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Infallibility—a Secular Assessment¹

Since the appearance in 1970 of Hans Küng's *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (I use the translation by E. Quinn, published as *Infallible? An Inquiry* by Doubleday, 1971), there has been a superabundance of controversy over it. An important early stage in the debate was the altercation in *Stimmen der Zeit* during 1970 and 1971 between the author and Karl Rahner; in 1972 a number of *Concilium* was devoted to the theme. Now that each of them has reprinted his articles, together with others more or less favourable to his side of the controversy, some assessment of the dispute is in order. My first step must be to deplore the intemperance of language into which some (by no means all) of the disputants have fallen. Three points, obvious enough, need making. Moderation is not achieved by appending qualifications to exaggerations. It is ornamental but not informative to reprint passages from one's opponent interspersed with a hail of bracketed exclamation-marks. And, thirdly, the subject-matter of the whole debate deserves remembrance: what would they say, did their Catullus walk that way?²

I. FOUR THESES OF KÜNG

One of the points in *Infallible?* most criticized is the descriptive phrase 'a priori infallible propositions', by which Küng seeks to place the belief he is attacking. (I, 150-3; 'Bilanz' 379-85.) I suggest that he is asserting here four distinct theses. The first is that propositions (*Sätze*) are irremediably problematic: they are capable of stating the truth, but can be differently interpreted and so can mislead (I, 156-61). I call this the *Interpretability-Thesis*. The second is a specification of the first, and asserts

1. I preface this article with a piece of personal history. I have nearly finished a book on the eucharistic presence (*In the Breaking of the Bread*: for an account of the work, see my articles in *New Blackfriars*). The theses put forward there call for a statement of my views on the question of Past and Present in the Church, and it is on this theme that I have been working. When the Editor asked me to review *Fehlbar?* (ed. H. Küng, Benziger Verlag 1973), I suggested that the writing of reflexions on the whole controversy would be of use to me and perhaps of interest to readers. All references are to the Bibliography at the end of the article, where items under each heading are arranged chronologically.

2. I would also complain about the number of misprints in Küng's admittedly massive volume: a cursory examination of thirty pages in the middle yielded seven of them. At line 29 on p. 235, the point of the sentence is clarified if to the word *möglich* the syllable *un* be prefixed.

the conditioning and limitation of propositions by the historical setting of their utterance (I, 160; 'Im Interesse' 48-9; 'Bilanz' 392): I call this the *Limitation-Thesis*. The third thesis concerns the propositions which Küng rejects. In it, he states what his adversaries hold them to be: propositions 'that must be taken as true, not only consequently, *a posteriori*, according to an examination (*Prüfung*), but as antecedently, *a priori* true, because of a particular assistance of the Holy Spirit, so that they cannot be false, and so have no intrinsic need of subsequent examination or verification' ('Bilanz' 379). I call this the *No-Test-Thesis*. The fourth and last thesis concerns the nature of the examination or verification which Küng demands for all theological statements (including, of course, the claim that there are *a priori* infallible propositions). The Christian message itself is the norm; although not identical with particular sentences of scripture, it received its original precipitate in the New Testament. So this biblical message cannot be put on a par with conciliar and papal definitions; it and it alone is the *norma normans* ('Im Interesse' 54-6). Such an approach is warranted by 'the original great catholic tradition' (*ibid.* 55); while to scripture and to that tradition an appeal is made for the proof of his opponents' contention ('Bilanz' 379-80; we shall see other formulations of the appeal later). I call this the *Criterion-Thesis*. Let us see how Küng's adversaries react to these four strands in his argument.

In general, they have claimed that the first two, the theses of Ambiguity and of Limitation, are harmless—everyone admits that context is important, and nobody (nowadays at least) contends that the kind of propositions considered can be regarded as exempt from the effects of time and place (e.g. Ratzinger 110-11). The value of this claim can be better assessed when we have seen what is said of the third and fourth theses. To the third—the 'No-Test' thesis—the reply is made that the propositions touched by Vatican I are not members of the class specified by that thesis (Fries 221-23). Infallibility does not enable the Pope (just as it does not enable councils of the Church) to go beyond the content of revelation as made known through Christ. The relation here between scripture and tradition may be disputed (on this, see I, 76-9); but, the reply is made, it is that original revelation which is the norm of infallible pronouncements, not an isolated exercise of authority (Lehmann 361-3). The attitude to the fourth (the 'Criterion') thesis is not easily summed up, for it touches a central point of the debate. In one sense, the thesis is postponed for consideration by others—Rahner denies that he, as a dogmatic theologian, is obliged to furnish a proof of the sort, since the task is for the fundamental theologian ('Replik' 53). But in the same passage he denies that the provision of such a proof is a necessary condition for belief in a doctrine: the present faith of the Church is a starting-point that must be respected

by any Catholic theologian. At the same time, Küng's fourth thesis is accepted in the sense that Catholic belief and its authentic declaration do not go beyond the data of revelation (Fries 222-3). The point is put concretely in a reaction to Küng's remark that, by Vatican I, 'if he wants, the Pope can do anything, even without the Church' (I, 105). This, it is alleged, is just what Vatican I excludes—Papal infallibility is not isolated from that of the Church, and is limited by the range of what has been revealed (Fries 222-3; Lehmann 349).

II THE EFFECTS OF EXPERIENCE AND OF CONCENTRATION

The first lesson I draw from the controversy starts from this last objection to Küng's Criterion-Thesis. He himself is well aware of what Vatican I said (see his reply in 'Bilanz' 355-2), my own comment has more to do with logic than with theology. His remark about the Pope instantiates a general principle that, where we are told that A is a necessary and sufficient condition of B, we have not yet been told which side of the equivalence 'calls the tune'. Some lines from a satire by Ronald Knox on a group of modern churchmen put it clearly enough:

'With sunnier Faith, with more unclouded Brow,
Brilliant ARCTURUS did The Fates endow:
Who cried, as joyfully he bound his Sheaves,
'What I believe is what the Church believes':
Yet some might find it matter for Research
Whether the Church taught him or he the Church.'

What side of an equivalence does call the tune is a matter for experience to teach us, and we ought to notice how the tune was in fact called in the days of Pius XII, who is regarded by all parties to the debate as a paradigm of autocracy. This is only half the tale, as history will remember his pontificate for two concessions. One was the emancipation of sexual intercourse from its subordination to procreation; the other was the official abandonment of biblical fundamentalism. On the first I refer readers to my *Birth Regulation* 60-1, 90-1, remarking only that Küng misleads at I, 37 when he makes Pius XII talk of 'complete continence'. The second concession is too obvious to need comment, but I would direct the attention of readers to asking why the concessions were made. Surely not because of a re-examination of the 'data of revelation', or whatever proponents or opponents of the Criterion-Thesis put forward. The concessions were forced on the Church by reason and by the weight of evidence and experience; and no discussion of change in religious belief, or of the standards for that belief, can get very far without admitting the

part played by the Secular here—by what the Cambridge Platonists called 'The Candle of the Lord'.

Let us apply the principle to *Humanae Vitae*, for that will lead us to a second lesson. Küng took it as a starting-point in *Infallible?* because of the reasons that had most weight with the Pope's attitude in that document (I, 56-63). The move is legitimate, but it would be interesting in a complementary way to start from the attitude of the majority on the Commission. Here were men, traditionally trained, whose views had over a few years radically altered: how?³ The answer must take into account the fact that the 'Roman Position' on birth control had not always been as distinctively Catholic as it recently was: one has to go back no further than the last century to find a widespread rejection of the practice. The moral to draw is general. We must expect to find the Church reflecting—let us hope with some discrimination—the commonplaces of the day, and we should be foolish to ignore the secular irritants that cause theology to secrete its pearls (see here *Birth Regulation* 274). But there are also two important lessons to be learned from the starting-point Küng has chosen: what the effect is of concentrating decisions upon one man, and (as a practical example of the effect) why the Curia neglects for practical purposes the distinction between infallible and non-infallible utterances.

Consider first the effect of concentration. Certain predicates applicable to groups are not applicable to members of the group: we can infer Peter's being a Galilean from the assertion that the apostles were, but we cannot make a similar inference to Peter's being twelve in number. To say that some utterance by the Pope authentically expresses the sense of what is taught and believed throughout the Church is to neglect the fact that religious belief is essentially multiform, and includes liturgical, social and speculative activities as well as creeds. Such belief demands a plurality, a community, for its embodiment, and the concentration of it into a single pronouncement (papal or conciliar) necessarily imports an explicitness and univocity that are novel. The same effect is achieved when, in an utterance like *Humanae Vitae*, the Pope (though not speaking *ex cathedra*) is taken as giving voice to the 'ordinary magisterium' of the Church. In all these cases, the *locus* of proclamation for belief is narrowed, and the content of the belief is changed thereby: the change cannot be avoided, because the *locus* was complex and collective, but is now singular. We can illustrate the effect by turning to the curial practice already mentioned.

3. Schillebeeckx, for instance, a theologian not now associated with the traditional doctrine, is cited *in extenso* by Küng as holding it in 1961 ('Bilanz' 364). At this juncture it seems right to add that Schillebeeckx is the theologian denoted by 'S' at pp. 215-6 of my *Birth Regulation*, where he is seen in 1964 fighting his way, not without bruises, to a change of mind.

It is no more than a response to the concentration and the ensuing change, both of which are present whether the Pope speak infallibly or not. Indeed, for the Curial officials the charisma of infallibility is not altogether welcome, as the absence of a claim to it may be invoked to produce dissent. Given that the notion of infallibility is accepted, there is no point in wishing that it will not 'creep'—Butler's word for the bestowal of an unwarrantedly high degree of obligation upon doctrines (Butler 374). On the contrary, an infallibility that does not creep is not worth having. Infallibility goes with that concentration of belief which alters what we take as belief. If the creeping disturbs us, we should start being disturbed by infallibility itself.

One cannot help feeling sorry here for some of Küng's adversaries, who (like von Hügel or Newman) find themselves palliating Roman views in a way that the Romans themselves repudiate. Some of their manoeuvres are admittedly silly. Rahner claims that nothing is taught by the 'ordinary magisterium' as infallibly proclaimed unless a claim to absolute assent as to divinely revealed truth is explicitly made ('Kritik' 34). He does not offer any guidance as to how the presence of such a claim is to be discerned—if words mean anything, persistence, emphasis of language, and invocation of divine guidance are not enough. As Rahner also believes that the Church is not always aware of the degree of her commitment to an assertion ('Replik' 62), the very possibility of discerning such a claim beyond cavil is rendered doubtful. Kasper seems in no better a condition when, accepting Vatican I, he escapes unwelcome consequences by claiming that it never declared what 'ex cathedra' meant (80). As a character says in *Brideshead Revisited*, they'd never get away with it in business. But Rahner (for more of whose account of 'infallibility in practice' see 'Zum Begriff' 11-17; 'Kritik' 33-7; 'Replik' 58-62; and an earlier article, 'Disput') has also been associated with much subtle reevaluation and re-interpretation of dogma, some of which earned him a letter of pompous reprimand from the Archbishop of Cologne (for which, and for Rahner's reply, see Höffner & Rahner). He has had to fight on two fronts in the debate, but one question must be put—on what grounds does he embark on re-interpretations of what, *prima facie*, should be simply the object of loyal acceptance? What's infallibility worth if it can't stand fire? I am reminded of the scene in *Much Ado About Nothing* between Dogberry the constable and one of the watch:

Dogberry: You are to bid any man stand, in the prince's name.

Watch: How, if a' will not stand?

Dogberry: Why, then, take no note of him, but let him go; and presently call the rest of the watch together, and thank God you are rid of a knave.

Some might be tempted to think that there is little to choose between Rahner's interpretations and Küng's denials; indeed, Rahner himself suggests that a working agreement might be possible, despite theoretical dissent. The belief is one which the final section will consider: for the present, it is the point of difference between them that I wish to make plain.

III. PRESENT AND PAST

My starting-point is a philosophical objection raised against Küng's description of propositions as 'a priori infallible'.⁴ The point is made lucidly by McGrath that infallibility is to be attributed to the source of propositions, not to propositions themselves; and that while 'infallible proposition' can be a useful shorthand for 'proposition declared to be true by an infallible authority', it can mislead us into thinking of such propositions as constituting a set of 'super-propositions' among those that are true ('The Concept' 68-69). The set will be determined, not by the intrinsic content of the propositions, as might be done with 'analytical' sentences, but by their having been uttered by a particular authority. McGrath points out—following and emending the redoubtable Dr Salmon—that the question is thus only put one stage back: is that authority infallible? The authority cannot invoke the charisma to justify its claim to it, any more than (the analogy is my own) the Bellman in *The Hunting of the Snark* could guarantee his claim, 'what I tell you three times is true', by uttering it thrice. Salmon's objection, he goes on, is valid as long as the claim to an infallible authority is accompanied by the claim that, without such a guarantee, it is impossible to arrive at certainty (McGrath 70-5, who points out that much apologetic written by Roman Catholics is open to Salmon's objection. An example which occurs to me is that entertaining but misdirected *tour de force*, Ronald Knox's *Let Dons Delight*).

But the matter is more complicated than has been made out, and leads to what, in my opinion, is the real point at issue. Suppose that the existence of an infallible authority be admitted: first of all, a likely psychological consequence will be an emphasis upon the validity of that authority at the expense of an interest in what it proclaims (I made the point in *Apologia* 168; Hengstenberg shows his awareness of the likelihood at 222-3). In fact,

4. I observe here that the whole debate has suffered from a grievous philosophical imbalance. Phenomenology and Heideggerian philosophy of existence have their own merits, but the analytical tradition has done so much work on semantic and syntactic matters that its virtual absence from *Fehlbar?* (and, of course, from Rahner's volume) is alarming. For what it can contribute, see McGrath. The strengths and weaknesses of the continental approach may be seen in Hengstenberg.

one passage in Rahner, to me incomprehensible, goes as far as to make papal infallibility guarantee whatever else we believe ('Zum Begriff' 18). But there is a logical consequence as well of admitting such an authority, and it is more important. If we want to justify the admission, but are unwilling to let ourselves (or the Church or the Pope) commit the Bellman's Fallacy, we shall probably conceive the doctrine of infallibility as the product of a growing awareness in the Church of what Christ's promises mean (Butler argues thus at 399; so, I think, does Rahner in 'Zum Begriff' 25; Schwager states the question clearly at 174). But if we do argue in this way, we are (quite apart from the dangers of circularity) taking up a stance that, be it right or wrong, is not distinctively theological at all; we are taking the course of development leading to the present as substantially sound, and so the present itself as the basis for assessing the sense of the past. Hegel writes something of the sort at the close of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: 'What has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not "without God", but is essentially his work.' It is here, on this philosophical or ideological issue, that I think Küng and Rahner are fundamentally divided. What obscures the division is that phrases like 'biblical message' or 'catholicity' chosen to describe norms of belief can be used, with a different theory to give them content, by both sides in the debate. Küng, for instance, may repudiate Rahner's doubts as to his catholicity ('Im Interesse' 40-3), but the fact remains that his own reading of the criterion excludes and is meant to exclude much of what has been developed by the Roman Church over the years ('Bilanz' 336-40).

Let us see something of what the two approaches to belief involve for their defendants. Rahner's own thesis, that present belief in the Church is a source of argument in theology, is naturally expressed in a nuanced and subtle way: but he is right to think of the *argumentum a praesenti*, if we may so call it, as a type of argument which is part of Roman Catholic theology as traditionally practised. The attraction of the argument, and of what it leads to, is undeniable: the existence of propositions guaranteed by the gift of infallibility is only a vivid embodiment of a more general confidence that Christ is not remote, and that here and now the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth. What offsets the attractiveness is a sense of history. The present is not self-contained, but the product of a past that was itself once present: what is to be made of disagreements between one 'present' and another?⁵ Again, as we have seen, what is to

5. It is worth pointing out that it is disagreement of this sort, rather than admission of past errors, which matters. Not all may accept that, when a disagreement exists, the later position is nearer the truth. Indeed, one hopes that not all will accept it. But they can hardly deny the disagreement itself.

be made of the role of experience and reason in such a view? And what is to be made by the Church of the written witness of scripture when it points to a state of things alien to what the Church is now? Küng's position involves in its own way an appeal of this sort to scripture, and it rightly accords to the word in its concreteness a place that no subsequent document can have ('Bilanz' 442, 444-5): we might call the appeal an *argumentum ab initio*. But an obvious question must be put—how does the biblical criticism accepted by Küng affect the scriptures as a source for the 'biblical message', 'belief in Jesus', or 'the matter of Jesus' (*die Sache Jesu*), to use the phrase of Häring (239)? Küng, to be sure, does not defend inerrancy or fundamentalism (I, 209-21), although Semmelroth is right to point out (206) that, in the place he accords the New Testament, he does get near that 'No-Test' position which in his third thesis (see p. 4 above) he has attributed to his adversaries. But Küng is in the position of any theologian who accepts biblical criticism. He has to face the conclusions that the sayings attributed to Christ in the gospels need not be his;⁶ that those sayings include talk of a *parousia* which we cannot take at its face-value; and that if—like most participants in the debate, I imagine—we attach an importance to Christian involvement in the struggle for social justice, we must be deftly selective in what texts we read. Most of all (a point nobody in the debate seems to have grasped), we cannot but see the New Testament as, whatever else it is, the precipitate of the first few years of a society. What kind of witness can such a record provide for later and more complicated times in that society? We have only to read the *Fioretti* of St Francis to understand that the problem is not specifically biblical.⁷

I have more sympathy with Küng's kind of argument than with Rahner's (if only because the past is at all events something *different*). But both patterns of argument only point to the problem of past and present, they do not elucidate it. I want to state how I understand the matter. To begin with, one needs to see the ecclesial past as liberating—its destruction makes us slaves of the present moment. But the past will liberate only as long as it can irritate. If it irritates, it can offer much. A view of the diversity of situation and response; an insight into the origins and development of what seems at present a challenge; a discernment of the patterns of change, and of the experience and wisdom of the dead—all that it can give us, as long as we are willing to let it speak in its own

6. A conclusion not well put by Küng when ('Bilanz' 408) he states his belief that the Petrine text in Matthew 16 is not an utterance of 'the earthly Jesus' (*des irdischen Jesus*; presumably then *des Pickwickianischen Jesus?*).

7. The problem is faced in Gollwitzer & Braun, an exchange of views that deserves reading by all who have worked through the present controversy.

'pastness', in its apartness from our own habits and preconceptions. It is not a matter of seeking some timeless apprehension of what is gone, for the quest is meaningless—the very exercise of our wits and experience is what it is because we are what we are. But it is a matter of exposing ourselves to the salutary friction of the past, to a contrast that (by revealing the sheer multiplicity of things) shows us something of our presuppositions that we did not previously grasp (for more on this, see my 'Fact and Fiat'). As I see it, exposing ourselves to the salutary friction of the past involves two processes. One is Understanding—that endeavour just mentioned to let the witness of the past speak in its own way, to us indeed, but not thereby in our fashion. Yet Understanding is not enough. The past of the Church is not a piece of history remote from present concern. If the past has led up to what we are now in the Church, we still cannot avoid an estimate of its value; if a continuity of some sort is claimed with it, the continuity itself does not free us from the obligation of passing favourable or unfavourable judgments, nor (which is more important) from the obligation of accepting or rejecting the past as a pattern for our own present. Understanding needs supplementing with Confrontation, even though the two processes are connected, and even though the Confrontation will usually not take the form of simple acceptance or rejection.

We have here, I suggest, an explanation of a contrast noticed but not elaborated by Küng ('Bilanz' 449), a contrast that one would have expected to see mentioned more often: that theologians who are prepared to approach the Bible critically are not willing to be as ruthless with conciliar and papal documents. Their hesitancy is very understandable. A critical view of the scriptures seems to remove them from the world of belief that we ourselves inhabit; but a similar assessment of the ecclesiastical documents comes nearer home. It entails an evaluation of the ecclesial past for which standards are not readily assigned, unless we admit the variations here and now in the teaching and claims of the Church. This selectivity in confronting is a modern analogue of that older depreciation of the scriptures which distinguished the Catholic response to the Reformation. The acceptance of biblical criticism is in the interests of those who defend the *argumentum a praesenti*: they have only to make sure that the lessons learned there are not given application in other places.

IV. IDENTITY AND INFALLIBILITY

The practice of both Küng and Rahner shows that each is aware that something like 'Understanding' and 'Confrontation' must be admitted (indeed, Rahner's defence of the *argumentum a praesenti* might be benignly

read as a plea for the necessity of Confrontation over and above Understanding). Where they (and not only they) find difficulties is in the inadequacy of the paradigms traditionally suggested for the kind of understanding and confronting that does take place in the Church. *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus* is, if taken as a criterion, contradicted by the very situations it was meant to remedy: it is, of course, an evaluation of differences in the past, but disguised as a claim that there are no such differences acceptable in the line of right believing. The idea of deduction or explicitation fares no better than that of changelessness—for what kind of deduction is it that must be eked out with authority? As for Abiding Identity or anything of the kind, Rahner himself admits that, although Küng does not do justice to the notion, neither do his adversaries ('Kritik' 27-8). The dissatisfaction might be formulated thus: talk of identity, here as elsewhere, presupposes some concept, some *ratio* under which the identity is asserted; and that concept needs to be made clear if the assertion of abiding identity is to be given any content. Phrases like 'the biblical message' are subject to ambiguity—can anything more definite be suggested?

One answer is provided by belief in 'infallible propositions'. An abiding identity in change is assured in that certain propositions, for all their incompleteness and defects, are guaranteed by the Holy Spirit to be true. Let me say at once that the attraction of a guaranteed truth manifested by certainty amid so much that is doubtful, is something that—with due respect to several participants in the debate—no examination of religion should ignore: it is here, surely, that Roman Catholicism has an affinity with Descartes, rather than (as Küng would have it, I, 164-9) in a quest for clear ideas. Moreover, we have in the historical embodiment of

~~infallibility something else that cannot be ignored—the attraction of a~~
 specifically papal—Plato's Theory of Forms is another example, so is Aristotle's account of the uniqueness of the Prime Mover, with his Homeric conclusion '*Heis koiranos esto*'. But that it has played its part in the theology of the Papacy is beyond question. (Which makes all the more surprising the failure of every participant in the debate to mention Grabmann's classical monograph.)

For me, talk of infallible propositions does not solve the problem of the identity of the Church over the years, it only clericalizes it. Theologians argue, what a council or a pope decides is what is right, and embarrassment comes only on those confessedly rare occasions when a papal or conciliar pronouncement turns out to be retroactively on the wrong side. The very rarity of the specimens, like the very rarity of 'infallible propositions', should warn us that we are on a false scent. Küng suggests, in

place of *a priori* infallible propositions, a fundamental remaining in the truth despite errors (I, 173-85). I prefer this, because it makes things turn out informatively worse. If there were just oddities like Honorius (or *Humanae Vitae*, if you wish) to test our interpretative powers, the crisis over identity would still be comfortably confined to professionals only. It is Küng who, wittingly or unwittingly, offers the crueller yardstick by which to measure the Church's abiding faithfulness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Because it is the whole of life that is involved here, and the whole Church's response to it. The response is just as multiple and varied as religious belief itself, and goes far beyond commitment to this or that specific proposition on a privileged occasion. For most members of the Church, theological questions engage attention intermittently, if at all, and an inspired forgetfulness as to the content of religious formulae (on this, see my 'Some Thoughts' 406) enables their deficiencies to be overlooked. It is not so with 'remaining in the truth', as a paradigmatic example will show. When Alexander VI accepted the first gold from Peru for the ceiling of St Mary Major's, he raised no dogmatic problems, and could comfortably err all the way to the Esquiline. What of the Church—the *corpus christianorum*, call it what you please and distribute its responsibility as you will—in the face of the plundering that began then and went on? Did it, despite this, remain fundamentally in the truth? An affirmative answer is possible, and may even serve some purpose by making us appreciate the extreme modesty of what is being affirmed. It is this extreme modesty that makes me, perhaps for the wrong reasons, sympathetic to Küng's theses. My reasons are methodological, and I shall give them in the next section.

V. DETERMINATION AND ASSERTION IN THEOLOGY

'Must' is not a word to be used to princes, said Good Queen Bess, and I do not think it is a word to be used lightly to or by theologians either. Its subject-matter is under-determined to a degree (it is all a matter of degree) that makes many questions canvassed in theology 'inscrutable because there is nothing to scute', to borrow a phrase of Quine's. I do not claim that the questions are illegitimate, but the lack of a sharpness of focus in data and concepts makes plurality and dissent in the answers offered neither avoidable nor lamentable. It is unfortunate that this under-determination in matter is often eked out by an over-emphasis in manner, but we should not be led to expect a degree of precision for which there is no warrant. When Küng talks as he does in his Criterion-

thesis about proofs from scripture, he is in danger of snaring the quest for inapposite exactitude with those who hanker after the kind of propositions he rejects. But we can detect the same difficulty elsewhere. Two

of Küng's friendly adversaries, Kasper and Löhrer, claim to dissent from him over the role of propositions in belief; but it is hard to see how the dissent might be gauged. For them, the 'fundamental direction' of any proposition solemnly proclaimed by the Church is sound (Kasper 86; Löhrer 97-8), and here Küng disagrees ('Bilanz' 397-8). Yet, also for them, the truth of a single proposition is to be understood only in its relationship to all dogmatic propositions, to scripture, and to the present state of affairs for preaching the gospel. The suggestion—oddly reminiscent of the views of F. H. Bradley—is the reverse of exigent, and the difficulty of measuring fundamental directions or of assessing the whole *corpus* of propositions is all too like the difficulty of estimating the fundamental remaining in the truth that Küng prefers.

We have seen by now what are the attractions in the idea of propositions which, by their very source, give us a sure place to stand—they seem exempt from time and from secular pressure, they go with a belief in the soundness of the present, they concentrate the *locus* of belief into something palpable and sure amid doubt, they direct attention to a limited range of ecclesial identity. But we have also seen that these attractions are only specious, and we should be confirmed in our conclusion by the very nature of knowledge, confirmation and communication. These do not depend upon some set of privileged propositions, rather as theorems depend upon axioms. There is no leaving the circle of evidence, assessment and conclusion for some self-authenticating exercise in insight—other objections apart, the integration of such insight into the rest of our knowledge would reinstate the very problem that the insight was meant to solve.⁸ To apply the matter to theology we must similarly deny that there is any getting outside the circle of biblical message, its interpretation, the pattern of worship, the lessons of history, the endurance of some beliefs and the transience of others, the *de facto* pattern of belief and practice, the interventions of authority in proclaiming the gospel and the reactions to those interventions. All this motley is shot through with the activities I have called understanding and confrontation, and there is no leaving the circle to be able to pass an outsider's judgment on it all. We are not outsiders. We criticize the past in the name of what we have learned from it. We are sailors who have to repair their ship without putting into harbour—Neurath's image seems apt enough for what we call or used to call the one ark of salvation.

8. It is a sign of the times that, although Küng writes briefly of neo-scholastic epistemology at I, 166-7, no one in either volume has drawn an analogy between belief in 'infallible propositions' and the neo-scholastic interest in self-authenticating judgments as a foundation for knowledge. For a classic example of the interest, see the exegesis of *De Veritate* I, 9 in Boyer. (Incidentally, the exegesis is groundless: see *Summa Theologiae* 1.17.3.)

Where Küng's thesis attracts me is its openness to the claim I have made that there is no leaving what, adapting a phrase from hermeneutics, we might call 'the ecclesial circle'. I illustrate the point by considering what, for some of Küng's critics, is a stumbling-block—the existence of propositions that are not infallible but which claim definitive assent (see Semmelroth 209; Lehmann 354). Küng's position here can, I think, be elucidated if we distinguish the different theses I mentioned in the first section. For him, situations of crisis can arise where a stand needs to be made, and where the primary, recapitulatory, propositions (often uttered in a liturgical setting) need sharpening, even into a definitive and obligatory formula (I, 144-8). In such instances, the ambiguities referred to in the first and second theses (see p. 4 above) are removed by the context of utterance, even though the proposition remains situationally conditioned ('Bilanz' 394-6, especially 395 and its footnote). At the same time, the third ('No-Test') thesis is not contravened: the propositions are accepted because true to the gospel (there is the 'Criterion-Thesis') not simply because uttered by a council or a pope (I, 147-8; 'Bilanz' 379-83). I should put the matter in my own terms by saying that propositions, however solemnly uttered, need themselves to be accepted in the sense of becoming part of the circle of belief and activity that makes up the Church. And, in its turn, the acceptance is not some independently produced criterion, but itself a product of, among other factors, the pronouncement it accepts.

I can see little force in the objection that Küng wants to have definitive imposition without infallibility. To begin with, his opponents are in no better state: they can give but little consolation after the event when they redraw the boundaries of the infallible and notify us that an imposition was not, as it turns out, definitive after all. Küng quotes in 'Bilanz' (397) a phrase from Ricoeur, 'la choix du oui dans la tristesse du fini', and any theology with a sense of history must take the reminder seriously. I should want to apply my remarks about the limitations of theology to the matter: the Church will have a propensity to dogmatize, and members of it should counter the propensity by an affection tempered with scepticism. They should bear in mind that the 'unit of intelligibility' in credal formulae is wider than ecclesiastics like to admit. Formulae, like forms of worship, should be shareable over a reasonable range of diversity: if it be objected that those who share may differ over the interpretation of the component parts, I would suggest that those parts themselves may, in isolation, not yield a coherent sense. (My own thoughts here run on Trent and the eucharistic presence; I suspect that some participants in the debate are thinking about Ephesus and Chalcedon.) Perhaps my point could be put by asking who is supposed to determine the presence of the crises of which Küng speaks. Not churchmen, surely: they have a vested interest in

crises. My own answer would be to deny that any one constituent of the Church could determine the matter: crises come in varied degrees and for complex reasons, and the feeling that something is wrong is more easily come by than a notion of what is wrong. The very word 'crisis' evaluates a situation, and may be withdrawn as the years go by. The loss of the Temporal Power was once deemed a crisis; nowadays, it is rather to the 'Donation of Constantine' that, harking back to Dante, we should allot the word. Küng obscures the issue here, I think, by the very generic character of the example he considers of a 'defensive formula'. He offers 'Jesus is the Lord' as something which might have served a definite purpose in Hitler's Germany ('Bilanz' 393). His contention is, of course, correct—but we should remember (as an instance of 'secular irritants', see pp. 5-6 above) that the Lordship of Hitler was conspicuously rejected by many people who did not believe in the Lordship of Jesus either. The formula would have been a slogan, stirring to resistance by its being professed by so many, but not giving any detailed guidance as to the forms resistance should take. The 'unit of intelligibility' would be wide—that is, the consequences drawn would come from those who professed the formula, not from an explication of it. Which means it could be abused, as Küng concedes at 'Bilanz' 396. Such is the way of slogans; what they say tells us little of how they will be applied—a shameful period in the history of the Church had for its watchword the unexceptionable motto *Instaurare omnia in Christo*.

VI. ON WORKING AGREEMENTS

Without infallible propositions, where can disagreement stop? Anywhere. The answer will serve also as a reply to the other question: without infallible propositions, where can disagreement start? That there is agreement or identity in the Church at all is a grace from God, but we must not identify this belief with the acceptance of a view of religion that would make it depend upon certain quasi-axiomatic propositions exempt from the chances that befall the others. Yet to deny that any propositions 'break the circle' of interpretation, evidence and confrontation, is not to reduce religious belief to personal whim. Personal whim may well replace belief, but the replacement is not justified by a rejection of infallibility, any more than scepticism is justified by a rejection of Cartesian epistemology. The circle has that multiplicity and that variety in its constituents which have already been noticed as characteristics of religious belief—characteristics to which the apparatus of infallibility does not do justice (see p. 6 above). The constituents support as well as correct each other; there is a process of question and

response, not a series of unheralded and unanswered novelties.⁹ Wittgenstein's 'Do not say what it must be—look!' is as good advice here as anywhere else. (It is given in *Philosophical Investigations* §66; for an interesting application to religion, see his 'Bemerkungen'.) What we see when we do look is a good measure of agreement between Küng and his adversaries over a wide range of topics in theology; their differences about infallibility are within the context of a more general coincidence of belief.

I should like to show why I think there is more to this general coincidence than a *de facto* or working agreement (the latter phrase is, as we have seen, Rahner's, 'Replik' 50-2). Elsewhere, Wittgenstein discusses the following of a rule—something which sounds 'formal'—and points out that the notion is in fact bound up with something 'material': the attainment of a good measure of agreement in results by those who follow the rule. Without this, the idea of the rule falls apart: results are not just matters of fact, they have a formal connotation (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 202-10, 240-2). So, I would suggest, the agreement between Küng and his adversaries is more than just *de facto*, it serves to give sense to the rule-governed activities in which, as theologians, they engage. Another work of Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, can complement this observation. He rejects there the suggestion (put forward by G. E. Moore) that propositions like 'This is my hand' or 'I have a head' are examples of what we certainly know. Not, of course, that Wittgenstein doubted them; rather, he holds that the whole apparatus of doubt, error and confirmation has no application here (§17) as no method of verification could provide anything clearer. Instead, he suggests that our talk gets its meaning from the total of our proceedings (229), and what counts as an adequate test of a statement is part of the description of the language-game within which the test is made (82). Part of the frame of reference within which we act is the truth of certain empirical propositions (83): it is not that we are forced to acquiesce in assumption, but rather that our investigations and activity presuppose that some propositions are not in fact doubted (341-4); the doubt is not one of the doubts in our game (317). I mention this view, because it seems to place correctly those propositions which neither Küng nor his adversaries think of doubting; the placing is correct in this sense, that the propositions are not so much instances of

9. Some of the contributors to Küng's volume—notably Schwager, also Häring and Pesch—show themselves aware of problems raised by the 'hermeneutical circle' in theology. The topic has produced many works in German, most of which asphyxiate for lack of examples, and many of which take for granted the very personal (and very limited) approach to the subject offered by Heidegger. Küng shows himself perhaps belatedly aware of the limits at 'Bilanz' 443.

externally, *a priori* guaranteed knowledge as indications of what kind of process theology is. They are not emancipated by *fiat* from the ecclesial circle, they serve to display how the circle works.

But what Wittgenstein does not discuss at any length is the relation and communication between language-games that are conspicuously different. He does, of course, admit their plurality; he admits that 'reasonableness' can vary between one and another; and he suggests that situations might arise where the gap between two patterns of life and activity would make communication impossible (*On Certainty*, 62-5, 94-9; *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 228). The application of his insights to problems of history that involve such questions is another matter (Winch and Apel provide examples of work being done here). I suggest that one factor in religious (and other) changes is a *shift in standard examples*: for instance, moral theologians may continue to agree that equivocation is allowable *ex justa causa*, while beginning to differ vehemently as to what examples are to count as a just cause. When this happens, we have that failure to agree in results already mentioned: its effect may be obscured by the preservation of normative words that two sides instantiate very differently. And such a failure of agreement in results, I suggest, is what looms behind the whole debate. Both sides are willing enough to talk of the Bible and of Catholicity: but there is now a wide dissent (I am not thinking primarily of our disputants) over where commendatory terms are to be applied. What for one is legitimate growth is for another superfluous fat, and I see little chance of a reconciliation by academic debate: *Unicuique suum*, as the *Osservatore Romano* proclaims with unaccustomed frankness. My own beliefs about the under-determination of theology make me catholic in taste for the forms it may assume: but the same beliefs make me sympathetic to those who want to effect a drastic deflation inside a church which has turned the chances of history into theological arguments, and which possesses a structure of government that panders all too well to the itch for overstatement, and allows all too little for the obstinacy of facts. My only complaint is that this 'disagreement over results', if I may so put it, is not stated clearly enough. Küng does, I admit, try to suggest a pattern of what the papal office might be (I, 241-7), but I did not find it very informative. Greeley offers activities associated with presidential government as a paradigm (196-200); elsewhere, Wicker has gone to the leadership of a seminar for episcopal analogies (274-5). The trouble is that any suggestion of the sort is faced with the actual existence of a very different model, and a working one at that. We are back again to disagreement over results: it is significant that *Infallible?* caused most annoyance by its 'Candid Preface', since it was here that the author showed most clearly where his own application of criteria

had led him in assessing the Roman Church today.

The Candid Preface was blamed for its tone (e.g. Ratzinger 98-9), undeservedly, in my opinion. Its deeper offence should be clear by now: its dissent from what has evolved in the Church is a symptom that a new form of activity—a new 'language-game'—is being practised here by the author and by others.¹⁰ Disagree enough over results, and you will no longer be using the same rule. In other words, those who blame Küng here are really asking the question with which the section began: where can disagreement stop? If one rule is changed, what takes its place? Does the change of activity mean that even the 'undoubtable' propositions may... I have tried to suggest that change need not be like that, and that the... of propositions exempt from its effects will not mend matters (what, nowadays, does the sturdiest defender of infallibility mean by 'according to the scriptures?'). What we want, and what we shall not get, is a forecast of where the interchange of challenge and response will lead. A knowledge of the Church's past shows that we ought not to be over-sanguine in our expectations of how well it will proclaim the good news in the future. If we are to be anxious, it should be about the right things: it is not unregulated dissent that challenges the Church today, it is death through boredom. Our faith in Christ's promises does not entitle us to lay down how he shall keep them: 'and though he tarry, we will wait daily for his coming'.

10. I detect a realization of this in the letter sent to Küng by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Inquisition) in 1971; the Bibliography gives this and subsequent items. Küng's tactics here are commendably ingenious. He uses the term '*a priori* infallible propositions' to give a technical cast to the discussion, so turning what the Congregation saw as a stately Roman condemnation into an undignified byzantine wrangle. He reinforced this line of attack by inviting Rome to send an 'Expert' to a Seminar (indeed, to an *Oberseminar*) on the theme. The invitation remained unanswered (*Fehlbar?* 497-514). As a baffled character in a play by O'Casey put it: 'There's nothin' about that in the rules of our Thrades Union.'

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2. In a letter written in July 1971 Küng stated that his reply would be delayed by a journey round the world (F, 501).

3. Küng is able to state his position here at much greater length than in *Infallible?* If a second edition of that work be required, it would be useful to incorporate matter from 'Bilanz', especially into the final chapter.

4. It does not seem to be made clear anywhere that this article also appeared in French in Castelli. I take the German text to have appeared first, but with a view to its publication in the larger work.

5. No indication is given by Rahner of which contributions are reprints.