

King Küng

Freud and the Problem of God, by Hans Küng; translated by Edward Quinn, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 126 pp. \$8.95.*

THE THEOLOGIAN'S TASK is always tortuous, particularly when he speaks to an audience of secular stripe, rather than to his religious confreres. He must state the eternal truths in new, original forms, yet he must not sacrifice the integrity of those unchanging truths. He must speak to the spirit of the age, yet he must not allow himself to fall into the trap of the *Zeitgeist*. In a word, he must be in, but not of, the contemporary intellectual world.

For Catholic theologians, whose tradition rejects the claims of secular authority, and whose Church claims the interpretative aid of the Holy Spirit, the problem is especially acute. The Catholic theologian must avoid both Scylla—an unoriginal rehash of Scholastic formulas—and Charybdis—heresy. No matter

how careful and prayerful he might be, the theologian risks the wrath of some orthodox readers who, hearing his message, will find in it not the eternal truths bedecked in new raiment, but rather a challenge to those truths. The charges of heresy have been flung not only at dissidents like John Courtney Murray and Teilhard de Chardin but even, a few years ago, at one Monsignor Montini, and, several centuries earlier, Saint Thomas Aquinas himself.

If the *Zeitgeist* lies ready to ambush the imprudent theologian, the trap is rarely quite so visible as it is in the Terry Foundation Lecture series, a regular staple of Yale's intellectual life. In that series, a prominent international thinker is invited to discuss how religion might benefit from the use of new discoveries in science and philosophy. In setting up that lecture series, the Terry Foundation called for the exploration of a "broadened and purified religion" which, it declared, could "greatly stimulate intelligent effort for the improvement of human conditions and the advancement of the race in strength and excellence of character." Clearly the Foundation is saying, and the lecture series is affirming, that religion is the pillar on which our society is supported. But it is the building, not the pillar, that is most important.

A scrupulous theologian would surely balk at this assignment. But where angels fear, Hans Küng plunges in. In his introductory remarks Küng pronounces himself flattered to be included in the "apostolic succession" (as he terms it) that has included past Terry lecturers such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, Carl Jung and Erich Fromm. Somehow this succession seems appropriate: two liberal Protestants, a deist with leanings toward alchemy, a humanist and avowed socialist, all leading up to Hans Küng, the quintessential theologian of the *Zeitgeist*. What other theologian is so comfortable in the secular realm? Vintage Küng essays appear not in the tiny,

erudite journals of the profession, but in best-sellers and on the *New York Times* editorial pages.

This popularity comes at high cost; in appealing to the mass market Küng must avoid the most challenging and provocative ideas. So it is in this instance, where he foregoes the opportunity to analyze the problems that psychoanalytic theory has created for religion. Instead he turns that subject on its head, considering the concessions that religion forces onto Freudian theory. As Chesterton might have said, a more rewarding work would have been entitled "God and the Problem of Freud."

From its birth, the theory of psychoanalysis has been in constant conflict with religious sentiments, particularly Christian ones. As Küng traces the development of Freud's world-view (in an extremely dry but magisterial recitation), the causes of this tension become abundantly clear. Freud bases his belief on strictly materialistic premises, derived largely from Feuerbach. Where religion is concerned, he treats it as a simple psychic dysfunction, to be treated and/or analyzed by strictly scientific processes. Like so many of his contemporaries, Freud had unlimited faith in the power of science to answer all questions. Nowhere does he so much as suggest the possibility that science might be unequipped to explain religious sentiments; nowhere does he admit the legitimacy of the argument from Revelation, or of transcendental ideals. Like Feuerbach his mentor, Freud constructs a theory of radical materialism directly hostile to the Christian heritage.

The tension between these two schools, then, is irreconcilable; it stems from the very basis of Freudian thought. But Küng finds a way to reconcile the two nonetheless, in (of all things) the humanist theory of Erich Fromm. If psychoanalysis can help man to reach his own full potential, Fromm avers—if man can live totally attuned to his own humanity—then man can become his *own* god.

Fromm, following Freud, sees man's ultimate purpose to be the development of his own consciousness. If religion is a reverence for ultimate values (as Tillich defines it), then it follows, through the Freudian logic, that psychoanalysis is fundamentally religious. In this transparent fallacy Küng locates the profound truth that religion should find in Freud's thought.

Granted, religion can learn from psychology. A pastoral minister must be able to appreciate the emotional needs of his flock, and any theoretical system must include an explanation for pathological behavior. An understanding of the human psyche should lead to a better understanding of human weakness. The great theologians can find a kernel of insight amid the melange of received wisdom and synthesize that insight into a fuller Christian understanding. Today, psychology provides the ground for such a productive synthesis.

Most psychoanalytic theory is heretical, from the Christian viewpoint. But this does not necessarily disqualify all psychologists' insights. The technique of distilling a simple insight out of a large, unfriendly body of thought is not new to Christian thinkers. It was Saint Paul himself who pointed out that God can bless impious men with important truths. If those men then pervert their special insights, through the fault of their own weaknesses, that does not detract from the usefulness of the original truth they perceive. "Let God be true, yet every man a liar." (Rom. 3:4)

The Christian faith teaches that man becomes less human when he shrinks from God's grace. Thus sin leads inevitably to emotional weakness, and the first neurosis entered the world when Adam fell. Carl Jung, despite his penchant for pantheism, did argue that every psychological problem is caused, at its base, by the subject's failure to resolve his religious impulses. This fundamental premise might form the basis for a more ortho-

dox Christian psychology. Even the extreme theories of Wilhelm Reich take on a new interest when Christian concepts are substituted in place of Reich's own terms. Just as "armoring" prevents the free flow of the all-important orgone energy in Reich's system, so in the Christian dispensation sin prevents the free flow of God's grace. There is the germ of an idea here, admittedly surrounded by much chaff. No such useful insights may be found in the work of Sigmund Freud. He is persistently hostile toward religion, adamant in his materialism, unready even to discuss transcendent matters.

The virulence of Freud's hostility toward religion is such that one might suspect some pathological cause. Freud hated religion obsessively, dwelling on the subject with increasing feverishness in his last years. Küng reports this obsession without explaining it—as he reports without comment that Freud also nurtured a strong distaste for music and (remarkably enough) for sex. Are these the symptoms of Freud's own admitted Oedipus complex? Again Küng mentions that possibility, but refuses to make a judgment.

Inspired by Darwin's successes, Freud in his analysis of religion sought to trace the development of worship back down the evolutionary trail to some root in "natural" religion. So, in both *The Future of an Illusion* and later in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud develops a truly bizarre explanation for the phenomenon of belief. In the latter work, which Küng considers as Freud's greatest statement on the subject, Freud once again explains all the relevant issues in terms of the all-important Oedipal struggle. Moses, he surmises, was murdered by his fellow Israelites, who then, stricken with guilt, arranged a cult of belief around his memory. Just as he explains the development of society (in *Totem and Taboo* and elsewhere) in the terms of his own obsession, here Freud uses Oedipal conflict as an explanation of religion.

Again and again in his development of this theory, Freud calls upon explanations redolent of his own obsession. Critical readers might be tempted to dismiss those explanations as showing more about the psychological condition of the author than about the subject under discussion. Not even a marginal adherent to the Judaeo-Christian tradition could give any credence to Freud's theory about Moses. Still Küng is remarkably sympathetic to his author; he concludes that Freud's theories on the development of religion are "hypotheses that have not been conclusively proven."

If only Küng could be similarly sympathetic toward the claims of his own Church! He might perhaps conclude that papal infallibility is an unproven hypothesis, rather than an outright falsehood. But, no, Küng gives the benefit of doubt only to Freud. Even in his capacity as a Christian theologian, Küng cannot bring the truths of Christianity into play in his analysis of the question of belief. Without Christ, Christian belief is nonsense. Yet throughout the course of these lectures, Küng never mentions Jesus Christ once.

How, then, can Küng be considered a Christian (let alone a Catholic) theologian? His failure to mention Jesus here is no aberration. In his ponderous 700-page *On Being a Christian*, he refuses to acknowledge the reality of the Resurrection. (Again, he does not even consider the Easter story as an unproven hypothesis.) His reverence for the sacraments, too, never shows. *On Being a Christian* contains no mention whatsoever of the liturgy, and the only reference to prayer occurs in a petulant footnote at the end of the final chapter. In a January op-ed article published by the *New York Times*, Küng arrogantly explains "Why I Remain a Catholic" without once mentioning his priestly privileges of saying Mass and hearing confessions. In fact, Küng does not approve of confession.

Gradually, as this book nears its blessed conclusion, the reader comes to

understand Küng's motive for discussing Freud. The key comes when Küng sums up the lessons that Christianity should learn from depth psychology. Conveniently enough, those lessons almost precisely match the reform advocated by Küng himself. It seems highly improbable that Freud, the implacable materialist, would provide his *imprimatur* to any such reforms, or to any sort of religion, no matter how "broadened and purified." Küng's study of Freudian theory, in short, is neither scholarly nor properly theological; it neither comprehends the basic content of Freud's ideals nor incorporates his major insights into a Christian framework. Freud is just one more stick with which Küng can beat the Vatican.

So it should have been no surprise to anyone who has read this book (or other works by the same author) that on December 18, 1979, the Sacred Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith declared that Hans Küng could no longer be considered a Catholic theologian. The reason cited—his "contempt for the magisterium"—is an understatement of the case. For several years Küng has made explicit comparisons between Rome and Moscow, Catholicism and totalitarianism, the Curia and the Politburo. He has warned American audiences that the Catholic Church is one of the two greatest threats to human freedom. He has refused even to attempt the defense of his writings in the Sacred Congregation, crying that the Vatican is launching a new Inquisition. In every real sense, the Vatican decree of last December was brought about not by the Sacred Congregation, nor by the Pope, but by Küng's ardent desire for a showdown.

The popular media, predictably, saw Küng as a martyr to intolerance. Newspaper accounts alluded ominously to the Inquisition, and hinted that the only difference between this and earlier episodes was the current absence of thumbscrews. In fact, of course, Küng has suffered no noticeable ill effects. He is still free to

teach, and still holds forth to large audiences at Tübingen. Assuming that he is eventually required to surrender his chair there, he will indubitably receive a handful of other attractive offers to teach elsewhere. His essays are, if anything, more popular now than ever before. Now more than ever, Küng is the perfect spokesman for the *Zeitgeist* in the religious realm.

Merely on the basis of his claim to be a Catholic, Küng enjoys two rhetorical advantages. First, he can claim—indeed does claim—to be literally more Catholic than the Pope. He can preach the dogmas of secular humanism and surround them with the aura of religious dignity, claiming that his views are more enlightened, more “modern,” than those of the Catholic hierarchy. Second, he can criticize the Pope and the bishops with a viciousness that would be unseemly in a Protestant or Jewish writer. When the remarkable patience of the Vatican was finally exhausted, it was an act not of repression but of self-definition and of self-defense. Küng may continue to grind his ideological axe; he simply cannot continue to claim that in doing so he is furthering the work of the Church. He is still free to be (as he has said he is) “deeply ashamed” of his Church; the world is simply put on notice that that shame is mutual.

Pope John Paul II, during his visit to this country, emphasized the right of the Christian faithful to worship devoutly and wholeheartedly, untroubled by the alarms and excursions of academic theological disputes. Quarrels there will always be, but the ultimate goal of sound theology is not to involve the faithful in academic disputations; the ultimate goal of sound theology is to make the worshipful, prayerful life of the Christian community more vibrant and all-embracing. Hans Küng, with his cavalier disregard for prayer and the sacraments, represents an entirely different school of thought; his primary allegiance is toward ideology rather than piety, toward the mind rather than the soul. Naturally, then, he draws

his greatest support from academics, editorialists, intellectuals: the men whose livelihood depends upon the continuance of controversy and the rejection of authoritative or of transcendent claims.

Shortly before his last confrontation with the Sacred Congregation, in August 1979, Küng journeyed to Peking, where he became the first Western theologian to address the Peking Academy of Social Sciences. Did he address that group as a Christian missionary or as a critic of religion? Did he confront the reigning ideological creed of that nation, or did he repackage his attack on the Vatican, filtering it through that same atheistic ideology? The media have not reported; it is Küng the martyr, not Küng the theorist, who attracts popular attention. But precisely because one can readily envision another Küng foray entitled *Mao and the Problem of God*, it is a great consolation to recall that, in this instance, the author cannot be regarded as representing the Catholic Church.

Reviewed by PHILIP F. LAWLER

The Best of All Worlds

The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, by Daniel Bell, *New York: Basic Books, 1978 (paperback edition). xxxiv + 301 pp. \$4.95 (paper).*

THE AUTHOR could have enhanced the value of this book if he had organized it better, if he did not give the impression of being out of breath trying to pack into one volume information, statistics, political commentary, sociological diagnoses, and efforts at outlining some sort of historical perspective. As a result, hardly has he secured the reader's consent in one pas-