

Reviews

CHRISTSEIN, by Hans Küng. *Piper Verlag*, Munich, 1974. 676 pp. DM38.

There is a peculiar genre of theological literature that has been reappearing periodically in recent history. It tries to give a summary of what Christianity is about in its most fundamental sense. Often directed to those outside Christianity, such works are also meant for those within the pale who feel keenly the tensions of their times and need a restatement that will come to terms with their problems. One is reminded in this regard of Schleiermacher's *Speeches* and Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity*. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of this sort of writing, calling itself an introduction to Christianity (Ebeling, Ratzinger) or a commentary on the Apostolic Creed (Pannenberg).

The genre is particularly interesting also because it not only can give a feeling for how the state of Christianity is perceived at any given time, but belies as well something of the overriding concerns of the period. These in turn often frame the presentation and guide its development throughout the book.

And now Hans Küng presents us with yet another contribution to the genre, entitled simply *Christsein* (Being a Christian). Despite its forbidding size, it has been a best-seller in Germany during the past year. Moreover, it is written with a grace and style one is unaccustomed to find in most German theology.

In his own words, *Christsein* constitutes a summa of Küng's thought, meant to span the central beliefs of a Christian. It is written for all those who want to know about Christianity today—for all those who want to deepen their belief as well as for those who have become dissatisfied with their disbelief.

Küng begins with an analysis of the current situation in the West and concludes that the promises made by the great ideologies have ended in a series of disappointments. While he himself is most sympathetic to a liberal humanism, even this has been found wanting. At this he turns to investigate the

Christian proposal. Important for him is establishing what is particularly unique to Christianity (a common feature of this genre), since he feels that this will provide Christianity's possibility of taking up where the various ideologies have left off. His conclusion is that the difference lies precisely in Jesus of Nazareth.

Now this is, of course, a truism, but significant is how Küng develops it. Recognising the power of the other great religious traditions, he compares Jesus with the founders and inspirations of Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism and Islam. He shows a remarkable consciousness of the great religious traditions and is generally accurate in his observations upon them. The interaction with them, which in many ways guides the development of his argument, is restricted to those living religions that still command the belief of peoples today.

After a section on God and an examination of proofs for his existence (it should be mentioned that Küng has authored a book recently on this very subject), there is a section on Jesus which forms the core of the book. Jesus cannot be neatly categorised into any one position as Zealot or Pharisee, priest or theologian. The point is well taken, but the neither-nor, fish-nor-fowl assertions about the historical Jesus tend toward a glibness that produces its own sort of docetism. For Küng, the message Jesus preached is the Word and Will of God, a section of the book particularly well developed. His discussion of the death of Jesus is perhaps the weakest: his theology outstrips his history here, putting much higher motives and wider existential issues into the minds of Jesus's judges than was most likely the case. However, the section on the resurrection of Jesus is one of the best summing statements I have seen, handling judiciously the tomb and appearance narratives and putting them into their proper context. The disciples, Küng tells us, first experienced the risen Jesus in a call to

continue Jesus's own concern, the preaching of the Word and the living of the Will of God; but now they would not only continue his concern, but preach the person of Jesus himself, whom they had experienced as living.

Then follows a section on the foundations of the Christian Church, dealing with the role of Paul and early interpretations of the person of Jesus (as to his relationship with God) and his concern. Special attention is given to meanings generated by the experience of Jesus's death, the meaning of his exaltation, and the development of the notion of the virgin birth and the theological purpose of the infancy narratives.

At this point Küng shifts to a discussion of the contemporary Christian Church, particularly the Roman Catholic communion, where he retraces ground familiar from his book on the Church. Aficionados of the infallibility debate will no doubt devote much attention to his section on the Petrine Office.

The final section is devoted to the ethical consequences of Jesus and his message. Küng believes that to be radically Christian one must be radically human, and that a genuine human

autonomy in ethics implies a theonomy as well. He avoids taking up positions on most issues, presumably because he is more interested in presenting foundations of ethics rather than in dealing with current moral problems.

Küng sums up much research and reflection ably and even breaks new ground in certain areas. It can be recommended for those wanting a statement of what an educated person would believe about Jesus and Christianity today. It is very sympathetic to the queries of the unbeliever and walks with him a good distance of the way. The tendentious comments about the Roman curia do not really serve the purpose of the work and can be taken as part of the autobiographical that enters into most writing. And the liberal tendency to transcend concrete actualities and avoid social and political commitment hovers over many sections of the book: but this is almost as common in German academic theology as overlong footnotes. I suspect that it will be some time before we see a compendium of basic Christianity as useful and as well-written as this. It meets an important need, so it is to be hoped that it will appear in English soon.

ROBERT SCHREITER

WHAT ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT? Essays in honour of Christopher Evans. Edited by Morna Hooker and Colin Hickling. *S.C.M. Press*, London, 1975. 242 pp. £3.50.

This symposium, to celebrate the sixty-fifth birthday of Dr Christopher Evans, Professor of New Testament Studies at King's College, London, is called by the introductory letter a 'Festschrift with a difference', since, it is claimed, instead of the usual highly specialist articles in honour of a successful scholar, we are to be treated here with a much more wide-ranging series of articles, by contributors from various fields of vocation, most of whom had been students of Professor Evans at some time during their past life, and who wish to register their thanks in printed form.

The subject chosen for the symposium likewise is far from academic only. 'What about the New Testament?' is a title indicating what we may call the 'Scriptural crisis' which has been commonplace for some time in the Anglican and Protestant communions, and is already beginning also to afflict Roman Catholic theology now we are recovering from post-Vatican II scrip-

tural euphoria, and realising some of the problems involved. This crisis is nothing other than that of the 'credibility' of the Bible granted the modern approach to scripture study. Thus we have here a timely work on an equally relevant subject.

Where then, do these offerings to Professor Evans so obviously fall short? The primary and most important defect to my mind is that no evidence is given from the articles that any of the questions at issue have been adequately thought through *at the theological level* by the majority of the contributors. This would be excusable if the subject of the essays were simply popular exegesis: but, in this symposium, the main preoccupation is precisely that of hermeneutics, questions ranging through the whole field of the principles of form criticism, the relationship between Jesus and the primitive community in the formation of the Gospel tradition, primitive christology, biblical inspiration, and canonicity. In