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EuroJTh (1995) 4:2, 175–176

0960–2720

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 'Être 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 erforderlichen Skeptizismus über manche Aspekte der Orthodoxie, darf man voraussagen, dass dieses Werk ebenso bedeutsam in den neunzig 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.

This does not mean to say that the author's own formulations of faith are always sufficient. Ever since the publication of *On Being a Christian*, Küng's readers have been aware of his unease with certain tenets of orthodoxy. His interpretation of God as 'the all-embracing and all permeating ground of meaning of the world process' has induced in him an aversion to the idea of divine activity in terms of intervention, a concept which he finds 'naive'. His rejection of the virginal conception—the narrative of the virgin birth is not a report of a biological fact but the interpretation of reality by means of a primal symbol—the nature miracles, and more seriously his qualms about the factuality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, are all implications of his radically immanentist doctrine of God. Curiously, the chapter on God the father is not overtly impaired by this trait, though sections in the second, third and fourth chapters, which discuss different aspects of Christology, suffer badly. The tendency of an excessively immanentist concept of God is to downplay the unique deity of Christ and to interpret Jesus according to the categories of history. The result of this emphasis, combined as it is here with Küng's otherwise commendable desire to respect Jesus' Jewishness, is to weaken the *skandalon* which St. Paul claimed to be essential to authentic Christianity. Though his doctrine of God bears the imprimatur of such earlier Protestant thinkers as Tillich and Bonhoeffer, it is surprising to note that the 'suffering God' motif popularised by his Tübingen colleagues, Moltmann and Jüngel, is rejected as being speculative.

These criticisms are serious. Yet, they should not blind readers to the wealth which is contained in this volume. There is much which is very valuable and highly perceptive in each of its chapters. Küng's respect for the classical interpretations of the faith, even when he feels that he cannot adhere to them in their entirety, is patent throughout: 'It is not as if the traditional formulae should simply be thrown away like scrap iron' he says, 'but they need to be countermanded, taken apart and put together again from different perspectives'. The apologist's task is not to debunk the faith nor to diminish it but to interpret it afresh: 'While the formulas of the councils are not to be thrown away unthinkingly, they are not to be repeated thoughtlessly either; rather, they must be interpreted carefully'. There is nothing glib about a radicalism such as this. Notwithstanding the immanentism mentioned above, the initial

chapter on God the Father is very good indeed as is the final chapter on eschatology, while chapter five, 'Holy Spirit: Church, Communion of Saints and Forgiveness of Sins' is superb. Here Küng, the ecumenical churchman, sets forth his case for the continuing renewal of the church by the gospel in the power of the Spirit and for the sake of mankind. 'Despite all my sorry experiences with my church', he confesses, 'I believe that critical loyalty is worthwhile, that resistance is meaningful and renewal possible, and that another positive turn in church history cannot be ruled out'.

It is quite possible that *Credo* will set an agenda for the 1990s in much the same way as *On Being a Christian* did for the 1970s. Whether we agree with all he says or not, Hans Küng has once more put us squarely in his debt.

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Oswald Bayer, *Theologie, Handbuch Systematischer Theologie*
Hrsg. von Carl Heinz Ratschow
Band 1, Gütersloher Verlagshaus,
Gütersloh 1994, 547 Seiten, 128,00 DM

SUMMARY

In Oswald Bayer's textbook, part I deals with the theology of the reformers Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon and John Calvin, and part II with that of Paul Tillich, W. Elert and Karl Barth. In part III, an independent monograph, the author sets out his own theological position. The characteristic of Luther's theological work is the threefold pattern of oratio, meditatio and tentatio, which brings theology and faith into the closest possible relationship. Despite Tillich's efforts to retain the reformation doctrine of justification in a form relevant to the present day, he in fact changes it in significant ways, and turns it into a general principle. Behind his version of revelation lies a generalized concept of religion. Bayer sketches out his own views against the background of the Reformation theology, insists that theology is inseparable from conflict, and emphasises that worship is both the origin and the goal of theological thought.