

# THE RATIONALITY OF BELIEF IN GOD: A RESPONSE TO HANS KÜNG

David Ray Griffin

The major purpose of Hans Küng's 800-page book entitled *Does God Exist?* is to show that belief in the Christian God is rationally justifiable. Given the title, purpose and size of the book, I was surprised by many of the things the book does *not* contain. It gives little attention and offers no solution to the problem of evil; it deals *briefly* with the traditional proofs for God, devoting at most one page each to the cosmological, teleological, ontological and moral arguments; and it contains no critical examination of the ontological and epistemological presuppositions that have been so central to the rise of atheism since the 17th century, i.e., the ontological doctrine that the chain of natural causation leaves no room for divine action in the world, and the epistemological doctrine that equates perception with *sense* perception and hence makes any experience of God impossible.

What *does* the book contain? Most of it is devoted to four points. First, Küng argues that we can base belief neither on a narrow rationalism nor an uncritical fideism, but only on a "radical rationality" reflecting on faith. Second, much of the space is devoted to arguing that one of the major causes of unbelief has been the fact that Christians, and especially the institutional church, have not been very Christian (324-27, 415, 634). The book is hence, as Küng says, a continuation of his previous book, *On Being a Christian* (vii, xxiii). Third, the bulk of the book is devoted to the twofold point that the arguments for and against God are equally inconclusive, so that we are left to make a free decision (540, 544, 568f., 574, 646, 656, 679). Fourth, Küng suggests some reasons why a decision for belief in God as the primal ground, support, and goal of reality is rationally justified.

There is much in the book that I heartily applaud. But in this critique I will focus on three issues that are central to philosophical theology and on which I am dissatisfied with Küng's treatment. Since his treatment of them is similar to that of many other modern theologians, the discussion has general relevance.

## I. *Rationality and The Problem of Evil*

The first issue concerns the problems of freedom and evil. Küng sees correctly, in my opinion, that the issue between the believer in God and the nonbeliever ulti-



mately comes down to this: "who, then, can give a convincing explanation of man and the world today, of reality as a whole?" (565) Now the evil in the world has probably been the main argument used by nonbelievers against the ability of theism to give a convincing explanation of reality as a whole. The world's evil seems to disprove the existence of a good and omnipotent deity. Closely related has been the conviction of nonbelievers that theism, in speaking of divine omnipotence, is incompatible with the reality of human freedom and hence responsibility. How does Küng respond to this twofold challenge to the rationality of belief in the Christian God?

Some of Küng's statements suggest that he wants to modify the traditional doctrine of omnipotence. He says God is not to be "understood in a naive, biblicistic way, as an almighty absolute ruler who deals with the world and with a man with unrestricted power according to his whims" (168 cf. 185). He wants to overcome the image of "a tyrannical god," (668-77), and speaks critically of the idea of God as an "omniscient being, dictating and centrally directing everything from above" (675). Human freedom "is not crushed by God's freedom" (649). The human is "a free partner" in the great game set up by God (652). However, Küng often speaks of God as the "all-determining reality," as the ground "which determines every individual existence" (550, 632, 664).

How are these two sets of ideas to be reconciled? Küng's most direct statement on this problem is the following: "The problem—much discussed by theologians—of the cooperation (*concursum*) of divine predestination and human freedom of choice, of the divine and the human will, is obviously no problem for Jesus" (674). I can only wonder at the relevance of this remark. Jesus, as far as we know, did not write an 800-page book trying to show that belief in God was rationally justifiable. Küng goes on in that context to say that Jesus' God is one to be loved, not feared. But this does not answer the question of how our freedom is compatible with a God who "determines every individual existence."

Furthermore, in spite of the assurances that God is loving rather than tyrannical, Küng admits that the human being, rather than being a free partner in the game God set up, is often an "involuntary victim," who is "played with in an evil way" (652). What does Küng do about this problem of evil? Does he give us a theodicy? No, he speaks disparagingly of the "unreal God of theodicy" (487), and says there can be no solution to the problem of evil by philosophical arguments (623). Rather, he makes a "forthright admission of his incapacity to solve the riddle of suffering and evil" (623). In fact, he suggests that we should not even try. Jesus' example is again invoked: "in the face of all the evil, Jesus did not give any philosophical or theological justification of God, any theodicy" (674). And Küng suggests that theodicies reflect an inappropriate inquisitiveness by trying "to get behind God's mystery and world plan" (623).

But if there can be no way rationally to reconcile the goodness of an all-deter-

mining God with the facts of the world, how can we rationally believe in the existence of an all-good, all-determining God? Notice that this is different from the question of whether one can, by pure reason alone, unaided by the perspective of Biblical faith, give convincing arguments for the existence of a God of perfect goodness and power. "Natural" or "rational" theology in that sense is not at issue here. The question of theodicy is a different kind of question. Here the concept of God is already somewhat provided by one's faith tradition. The task fits under the program of faith seeking understanding, which Küng approves (527, 577). The question is, *given* a Christian idea of the God-world relation, can this idea be shown to be self-consistent? Küng seems to say it cannot. Accordingly, I cannot see how he can say belief in the Christian God is rationally justifiable.

Küng's own quasi-solution is to appeal to mystery. He says that God is "permanently incomprehensible" (624, 680, 694). The way this kind of appeal can be a quasi-solution to the problem of evil was spelled out in the 19th century by Henry Mansel (in *The Limits of Religious Thought*). The formalized problem of evil presupposes that the divine attribute of perfect goodness gives us a basis for knowing what a being with this attribute would do. Hence, one of the premises usually reads, "If God were all-good, God would want to prevent all evil." But, says Mansel, this presupposition is false. God is infinite and unknowable. Our language when applied to God cannot mean what it means when applied to a human being. So, when a college sophomore begins to disprove God's existence by saying "If God were all-good . . .," the sophisticated graduate student can interrupt with this wisdom: "God *is* all-good, but nothing follows from this, since we do not know what infinite goodness would do. Accordingly, we cannot know that a good God would want to prevent all evil."

It is in this way that the assertion that God is completely incomprehensible could provide Küng a quasi-solution to the problem of evil. But this move would be in serious tension with other elements of Küng's theology.

In the first place, when he is summarizing why the question of God's existence is important, Küng lists all sorts of consequences that follow if God does exist. If God exists, then this life is not all; our infinite yearning will be satisfied; hope of new life is assured; our sufferings are not the last word; perfect justice will be realized (562f.). But how can Küng say that these things follow from God's existence? If God is "permanently incomprehensible," then we have no idea what God will bring about in the future. Küng cannot have it both ways. He cannot appeal to total ignorance of God's ways when dealing with the problem of evil, and then assume some knowledge of God's ways when dealing with eschatology.

In the second place, Küng says that the only form of behavior that is appropriate in relation to the incomprehensible God is "believing trust" (680). But if God is completely incomprehensible, I would think that infinite suspicion would be more appropriate.

In the third place, Küng says that, although Christianity has no *theoretical* solution to the problem of evil, the cross provides a *practical* solution, by letting us know that God suffers with us. Through the revelation in Jesus, we know that God is not enthroned above all suffering in apathetic transcendence, but is “a God who is wholly on our side” (695). I agree with Küng that the idea that God suffers with us is important in facing the evils of life. But I cannot understand how I can believe that God is wholly on my side and suffers with me if I also believe with St. Thomas, whom Küng quotes with approval, that “all that man knows of God is to know that he does not know him” (601).

In the fourth place, in speaking of the relation between Christianity and the other religions, Küng says that other religions “do not provide the truth for Jews and Christians. Only the one true God of Israel, known by faith, is *the* truth for Jews and Christians” (627). But this does not seem to follow if *the* truth about deity is that deity is incomprehensible. For, certain forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have said more consistently that the ultimate reality is incomprehensible. Küng himself quotes Lao-Tsze as saying that the divine is “the absolutely incomprehensible” (606).

In the fifth place, Küng’s suggestion that attempting a theodicy represents an inappropriate inquisitiveness is not consistent with his attitude on the origin of the universe. Central to his own argument for God’s existence is the idea that we need to ask where the first atoms came from (564, 640). He is critical of those who refuse to ask such questions. He insists that a “radically understood rationality” demands an answer: “Are not too many scientists (or those who think they are scientists) content with the laconic answer that these questions are unanswerable and there is no point in answering them? Are not such irrational reactions connected with the centuries-old prejudices between religion and science, which today can be overcome in principle?” (640). Küng is right. Upholding the ideal of rationality requires that we not refuse to ask any question. But by what principle does he say that asking about the first creation of matter is not inappropriate, while asking about the problem of evil is? The principle is probably the all-too-human one: we will press those questions to which we think we have an answer, and try to stifle those for which we can see no answer. Insofar as Küng does this, he does not carry out his call for a rationally justified belief in God. Is not his own reaction to the problem of evil an irrational one “connected with centuries-old prejudices,” in this case prejudices about God’s omnipotence and infinity?

## II. *Rationality and a Self-Consistent Concept of God*

I turn now to my second question. Küng correctly says that, prior to asking whether God exists, we must first decide what we mean by “God.” Having a rationally justifiable belief in God’s reality requires having a meaningful concept of

God.

I have been suggesting that one way in which Kūng falls short of his goal of arriving at a rationally justifiable belief in God is by his appeal to incomprehensibility in order to avoid the problem of evil. But this appeal is *ad hoc*, designed only to meet this particular problem. Throughout most of the book, Kūng is saying or presupposing several things about what God is like. One of the issues to which he gives considerable attention is whether God is personal. He sees the main issue in regard to the relation between Christianity and the other religions to be “whether God is to be understood in a more personal or a more impersonal sense” (594). He endorses the view that there are only two main types of piety, prophetic and mystical, and that the only consistent mysticism is the impersonal form (604f.). Mystical piety is based on weariness of life, is passive and quietist, and aims at the extinction of the emotional and volitional life. Its deity is “nonpersonal, wholly devoid of anthropomorphic features” (605). Prophetic piety, on the other hand, which Kūng believes to be of the essence of Christianity, requires a God with “the features of a human personality, in whom primitive anthropomorphism lives on” (606). Kūng seemingly plumps clearly for personalistic theism.

However, many of his statements are inconsistent with this personalism. He not only follows Heidegger in stressing the “ontological difference” between being and the existent, but he equates being itself with God (602). As such, God is “the infinite *in* all finite, being itself in all that is” (632). God, accordingly, is not an existent, not even the supreme existent (599, 602). This entails that the term ‘person’ is “merely a cipher for God. God is not the supreme person among other persons” (632f.).

We seem to have a complete contradiction here. Yet Kūng does not think so. He believes that we can say that God “is neither personal nor nonpersonal, since he is both at once and therefore transpersonal” (634). But how can we think this? Kūng knows that Whitehead and the process theologians who follow him distinguish between two natures of God, one of which is abstract and hence impersonal, the other being concrete and personal (178). But Kūng does not follow this way of reconciling the personal and impersonal in God. Rather, he appeals to the idea of “complementarity” in contemporary physics, according to which we must think of light as both particle-like and wave-like. Kūng suggests we can use the idea of complementarity in theology to understand how God is both impersonal and personal (630).

But is this move consistent with the radical rationality Kūng advocates? Could one not invoke the notion of complementarity to provide a facile resolution for every contradiction? This is no idle suspicion. Kūng uses the notion of complementarity to reconcile the Biblical view that human beings are ethically responsible with Einstein’s view that “the universal operation of the law of causation” means that human actions are totally determined so that we “cannot be responsible,

any more than an inanimate object is responsible for motions it goes through" (629, quoting Einstein). Küng says: "Could there not be such a 'complementarity' also between the 'God' of Einstein and the God of the Bible?" Only with the concept of 'complementarity,' he says, is it possible "to combine the strict system of laws of nature with ethical freedom" (630). I cannot regard any position as rational that violates the law of noncontradiction, and Küng's vague appeal to complementarity does not avoid this problem.

Furthermore, Küng is in other contexts very wary of basing one's theology upon current limitations in our scientific knowledge, since, when these limitations are overcome, theology has part of its foundation undermined and must make an undignified retreat (330). Is the current notion that electromagnetic phenomena must be described as both waves and particles not quite likely a temporary expedient which will be overcome by more adequate ideas in the future? Will it not then be obvious that theology has once again tried to derive apologetic support from temporary limitations in scientific understanding?

### III. *Natural Science and the Christian God*

I shall discuss one more feature of Küng's book that I find problematic. He says that Christian theology should not be antagonistic to natural science, nor should it try to live in peaceful coexistence. Rather, there should be a "critical-dialogic cooperation between theology and natural science" (115, cf. 118, 308). Again, I heartily agree with him. But I do not find that his position allows anything of importance to be contributed to the dialogue by Christian theologians. Rather, he capitulates completely on what I consider to be the main issue between theologians and the dominant viewpoint among scientists. This is the question as to whether "science", in the twofold sense of (1) the scientific method and (2) world-view consistent with this method and with our current scientific knowledge, rules out the possibility of speaking of God as a causal influence in the world in general and in human experience in particular. If it does, then the theologian must either reject science, or else give up most of the ideas associated with God in the Christian tradition, such as divine providence, prevenient grace, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the direct experience of God. So if the God defended is not a God who acts in the world, I cannot regard the defense to be a defense of the *Christian God*.

But I do not believe that either of these alternatives must be grasped, for I do not believe that science rules out the possibility of speaking of God as a causal factor in the world. Now, lots of *scientists*, and *philosophers* of science, rule out this possibility. But this does not mean *science as such* does. And this is precisely where I believe the major debate today needs to be focused. This would not properly be called a debate between 'theology' and 'science', but a debate between two competing philosophical positions, one which says that the present activities of the

world can be understood just fine without reference to God, and one which holds that a more adequate and hence rational position can be attained by combining insights derived from theology with insights derived from the natural sciences as they have been practiced thus far. According to this second position, which I advocate, scientists and theologians would be engaged in a cooperative dialogue, with each party seeking to see how its partial insights need to be modified in the light of the insights of the other party, and how all these partial insights can fit together into a larger truth.

Now, Küng recommends a cooperative dialogue. But he seems to think that the only insights Christian theology contains to supplement the insights of science are ideas about the beginning and the end of the world. Theology can answer the question of where the first atoms came from, and what the purpose of the world is, how it will end (640, 647, 654-59). But Küng does not believe that Christian theology contains any truths to contribute to the understanding of what is going on in the world *now*. He says that theology must be fitted into the modern world picture (115, 117). This world picture is the product of modern science, which has “made possible the knowledge of intramundane events in the light of their own natural causes, without any need to appeal to God as an explanatory hypothesis” (330). This means that Küng not only rules out an appeal to a special supernatural intervention of God to explain the origin of life and of the human mind (648), but that he also does not think that divine activity should be appealed to as an explanatory hypothesis for *anything* that is going on in the world.

This means that he thinks “natural theology as a constituent of a cosmological theory” is obsolete (332). He knows, of course, that “as long as we think we need a natural theology as a relevant explanatory constituent of a cosmology, we continue to have reasons also for believing in the existence of God” (332, quoting Hans Albert). But he believes that this implies a “God of the gaps” who will be made obsolete with further scientific knowledge (332, 333, 646, 649). Hence, he accepts the modern world picture, according to which all events can be adequately explained in terms of their natural causes, with ‘natural causes’ being taken to exclude God. He accordingly endorses Bultmann’s view that if we understand one of our decisions as a divine inspiration, we must do so without thinking that this decision is not fully understandable in terms of purely natural antecedents (653).

I suggest that Küng has too quickly capitulated to the scientific view that natural science can in principle tell us everything of importance about the processes of the world, that ideas about divine causation are not only superfluous but necessarily anti-scientific, and that a rational position must exclude such ideas. He seems to believe that this view, which rejects divine causation as an explanatory hypothesis altogether, is the only alternative to the rightly rejected “God-of-the-gaps” strategy. This strategy argued that, whereas most events and phenomena could be understood adequately without reference to divine causation, a few events and/or

phenomena had no natural causes and hence pointed to God's special intervention.

Küng apparently does not see that there is a third possible position, that one's world-view can have a God-shaped hole in it without having a God of the gaps. In the God-of-the-gaps view, divine causation is not considered a *metaphysical* category, necessary to understand *all* events; rather, it is merely a *cosmological* hypothesis, thought to be necessary to understand *some* events in the world, such as miracles, or the origin of life or of the human soul. But one could have a God-shaped hole in one's *metaphysical* outlook. The category of divine causation would be thought to be necessary to account adequately for *any* event in the world. This would not be a "gap" in our knowledge of events that could in principle be overcome by further empirical knowledge, for the role played by God in events would not be of the same kind as played by other causes. On the basis of such a metaphysical position, the theologian could avoid the problems of the stop-gap God without having to give up the idea, which seems to be essential to the Biblical-Christian idea of the God-world relation, that God exerts a real and variable influence in the world.

The reverse side of the idea that God is not a causal factor in the world is that we have no direct experience of God. And Küng holds this: "*The reality of God*, if he exists, is in any case not directly 'given' in the world: God as a datum is not God. He is not among the objects that experience has no problems in discovering. There is no direct experience of God" (533).

Now there are two distinguishable issues involved here. One is the question whether we have any direct experience of God *as God*, i.e., whether humans can have an experience of God that is stamped as such, so that it takes no interpretation of the experience to conclude that it was an experience of God. I agree with Küng's rejection of this view. But a second question is whether there is any direct experience of God at all, an experience in which it might not be obvious that God was a datum, and hence would only be thought to be an experience of God by those persons who correctly interpreted it. Küng also rejects this. But on what basis? It seems that he accepts the view that the only experience we can have of actualities beyond ourselves is through our senses (538f., 549). And indeed, if our experience of realities beyond ourselves is limited to sense experience, then Küng is right to accept the verdict of modernity that God "is not an object of immediate experience" (575).

This twofold position of Küng, that the world with its web of cause and effect is closed to God, and that we have no direct experience of God, explains two of the largest lacunae in his book, to which I referred in the opening paragraph. Those who know the history of modern atheism, and the difficulties of modern theologies, know that these two assumptions have been fundamental since the 17th century. The compromise position of deism, which limited God's causal activity to the original creation of the world, was motivated primarily by the conviction



that there was no room for divine causation in the world. This deistic compromise proved unstable, and soon led to complete atheism. Also, the view that the idea of God arose solely as a projection was based largely on the conviction that there could be no direct experience of God. This was based on the dogma of the so-called empiricists that all perception is sense perception or derivative therefrom. Given this dogma, one knew *a priori* that the idea of God did not arise out of any revelation from God or any human experience of God. One *knew* that the idea had to be some kind of projection. The only question was whether Feuerbach, Marx, Comte, Freud, Nietzsche, Durkheim or someone else provided the best explanation of this projection.

Given the centrality of these two dogmas of modernity, that the world is closed to divine influence, and that there can be no direct experience of God because all perception is through our senses, one would expect that an 800-page book entitled "Does God Exist?" would devote considerable attention to these two dogmas. But *no* attention is given to them. Küng gives much attention to various thinkers who held the idea of God to arise purely from a projection; but he does not deal with the epistemological assumption on which this was based, that all perception is sensory. And he does not include among the causes of atheism the doctrine that the world is closed to divine causation. And this is natural, since he accepts both of these dogmas, and we usually do not include in our analysis of "problems to be overcome" ideas we ourselves accept as true! We notice as problems only those problems which we think to be false; we are blind to the others. And this makes us blind to the contributions of those who have tried to offer solutions to those other problems. I will illustrate this by looking briefly at one aspect of Küng's treatment of Whitehead's thought.

At the core of Whitehead's thought is his doctrine that there are no "vacuous actualities." This means, positively, that all individual actualities are "occasions of experience." This does not mean that they necessarily have *consciousness* or sense experience. Most occasions of experience do not. But it does mean that they internally take account of the actualities in their environment. This "taking account of" Whitehead calls "prehension." It is, in Francis Bacon's words, a form of perception more subtle than sense. This prehension, or non-sensory perception, is enjoyed by all individuals, whether they have sensory organs or not. In individuals *without* sensory organs, this prehension is the only form of perception they have. In individuals *with* sensory organs, this prehension is more fundamental than sensory perception; in fact, sensory perception presupposes it.

Whitehead did not make up this doctrine for the sake of explaining how we can experience God, or how God can act in the world in general. For he developed this view before he came to believe in God. But, once he saw that his system had a God-shaped hole in it, the doctrine of prehension did serve this twofold function. That is, against the view that God cannot be conceived as a causal influence in na-

ture, which was based largely on the idea that nature is composed of bits of matter that can be influenced only by other bits of matter, Whitehead's doctrine that nature is composed of occasions of experience which prehend all the other actualities in their environment opens a way to understanding how an omnipresent non-material reality could influence them. And overagainst the sensationalist epistemology, Whitehead's view says that our fundamental relation to other actualities is not through our senses. It thus explains how the ideas of deity that are present in every tradition could be based in part on a direct experience of God.

Since this side of Whitehead's thought speaks so directly to two of the major causes of modern atheism, one might suppose that it would be given careful analysis by Küng. But he devotes only three sentences to it. After quickly dismissing it in one sentence by indicating that it is not obvious that it is true (a rather strange criterion: would Küng think that God's existence should be dismissed on the grounds that it is not obvious?), Küng says: "Our interest, however, lies in the *understanding of God*" (177). The quick dismissal, and the "however," show that Küng does not consider Whitehead's view that all "actual entities" are "prehending occasions of experience" essential to his understanding of God. He thus overlooks that aspect of Whitehead's thought which is perhaps most important in regard to the causes of atheism in the last few hundred years.

### *Conclusion*

I have focused on what I consider three ways in which Küng violates his own intention to confront the major sources of unbelief and to show that belief in the Christian God is rationally justified. In resorting to 'incomprehensibility,' he fails to provide an answer to the atheistic charge that the evil in the world disproves the existence of a being of perfect power and goodness. In resorting to 'complementarity,' Küng fails to show that the idea of God is even self-consistent. In accepting the ideas that God cannot act in the world, and that humans cannot directly experience God, Küng has not allowed theology to enter into a dialogue with science as an equal partner, he has given up ideas which are arguably essential to any Christian understanding of God, and he has given up what many of us would consider essential reasons for believing in God.

My goal in this response was not to try to do justice to Küng's book in its entirety. That would have been impossible. There is much in the book that is interesting, and there is much with which I agree. My concern has been only to focus on a few key issues which, had they been treated differently, could have made the book much stronger.

## NOTE

1. Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1980).