Book Reviews/Recensions/Buchbesprechungen

Plurality and Christian Ethics
New studies in Christian Ethics 4
Ian S. Markham
Cambridge: CUP, 1994, xiv + 225 pp.,
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RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage est fort bien écrit, sur un sujet central et important, qu'il traite de manière solide : si la tolérance ne doit pas dégénérer en nihilisme pour finir en conflit ouvert pour la conquête du pouvoir, elle doit s'exercer dans un processus de dialogue qui se donne comme but la recherche de la vérité. Une telle recherche présuppose le caractère intelligible de l'univers dans son ensemble, ce qui présuppose à son tour l'existence d'un être nécessaire : 'Dieu'. La liberté d'opinion a besoin du théisme. Inversement, le théisme doit être épris de liberté, c'est-à-dire qu'il doit être associé à une anthropologie théologique qui prenne au sérieux la distinction entre Dieu et l'être humain et qui reconnaisse honnêtement le caractère historique de notre compréhension de la vérité, ainsi que l'universalité et la persistance de notre caractère pécheur.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das zentrale, überzeugende und wichtige Argument dieses gut geschriebenen Buchs ist folgendes: Soll die Toleranz nicht durch einen moralischen Nihilismus zu einem nackten Machtkampf degenerieren, so muss sie in einem wahrheitsuchenden Dialogsprozess ausgeübt werden; die selbst ein notwendiges Wesen, d.h. Gott, voraussetzt. Der Liberalismus braucht theistisch zu sein. Gleichweise braucht der Theismus liberal zu sein: das heisst, er muss mit einer theologischen Anthropologie, welche den existentiellen Unterschied zwischen Gott und Mensch ernst nimmt und die historisch-Bedingtheit unseres Wahrheitsverständnisses sowie die Beharrlichkeit und Universalität der menschlichen Sündhaftigkeit akzeptiert, sich vereinigen.

This is a good book that persuasively addresses a very important problem. The problem has to do with tolerance, and it can be articulated in terms of two questions: how can those who claim to know the truth (e.g. Christians) regard tolerance as a virtue? And how can those who regard tolerance as a virtue (e.g. liberals) avoid subverting it by implicitly endorsing moral nihilism?

The answer that Markham proposes is avowedly an explication of that given by Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*: neither retreat into a unitary religious culture nor advance into a unitary secularist one, but the affirmation of plurality *and of its religious depth*. Markham begins his explication by giving a critical account of the first option, the traditional Christian response, as it is represented by the Christendom Group, and especially the thought of V. A. Demant. This ignores the first question altogether and offers as an answer to the second the recovery of a unitary Christian culture. But two significant points are overlooked here. First, the problem of religious intolerance and the fact that the secularist impulse of liberal societies is understandably fuelled by the traumatic experience of the Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries. And second, the fact that tolerance is a modern *achievement*—or, as Markham puts it, that 'secularism was God's way of teaching the Church a much needed lesson' (p. 169). Like Charles Taylor, and unlike Alasdair Macintyre, Markham thinks that modernity has got some things right.

Superior, in Markham's opinion, to this typical European response to the problem of tolerance ('typical' because there are exceptions to the rule, e.g. D. L. Munby), is the American alternative. This is represented to some extent by Robert Bellah and more so by Richard John Neuhaus. Both contend, *pace* secularists, that religion need not be intolerant; but whereas Bellah supposes tolerant religion to be an entirely novel entity—'civil religion'—Neuhaus holds it to be a developed form of Christianity.

Markham aligns himself with Neuhaus and, building on him, adduces a battery of good theological reasons why Christians not only may but should regard tolerance as a virtue. The main obstacle to such recognition is the orthodox (Thomist) explanation of disagreement as attributable simply to the sinfulness

of the heterodox. This fails to take account of the universality of sinfulness, infecting even the 'orthodox' and of the fact that, until the eschatological completion of salvation, *all* of us 'see through a glass darkly'. It also neglects an alternative cause of disagreement: the 'epistemic distance' that God has deliberately put between human beings and himself (the Truth), to create space for human freedom and precisely to make arriving at the truth a communal and dialogical process.

But if religion needs a tolerance, tolerance also needs religion. Here, Markham offers his own version of the exciting argument made by others (e.g., S. R. L. Clark, *Civil Peace and Sacred Order*) that liberal values and institutions need theism to be intelligible and sustainable. Rightly aghast at the epistemological pretentiousness of those who claim to possess absolute truth absolutely, but wrongly supposing that any claim to know the truth is bound to fuel intolerance, most liberals have become not only sceptics but anti-realists: they deny that the truth can be known, and therefore that there is any way of deciding between rival claims or narratives. On this account, however, not only does tolerance displace genuine dialogue (in which the parties engage with one another in a common search for truth), but it also becomes entirely discriminate: it has no grounds for withholding itself from the likes of racism and fascism.

As an initial guide to the way out of this quandary, Markham recommends (a version of) Alasdair Macintyre. For, on the one hand, Macintyre denies that there is any absolute transcendent, Olympian viewpoint open to us (humans) from which we can tell true claims from false ones. But, on the other hand, he affirms that it is possible for us, *from within* a particular historical tradition of thought, to judge another tradition better or worse at comprehending the data of reality. By implication, then, Markham (rightly in my opinion) reckons Macintyre to be realist rather than historicist. He is realist in that his affirmation of the possibility of making critical judgements between rival narratives implies the existence of the transcendent criteria of intelligibility and the ultimate intelligibility of the universe as a whole. We humans may never be in a position to know that we have grasped absolute truth absolutely (hence tolerance is a virtue), but absolute truth is, nevertheless, there to be grasped (so dialogue has a purpose).

Macintyre's realism, however, is only implicit and stands in need of justification.

This Markham seeks to provide in the form of a theistic metaphysic by way of a version of Aquinas' cosmological argument. *Pace* Hume, he argues that this never pretended to be persuasive on neutral, tradition-independent grounds, but was intended rather to show the explanatory power of the theistic view of the world. And, following Hugo Meynell and Keith Ward, what it explicates is not the temporal origin of all that subsequently is ('God' as first cause), but the intelligibility of the universe as a whole ('God' as logically necessary being).

So, in sum, Markham's argument runs as follows. If tolerance is not to degenerate via moral nihilism into naked power-struggle, it must be exercised in the process of dialogue that intends the discovery of truth; but the search for truth presupposes the intelligibility of the universe as a whole; and this, in turn, presupposes a necessary being, that is, 'God'. Liberalism needs to be theistic. But, equally, theism needs to be liberal; that is, it needs to be allied to a theological anthropology that takes the distinction between God and human being seriously (which, as Barth pointed out, is the only way of taking God seriously *as God*), and is honest about the historicity of our grasp of the truth and about the persistence and universality of human sinfulness.

Markham's argument is, as far as I can judge, cogent and it opens up the exciting prospect of constructive dialogue between tolerant religion and non-secularist liberalism that promises to be mutually beneficial. There is, however, one substantive point that I found perplexing. For Markham speaks of God, not only as 'the necessary being', but also as 'the location of ultimate value' (pp. 147, 167) and of moral values being firmly 'rooted in [God's] character' (p. 167). But it is not entirely clear to me that to describe God as the ground of Value is quite the same as describing him as the basis of Truth. Nor is it clear quite what is meant by talking about values being *rooted* in *personal character*.

In the course of making his case, Markham provides useful summaries of the thought of Demant, Munby, R. H. Preston, Bellah, and Neuhaus and very useful summaries of the debates between Macintyre, on the one hand, and Peter Winch, Jeffrey Stout, and John Millbank on the other. In the case of Demant, who gets the best part of a whole chapter (4) devoted to his economic thought, the summary becomes a distraction—but that is to cavil.

A more substantial complaint, however, may be made against the publisher for pricing this

valuable book well beyond the reach of students at £30. The sooner it appears in paperback, the better!

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Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today
Hans Küng

London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993, xv + 196 pp., £9.95 paperback.

RÉSUMÉ

Le dernier ouvrage de Hans Küng, un commentaire sur le symbole des Apôtres, est le fruit de quarante ans d'étude. Il mêle des thèmes traditionnels et radicaux avec une simplicité de style remarquable, et réussit à produire une apologie du Christianisme attractive pour la fin du XXe siècle. En dépit de sa notion excessivement immanentiste de Dieu et de son scepticisme injustifié vis-à-vis de plusieurs doctrines orthodoxes, cet ouvrage promet d'être aussi important pour les années 90 que l'ouvrage intitulé 'Etre Chrétien' *l'a été il y a bientôt deux décennies.*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das neueste Buch Hans Küngs ist ein Kommentar zum apostolischen Glaubensbekenntnis, das Ergebnis von vierzig Jahren der Forschung. Der Autor bringt traditionelle sowie radikale Motive auf einer beneidenswert einfacher Weise zusammen, um eine anziehende christliche Apologetik für das Ende des 20.Jahrhunderts zu erschaffen. Trotz seiner übertriebenen Immanenzlehre und eines nicht erforderten Skeptizismus über manche Aspekte der Orthodoxie, darf man voraussagen, dass dieses Werk ebenso bedeutsam in den neunzigen Jahren sein wird, wie es vor fast zwanzig Jahren sein Zum Christsein *war.*

Hans Küng's latest offering is a simple and attractive apologetic tract designed to commend ecumenical Christianity, both catholic and evangelical, to men and women of the 1990s. 'Once', he says, 'this would have probably been called a "Little Catechism of Christian belief" '. Little it may be when compared with most of Küng's earlier major publications, though it is neither less substantial nor less significant than the rest of them. Rather, it is a distillation of nearly forty years thought and study of the principal themes of Christian faith set forth in the well used though seldom unprofitable format of a commentary on The Apostles' Creed. What makes it especially appealing is its blend of clear eloquence, its respect for, though not always acceptance of, traditional formulations of doctrine—of which more in a moment—, its sensitivity to the questions posed by the scientific, religious and ethical pluralisms of the late 20th century and its deep sympathy for various Christian traditions apart from the one into which the author was born and continues to give his albeit critical allegiance. The positive tenor of the work is encapsulated in the final words of the introduction: 'I can say yes to the articles of the Apostles' Creed . . . as guidelines for my own living and hope for my own dying'.

In six separate chapters Küng faces the issues of God as Father and creator, Christ as divine Son, suffering and atonement, the question of the resurrection, the doctrine of church and Spirit and then eschatology. Although each section treats both scripture and tradition as being in some sense authoritative, Küng is convinced that neither of these concepts can any longer be taken for granted. For Christians to proclaim their belief in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, on the mere basis of a traditional understanding of the Bible, is to neglect the challenge of the day and to perpetuate the western church's seeming irrelevance to contemporary life. 'Literally every word of the "Apostles' Creed" must be translated into the post-Copernican, post-Kantian, indeed post-Darwinian and post-Einsteinian world', he claims. While such a pronounced emphasis on 'relevance' is in danger of succumbing to wholesale relativism, Küng's commitment to Christian truth and his often shrewd criticism of the more blatantly anti-theological dogmas of the present *fin de siècle* preserve him from faddishness. Even so, to produce an effective Christian apologetic in response to the perceived verities of post-modernism could easily become self defeating. Fortunately Küng's own attempt at translating the Creed into a contemporary idiom seldom allows the preconceptions of the present wholly to overrule the self-authenticating nature of the Christian revelation to God.