Although my summer’s “reading up on God” project may become more systematic later on, it is beginning in an episodic way with my dipping into Hans Küng’s massive book, Does God Exist. Why start here? Because I have the book on indefinite loan, and need to give it some attention so that it can be returned to its rightful owner. Because Küng is one of the most prolific Catholic theologians of the latter decades of the twentieth century and in his work has been venturesome enough that in 1979 the Vatican censored him and banned him from teaching as a Catholic theologian. Because, one extended discussion of his body of work proposes that Küng is closer to Protestant liberalism, beginning with Albrecht Ritschl, than he is to classical Catholic metaphysical theology. Küng’s doctoral dissertation was on Karl Barth and his theological writings are strongly scripture-based.

The size of Does God Exist? is daunting: Front matter, including a table of contents that’s nine pages long, 702 pages of text, 93 pages of notes, and 42 pages of indices. Furthermore, this volume is intended to be “mutually complementary” with Küng’s earlier On Being a Christian (720 pages). I am grateful to Küng and translator Edward Quinn for making this book relatively easy to use. The preface and a one-paragraph statement at the beginning of the first section state its intention clearly and answer the question in the book’s title in simple, direct language. The nine-page table of contents displays the unfolding plot line of the book. Throughout the text, Küng provides bulleted summaries of the discussion so that readers can regularly keep track of the way his argument is progressing. In fact, as I have wondered how I could use this book in an adult study program in my church, I have considered the possibility of extracting some of these lists and using them as the basis for discussion. Although I am interested in the topics that Küng discusses in section A through F of the book, I am skipping them in order to read section G: “Yes to the Christian God” in which the author discusses three broad topics: The God of the non-Christian Religions, the God of the Bible, and the God of Jesus Christ.

In his preface, Küng explains what he intends to do in the book. After stating that there are two questions—Does God exist? Who is God?—Küng expands the topic: “Yes or no? Many are at a loss between belief and unbelief; they are undecided, skeptical. They are doubtful about their belief, but they are also doubtful about their doubting. And there are
many who are even proud of their doubting. Yet there remains a longing for certainty. Certainty: Whether Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, whether Christians or Jews, believers in God or atheists—the discussion today runs right across old denominations and new ideologies” (xxi).

Küng also gives his answer up front: Yes, God does exist. “And as human beings in the twentieth century we certainly can believe in God, even the Christian God. And perhaps more easily today than a few decades or even centuries ago...Today there is no necessity to be against God merely because we are for geocentrism and evolution, for democracy and science, for liberal or socialism. No, we can be forthrightly for true freedom, equality and fraternity, for humanity, liberal-ality and social justice, for humane democracy and controlled scientific progress, just because we believe in God” (xxiii).

For Küng, there’s more at stake than intellectual understanding. He wants to provide a basis for human action that has meaning to the individual and encourages strong, enduring human relationships in the world of our time. This purpose is stated clearly in the paragraph with which the author begins section A, Reason or Faith?

“God’s existence is questioned today. But our problem is not simply to cope with this question. There remains the struggle of a different kind with the insecurity of human existence, which has existed from time immemorial. And since the emergence of modern, rational man, there has been an almost desperate struggle with the problem of human certainty. Where, we wonder, is there a rocklike, unshakable certainty on which all human certainty could be built?” (1).

In the bulleted final paragraph of section F “Yes to God—Alternative to Atheism,” Küng provides his general answer to the question. “The acceptance for man of autonomous norms with an absolute—that is, theologically justified—claim is the ethical expression of that fundamental trust in reality (and human existence) that is determined by an ultimate primal ground, primal meaning, primal goal: the ethical expression, that is, of trust in God, of belief in God. Without this rationally justified trust in God, no absolute claim of any kind of autonomous ethical norms can be accepted as ultimately justified” (583).

All of this, Küng confesses, sounds very abstract. Thus, in his final section G, “Yes to the Christian God,” he turns away from the “God of the philosophers” to the “God of the Bible,” hoping here to “give concrete expression” to his ideas. Even this section of the book is an extended treatment of the topic, 115 pages of densely packed theological prose. I am grateful for the fact that Küng writes in a style that presents his ideas clearly. Although many of the sentences are complex, his thought moves forward in a logical and understandable fashion. My purpose in these notes is to summarize Küng’s exposition rather than to evaluate or develop a review essay. They will provide a way for me to incorporate his ideas into my own effort to rethink the central claims of the Christian way of understanding reality. On the final half page of this long book, Küng offers his own answer to the question with which he begins. I have made that final statement the concluding section of these study notes.

I. The God of the non-Christian religions

Even in his discussion of the distinctive Christian understanding of God, Küng starts from an unexpected beginning point, which is a consideration of the relation of Christian under-
standings of God with those of other living religions. He writes that it would be pointless to discuss all of the variations of the ideas about God in the religions of the world, but he believes that the discussion of Christian ideas will benefit from a careful and limited discussion of ideas that Christians find strange. “What we want therefore is not a pointless and fruitless collision, with the Christian once more wrongly assuming that he can prove the superiority of his God, but a genuine and fruitful encounter in which the non-Christian religions might be stimulated to tell us of their best and most profound elements” (587). Küng does this by discussing, first, the tumultuous history of Catholic efforts to do missionary work in China, dealing primarily with the struggle to understand the many names of God as this term has been used in Chinese religion, especially Confucianism and, second, the nameless God in the Buddhist religion. As in earlier sections of the book, Küng presents a set of three bulleted conclusions. The leading phrase in each of them:

- God cannot be grasped in any concept...
- God transcends all concepts, statements, definitions...
- God thus transcends the world and man and at the same time pervades them (601,2).

Küng believes that the “East supplies Christianity with forms of thought and figures, structures and models, with the aid of which Christianity could be conceived and lived as easily as in the West” (602).

Another issue that Küng seeks to clarify is the relation of experience and reflection in religion. He begins by invoking William James’ description of two kinds of religion, giving priority to religion as experience over religion as conceptual interpretation in dogma and ritual. He refers to Ritschl as a theologian who held somewhat similar views, but writes that Nathan Söderblom, followed by Friedrich Heiler, provided a better discussion of two types of religious experience. “At first he [Heiler] spoke of mystical and prophetic piety, but later—under the influence of Rudolf Otto—of mysticism and piety of faith” (603). Küng then discusses the two main types of religious experience, which he describes as religion’s “subjective aspect” as distinguished from its “doctrines, rites, institutions.” Küng suggest three differences between mystical and prophetic religion: 1) Denial of the impulse of live in contrast with the uncontrollable will to live; 2) passive, quietist, contemplative in contrast with active, challenging, desiring; 3) the hidden God in contrast with the revealed, ever active God.

Küng raises the question whether these various ideas about God are equally true. While acknowledging that the many variations of the inner experience of the Absolute harmonize in many ways, he is unwilling to say that the differences all iron out because of the similarity of experience. “Religion thus claims to provide truth—not merely psychological, subjective or conceptual, abstract, but objective truth, in fact, absolute and primary truth. In religion, then, it is a question of truth” (609). We need both the inner experience and the intellectual discussion of experience and reality; experience and religious reflection are both required (611).

II. The God of the Bible

Küng points to the uniqueness of the one-God development in the Old Testament. It had much greater energy than similar ideas that emerged in Egyptian and Greek religion. The
Jewish version emerged as "practical monotheism; the people were to worship this one God only. They were to have no other deities, no feminine partner deity, no evil rival God. Küng states two conclusions: 1) because this God is common to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, these three groups should show a strong spirit of cooperation with one another; 2) other gods must fall; faith in this one God "prevents both the deification of natural powers and the turning of political powers and rulers into idols" (619).

This one God has certain characteristics, which Küng describes under these headings: 1) God of liberation ("Israel's religion, then, is entirely originally the religion of the exodus, the emigration, of being spared, rescued, liberated" (621); 2) God with a name (YHWH), which describes God as active presence rather than as a metaphysical principle. By the time that he finishes this part of his discussion, Küng concludes that the other religions find salvation. Nevertheless, he believes that the God of Israel is the one true God and is the reality toward which all of the religions are reaching. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, this God is the truth.

Küng uses Einstein as his way of moving forward in his discussion of biblical religion. Einstein often described himself as a deeply religious person. He was greatly influenced by Schopenhauer and even more by Spinoza. For Einstein, religion was a strong sense of cosmic feeling and this feeling is "a knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms" (628). Einstein was opposed to a religion of fear or to a moral religion. His world, including human action, was deterministic in a strict sense. He was unable to accept the later identified principles of indeterminacy, nor could he countenance ideas of God that seemed consistent with the possibility of activity that was not, strictly speaking, determined. For Einstein, "it is the principle of cause and effect ruling in science, the universal law of causality, that excludes any divine intervention in human events" (629). Küng, however, insists that there is more to this topic than Einstein can help us understand. There is a complementarity between our understanding of the world and of the God of the Bible that provides the possibility of divine action despite the causal character of the universe.

Küng's position holds two contrasting ideas in balance: 1) "We have observed that God is not an infinite—and still less a finite—alongside or above the finite. He is the infinite in all finite, being itself in all that is...[E]ven Christian theologians speak of God as the Deity, as the supreme good, as the truth and the good, as love itself, being itself, the ocean, the inexpressible, the mystery." 2) "But we have also seen that the positive human qualities in particular, if they are affirmed while finiteness is denied and if at the same time they are raised to infinity, can be predicated of God. Only in this way does the Absolute remain for us not absolutely nothing—nor is it supposed to be such even according the Buddhist advocates of 'Absolute Nothingness.' And could a God without mind or understanding, freedom or love, be a God? As the Old Testament itself observes: Can he who created the ear be deaf, he who created the eye be blind, he who created the mouth be dumb? Could God, the cause of all human individuality and personality, be an impersonal "It" and not a personal 'Thou,' open to man's trustful approach, an approach that is not intrusive but maintains a respectful dis-
tance? How otherwise could God have founded mind and freedom, freedom and love, in the world and in man? (632-3).

God and Creation
In the next few pages, Küng discusses the basic biblical idea of God as creator. Clearly, he is well versed in scientific literature, including the big-bang theory. He shows that theoretical scientists change their minds, hold to differing and sometimes conflicting theories, and are willing to doctor their ideas in order to ward off theological ideas that they are determined to oppose, no matter what. Küng is convinced that atheists can no more prove their foundation claim with scientific evidence than can theologians prove their ideas about God from scientific evidence. At the core of their respective positions, scientists and theologians speak in metaphorical and mythical language about convictions that are foundational to their personal being (638). For most people, the question that leads to their assertions about the world and God is this: “why is there something rather than nothing?” This is the question lurking behind others, including “What was there before the big bang?” and “What will remain when all is finished?”

Looking up at the sky on a clear night, Küng says, he wonders what it all means. To the question “where does it all come from,” the answer “out of nothing” is unsatisfactory. “The only serious alternative—which, like so many other things, pure reason admittedly cannot prove, since it transcends its horizon of experience—is that the whole system stems from that first creative cause of causes, which we call God, and indeed the Creator God. And even if I cannot prove him, I can with good reason affirm him: in that reasonable, tested and enlightened trust in which I have already affirmed his existence. For if the God who exists is truly God, then he is not only God for me here and now, but God at the beginning, God from all eternity” (641).

Küng acknowledges the claim by Feuerbach and Freud that his theological affirmation could be a projection, a creation of his own mind because he is afraid to be alone in the universe. His response is to acknowledge that every point of view contains a certain amount of projection, but that he has “every reason to assume that my projection is not merely a projection, but that a reality corresponds to it, that the reality of the Creator God meets my image of it, confirming, correctly, infinitely surpassing it.” Believing in God does not include imagining God in mythic form (as in Michelangelo’s paintings), nor does it include the necessity of deciding in favor of one of the “varying models of the universe produced by leading scholars.” Küng’s conclusion is this: “Believing in the Creator of the world means affirming in enlightened trust that the world and man are not inexplicable in their ultimate source, that the world and man are not pointlessly hurled from nothing into nothing, but that in their totality they are meaningful and valuable, not chaos but cosmos; that they find their security first and last in God their primal ground, originator, creator. Nothing forces me into this faith. I can decide for it absolutely freely. Once I have decided, then this faith changes my position in the world, my attitude in the world; it establishes my fundamental trust and gives concrete shape to my trust in God” (642).

This belief in God leads to respect for creation and for its creatures, and especially for one’s fellow human creatures. It includes respect for the environment. “Believing in the Cre-
ator God of the world thus means accepting with greater seriousness, greater realism and greater hope my responsibility for my fellow men and for the environment and the tasks assigned to me. Is it not appropriate to make such a decision of faith in the Creator God for myself? *Credo in Deum omnipotem, creatorem caeli et terrae* (642).

**Does God Intervene?**

This decision for faith in the meaningfulness of creation leads to another issue. If God is affirmed in faith as present in and through creation, does this God intervene, making things turn out the way that God wants them to? Küng has already discussed the relationship in physics between causality and indeterminacy, pointing out that physicists have concluded that both aspects of the world exist in a tightly bounded relationship. He uses the phrase “turning points” to refer to moments in the process when things seem to take a new direction and asks if God is the one who acts in these turning points. Küng advances his argument by turning away from physics to theoretical biology to find an answer to the question. Here, too, he demonstrates that the theorists, basing their work on empirical studies, also describe a system in which causality and contingent choice work together. The causal system provides room for choices and the choices take place within a tightly bounded system of causal relations. He is not willing to say that God specifically directs these turning points.

Küng poses the question this way (quoting Nobel laureate biologist Manfred Eigen): “Does God play dice with the world?” That is, does God work in such a way that seemingly random choices with uncertain consequences are the modes of divine activity? His answer is “Yes, but within the rules of the system.” Here, he depends upon the work of Eigen and another biologist Rupert Riedl (quoting Eigen) to say that “the God who only played dice would be a gambler” but the “God who never played dice would have constructed a machine and none of his products would be free” (645).

Even when the physicists and biologists find that the world operates with this interplay of causality and freedom, all seeming to work toward the creation of high systems of order, another question arises? Even in a dice game with rules, who is doing the playing? Is it God, or is it the case that “self-organizing matter, self-regulating evolution, render God superfluous?” Here Küng’s conclusion is that science can neither prove nor disprove God at work within this system. Biologists (and all of us) are faced with “an existentialist alternative: meaninglessness and desolation or...God:”

“Either we say No to a primal ground, primal support and primal goal of the whole process of evolution and then we must put up with the meaningless of the whole process...Or we say Yes to a primal ground, primal support and primal goal and then the fundamental meaningfulness of the whole process admittedly cannot be proved from the process itself but can be trustingly assumed” (647).

Riedl again is quoted: “In my opinion, no one can think without metaphysical premises. Certainly it is possible not to be aware of them. But it is impossible to take a step into the unknown without including expectations that are meta-physical and go beyond the things we already know. Faith and its children—religion, philosophy and world vision—are indispensable to any civilization. Faith is the irreplaceable framework for the inexplicable” (647-8). Küng is clear and confident: God is in the world rather than outside of the world. God is
“source, center and goal of the world process...He is himself the all-embracing and all-controlling meaning and ground of the world process, who can of course be accepted only in faith” (649).

**Miracles, Providence, God’s Great Game with the World**

At this point, Küng raises a set of questions and provides one of the most religiously satisfying sections of his book. The more that we emphasize that God works in and through the natural processes of the world, the very processes that are describing so precisely by science, the greater is the anomaly of the biblical tradition of miracles and God’s providential action. How can the God who works in nature contravene nature’s processes? Part of his answer is that the mindset of people in biblical times differed from that of the science-oriented people of our time. People of biblical times “did not think scientifically and consequently did not take miracles to be infringements of the laws of nature, as a breach in the continuity of the causal sequence. In the Old Testament, no distinction was made between marvels that were in accordance with the laws of nature and those that broke them. Any event by which Yahweh revealed his power was regarded as a miracle, as a sign, as Yahweh’s great and mighty deed” (650). The remarkable stories were told to be “pointers to his action in the world...They proclaim a God who does not leave the world alone, who does not let history become a gloomy, tragic fate for man but a connection of events perceptible in faith.”

Küng declares, however, that the meaning is always seen in retrospect, and he uses the story of Moses seeing the backside of God as his example. “But for us as for Moses, it is always only in retrospect that we can know and understand in faith how what often seemed so difficult was really for our good. Believing, I can perceive in my life, with all its twists and turns, a dispensation, perhaps even a guiding power. Here I do not need to project anything into it; faith permits me to read at least in some important points and lines what was already there. It is only afterward that I can see what had been the deeper meaning from the beginning. I do not see God from the front, but I do not need to see him from the front.

Küng extends his metaphor that the world, including human activity, is a game. God has set the rules and we along with God throw the dice and deal with what happens. Küng mentions in passing what is ever clearer to me, however, that it is “a cruel game that can astound and horrify us and whose pitilessness has led men of...deep faith...to become doubters in regard to their Lord. But here, too—the believer can say—God has bound himself by laws that, while justifying everything, are justified in him” (652,3).

**What comes at the end?**

This six-page section (pp. 654-659) is a strong testimony of faith in which Küng discusses the end of all things in a way that is parallel with his earlier discussion of the beginning of all things. The central figure in his account is God the Finisher who is understood in a manner that is parallel to his earlier description of God the Creator. In a page, Küng summarizes the two descriptions of the end of the universe that he finds present in scientific literature. The pulsating or oscillating universe, according to one view, will someday stop expanding, contract in upon itself, and then in a reverse of the big bang collapse in upon itself and then,
maybe, experience another big bang. The second model, which he believes was gaining favor among scientists, is that the universe will gradually burn out, turn cold, and there will be absolute night.

Küng is clear that “while biblical protology cannot be a report on events at the beginning, neither can biblical eschatology be a prognosis of events at the end.” He continues: “Images are not to be taken literally; otherwise faith becomes superstition. But neither are images to be rejected merely because they are images; otherwise faith becomes a religion of reason.” While images are not to be “reduced to concepts and ideas,” they do have to be understood correctly, interpreted according to their own logic. The beginning and the ending of the universe cannot be experienced directly, which means that science cannot confirm or refute “faith’s testimony.” Nor can theologians effectively harmonize biblical statements with scientific theories. The biblical statements view the ending of things as “the completion of God’s work on his creation. Both at the beginning of the world and at its end, there is not nothing, but God” (655).

Küng’s testimony is made in the full knowledge of history—cosmic history with its disasters and human history with its cruelty and suffering. Is all of the world tending toward nothingness, all of its beauty, art, love, life, hope? “Is all of this to come to nothing, to count for nothing? Can anyone blame me for thinking that almost any other alternative seems better, more human, more reasonable, that this single great unreason?” The one alternative, “which pure reason, of course, cannot prove to me, because it transcends reason’s horizon of experience,” is God, the same God who gives purpose to the beginning and also gives meaning to the ending. This faith is not a reason for waiting passively for all things to end. “Precisely because we look for the consummation, it is essential to remain faithful to earth. I ought not simply await my end and the end of the world, but, in the light of the expected consummation, creatively to undertake my part in the world and in history. Called to freedom, I should cooperate in giving to the inexorable evolution of the cosmos a meaning that only man can give to it. Küng specifically rejects the pessimism and skepticism of people like Jakob Burckhardt and Oswald Spengler.

Believing in God the Finisher means that the world as it now exists is not ultimate reality; it means that the current character of the world, with all that is wrong, is not the way it is meant to be or the way it will always remain. “Believing in God the Finisher of the world, then means continually giving fresh meaning to my life and the life of others in virtue of the hope that my life will reach fullness of meaning, that human history will become completely transparent, the individual and human society be truly fulfilled, only in the encounter with the ultimate reality of God. There can be a true consummation and a true happiness of mankind only when not merely the last generation, but all men, even those who suffered and bled in the past, come to share in it. Not a kingdom of man, but only the kingdom of God, is the kingdom of perfection, the kingdom of fulfilled justice, or unbroken love, of liberated freedom, of universal peace, of eternal life. Credo in vitam venture saeculi” (659).

God’s law and human rights
This brief section is almost a footnote to this section of Küng’s exposition, which has its main purpose showing how distinct the God of the Bible is from the god that the philoso-
phers have allowed. In this brief section, Küng turns from the discussion of the biblical God in the light of science, especially physics and its technical theories about the beginning, continuation, and ending of the universe.

"It must now be clear that, just as the understanding of God established by way of rational reflection in the light of the reality of this world and of man remains ambivalent, so, too, the norms deduced rationally and abstractly from this reality. They, too, are nowhere immediately evident and given objective expression. Hence they remain ambiguous and, in the last resort, undefined both for each individual and for the community, for behavior and action in concrete situations. It is particularly difficult to perceive how far in their thoroughgoing relativity anything truly absolute can find expression" (663). None of us, Küng continues, develop norms of behavior all by ourselves. We live in communities and develop our norms and patterns of behavior from those that have developed and become embodied in these communities.

**God of the philosophers—God of the Bible**
Küng’s conclusion to this part of his exposition is brief—only three pages. He summarizes the God of the philosophers with three terms: the primal ground of all reality, the primal support of all reality, and the primal goal of all reality. In response to each of these he gives the same answer, which has three parts: 1) Yes, God is this primal ground, support, goal. God “is not another.” 2) Yet, God is not this—not a primordial nature principle, abstract causality, power, law, abstract normativity, or attracting force. 3) God is Creator, transcendentally founding and immanently determining everything; Ruler, transcendentally determining and immanently supporting everything; Finisher, transcendentally sustaining and immanently fulfilling everything.

How should we understand the relationship of the philosophers’ God and the Bible’s God? "The important thing was and is to see the relationship in a truly dialectical way. In the God of the Bible, the God of the philosophers is in the best, threefold sense of the Hegelian term ‘sublimated’—at one and the same time affirmed, negated and transcended."

His conclusion is concise: "This God is the more divine God, before whom modern man, now grown so critical—without ever having to give up his reason—‘can pray and offer sacrifice, again fall on his knees in awe and sing and dance before him’" (666).

**III. The God of Jesus Christ**
Küng begins the climactic section of his book by citing the Jewish atheist Bloch who argues that the emphasis upon Jesus so identifies Jesus with God that heaven is depopulated. He refers to death-of-God theologians: “God is dead, long live Jesus, the Son of man; yes, long live Man!” (667). This point of view Küng seeks to replace with his three-fold discussion of the God whom Jesus brings to us.

**1. God as Father**
Here Küng brings up a serious problem in a significant number of Old Testament texts in which God is presented as tyrannical, cruel, and bloodthirsty. This understanding, that seems to include demonic traits in the divine personality and action in the world, is present
in many of the psalms as well in the Old Testament prior to the major prophets. It is a view that easily allows a harsh understanding of law and order in the maintaining of the universe, and Küng acknowledges that this view is also widespread in some aspects of the Old Testament and in Jewish piety at the time of Jesus. His view of this matter is that Jesus “makes clear what was vague in the Old Testament, he makes unambiguous what there seemed ambiguous...For him, God is the concrete partner of his believing trust and devout obedience...This God of Jesus has no despotic, demoniacal features. God is unambiguously good, never demoniacally evil; he loves men and is never indifferent” (671).

Küng discusses what it means in the Bible to call God "Father." The conception is entirely different from those appearing in ancient religions in which the father-god sired other gods and in some distinct way stood as the counterpart of maternal deities. The God whom Jesus called Father is not masculine and includes feminine characteristics in “his” character and activity. Küng uses the portrait of the father in the parable called “the prodigal son” as the genuine picture of the God whom Jesus represents. “The true God of Jesus is the God of Israel. . . . freshly understood” (675).

The conclusion I draw from this discussion is that Küng simply waves his hand and does away with all of the portions of the Old Testament that portray God in other ways. This would be my way of handling this material, too. I can manage it in my private activities and in my theologizing. Where I have more and more trouble is in the approach to worship that uses lectionaries based on continuous reading. My listening to Morning Prayer based on the New Zealand Prayer Book keeps thrusting me into these disturbing texts, both from the Psalter and from large portions of the story of the Hebrew people. I simply am unwilling to read these in worship even when there is opportunity in the sermon to provide interpretation that moves us through the terror into some kind of reasonable understanding based on the “fresh understanding” that Jesus gives.

2. God through Jesus Christ

Referring to the violent death of Jesus, Küng states the opinion that if Jesus was simply one more good man who died for a cause, if he was forsaken by God at that moment of crisis and death, then we not only are done with Jesus but we are also done with this God.

Death—and afterward?

He quickly moves to the resurrection faith of the church. It is not to be found in the details of the story—which he refers to, in part, as mythological—but in the central faith itself. All of the New Testament witnesses and writers agree on one thing: “that Jesus live, he lives through and with God. Since he lives through and with God, he lives forever—as a sign of hope and obligation for us. And since he lives through and with God, the God for whom he stood in life and death is also justified. What was seen as a positive possibility—eternal life of the individual human being with God...has been fulfilled in this one person” (678). For Küng, the choice is simple: "Either I die into nothingness...or I die into that absolutely last reality, which is, then, also the absolutely first, the incomprehensible, comprehensive, most real reality, which we call God” (679).
He believes that the latter possibility seems more reasonable all of the time and seeks, using his own words, to justify this trust at the bar of reason. His treatment, however, leaves me only partly persuaded. This trust is an extension of what the earlier portions of this last section of the book have sought to do, which is to present an understanding of God that can be affirmed in trust, a view that can neither by proved nor disproved by scientific investigation, a view that is internally self-consistent. “For if God really exists and if this existing God is really God, then he is not the God only of the beginning but also the God of the end, he is not only alpha but also omega, he is both my Creator and my Finisher. I can therefore rely with absolutely reasonable confidence on dying—like Jesus of Nazareth—in death, with death, out of death, into God; or—better—on being taken up by him...It is by God himself that I am taken up, called, brought home into him as the incomprehensible, comprehensive, last and first reality, and thus finally accepted and saved” (679).

Despite Küng’s eloquence, this part of his discussion falls short. Küng was living a quiet, comfortable life, surrounded by the privileges of his university setting, with little evidence of personal suffering. He could take the long view that the God who started things off so well, is in fact still keeping things going and someday will actually bring this world to the state of being that was intended from the beginning. No matter how bad things go for us in real time, we can maintain our sense of purpose and a conviction that our life even as it is will be continued constructively in its union with God. When we consider how many people suffer, and in such extended ways, from natural disaster, political terror, injustice, and illness, this intellectual kind of hope seems insufficient. Mircea Eliade, the mid-century historian of religion, wrote that the great religions are great because they enable people to “cope with the terrors of history.” Küng is persuaded that his understanding of God who was present at the crucifixion and who in a spiritual and theological way participates in a terror-stricken world will in the long run prevail and make things right. But how does that help people today in the midst of their suffering? I can understand why many people are less than persuaded by this line of thought.

**Son of God**

Küng devotes seven pages to “the Christological question: the relationship of Jesus to God. Here the question of God reaches its ultimate depth.” He makes the interesting comment: “One thing was clear: that in the light of Jesus, God could be understood quite differently; it became apparent who God is; God showed his true countenance. And this also became increasingly clear: that in the light of God, Jesus, too, can be understood quite differently” (681).

Küng acknowledges that popular piety sometimes speaks of Jesus as God or as a God in ways that are confusing and unsatisfactory. In contrast, he claims, “the official Church” has never “put Jesus in place of God and so abolished God in practice” (681). He accepts the view, which he claims that New Testament scholarship largely affirms, that Jesus probably never used messianic titles for himself, other than, perhaps, the “ambiguous ‘Son of Man’ title.” After the resurrection, however, people found that no title was too high to give him, so that the one who had called them to faith “became the content of faith.” In this respect, “Son
of God’ displayed a dynamism that belonged to no other title.” What this title meant, however, “is undoubtedly not descent but a juridical and authoritative position of Jesus, not a physical sonship as with the pagan sons of the god and heroes but an election and authorization by God” (682). Küng introduces the term incarnation, but quickly comes to one of his bulleted, italicized summaries:

“God’s becoming man in Jesus means that in all Jesus’ talk, in his whole proclamation, behavior and fate, God’s word and will have assumed a human form. In all his talking and action, suffering and death, in his whole person, Jesus proclaimed, manifested, revealed God’s word and will. He, in whom word and deed, teaching and life, being and action, completely coincide, is in person, is in human form, God’s Word, will, Son” (685).

Küng notes that John’s gospel makes clear “this unity of revelation between Father and Son,” and then says: “That all this means is not mythology or mysticism or metaphysics, but is summed up in the prosaic but fundamental statement: God himself encounters us in a unique and definitive way in the activity and the person of Jesus. For the person who commits himself trustingly to Jesus and believes in him, God manifests himself—but not in a way perceptible to the neutral observer” (686).

In the last portion of this section, Küng turns to the other side of the Christological question to discuss the meaning of the claim that not only is Jesus distinctively identified with God but at the same time he is distinctively related to humankind: “Very God and very Man.” With relatively little discussion, however, he comes to his conclusion that while he is just like the rest of us in his loneliness, insecurity, temptations, doubts, and errors, there is something distinct about him: “But as distinct from myself and all human beings (including saints and founders of religions), he is not a mere man, but the true man precisely as God’s Word and Son. As the true man, in whom theory and practice, being and action, teaching and life, form a unity, by his proclamation, his behavior and his whole fate, he is for me a model of being human...Christology or Christ theory may be important, but faith in Christ and the following of Christ are more important. What matters is being a Christian, and this he—Jesus Christ—makes possible for me” (688).

The Christian aspect of the Christian God

In this section, Küng seeks to identify the features that distinguish the Christian understanding of God from all others, including the God of the Old Testament. He uses Mark’s presentation of the story as the basis of his answer. He did not start with Jesus’ pre-existence and special birth or the facts of salvation. Rather, he started with Jesus’ receiving a mandate from God at his baptism, a mandate which was concealed from the public until his passion when Jesus was called Messiah and Son of God, a title he did not himself use but acknowledged. “In a word, according to Mark, it is only the passion of Jesus that makes him God’s Son, evident as God’s Son; only in the light of the cross is divine sonship rightly understood” (689). In Romans, Paul made the same claim when he declared that he was preaching Christ, and him crucified. In the last resort, Küng states, the Old Testament God still is ambiguous, but the “New Testament faith in God is concrete, definite, consistent and at the same time unambiguous and veritably personalized in a human form. The God of the New Testament has a name and a face. He is the God of Israel, who is also the Father of Jesus Christ” (690).
In the next short section (with the title "the criterion of Christian ethics"), Küng takes this discussion one step further. These definitions, he suggests, would remain abstract and ineffective if they did not have an immediate impact upon human life. He refers to the insufficient basis for ethics often cited in the literature, traditional dogmatics or the Sermon on the Mount. Christian ethics, he insists, has to be more that "a collection of abstract, general ideas and norms...The authentic meaning of the Gospels, the ‘teaching,’ the message of Jesus, his Sermon on the Mount, can be understood only if these are seen in the light of his life, death and new life" (691). Küng’s bulleted and italicized summary is eloquent:

“The criterion of Christian ethics, then, is discipleship of Christ. This Christ Jesus is in person the living, authoritative embodiment of his cause: embodiment of a new attitude to life and a new life-style. As a concrete, historical person, Jesus Christ possesses an impressiveness, audibility and realizability that are missing in an eternal idea, an abstract principle, a universal norm or a conceptual system” (693).

The God of Love

In this three-page section (693 ff.), Küng the philosopher disappears and Küng the Christian believer comes to the fore. He quotes from Simone de Beauvoir’s memoir of Jean Paul Sartre to set the stage for his own testimony that "suffering is actually the crucial test of fundamental trust in God." Why does God not prevent this evil? "Either he cannot—is he, then really all-powerful? Or he will not—is he then, the good God in whom I should put my trust? Or he cannot and will not—is he not, then, powerless and ill-disposed? Is he not a despot, a swindler, a gambler, an executioner?" Küng acknowledges that this set of questions can easily "be an excuse for atheism." His response is that, conversely, “that only if there is a God is it possible to look at this infinite suffering of the world at all?" He cites Job in the Old Testament to support his proposal. "It is true that, in the light of Jesus, the fact of suffering cannot be reversed; a residue of doubt remains possible. Only one thing—but it is decisive—can be said in the light of the life and suffering of this one man to those who are apparently pointlessly living and dying. Even obviously pointless human life and suffering can have a meaning, can acquire a meaning."

It is, however, "a hidden meaning." Even this offer remains free, which means that "I must decide. I can reject this (hidden) meaning, in defiance, cynicism or despair. I can also accept it, in believing trust in him who gave meaning to the pointless suffering and dying of Jesus. It renders my protest unnecessary; my indignation, frustration, do not occur. Despair is at an end. Trust in God as the root of fundamental trust here reaches its greatest depth." The God we see in Jesus, the one who "has identified himself with me in Jesus," does not “demand but bestows love...I can rebel against a God enthroned, above all suffering, in undisturbed bliss or apathetic transcendence. But not against the God who has revealed to me in Jesus’ passion all his com-passion" (sic)...God's love does not protect me from all suffering. But it does protect me in all suffering. Thus, what is to be completed only in the future does indeed begin for me in the present: the definitive victory of the love of a God, who is not a disinterested, unloving being whom suffering and wrong cannot move, but who himself has assumed and will assume men's suffering in love" (695).
3. God in the Spirit

Küng’s brief treatment of the Holy Spirit refers to a) the fact that the New Testament’s discussion of this subject is fragmentary, b) the church’s later development of a doctrine of the Holy Spirit in relation to God and Jesus is complex and encrusted with intellectually difficult language, and c) the function of spirit in the history of religions significantly from early Christian understandings. Küng’s thesis is clear, however. The question faced by believers is this: “How was the fact to be expressed in early Christendom, how is it to be expressed today, that the invisible, incomprehensible God, that Jesus Christ raised up to him, is truly close to believers, to the community faith: entirely, actually present and effective?” Küng’s answer is that “the writings of the New Testament give a unanimous response. God, Jesus Christ, are close in the Spirit to the believer, to the community of faith, present, then, through our subjective reality, presentality, efficacy of God and Jesus Christ himself encountering us” (696). Again, “the Spirit is no other than God himself. He is God himself close to man and the world, as the comprehending but not comprehensible, the bestowing but not controllable, the life-creating but also judging, power and force” (697). “Receiving the Holy Spirit,” he continues, “does not mean submitting to a magical happening, but opening myself inwardly to the message and thus to God and his crucified Christ, permitting myself, then, to be seized by the Spirit of God and of Christ.”

Küng concludes this part of his exposition by discussing the relation of God, Jesus, and Spirit, which some consider “the central mystery of Christianity” and others as “Hellenistic speculation alien to Scripture.” He proposes that we resort more to the language of the Bible than to that of the theologians and church councils. He cites Paul’s development. “For Paul, not only are man’s more or less extraordinary individual deeds or experiences (as, for instance, ecstasy or vision) determined by the Spirit but also the very existence of the believer, his day-to-day existence. Paul sees the Spirit wholly in the light of that turning point which was decisive for him: the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since it was revealed there that God himself acted in Jesus, the Spirit of God can now rightly be understood also as the Spirit of Jesus taken up to God.”

Küng develops this idea in a way that could be understood as understanding God and Jesus as being together in heavenly glory and the Spirit as their way of interacting with humankind.” Paul seems to be saying that “there is no absolute identity of two personal agencies, but that the Lord raised up to God is now in the existence and mode of operation of the Spirit. He appears to be identical with the Spirit as soon as he is considered not in himself but in his action on the Church and on individuals” (701). Küng declares that “there is no finer expression of the original understanding of the Trinity than in the great closing doxology of the Roman Canon: ‘Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever. Amen’” (702).

Küng’s conclusion

The final half page of this massive tome presents an overview of the route that Küng has taken to answer his question “does God exist?” It also contains his sort, unequivocal answer.
“After the difficult passage through the history of the modern age from the time of Descartes and Pascal, Kant and Hegel, considering in detail the objections raised in the critique of religion by Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, seriously confronting Nietzsche’s nihilism, seeking the reason for our fundamental trust and the answer in trust in God, in comparing finally the alternatives of the Eastern religions, entering also into the question ‘Who is God?’ and of the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ: after all this, it will be understood why the question ‘Does God exist?’ can now be answered by a clear, convinced Yes, justifiable at the bar of critical reason.

“Does God exist? Despite all upheavals and doubts, even for man today, the only appropriate answer must be that with which believers of all generations from ancient times have again and again professed their faith. It begins with faith—*Te Deum, laudamus*, ‘You, God, we praise’—and ends in trust: *In te, Domine, speravi, non confundar in aeternum!* ‘In you, Lord, I have hoped, I shall never be put to shame’ (702).