Hans Küng is no doubt the most controversial Roman Catholic figure at the present time. A popular author and a strong critic of the papacy, Küng has suffered at the hands of the Church: all sorts of efforts to silence him have emanated from Rome. He has stood bravely against this, which can only elicit admiration. Although he is still permitted to teach at the University of Tübingen, the Catholic Church has divested him of his title "Catholic Theologian" — Ed.

Hans Küng on God

George H. Smith


One day a theologian and a philosopher were criticizing the other's profession. "The trouble with you philosophers," exclaimed the theologian, "is that you are searching at night in a dark alley for a black cat that isn't there." "Ah," replied the philosopher, "you theologians also search at night in a dark alley for a black cat that isn't there — except you think that you found the cat!"

In his latest book, Does God Exist?, the controversial theologian Hans Küng claims to have located the elusive cat. He "is not an object of immediate experience; he is not part of existing reality, he is not among the objects available to experience; no intuition or speculation, no direct experience or immediate perception, can provide a 'view' of him" — but he is there nonetheless, Küng assures us.

Before joining Küng on his search, some general comments should be made about this massive, sprawling work of nearly 900 pages. Most of this book is devoted not to a defense of Christian theism per se, but to an examination of various philosophers and theologians. Descartes, Pascal, logical positivism, linguistic analysis, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth — these are but a sample of the wide range of philosophers and theologies surveyed by Kung. When dealing specifically with atheistic philosophers, Küng concentrates on Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. And although his treatment of atheistic philosophers is far superior to some previous efforts by Catholic theologians (e.g., Vincent Miceli's The Gods of Atheism), the reader in search of a definitive Catholic work on this subject should still consult Cornelio Fabro's God in Exile: Modern Atheism.

It is to Küng's credit that he treats atheism (as he sees it) seriously and even sympathetically. There are good and bad aspects to atheism, Küng says, but the same may be said for religion. Atheism is not a deliberate (and sinful) rebellion against God, as the facile analyses of many theologians would have it; nor is it a form of crypto-theism. Küng exhorts his fellow theologians to treat atheism seriously and with respect. Theologians, no less than philosophers, should equip themselves with the spirit of intellectual honesty and open inquiry. Belief in God is a matter of truth or falsehood, and only a rational investigation can decide between the two. Theologians should not be slavish apologists for religious dogma.

Küng's discussion of atheistic philosophers is frequently insightful and informative, but it is also the source of the book's greatest weakness. Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and other philosophers examined by Küng happen to be atheists, but — with the exception of Feuerbach — none of them are properly designated as philosophers of atheism. They did not approach atheism systematically, and for some (such as Marx) atheism is but a minor part of a comprehensive theoretical system. Many atheists not mentioned by Küng at all — especially those in the tradition of British and American freethought — dealt with atheism in far more detail than Küng's Continental atheists, and from a radically different perspective. Of course Küng is aware of other atheistic traditions (Enlightenment atheists, such as Baron d'Holbach, receive occasional mention), but Küng's Continental atheists are used by him as a prototype for atheism in general.

Much is made of Marx's "sociopolitical atheism," but the social and political implications of religion have long been prominent features in the atheistic tradition. Nietzsche's alleged "nihilism" (a questionable interpretation at best) is somehow seen by Küng as the logical termination of an atheistic philosophy — ignoring the fact that many philosophers embraced atheism precisely to escape the nihilism of irrationalism and a morality based on the supposed will of God. The distortion caused by Küng's selective focus is perhaps best illustrated by his claim that Feuerbach is "the 'Church Father' of modern atheism." Now Feuerbach had a dramatic impact on Marx, Freud, and other Continental thinkers — there is no doubt about that. But his impact on British and American freethought was virtually nil. Küng's contempt for "bourgeois, mediocre 'freethinking'" is obvious; it is not profound enough for his transcendent mind. But this does not excuse Küng's extrapolating a general view of atheism from a few atheistic philosophers regarded by him as worthy.

If Küng had taken the neglected freethinkers more seriously, how might his approach have differed? First, he may have understood that the dominant form of atheism in freethought has been atheism as the absence or lack of belief in a god (i.e., a supernatural being) rather than the absolute denial of a god's existence. Küng treats atheism exclusively in the latter sense. But the freethinkers realized the importance of a precise definition of atheism, and throughout their journals in the nineteenth century one finds rather extensive discussions and debates concerning this topic.

One cannot "prove" God's nonexistence, Küng argues triumphantly; therefore, the
The atheist is on an equal footing with the theist, who admittedly cannot prove God's existence. If Küng would descend from the clouds of Feuerbach and Nietzsche and permit himself a few hours of examining the writings of Charles Bradlaugh, J.M. Robertson, Joseph McCabe, Chapman Cohen and other freethinkers, he would find his argument demolished many times over. The atheist need not prove the nonexistence of a god, the freethinkers maintained. The theist asserts a positive — the existence of a god — so the onus probandi (burden of proof) rests with him. The theist must, first, provide a coherent, noncontradictory description or definition of God (so we know whereof we speak); and, second, must provide some reason (evidence or argument) to believe in the existence of such a being. If the theist fails in either of these tasks, the rational person, faced with no reason to sustain belief in a god, should remain a nonbeliever, i.e., an atheist. This, in essence, is the epistemological basis for atheism, and the one advocated by a great many atheists, past and present. Yet nowhere does Küng discuss such basic issues.

How, then, does Küng justify theism? How does he locate the troublesome cat we mentioned earlier? Unfortunately, it is impossible to summarize Küng's argument. There simply is no argument. There is page after page of assertions and profundities, but no argument. Küng concedes that the traditional proofs for the existence of God fail, but he still maintains that they are "meaningful" and provide "food for thought." To this the freethinker, blissfully unaware of the subtlety of Küng's thought, might disrespectfully blurt out, "So what?"

It seems, according to Küng, that God's existence can "be verified but not proved." Fair enough. If we take "proof" in Küng's sense to mean deductive proof, then the atheist is willing to accept some less rigorous form of verification. But Küng further insists that the verification must be "indirect," and now the mediocre freethinker becomes suspicious. God, argues Küng, "is not there to be discovered, not ascertainable and knowable, as are the things of this world." When discussing God, we face "the question of the knowledge of a quite different reality."

How do we attain knowledge of this different reality? Basic to Küng's approach is his bald assertion that reality is "mysteriously unjustified." "Reality is there as a fact, but enigmatically, utterly lacking in any manifest ground, support or purpose." Man, plagued with this "radical uncertainty" concerning reality (many of us, presumably, have repressed it), finds a solution in God. God provides a rational basis for trusting in reality. "If someone denies God," on the other hand, "he does not know why he ultimately trusts in reality." Then comes the usual complaint about the consequences of atheism which, in the five hundred pages preceding this passage, one had reason to hope that Küng would not resort to:

The price paid by atheism for its denial is obvious. It is exposed by an ultimate groundlessness, unsupportedness, aimlessness, to the danger of the possible disunion, meaninglessness, worthlessness, hollowness of reality as a whole. When he becomes aware of this, the atheist is exposed also quite personally to the danger of an ultimate abandonment, menace and decay, resulting in doubt, fear, even despair.

Against the radical uncertainty of atheism, belief in God provides a reasonable antidote. God is the "primal ground, primal support and primal goal of reality." (In case one misses this the first time around, it is repeated dozens of times throughout the book). Exactly how does belief in God remove radical uncertainty about reality? There are no messy arguments here. Mere assertion replaces argument:

If God exists, then the grounding reality itself is not ultimately groundless. Why? Because God is then the primal ground of all reality. If God exists, then the supporting reality itself is not ultimately unsupported. Why? Because God is then the primal support of all reality. If God exists, then evolving reality itself is not ultimately without aim. Why? Because God is then the primal goal of all reality.

This, for Küng, is the ultimate in clarity. This is the substance of his "argument." And regardless of how many times Küng repeats it (perhaps hoping to induce a hypnotic trance in the reader?), and regardless of how many times one reads it over (as I did) hoping to find wheat among the chaff, it never gets any better. Küng, who sees himself in the tradition of Catholic "modernism," has many bad things to say about scholastic theology and the Aristotelian tradition. But the clarity of an Aristotelian such as Mortimer Adler (in How to Think About God) is far preferable to the vague obscurities of Hans Küng. Küng as a historian of philosophy and theology is knowledgeable and worthwhile. One must look elsewhere, however, for a rational approach to theology.