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Mozart: traces of transcendence

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Mozart: Traces of Transcendence

Hans Küng

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993

xii + 81 pp.

Hans Küng's brief essay on the religious and theological dimensions of Mozart's music can only be highly recommended. It is surely the best essay of its kind to appear in print—without doubt of greater insight and penetration than Karl Barth's famous homage, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) and, for similar reasons, superior also to Jaroslav Pelikan's theological meditation on Bach. What makes Küng's work so outstanding is its movement beyond basic aesthetic appreciation to the careful analysis both of musical and theological issues in the historical context of Mozart's life. The analysis, in turn, returns both Küng and his readers to the aesthetic and religious appreciation of Mozart's achievement at a more profound level.

As his point of departure, Küng notes the contrast between Karl Barth's assumption of Mozart's deep Catholic religiosity and the more "ambivalent" view of Wolfgang Hildesheimer's penetrating biography—in which the "religious" atmosphere of Mozart's time is seen as a background, but not as a profound presupposition, of Mozart's musical culture. From the beginning, Küng addresses squarely the issues raised by this contrast of perceptions by examining Mozart's sometimes negative relationship to the Catholic hierarchy, as represented by his one-time patron, Archbishop Colorado, and then balancing this aspect of Mozart's life and work with the intimate relationship between his religious and secular style of composition. Küng, as a theologian and a Catholic, well understands that Mozart, as a non-dogmatic Catholic who had little difficulty relating positively to Protestant musicians (and to Freemasons!), could nonetheless partake of a deep Catholic religiosity, revealed not only in aspects of his music but in his comments that he would never live in a country that was not Catholic and that no Protestant could really understand the *Agnus Dei*.

Küng also carefully considers the work done by recent musicologists and historians on the "secular", popular, and even the vulgar Mozart—and attempts to strike a balance between the traditional romanticization of Mozart and contemporary iconoclasm, including that of the unhistorical and untrustworthy play *Amadeus*. Küng can conclude that "Mozart's music does not contain any message of faith as does that of Bach, nor is it a confession of life like that of Beethoven or Bruckner, far less programme music like that of Liszt or Wagner. . . Mozart's primary concern was simply to make music. . . with 'expression', using every possibility of melody and harmony" (p. 21). Nonetheless, and with great insight and sensitivity, Küng is able to draw out the lines of connection between the profound spirituality and sense of enormous mystery that Mozart himself recorded as a part of his early experience of religion and the entrance into what

Mozart himself referred to as “the mystical sanctuary of our religion” that so frequently occurs in Mozart’s religious music. Küng concludes with a chapter analyzing the entirety of Mozart’s great *Coronation Mass*.

This is a fine and wonderful little book that will be read with appreciation by theologians, musicians, untrained lovers of music, and Christian laity alike. It is certainly the best examination of Mozart’s musical religiosity to date.

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Evil, Sexuality and Disease in Grünewald’s Body of Christ

Eugene Monick
Dallas: Spring Publications, 1993
xv + 189 pp. \$18.50 U.S.

Eugene Monick’s book is a thought-provoking study of the links between sexuality, sickness and religion. His major focus is the violently graphic crucifixion scene of the Isenheim altarpiece, completed by Matthias Grünewald around 1515. The work was commissioned by members of the Order of St. Anthony, for the chapel of a monastery which had become a hospice for victims of plague, leprosy, syphilis and the “burning sickness”, a form of gangrenous ergotism.

The painting features a grotesquely twisted Christ, whose body is riddled with wounds and festering sores. Monick arrives at the rather startling conclusion that this Christ—like many of the original viewers of the painting—suffers from the effects of syphilis. This image is one which is far removed from that of orthodox Christianity, where the perfect person takes upon himself the sin and suffering of the outside world; Grünewald’s Christ embodies corruption literally as well as figuratively. Of particular note is the suggestion that his disease is one linked to sexual activity, traditionally considered evil in orthodox Christian thought.

The notion of Jesus as a sexual being is not new. It appears as early as the second century in gnostic literature and in modern times has been explored by a diverse body of writers, from theologians William Phipps and Rosemary Ruether to art historian Leo Sternberg. However, Monick suggests an even more controversial hypothesis—that Grünewald’s Jesus had a sexually-transmitted disease. This Christ has special relevance in the age of AIDS.

As a Jungian analyst, Monick believes there is an interlacing network of good and evil at the core of the human psyche. As an Episcopalian priest,