, \$4.95.

Reviewed by THOMAS V. MORRIS, University of Notre Dame.

Like many of the readers of this journal, I regularly initiate undergraduates into the ways of philosophy. My introductory lecture course begins with a couple of weeks on the nature of rational belief, moves on into some of the classic problems of metaphysics, and culminates in an examination of some questions central to the philosophy of religion. In the past, I have used the most recent edition of Richard Taylor's *Metaphysics* (Prentice Hall) to cover the second segment of the course. The next time around, I plan to use this new little book by Hasker instead. Although he covers a narrower range of issues than Taylor, the simplicity and clarity of Hasker's exposition, as well as the general accessibility of his argumentation to philosophical novices, in my opinion make Hasker's book preferable to Taylor's for this sort of context. Moreover, this is a book which can hold the attention of the non-philosophical reader, the average student as well as the intelligent layperson. It employs to great effect various pedagogical devices, such as well chosen quotations and illuminating illustrations, often with a touch of humor. All in all, it succeeds in its appointed task admirably well.

What that task is should be made clear. *Metaphysics* is the second volume to have appeared in the new *Contours of Christian Philosophy* series edited by C. Stephen Evans of St. Olaf College and published by a popular, evangelical Christian press. The books in this series are to be short, introductory level texts,