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# HANS KÜNG'S THEOLOGY: NOT QUITE FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

THEOLOGY FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

by Hans Küng

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Reviewed by James E. Faulconer

HANS KÜNG, professor of dogmatic and ecumenical theology at the University of Tübingen, is a distinguished theologian having written thirty-three or more books ranging from works on comparative religion to mariology and from the infallibility of the Pope to the relation of psychoanalysis and theology. In the United States, Küng's best known works are *On Being a Christian* (Doubleday, 1976) and *Does God Exist?* (Doubleday, 1980). But Küng's reputation here is, perhaps, not a consequence of his books, but of his controversial relationship with the Catholic Church, a relationship which earned him Pope John Paul's censure and cost him his license as a Catholic theologian. He is considered by many to be a forward-looking Catholic thinker, someone confronting the problems of Catholicism head on and offering non-traditional answers. He is considered by others to be a heretic, and probably a publicity-seeking one at that.

In this book Küng says he offers a post-modern theology (xiv). As a forward-looking thinker, that is no surprise, since post-modernism has become a buzz word of intellectual circles, both in Europe and in the Anglo-American world. Nearly everyone in academic circles is going post-modern, in spite of the violent reactions of the more intellectually conservative—or perhaps because of those reactions. It takes little reading of academic journals and few sessions

at academic conferences to know that many make the move to post-modernism because it's trendy. (For some reason literature, not theology, departments are most often afflicted with these people, though the disease seems to be spreading.) The trendiness of post-modernism has given it a bad name, for as a trend it gets reduced to schmaltzy relativism on the one hand, or rebellious, simple-minded, nihilism on the other. Many who call themselves *post-modernist* today are merely cardboard cutout romantics with a new name.

If the discussions of post-modernism found among the trendy were anything close to the truth, post-modernism's bad name would be well-deserved. But the relation between the post-modernism of the trendy and the post-modernism of people like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, to name a few, is anything but a matter of betting on a trend. In fact, it is not too much to say that the word *post-modernism*, as it is used among the trendy, has little more than a homonymic relation to *post-modernism* as it is used by such thinkers. For thinkers such as these, the move toward post-modernism results from a genuine and deep dissatisfaction with and disaffection from modernism, and a commitment to go beyond it in some way.

Post-modernism begins in the recognition that modern thought, which arose after the Renaissance and ended in about 1900 (though its remnants and effects are still very much with us), had particular characteristics,

characteristics that can be called into question. For example, among other things, modern thinking insists on some presence behind the world of our experience to account for that world. That presence can be God, but it need not be. It can also be Law. It can be Reason. It can be something else. But modernism assumes that if the human world is to have any meaning at all, there must be such a presence, the general name for which is the *theos*. (This presence is called the *theos* because of its assumed parallel to the Divine in religious understandings of the world, a parallel that logically need not be an identity, though many modernists and post-modernists assume it is.)

In addition, modern thinking demands that reality be amenable to some systematic exposition of reality. That exposition can take any number of forms—Kant or Hegel, empiricism or rationalism, this or that—but some systematic exposition is required. Modernism assumes that, whatever the presence, it can be captured in systematic language and only in systematic language. Here, too, post-modernists use the parallel with religion to describe modernism: modern thinking is "theological," not because it is necessarily religious, but because it insists on a systematic account, a *logos* of some *theos*. (To distinguish them, I will use *theology* to refer to theology in the usual, narrower sense and *theo-logy* to describe the wider, cultural sense.)

Modern thought demands method. The demand begins with Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637) and *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1684). After that, the demand for method is obvious at every point of modern philosophy and science and can be said to be the thing that made pre-twentieth-century science (modern science) what it was. In the twentieth century the demand for method continues in, among other things, the demand that every graduate thesis spend considerable time discussing methodology. The modernist assumption is that the right method will give one the truth. Presence, system, method; all intertwine in modernism; all are rejected in post-modernism.

But the rejection of presence, system, and method in post-modernism is not a romantic rebellion. Post-modernists don't argue for feeling and intuition instead of reason (i.e. presence). They don't argue for paradox instead of systematicity. They don't argue for aimlessness instead of method. From the post-modernist's point of view, such a

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rebellion against modernism is only another form of modernism created by placing a negation sign in front of the categories, demands, and values of modernism. But romantic negation accepts the values and structures of modernism, even though it reverses them. Post-modernism seeks to "go beyond" modernism without simply negating it.

I ASSUME that Kung intends to offer us a genuine post-modernism. I assume he is dissatisfied with modernism and not merely cashing in on his own trendiness and that of the word *post-modern*. And I assume Kung intends to look for and point a way out of the morass of objectivism, scientism, and technologism with their romantic counterparts of subjectivism, emotionalism, and yearning for a never-existent golden age, the morass we inherit as children of modernism and the Enlightenment, a morass that insinuates itself into everything, including, and sometimes especially, religion.

Unfortunately, although Kung may be looking for a way out of that morass, he doesn't point a way. Though his book is fine on particulars, overall it is confused and self-contradictory, and it is certainly not post-modern. Kung posits that his is a post-modern theology. He also says the theology he offers is a "coherent systematic whole" (xiii; and he devotes most of the book to an explication of that whole). But these two claims contradict each other. In spite of the various divergences among and arguments between the thinkers of post-modernism, they agree in their opposition to the notion of a coherent, systematic whole and the claim to finality—and authority—which necessarily accompany such a whole.

At least two problems emerge from Kung's contradiction between his aims and his means. First, Kung thinks the theological question is to be approached by clearing up doctrines and problems. He says that "without clarifying the 'classical conflicts,' there can also be no 'future perspectives,' no 'departure' for new shores" (xiv). He then spends the first third of his book clarifying those conflicts and the second two-thirds offering us future perspectives and a departure for new shores. But post-modernists think theo-logy (and, therefore, theology) is itself the problem, not the problems which occur within it. Theology itself is in question, both as the specific theology of religion and as the broader theologies of western culture.

Post-modernism is unalterably opposed to the notion of the *theos*—the theological and

philosophical concept of God, the coherent and systematic whole—though it is not necessarily opposed to the possibility of religion or divinity. Erich Heller says Nietzsche's attack on the *theos*, the origin of post modernism's antipathy to the *theos*, reduced "the whole story of atheism and agnosticism before and after him to the level of respectable mediocrity and [made] it sound like a collection of announcements by bankers who regret they are unable to invest in an unsafe proposition."<sup>1</sup> But if atheism has been reduced, then so has its opposite, theism. They are mutually defining. In fact, as Ricoeur, a committed believer, argues, genuine religion begins in a-theism, in giving up the theological project with regard to religion.<sup>2</sup>

The mediocrity of theism has made the thought-bankers lose confidence. Instead of trying to get back their confidence by bolstering the supposedly unsafe propositions, these bankers must rethink the very nature of the business in which they are engaged. They must give up banking. If theo-logy is the problem, clarifying the conflicts which occur within theology will do nothing to get us beyond the real problem. And Kung seems unwilling to give up theo-logical banking. He disagrees with other bankers about whether one should invest in God, but he doesn't disagree that investment and banking are "where it's at." From a post-modernist point of view, therefore, Kung's theology is a theology, not for the third millennium, but for the end of the second, a last gasp rather than a first breath. (Or, if you prefer Kung's metaphor, his ship turns out to be going in circles; the "new shores" to which he would depart are the same shores as those from which he would leave.)

Mimicking Nietzsche, we might call Kung "the last theologian," though the last theologian differs from "the last man" in that no one has yet seen an instance of Nietzsche's overman.<sup>3</sup> But there may well now be at least one "over-theologian," someone who has come to a new vision of what theology is, a way of talking about God and religion that is not modernist, that is a-theo-logical instead of theo-logical. There are a variety of examples of the possibility of such a vision,<sup>4</sup> but for the most obvious possibility of such an a-theo-logical re-vision of thought about the Divine for Latter-day Saints, consider the scriptures themselves. If we do not insist on imputing some theology to them as an underpinning, the stories and sermons of the scriptures serve admirably well, as do the words of inspired prophets and the testimonies of all believers.

THE second problem of Kung's confussion is a consequence of the first: Unwilling to give up the standard of the coherent whole, Kung is unable to solve the dilemma of authority. He sees the problem well. He has insightful things to say about the ways in which authority shows itself and is abused. From within the framework of traditional theology, he may even have useful things to say in response. But Kung does not see that his discussion is vitiated by his claim to a unified, coherent theology.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche argues quite convincingly that the point of a *theos* is to suppress difference and otherness.<sup>5</sup> Fearing the difference of violence, and confusing that difference with all difference, human beings constitute a *theos* and demand that everything be brought under the sway of that *theos* as a unified, coherent whole, in a theo-logy. (In religion, we confuse all difference with heresy and, therefore, demand theology.) We buy the possibility of avoiding, or at least controlling violence, but we buy it with oppression, with what we think is the only possible option. The oppression of violence brings with it oppression in general. Consequently, theo-logy, whether religious or secular, cannot avoid being oppressive since its very purpose is to oppress. (The protestation that the only difference suppressed is undesirable difference is question begging: what is undesirable within a theo-logical system is defined by the order dictated by one's *theos*.)

Given the authoritative function of theology, unified, coherent theology continues the demand of authority, even when it criticizes existing authority, even when it is demure in its demand. This can easily be seen in the case of politics. For medievals, the monarch provided the link between the *theos* and those below the monarch. His job was to keep order, an order which made itself known through him. Modern politics rejects the oppression of the monarch—the monarch's method of keeping order—because it rejects the monarch's *theos*, replacing it with one which is available to each person, not only to the monarch.<sup>6</sup> In modernism, Reason replaces God as the *theos*, even for believers. Now Reason, as it manifests itself in the individual, maintains order. But maintaining order is still essential, and maintaining order is still a matter of oppression, even when rights are guaranteed by a constitution or a bill of rights. Though the two approaches to political theory differ greatly, they agree completely on the need for a *theos* and the need for the *theos* to maintain order by suppress-

ing difference through some theo-logy and its ministers.

In sum, every unified, coherent theo-logy is implicitly also a claim to authority. It is a claim to the vision of order dictated by the *theos*. Therefore, it is also a claim to the right to suppress undesirable difference. And because, by definition, theo-logies are also totalizing—unified and comprehensive—nothing is excluded from their claim to authority. Because they are theo-logies, theologies are always a demand for the authority of their authors.

Thus, Kung's theology changes the question from what authority is and whether it should be exercised to who should exercise it and how. But because it relies upon the intellectual authority of the unified, coherent whole (modeled on the traditional notion of the authoritative god-*theos*, beyond the world and all becoming), unified theology cannot give up the problem of authority. Because Kung offers a theology from within theo-logy, his book cannot get beyond the question of who should do the oppressing—and it implicitly always argues (as any alternative theo-logy must) that the one offering the unified and coherent theology is the one who has or should have the authority. If one works within the theo-logical tradition and assumes the necessity of some *theos*, the question is always one of who should oppress whom, not a question of whether there should be oppression.

But Joseph Smith's understanding of authority was anything but that of necessary oppression. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–44 makes that quite clear. Implicit in that revelation is a notion of priesthood that is a-theo-logical and non-authoritarian, that avoids oppression and doesn't assume that oppression is necessary to avoid violence—or heresy. Whatever *authority* means for genuine priesthood, it is not the authority of a *theos*, religious or secular. Using Ricoeur's terms, we might say that genuine priesthood is necessarily a-theistic.

In spite of its intentions, Kung's work is a subtle re-instantiation of the very problem he wants to avoid. He is another in a long line of revolutionaries who seek only to replace the old authority with a new one, their own. But post-modernism is not only a questioning of the establishment, it is also a questioning of revolution. Post-modernism is not itself a revolution, for revolution is not enough. Restoration—healing, salvation—is necessary. Kung offers only revolution. Post-modernism demands more, and the Restoration already offers something more than revolution.

The promise of the Restoration is seldom fulfilled in the work of LDS intellectuals, whether “conservative” or “liberal,” because our work is almost universally theo-logical, even when it is not explicitly theological. As we move into the third millennium, rather than aiding us in a search for a non-theo-logical way to speak of the Divine, Kung's book tempts us to re-enter the theo-logical and theological tradition. It tempts us to remain in apostasy. ☩

#### NOTES

1. Eric Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche*, 3.  
2. Paul Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in MacIntyre and Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, 59–98, Columbia University, 1969.

3. In Nietzsche, the overman is the person whose being goes beyond the being of the last person. The last person is the final version of humanity under the sway of some theos, even an already “dead” one.

4. See Mark Taylor's *Erring* (University of Chicago, 1984; especially the first 148 pages), Andrew Louth's *Discerning the Mystery* (Clarendon, 1983), Carl Raschke's *New Dimensions in Philosophical Theology* (Scholars, 1982), John Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics* (Indiana University, 1987; especially chapter 10), and Edith Wyschogrod's *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1974). Though not itself a book on theology, because it offers an alternative to theo-logy, Charles Scott's *The Language of Difference* (Humanities Press, 1987) offers a discussion very useful to any re-vision of our talk about God and religion.

5. For a brilliant, applicable, contemporary essay on the problem of authority, see Michel Foucault's “What is an Author?” in J. V. Harari, *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, pages 141–160, Cornell University, 1979.

6. The move from medieval politics to modern politics is analogous to the move from medieval Catholicism to the Reformation. With modern politics, the *theos* can be known by each individual, so each individual becomes responsible for maintaining order.

#### TCHAU, SENHOR

I take your *obrigado* for a threat:  
“Come back,” you say, “venha,  
Venha outra vez” for what?  
For bacalhada made with trash-fish heads?  
For feijoada filled with pigs’ ears and feet?  
I found your pig’s fat tail  
last Quarta-feira almoco—  
Lunch for cães, seu rabo de porco.  
I threw that tail to your three-legged caõ  
Which choked it down without a bite;  
You didn’t watch. You thought I ate it,  
Never looking for the bones.  
It must have pleased your one-eyed soul  
To cut that tail from the pig’s red corpse—  
I hear your pious, “waste nada Deus me deu,”  
See you squeeze the soggy, bloody flesh—  
Meant for only your “rich” Americano’s plate.  
May Deus te dou all fat pig’s tails, senhor,  
But nada, nada will you get from me,  
Not after today’s fine bacalhada:  
Fish heads and tails—olha aqui—  
No meat: fish heads and tails over rice.  
Your speckled caõ smelled this  
And walked away. I’m leaving, too.  
Tchau, senhor. I’ll eat at *Black Maria*—  
Stomp her baratas, not yours.  
Pig’s tail? Fish heads and tails?  
Nada, senhor, nada mais de mim!

—M. SHAYNE BELL