

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY: SUMMARY

The seminar focused on Hans Küng's *On Being a Christian*¹ on the premise that the book represents a major christological work, even as it might be discussed from a variety of theological perspectives. It was our further assumption that this is a powerful and important book; its wide acclaim, both on the popular and theological levels, indicates that Küng's attempt to present a synthesis of current biblical scholarship about the Jesus of history results in a compelling, christocentric statement. As one participant put it, the book must first be understood as filling a need, especially among Roman Catholic Christians, in returning the Bible to its normative status as a source for theological reflection. Küng's work combines a massive erudition and intelligence with heartfelt faith, speaking "from faith to faith" as well as to those beyond faith. While not all in the seminar agreed (some found it "too prolix," "too polemical," "too long," etc.), many participants testified to the personal impact of *On Being a Christian* in strengthening faith, in presenting a vision of the whole of Christian faith, in leading to new questions. Certainly the seminar discussion raised more questions than it answered. But questions and comments alike were helpful in clarifying some of the important theological issues which a book of this scope entails.

Küng's thesis is that Christianity, being a Christian today, means both an imitation of Jesus and a present encounter with him in his risen life. While the book is set in contemporary, global perspective, its main portion is a biblical, functional christology "from below." This christology is framed by an introduction ("The Horizon") which sets up the contemporary problematic from the standpoints of the modern humanisms, the problem of God, and the challenge of the world religions, and by a concluding section ("Practice") which draws practical, ethical and ecclesiastical implications. The heart of the book is focused on the methodological issues underlying the christology ("The Distinction") and the substantive christology itself ("The Program"). Since the purpose of the book as a "small summa of the Christian faith" is to demonstrate "what is decisive and distinctive about the Christian program: what this program *originally* meant" and "what it can offer *today*," it becomes apparent that the christology which Küng elaborates forms the nucleus, at least, of a whole theology. The seminar considered *On Being a Christian* under the following aspects.

¹Translated by Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

As apologetic. Unlike Roman Catholic apologetics of the past or present, Küng offers no philosophical, ontological, or anthropological structures as a starting point for the religious questions and as a connecting link to the Christian answer. Rather, *On Being a Christian* might be described as a "soft" apologetic in presenting the appeal of the concrete Jesus in his message, behavior and fate, discerned through the aid of historical criticism, as a possible and credible answer to those "who want to know what Christianity really means." Participants pointed to the section of the book dealing with the question of God: Küng asserts the impossibility of a strict, logical proof of God while nevertheless maintaining the reasonableness, in the line of a Kantian practical reason and suggested in the notion of "basic trust," of affirmation of the reality of God. A full consideration of Küng's work as an apologetic for Christian faith would have to await publication of his *Existiert Gott?*, which one participant noted was mistakenly cited in the footnotes as already published. Another commented that as apologetic, Küng's work in *On Being a Christian* was eminently successful in demonstrating the relevance of Jesus and the Christian message for contemporary Westerners confronted with problems of meaning and direction; its shortcomings lie rather in its larger pretensions to completeness as theology and christology in dialogue with the world religions.

As theology. The seminar discussed the question of the kind of organizational or systematic principle that holds this book together. Dan Donovan's comments were particularly illuminating as he maintained that neither a Tillichian method of correlation (the question of the struggle in human existence today answered by Jesus and the Christian message) or a more Barthian, Bible-centered christocentrism provided an adequate description. Rather, Küng clearly wants to affirm Christianity as the most satisfying answer to contemporary questions of meaning and transcendence while at the same time proposing an understanding of Jesus Christ and of Christianity informed by positive appreciation of post-Bultmannian historical criticism. Küng is confident that one can move behind kerygma to history through the results of contemporary criticism. It seems fair to say that his method is basically a Reformation turn to the sources in the Scripture, a tradition with which contemporary Catholic theology must come to terms.

As a hermeneutic enterprise. Questions centered on the adequacy of Küng's proposal to go behind the Christ(s) of piety,

dogma, literature, and the enthusiasts, to the "real Christ." Does Küng understand his picture of Jesus not as an interpretation but as the reality? Or does his claim for the real Christ mean that only those who "walked with Jesus" knew the reality of this man, his message and his significance? What then is the status of the risen Christ, and so of the tradition which he engendered and in which he lives? Participants noted that while Küng attempts to describe Jesus "without the filter of the resurrection" his is not (could not be) an uninterpreted picture. But is Küng sufficiently aware of his interpretation as one interpretation, and of his own historical standpoint and distance as interpreter?

As historical criticism. One participant insisted that while Küng's purpose of offering a summary of current historical scholarship about Jesus is an important goal, it is too soon for such an attempt. Rather, *On Being a Christian* represents a view of early Christianity's understanding of Jesus. Another participant objected that the book failed to provide a full appreciation of the Christ of faith in its effort to describe the historical Jesus. There was discussion of Küng's treatment of Judaism as narrow, and the question of his typology (establishment, revolution, emigration, compromise) as predetermining his reading of the New Testament, especially when it is noted that these four ideal types serve to characterize the four religious founders (Moses, Muhammed, Buddha, Confucius) as well as four contemporary options. Dissatisfaction was expressed with Küng's cursory treatment of the world religions, especially his overriding concern to compare them (by Christian and Western standards) with Christianity and to demonstrate the relative superiority of Jesus and of Christianity in each case. It was suggested that it might be important to discern ways in which the religions are similar (e.g., a "kenotic" typology) as well as ways in which they are distinct. The four types were also considered as Küng's way of demonstrating the universality of Jesus, of making the transition across history from the time of Jesus to the present.

As a christology. Discussion centered on the issue of the adequacy of a functional christology, a description of Jesus "from below." In *On Being a Christian*, such a functional description serves to demonstrate Jesus' uniqueness, but participants debated whether uniqueness is adequate for a valid christology. Does there also have to be some notion of absoluteness? How should Küng's references to Jesus as "decisive" or as "ultimately normative" be understood and how does he validate

them? Does the contrast between Jesus and other religious founders indicate a difference in degree or in kind? Can historical criticism, necessarily somewhat skeptical, lead to a full christology, or is some ontological foundation (elements of a christology "from above") required? Some participants noted that *On Being a Christian* lacks the necessary doctrines of God and of the Holy Spirit which would explain the significance of Jesus in his being and in his continuing presence in history; the book may come close to presenting only a "Jesusology." Others pointed to the significance of Küng's earlier work on Hegel's christology, *Menschwerdung Gottes*, for a discussion of philosophical perspectives, and for indication of the way in which function must not be falsely dichotomized from ontology. Bernard Cooke suggested that Jesus can be understood to function, like other religious founders, in a continuous, originating and ongoing fashion that incorporates ontology with function. He pointed to the enduring importance of early Logos christologies in dealing with the issue of Jesus as universal savior, and to the futility of trying to isolate the uniqueness of Jesus when he is thus understood. Others countered that such universal claims are pretentious, and affirmed Küng's rejection of any form of "anonymous Christianity" in maintaining that Christianity involves explicit religious belief in Jesus' decisiveness. A final issue concerned the question of the meaning of salvation for Küng: if salvation is possible through the "ways" proposed by the world religions, and no form of anonymous Christianity is accepted, then apparently the grace of Jesus Christ is not constitutive of salvation. What then is salvation? And what (in addition) does Jesus Christ in his message and personal destiny bring to Christians?

As an ecumenical work. Some participants questioned *On Being a Christian* as a successful integration of the Catholic dogmatic tradition with Küng's more Protestant emphasis on Scripture. Several offered comparisons of Küng's christology with other recent work in christology by Edward Schillebeeckx and Walter Kasper. It was suggested that further discussion in the seminar on christology might focus on the key issues of (1) an ontological or a functional christology and (2) Jesus as normative or constitutive bringer of salvation in relation to the world religions, in these recent Catholic works.

ANNE E. CARR
University of Chicago