

## **Kurnig – The First Modern Antinatalist** (by Karim Akerma)

### **Introduction**

There is good reason to assume that if one subtracted the metaphysics of will from Schopenhauer's proto-antinatalist philosophy, some non-metaphysical antinatalism would ensue. Therefore, one might suspect that after the decline of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will, a modern antinatalist might have taken up the respective systematic place. As a matter of fact, there is at least one such philosopher. He wrote under pseudonyms such as Quartus and finally published his antinatalist writings under the pseudonym of Kurnig. Some indications in Kurnig's writings suggest that he made a living as a medical doctor<sup>1</sup>. Otherwise we know very little of him except for the following remarks according to which he was a well-travelled man: In Bethlehem he saw the places where Jesus was active. He visited mosques in Africa and Turkey. On Ceylon, in India, China and Japan he stood still in front of Buddha's image<sup>2</sup>. One more personal attribute which Kurnig reveals to his readers is his atheism (cf. p. 84f).

To my knowledge Kurnig is the first thinker who dedicated a whole book to anti-procreationism. In his time the term 'antinatalism' was not yet in use as a label for the ethics of non-procreation. Kurnig defends an outspoken antinatalism, which – in the wake of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion – aims at nothing less but a complete depopulation of the world. While it is true that Kurnig's thinking is deeply rooted in Schopenhauer's philosophy, as evinced by numerous quotations from Schopenhauer, his antinatalism is non-metaphysical. At the same time it also features an optimistic touch inasmuch as it presupposes growing insight: 'With increasing intelligence, mankind comes to realise that, all in all, suffering far outweighs pleasure, that it must stop procreation and must do so as soon as possible. Thus: NEO-NIHILISM.' (Last page)

Kurnig's optimism resides in his assumption that mankind on the whole displays increasing intelligence over the course of history. Since Kurnig published his Neo-Nihilism around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the First World War, we must in hindsight say that his optimism was exaggerated.

In what follows I want to make the reader familiar with a thinker who is extremely difficult to access. Not only because he published under a pseudonym – but also because his writings seem to have been out of print for a long time with only a few copies available second hand or in libraries. In addition to this, his Neo-Nihilismus is printed in Gothic script, which even members of the German language community have difficulty reading.

Let me first present to you the philanthropic character, the modernity, and the radicality of Kurnig's antinatalism through a series of quotations.

To those who – in the face of human suffering and the inevitable death experience – expressly adhere to procreation, Kurnig replies:

'You think you're saying and doing something pretty strong, beautiful, full of character, don't you? But do you know what it is? Weakness of character and ignorance. I mourn the creatures you bring into the world who could not defend themselves when you created them, who otherwise would have protested out loud against your action. Since it all boils down to suffering and destruction. Our race serves nothing and exists only as a result of those who,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kurnig's self-referential quotation of Byron: '...I have shown kindness to men...' (51 fn) as well as his many references to the medical profession.

<sup>2</sup> Kurnig (1903) 51, fn

like you, do not examine things thoroughly. Life is suffering; to abstain from procreation is philanthropy and duty.’<sup>3</sup>

Since his view amounts to self-annihilation of mankind, and many will associate this with violence, Kurnig anticipates the accusation of defending a violent view by saying: ‘Not by violent means (murder, war and the like), but peacefully, let mankind disappear from our globe.’<sup>4</sup>

Kurnig accuses optimistic philosophers of both the present and past of not thinking through ‘a topic of supreme importance such as an existence that is forced upon man. This alone is enough to condemn their erroneous philosophizing. They live, as it were, in a fatal circle, in the stupor of eternal procreation.’<sup>5</sup>

The determination with which Kurnig defends antinatalism is evidenced in the following quotations: ‘The silence of some of us may not confuse us. Because of external circumstances many are not allowed to admit that they are pessimists and, therefore, not prepared to have children.’<sup>6</sup> ‘It is better to accept martyrdom in whatever form – which is connected to non-procreation – than to procreate.’<sup>7</sup>

To those who experienced hardships in their lives because they never had children, Kurnig offers the following consolation: ‘Never to have procreated – this be your consolation when you die.’<sup>8</sup>

Even though Kurnig may well have been the first thinker ever to dedicate a whole book to antinatalism it makes sense to speak of predecessors.

### **Antinatalist Predecessors**

While it is true that Kurnig is the first outspoken modern antinatalist I know of<sup>9</sup>, there may be earlier ones and other antinatalists still to be discovered. Perhaps they published in foreign or non-European languages; perhaps they were hushed up early on. As is the case for the history of ideas in general, language barriers constitute a considerable problem also for the history of antinatalism. Most contributions to antinatalism are of recent date, written in the English-speaking world with authors who sometimes appear to read no other languages than English and who are thus cut off from non-English contributions to proto-antinatalism and antinatalism in past and present. A good case in point is the Norwegian philosopher Zapffe (1899–1990), who features as the first modern antinatalist in Ken Coates’s intriguing account of rejectionist philosophies and antinatalism: ‘But it is Zapffe who must be credited as being the first rejectionist to come up with the idea of anti-natalism as the way out of existence for humans.’<sup>10</sup> In discussions on the internet Zapffe’s voluminous book ‘Om det tragiske’ (On the Tragic) is sometimes heralded as antinatalism’s yet unexploited Holy Grail. Upon closer inspection, however, the book contains but a few truly antinatalist statements.<sup>11</sup> Since Kurnig and Zapffe have a common denominator, and are both responding to a given demand, towards the end of this text I will present English translations of some of Zapffe’s antinatalist utterances from *Om det tragiske*.

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<sup>3</sup> Kurnig (1903) 84

<sup>4</sup> Kurnig (1903) 51

<sup>5</sup> Kurnig (1903) 73

<sup>6</sup> Kurnig (1903) 126 fn

<sup>7</sup> Kurnig (1903) 57

<sup>8</sup> Kurnig (1903) 92. Cf. 139 and 156

<sup>9</sup> Cf. my short presentation published on 1 June 2015 in the online magazine *tabula rasa* at <http://www.tabularasamagazin.de/exodus-aus-dem-sein-kurnigs-neo-nihilismus-als-buddhistisch-saekularisierter-geist-des-fruehen-christentums/>; see also Akerma (2017), p. 396ff.

<sup>10</sup> Coates (2014), Kindle-Position 1103f.

<sup>11</sup> C. f. Akerma (2017), 664ff.

In his reflections on modern antinatalism Coates continues with the following remark: ‘Although Zapffe was also an anti-natalist, Benatar is unique in his focus on procreation and in his strong advocacy of anti-natalism on philosophical grounds.’<sup>12</sup> Since Kurnig has dedicated a whole book to antinatalism, what Coates says about Benatar also applies to Kurnig. It will apply to Kurnig until maybe someday we discover an as of yet unknown or hushed up thinker who anticipated Kurnig’s antinatalism.

While the history of proto-antinatalism can be traced back well into antiquity and other-worldly religions, even Kurnig’s antinatalism is not solitary. He aligns himself with Schopenhauer, and although he has antinatalist predecessors he does not seem to be familiar with them:

### Pseudo-Humboldt

In 1861 a previously unknown author published the alleged memoirs of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). I quote from the presumptive forgery: ‘I am not cut out to be a family man. I also believe that marriage is a sin, and the production of children a crime.’ Whoever marries with the intention to procreate is ‘a sinner because he gives life to children without being able to give them the certainty of happiness.’<sup>13</sup>

### Edmond (1822–1896) and Jules (1830–1870) de Goncourt

The Goncourt brothers are not only namesakes for the Prix Goncourt, the most famous French literary prize, they are also early visionaries of a two-pronged ebbing away of mankind:

‘How is it that in no epoch of history, in no place on earth, a sect of wise men has been formed with the aim of making human life die out in the face of the cruelty of its evils? Why is it that this end of mankind by abstention from procreation has not been preached? – Or, for the more hasty, by exploring and inventing in public chemistry laboratories possibilities for the most gentle suicide, where a combination of exhilarating gases would be taught that made a bout of laughter out of the transition from being to nonbeing?’<sup>14</sup>

Further down I will show that the Gnostics were such a ‘sect of wise men’ propagating non-procreation.

In the Humboldt memoirs as well as in the Goncourts’ journal one encounters an outspoken form of antinatalism. These utterances are, however, piecemeal and unsystematic. What Kurnig achieved – who may never have read ‘Humboldt’ or de Goncourt – was to offer antinatalism as a moral device in order to end suffering.<sup>15</sup>

## **The structure of the book Neo-nihilism**

In a short text on a frontispiece Kurnig writes in November 1901: ‘In view of the lively interest that Neo-Nihilism has already aroused in wider circles, I consider it my duty to offer my formerly published views (sometimes under deviating pseudonyms) to the thinking reader

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<sup>12</sup> Coates (2014), Kindle-Position 1188f.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Mainländer (1894), 209f.

<sup>14</sup> Goncourt, Edmond et Jules de. Journal. Mémoires de la vie littéraires. 1864–1878 [My translation] French text available at: [https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Goncourt\\_-\\_Journal.\\_t3,\\_1888.djvu/289](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Goncourt_-_Journal._t3,_1888.djvu/289): ‘Tous les systèmes, toutes les religions, toutes les idées sociales se sont produits ici-bas. Comment ne s’est-il pas formé, à aucune époque de l’histoire, à aucune place de la terre, une secte de sages pour laisser mourir la vie devant la férocité de ses maux ? Comment n’a-t-elle pas été déjà prêchée cette fin de l’humanité, non seulement par l’abstention et la procréation, mais encore pour les plus pressés, par la recherche et l’invention du plus doux suicide, par l’institution d’écoles publiques de chimie, où serait enseignée une combinaison de gaz exhilarant, qui ferait un éclat de rire du passage du être au non-être ?’ [Accessed 14.01.2018]

<sup>15</sup> Not only does Kurnig leave out of account animal suffering, he even ridicules the vegetarian diet of a critique (see Kurnig (1903, last part, 17f). For the relation between antinatalism and vegetarianism see Akerma (2014) ‘Ist der Vegetarismus ein Antinatalismus’ [Does vegetarianism include antinatalism?] at <http://pro-iure-animalis.de/index.php/antinatalismus/articles/ist-der-vegetarismus-ein-antinatalismus.html> (visited 04.02.2018)

this time collected in a new form.’ In 1903 ‘Der Neo-Nihilismus’ was published in a second increased edition. Its subtitle reads ‘Anti-militarism – Sexual life (end of mankind)’.

The book consists of two parts, with the second part being subdivided into three major sections.

Part one (p. 1–46) is called ‘Anti-militarism: a look into the pedagogical anarchy of the present day’. This part had formerly been published under the pseudonym of Quartus.

Part two of Kurnig’s Neo-nihilism is subdivided into the following three major sections:

I. Sexual life and Pessimism (p. 49–92)

(Here Kurnig makes clear that there is no contradiction between a sexual life and the abstention from procreation. Remarkably he does so way before the invention of reliable and accessible modern contraceptives.)

II. Sexual life and Pessimism: new contributions to Kurnig’s Neo-Nihilismus – dialogues and fragments (p. 95–161)

(Kurnig here designs a number of dialogues in which different people discuss various aspects of his philosophy. He takes on an external perspective on his own teachings having the dialogue partners discuss Kurnig’s views as if Kurnig were a stranger.)

III. The Pessimism of Others (p. 165–192)

(Here, Kurnig offers a list of pessimistic quotations.)

After page 192, the pagination starts anew offering a collection of criticism and Kurnig’s replica on pages 1 to 24. This is followed by a short chapter entitled ‘Geogenie. Materials for a description of the earth’s origin in a neo-nihilistic perspective.’ Arranged as an essay for the first time by Kurnig on pages 25 to 30.

### **Schopenhauer’s Proto-antinatalism**

Throughout his antinatalist writings Kurnig borrows from Schopenhauer.<sup>16</sup> But there is a clear cut with regard to the modernity of Kurnig’s antinatalism. Even though we can provide a series of quotations suggesting that Schopenhauer was an early antinatalist, this is only valid with some reservations. Schopenhauer’s antinatal utterances are overarched by his metaphysics of the will. One may, therefore, speak of Schopenhauer as a proto-antinatalist. The following quotation comes close to modern antinatalism though even here Schopenhauer’s antinatalism is still embedded in his metaphysics of the will:

‘Voluntary and complete chastity is the first step in asceticism or the denial of the will to live. It thereby denies the assertion of the will which extends beyond the individual life, and gives the assurance that with the life of this body, the will, whose manifestation it is, ceases. Nature, always true and naive, declares that if this maxim became universal, the human race would die out; and I think I may assume, in accordance with what was said in the Second Book about the connection of all manifestations of will, that with its highest manifestation, the weaker reflection of it would also pass away, as the twilight vanishes along with the full light. With the entire abolition of knowledge, the rest of the world would of itself vanish into nothing; for without a subject there is no object.’<sup>17</sup>

In view of this quotation the question arises of why Schopenhauer did not espouse non-procreation more outspokenly? It looks as if there are two major answers to this question ((1) and (2)).

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<sup>16</sup> For an assessment of Schopenhauer’s proto-antinatalism cf. Akerma (2000) chapter 11 (Schopenhauer als Verbebenstheoretiker / Schopenhauer as theorist of mankind’s ebbing away).

<sup>17</sup> Schopenhauer (1909) Vol. 1, p. 486f. Schopenhauer’s presentation is prefigured in a strain of Gnostic thinking, namely in the Valentinian speculation as depicted by Hans Jonas: ‘*For if not only the spiritual condition of the human person but also the physical condition and very existence of the universe are constituted by the results of ignorance and as a substantialization of ignorance, then every individual illumination by ‘knowledge’ helps to abolish again the total system sustained by that principle.*’ Jonas (1963) 175.

(1) Unlike Kurnig, Schopenhauer may have been of the opinion that non-procreation requires an overall renunciation from sexual activity which could be achieved only by marshalling all one's willpower. Against this background Schopenhauer may have treated the call to abstain from procreation in the same manner as he treated suicide: suicide as well as abstention from procreation can rightly be considered as extreme expressions of the will rather than a dismissal of the will. Kurnig, by contrast, is of the opinion 'that the cruelty of child production should be fought with determination and, as Kurnig has made clear, without sacrificing sexual pleasure'. (126) Kurnig is justified in saying this since 'preventive intercourse' or 'facultative sterility' was not only widely practised at his time but also supported by a series of devices.<sup>18</sup> Particularly noteworthy is Wilhelm Mensinga's (1836–1910) invention of the occlusive pessary (a rubber cap with an elastic rim that seals the cervix and protects against pregnancy) which he tested before publishing the results of his anti-procreational research in 1882 under the pseudonym of C. Hasse in his 'Über die facultative Sterilität ohne Verletzung der Sittengesetze' (On facultative sterility without violating the moral law). Against this backdrop Kurnig seems entitled to say: 'Everything depends on good will; if you only want to satisfy the desire without procreating, then you will certainly succeed in the majority, the vast majority of cases.'<sup>19</sup>

(2) Within the frame of these metaphysics of the will a second argument against antinatalism has been put forward by Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906); subtextually it may have been anticipated and been present in Schopenhauer too. Hartmann was opposed to antinatalism since, according to him, evolution would sooner or later bring about a new human-type being. Whereupon misery would begin anew.

Both interpretations as to why Schopenhauer did not espouse antinatalism are not too convincing since, with man having died out, all manifestations of the will would vanish – the will would 'cease' as Schopenhauer says. Ultimately the fact that Schopenhauer does not espouse antinatalism remains a riddle.

### **Cautious Optimism, Art and Exodus from Existence**

In his Antimilitarismus (first published in 1894 under the pseudonym Quartus, being part of Kurnig's edition from 1903) Kurnig explains his cautious optimism: had there been no progress, people would still burn witches. Against the background of moral progress Kurnig envisages a more peaceful confederation of states. Doing this, however, he has the following reservation undermining all full-fledged optimism. Even if there were to be a confederation of states, 'mankind will never achieve the blissful life once dreamed of by the Greeks. Rather, the most important thing will remain to be: getting through with as little pain and suffering as possible. Thus we are to procreate as little as possible in order to keep as small as possible, and to continually diminish, the number of sufferers. [...]The study of philosophy and the cult of beauty (in art) is the only means that will be able to warrant mankind relatively lasting satisfaction. And it will prepare mankind for an exodus from existence, as imagined by the saints in the religious sphere.'<sup>20</sup>

### **Buddhism, Hinduism and early Christianity as models**

In line with Schopenhauer, Kurnig finds a model for his antinatalist moral theory in original Christianity as well as in Asian religiosity. With respect to Brahmanism and Buddhism Schopenhauer had poignantly observed: 'the innermost kernel and spirit of Christianity is

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<sup>18</sup> For an overview cf. e.g. <https://www.fpa.org.uk/factsheets/contraception-past-present-future#Ro1J> [visited on 7 Jan. 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Kurnig (1903) 5 (last part of book)

<sup>20</sup> Kurnig (1903) 42

identical with that of Brahmanism and Buddhism; they all teach a great guilt<sup>21</sup> of the human race through its existence itself, only that Christianity does not proceed directly and frankly like these more ancient religions: this does not make the guilt simply the result of existence itself, but makes it arise through the act of the first human pair.<sup>22</sup>

In Schopenhauer's account of genuine Christianity, marriage is only a compromise and a concession to the sinful nature of man while celibacy and virginity are set up as the higher consecration.<sup>23</sup>

Let me first present Kurnig's thoughts on genuine Christianity followed by an account of his thoughts on Asian religion. This is against the chronological order, but, according to Kurnig, the Christian doctrine has already lost its antinatal impetus whereas, in his assessment, Buddhism and Hinduism will help to foster a modern spirit of depopulation.

### Christianity

When Kurnig praises the sceptical spirit of early Christianity as regards reproduction, he is well aware of the following: 'One of my objections to Christianity has always been that it is not always clear enough about the repudiation of child production.'<sup>24</sup> In its beginnings it was widely assumed that: 'After Christ mankind would soon cease to exist.'<sup>25</sup> Then a departure from the pessimistic spirit of original Christianity occurred: 'The Jewish optimistic spirit and desire to have children became dominant.'<sup>26</sup> Because of this Kurnig is in a position to confront his Christian contemporaries with a central finding of David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), who is also mentioned by Schopenhauer in Chapter XLVIII – entitled 'On The Doctrine Of The Denial Of The Will To Live' – of his *The World as Will and Idea*. Strauss published his sensational work 'The Life of Jesus – critically examined' in the years 1835-36 and made the following remark in his 'The Old Faith and the New' (published in 1872): 'So we must confess: we are no longer Christians.'<sup>27</sup> Because Christianity – which originally was pessimistic and sceptical about reproduction against the background of an imminent end of the world – had long since been coloured optimistically by the subliminal continuing effect of Jewish beliefs, there were actually no more real Christians who, according to Luke (20,34f), would have to endorse the following: 'The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.' In the accurate diagnosis of Kurnig (in all this borrowing from the account in chapter XLVIII of Schopenhauer's 'The World as Will and Idea') there is not much left of early Christianity's sceptical spirit with respect to procreation.

In chapter XLVIII of his *The World as Will and Idea* Schopenhauer says: 'For not only the religions of the East, but also true Christianity, has that ascetic fundamental character throughout which my philosophy explains as the denial of the will to live; although Protestantism, especially in its present form, seeks to conceal this.'<sup>28</sup> By and large adopting Schopenhauer's analyses, Kurnig points out that Christianity has lost its antinatal aspirations.

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<sup>21</sup> For a confirmation of the view held by Schopenhauer cf. David Graeber in his book 'Debt' where he summarises the kernel of the holy scriptures of the Brahmanas in such a way 'that human existence is itself a form of debt. [...] To live in debt is to be guilty, incomplete. But completion can only mean annihilation.' (E-book, position 1205)

<sup>22</sup> Schopenhauer (1909), Vol. 3, p. 410.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Schopenhauer (1909), vol. 3, p. 426.

<sup>24</sup> Kurnig (1903) 56 fn

<sup>25</sup> Kurnig (1903) 129

<sup>26</sup> Kurnig (1903) 130

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Kurnig, p. 130

<sup>28</sup> Schopenhauer (1909), vol. 3, p. 424.

### Asia as a Harbinger of a Complete Depopulation? – The Vedic Contradiction

While Christianity has long since lost most of its antinatal impulse, Kurnig believes that he is entitled to welcome the harbingers of a future depopulation of the earth in the guise of contemporary Buddhists and Hindus. In his replica to a review in the 'Pionier' on 22 September 1897, he writes: '... the vast majority of the earth's inhabitants pay homage to the pessimism of a gentle depopulation of our globe.'<sup>29</sup> Here, Kurnig seems to commit the cardinal error of not distinguishing between Hindu priests or Buddhist monks, with the latter living in celibacy, on the one hand and their lay followers on the other, who rarely intend on giving up having descendants. Contrary to Kurnig's view, a considerable amount of Hindu teaching is even strongly pro-natalist. According to the Laws of Manu the begetting of a son is a religious duty the fulfilment of which contributes to the salvation of the father's soul<sup>30</sup>. Elsewhere Kurnig describes what I would like to call the Vedic Contradiction. Far from paying homage to mankind's ebbing away, Buddhists and believers of Hindu religions follow a maxim that Kurnig himself has exposed as problematic: 'Beget a child such that it may be redeemed from existence – in other words, one is supposed to do something in order to make it undone.'<sup>31</sup> In fact, a Buddhist – provided he does not believe in a persisting soul substance – would have difficulties in raising objections against Kurnig's irony: Inasmuch as Buddhism does not conceive of a persisting soul, there can be no pre-existing soul for which it would be an advantage to become incarnated. A Hindu, however, who believes in reincarnation, might reply to Kurnig: While it is true that the Hindu parents are responsible for the fact that a person has to die, one must also consider that a human incarnation is an important stage for souls in order to find salvation. In sum it is probably safe to say that for the vast majority of Hindus und Buddhists throughout history a pro-natalist impetus resides in the belief that a prevented birth is a prevented rebirth.

### **Kurnig's Neo-nihilism as Modern Gnosticism**

Had Kurnig labelled his position 'Antiprocreationism' (by recourse to the word 'Prokreation', which he uses a lot) rather than 'Neo-Nihilism', we would then have a term today, which describes more clearly or more exclusively the meaning of the actually established term 'Antinatalism', which played a role in population policy before it came to designate a moral theory.<sup>32</sup> In this context, I would like to mention the antinatalist French thinker Annaba<sup>33</sup>. He used the term anti-procreationism rather than antinatalism. In 2008 Annaba looked back on 40 years of anti-procreationist statements: 'Depuis quarante ans vous vous vous gaussez / de mes imprécations antiprocréationnistes '<sup>34</sup> 'For forty years you've been laughing at / my antinatalistic imprecations.'

Kurnig, however, went for the term Neo-nihilism: 'Neo-Nihilism is destined to become... the domain of reconciliation between the nihilistic elements in the teachings of Buddhism and Christianity on the one hand - and the optimistic spirit of culture on the other...'.<sup>35</sup> If Kurnig, ,

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<sup>29</sup> Kurnig (1903) 16

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Reynolds/Tanner (1983) 42

<sup>31</sup> Kurnig (1903) 135

<sup>32</sup> Before the concept of antinatalism was used to designate a moral theory it had been used by historians such as Gisela Bock in her contribution ANTINATALISM, MATERNITY AND PATERNITY IN NATIONAL SOCIALIST RACISM (1994). In her text Bock scrutinises Nazi antinatalism as being directed first and foremost against women and especially women of Jewish and "Gypsy" origin, many of whom became sterilized. There is a second usage of the concept of antinatalism – prior to designating a moral theory. It is in the domain of research on development policies from the 1970s and 1980s where we find the concept of antinatalism being used to discuss such topics as an antinatalistic population policy in a series of developing countries.

<sup>33</sup> C. f. Akerma (2017) 85f.

<sup>34</sup> Annaba (2008) p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Kurnig (1903) 24 (last part of book)

sees a positive tendency in human cultural development, he is optimistic in yet another respect. Against all the empty talk that life is just as it is, he formulates with the greatest justification: ‘The pessimist does not admit that the tragedy of human life on earth is something unavoidable...’<sup>36</sup> This is where the second strain of optimism resides within Kurnig’s pessimism. In spite of this, however, the term ‘Neo-Nihilism’ is somewhat unfortunate inasmuch as Kurnig himself says about the anarchists and, in part, the nihilists<sup>37</sup> (cf. p. 109) that they are almost conservative in comparison with his teaching, since they are content with palliative social changes: ‘Anarchists, socialists, nihilists, optimistic philosophers – all content themselves with palliatives.’<sup>38</sup> In fact, for Kurnig the sentence could be coined, following Marx: The critics only wanted to change the world in various ways, however, – the point is to sublimate it.

As shown above, Kurnig himself is well aware of the fact that he cannot appeal on Christianity as a non-ambiguous role model for his anti-procreationism. And it became clear that he is mistaken in invoking Buddhism and Hinduism as modern vehicles of his teachings in favour of non-procreation. Despite this Kurnig could well have appealed to another religion as a paragon that was at once nihilistic and antinatalist: the Gnostic systems. According to the Gnostics the creator of this world is evil and the world is bad. In the teachings of the Gnostics, the creator of this world, the biblical God, is a mere demiurge. In Gnostic thinking the demiurge appears as a degraded ‘symbol of cosmic oppression’<sup>39</sup>. The real and good God who is not responsible for this world resides outer worldly. He is the native land of the souls which, having been lured away from him, precipitated into this world and who will one day return to him – unless man continues the evil of procreation.

Schopenhauer – who is Kurnig’s most important source with regard to the history of ideas – deals with Gnosticism in his presentation of church father Clement of Alexandria’s (150–215) critique of the Gnostic religion. Schopenhauer is familiar with Clement’s judgement of Marcion (~ 90–160), one of the main exponents of the Gnostic religion and gives the following account:

‘... he [Clement] objects to the Marcionites that they find fault with the creation, after the example of Plato and Pythagoras; for Marcion teaches that nature is bad, made out of bad materials; therefore one ought not to people this world, but to abstain from marriage.’<sup>40</sup>

Schopenhauer continues his account of Clement’s critique against the Marcionites with a presentation of what Clement says about the Gnostics’ handling of the ancient principle of *einkrateia* (self-restraint) which entails antinatalism:

‘The same thing then takes place with regard to the second point, the *εγκρατεία* [enkrateia], through which, according to his view, the Marcionites show their ingratitude towards the demiurgus and the perversity with which they put from them all his gifts. Here now the tragic poets have preceded the Encratites (to the prejudice of their originality) and have said the same things. For since they also lament the infinite misery of existence, they have added that it is better to bring no children into such a world; which he now once again supports with the most beautiful passages, while at the same time, accusing the Pythagoreans of having renounced sexual pleasure on these grounds. But all this does not touch him; he sticks to his principle that all of them sin against the demiurgus, in that they teach that one ought not to

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<sup>36</sup> Kurnig (1903) 102

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Kurnig (1903) 109

<sup>38</sup> Kurnig (1903) 110

<sup>39</sup> Jonas (1963) p. 93.

<sup>40</sup> Schopenhauer (1909), vol. 3, p. 431.



marry, ought not to beget children, ought not to bring new miserable beings into the world, ought not to provide new food for death...'<sup>41</sup>

It is difficult to say why Schopenhauer did not elaborate on the concept of a depopulation of the world that he had come across in Gnosticism. It might be due to the above mentioned systemic reasons of his metaphysics of the will: abstention from procreation requires will-power and would thus confirm the will rather than negating it. Regardless, this interpretation is not too convincing and the riddle remains unsolved offering itself to further research.

While Kurnig seems to have received Schopenhauer's most important works, he curiously remains silent on Schopenhauer's remarks on the Gnostics such as Marcion, who – in Schopenhauer's representation – are very much in favour of an abstention from procreation. This constitutes a further riddle in the history of antinatalism. Schopenhauer's account of Gnostic thought would have been an excellent point of reference for Kurnig's own neo-nihilism. Why he did not do so remains left to speculation, at least for the time being. Perhaps Kurnig never read what Schopenhauer wrote about Gnosticism.

As indicated above, Kurnig is somewhat misguided in his self-assessment. He puts himself in the tradition of Brahmanism and Buddhism, mistakenly perceiving them as religions that pray abstention from procreation to the present day. In himself Kurnig sees the executer of the supposed antinatalism of these religions. Rather, however, his neo-nihilism continues the historic antinatalism of the Gnostics. With greater justification it could be said that Kurnig is a Neo-Gnostic than a Neo-Nihilist. Probably in no other religious teaching was antinatalism more pronounced and explicit than in Gnostic thinking. To emphasize this I cite from Clement of Alexandria (150–215) as quoted by Hans Jonas in his book 'The Gnostic Religion':

'Not wishing to help replenish the world made by the demiurge, the Marcionites decreed abstention from matrimony, defying their creator and hastening to the Good One who has called them and who, they say, is God in a different sense: wherefore, wishing to leave nothing of their own here, they turn / abstemious not from a moral principle but from hostility to their maker and unwillingness to use his creation.'<sup>42</sup>

What is valid for the Marcionites does also apply to Manichaeism: '...one should abstain from all ensouled things and eat only vegetables and what-ever else is non-sentient, and abstain from marriage, the delights of love and the begetting of children, so that the divine Power may not through the succession of generations remain longer in the Hyle. However, one must not, in order to help effect the purification of things, commit suicide.'<sup>43</sup>

In view of the aforesaid and put in a nutshell Kurnig's thinking appears to be a combination of Gnosticism freed from the idea of a malevolent demiurge and of Schopenhauer's philosophy freed from his metaphysics of the will. Unfortunately Kurnig did not make wise use of the Gnostic religion even though its antinatalism was at the tip of his fingers in the form of Schopenhauer's writings. What Kurnig does, however, is to inadvertently equip the Gnostic religion with a moral principle, the lack of which Hans Jonas emphasizes in his book 'The Gnostic Religion', namely the minimization of suffering.

## Education

Kurnig conceives of the abolition of suffering as a complete depopulation of the world, which has to be initiated and accompanied by antinatal enlightenment and education. In this respect, he considers his writings to be both a basic theoretical foundation and propaganda against procreation.

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<sup>41</sup> Schopenhauer 1909, vol. 3, p. 432.

<sup>42</sup> Clement of Alexandria, quoted in Jonas (1963) 144f

<sup>43</sup> Alexander of Lycopolis, quoted after Jonas (1963) 231.

In the word 'depopulation', as used by Kurnig, connotations of war or illness may resonate. However, Kurnig is an outspoken anti-militarist, who regards war as an almost always unpunished crime, for which people are prepared by a wrong education: 'The ground in which the war between the peoples is rooted and thrives is the education of the children.'<sup>44</sup> In Kurnig's diagnosis the educational system prefers to morph the child 'into a warrior, a criminal, and to prepare it from the outset for the wars it will have to participate in once it is grown up.'<sup>45</sup> Opposed to this, Kurnig resumes, we have to 'sissify' the educational system in the spirit of antimilitarism and to reform it in order to make people refrain from having descendants.

The supreme goal of Kurnig's Neo-Nihilism is our 'exodus' from being, mankind's dying out. To achieve this, we have to start early on with the right pedagogic principles. Kurnig seems optimistic that education will be able to form an antinatalist attitude to life and he claims: 'An order of things aiming at extinguishing soon, obviously entails different laws, a different education than one aiming at an unpredictable continuation.'<sup>46</sup>

Kurnig's pedagogical principles are well-suited for clearing up a common misunderstanding, namely the idea that those who oppose the creation of new people must dislike children. Contrary to this, Kurnig says: 'Always treat children very respectfully, keep in mind their immaturity. Educate the children in a spirit of fraternity, of peaceful international rapprochement, of harmony: nurture in them a taste for studying abstract sciences and especially the fine arts – the only means to perhaps... make them forget – at least intermittently – this miserable world into which the error or misdeed of their creators has put them.'<sup>47</sup> Perhaps one can sum up Kurnig's pedagogical principle as follows: It is right to provide all existing children with an anti-militaristic and anti-procreationist education. It is wrong to act in such a way that new children begin to exist and then to rejoice in the way in which they thrive under the educational measures taken. Kurnig paraphrases: 'I beget you (says such a nurturer) to have the pleasure of seeing what is within you and what is not. Doing this I am forcing upon you a lot of suffering and, at last, the nasty catastrophe of dying...'<sup>48</sup> In order to make people abstain from procreation Kurnig points to the desideratum of a comprehensive depiction of how people die<sup>49</sup>: 'The unwritten annals of the death hour would make a very strong contribution to pessimism.'<sup>50</sup>

### **Special Role of the Doctor**

Surprisingly, Kurnig recognises antinatalism's natural ally in doctors: 'The doctor may... work more and more towards gentle depopulation.'<sup>51</sup> 'I believe to hear the following exclamation from a doctor after reading my writings: 'I cannot go to see people and, as it were, adjure them not to bring a child into the world!' And why shouldn't he? (I'd like to know.) If he doesn't, who should do it? The priest? Once the doctor has reached the highest pessimism, he will have to be counted among the highest benefactors of mankind in the exercise of his profession.'<sup>52</sup> Why did Kurnig ascribe a special role to doctors when it comes

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<sup>44</sup> Kurnig (1903) 25

<sup>45</sup> Kurnig (1903) 25

<sup>46</sup> Kurnig (1903) 52 and 64

<sup>47</sup> Kurnig (1903) 92

<sup>48</sup> Kurnig (1903) 125

<sup>49</sup> In our days it is Sherwin Nuland with his book 'How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter' in which he shows that we rarely die 'with dignity'. With his 'Letzte Worte' (Last Words) Karl. S. Guthke presents a history of last utterances in which he also makes reference to earlier such collections. Typical for these utterances, however, is that they are mostly strongly stylised.

<sup>50</sup> Kurnig (1903) 149

<sup>51</sup> Kurnig (1903) 80

<sup>52</sup> Kurnig (1903) 159f

to antinatalism? Probably being a doctor himself and judging from himself he obviously conceded to physicians a high degree of insight into the misery of the world. At the same time, doctors are at the forefront when it comes to questions of the beginning and the end of a life.

### **The Death Catastrophe**

Philosophically, the history of mankind is sometimes presented as a cosmic adventure. In literature, the existence of the individual is oftentimes depicted as an adventurous journey. For Kurnig, however, ‘the death of a human being is such a nasty adventure... that nothing is able to make it beautiful or less ugly.’<sup>53</sup> He continues: ‘... the horrors of this one hour would be enough to make you condemn the whole of life.’<sup>54</sup> Here, Kurnig is understating the case since the process of dying is frequently not over after one or a few hours but may take days or even weeks. And, regrettably, Kurnig does not explain more in detail why the ‘nasty death catastrophe’ that ends every existence cannot be compensated for by a fulfilled life. In order to parry this whitewashing of life, it should be pointed out that dying persons are so overwhelmed and absorbed by the imperatives of their failing organism that they have little psychological or physical strength to reminisce.

What Kurnig does explicitly fend off is an argumentative move that draws the conclusion from the ‘desire to endure the final catastrophe as late as possible’<sup>55</sup> that life must be beautiful after all. No, rather it is true that the final chord is anticipated to be so dissonant that we do not want to hear any of it for ourselves, and we therefore continually want to reject it and postpone it. Even people struggling to live on at the very end of their lives are no proof of the prevailing affirmation of life: ‘At this moment, you are almost numb with pain and fear of death, your senses almost swoon – you are ready to confess that you have always been wrong when you only live, live on...’<sup>56</sup> The desire to continue living at all costs sets in where reason gives way to fear of death, where what constitutes man is overwhelmed by the biological radicals of the organism. Such desires for survival are blackmailed biologically – not autonomously, but inhumanly.

### **Suicide Cynicism<sup>57</sup>**

Kurnig has no problems in parrying those who would fling at him the well-known anti-antinatalist argument of ‘If you do not like life, why not commit suicide?’ The reader learns that some people indeed recommended to him ‘to take his own life – one of them even had such words printed’<sup>58</sup> Kurnig retorts to this objection: ‘Once alive, you want to see the sinister catastrophe of death postponed as long as possible; but never to have been you would have deemed a thousand times better.’<sup>59</sup> Demanding that a person who finds their continued existence unpleasant should commit suicide; or that a person who finds themselves severely ill - but nonetheless at the mercy of their organism's claim for continued existence - should take their own life is a cynicism that can hardly be surpassed. Moreover, according to Kurnig, there is something important that is to be done until the unavoidable decay and death, which will occur anyway, comes: namely to spread propaganda directed against procreation<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Kurnig (1903) 84

<sup>54</sup> Kurnig (1903) 148

<sup>55</sup> Kurnig (1903) 145

<sup>56</sup> Kurnig (1903) 147

<sup>57</sup> For the topic of suicide-cynicism and related topics cf. Akerma (2017) 592.

<sup>58</sup> Kurnig (1903) 116

<sup>59</sup> Kurnig (1903) 146

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Kurnig (1903) 116

Rather than committing suicide, we are to spread pessimistic propaganda, which according to Kurnig, is morally and philosophically superior to committing suicide<sup>61</sup>.

### **Never to Have Been**

Kurnig perhaps exaggerates, when he says that, with regard to life, ‘no unborn<sup>62</sup> would ask for it’ (p. 51). Everyone would have preferred to never have been. Did he ever carry out a survey among a substantial number of people, though? Kurnig knows very well how difficult it is to think of oneself as never having been, without thinking at the same time that one would have missed out on something. He labels this the ‘main point’: ‘... the consideration to never have existed, the idea of one's own self as never having been! The absence of one's very self, of one's highly important personality on the world stage; the chair one sits on, the bed one sleeps in: empty...’<sup>63</sup> All in all, Kurnig's conception of how people would react to the idea of never having been remains somewhat contradictory: no unborn would have asked for existence – the idea to never have existed is scary to everyone.

### **Those who Put us in Danger of Life and of Death: the Parent Taboo**

With what one can label the parent-taboo<sup>64</sup>, Kurnig addresses a powerful psychological impediment which constitutes an obstacle to his ethics of depopulation: ‘... the love, the reverence for our parents mandates to us that we don't criticize our life, which we received from them as a gift.... let alone to try to shake it off as an ugly gift...’<sup>65</sup> How does Kurnig argue in view of the mighty parent taboo? He registers the conflict between children (who see the gift of life as a burden) and their progenitors once the taboo has been breached, ‘as a major part of the suffering fallen to us’<sup>66</sup>. In an immense and perhaps desperate overestimation of his future influence Kurnig even gives out the recommendation to parents to arm themselves against the natalist rebellion emanating from him (Kurnig): ‘If you play with fire, you must expect to get your fingers burned,’ the proverb says. And why should someone who creates a child – thereby, among other things, putting it in danger of life and of death – be gay and in cheerful spirits?’<sup>67</sup>

### **Kurnig – Zapffe**

Let me now demonstrate an astonishing similarity between some of Kurnig's and Zapffe's formulations. In his Neo-Nihilism Kurnig describes how, with human beings, a gap has opened up between nature and the realm of living beings:

‘Now, however, humanity has the power to say to nature: ‘You, nature, you persist us poor people; we suffer infinitely more here on earth than we enjoy; and, moreover, this pleasure itself is largely ephemeral, even deceptive. We are therefore withdrawing from your vicious circle as if from bad company. You yourself have shown to us the way out through our intellect, e. g. by the means of facultative sterility.’’<sup>68</sup>

Decades later it was Zapffe who formulated this insight in more poetic words in his *Om det tragiske*:

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Kurnig (1903) 146

<sup>62</sup> For the topic of the unborn cf. Akerma (2017) 625ff.

<sup>63</sup> Kurnig (1903) 105

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Akerma (2017) 199f.

<sup>65</sup> Kurnig (1903) 107

<sup>66</sup> *Ibd.*

<sup>67</sup> Kurnig (1903) 150

<sup>68</sup> Kurnig (1903) 103

‘You got me. But my son you will not get. You were committing a fateful mistake when assigning even procreation to my will. And you did not do this out of love..., but rather to burden me with the heaviest of all responsibilities...: Am I to perpetuate this species or not? And from now on I will ask no longer what you want; rather you shall ask what I want. And I will no longer offer further sacrifices to the God of life. I will punish you with the ability you bequeathed to me in order to torment me; I will turn my clairvoyance against you and thus bereaving you of your victims. And the abused millions will stand behind me like a plough... And evermore will two people create one human being... Thus you will feel your powerlessness begging me on thy bloody knees.’<sup>69</sup>

For Kurnig, antinatalism – more precisely, neo-nihilism – belongs fully to the category of corrections to nature.<sup>70</sup> This assessment echoes in the following formulation that Zapffe made: ‘I will have to desist from the creation of new holders of interest. This decision would initialise a terminal epoch in the development of humankind; [...] This renouncement, this refusal of a continuation represents the utmost cultural possibility of mankind.’<sup>71</sup>

Both Kurnig and Zapffe bring to bear the guiding principle of philosophical anthropology (cf. the works of such authors as Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen<sup>72</sup>), according to which man is a cultural being by nature. It is only in antinatalism that man – to use an expression of Karl Marx – fully severs himself from the umbilical cord of the natural nexus of the species.

### **Kurnig’s Replica to Counterarguments**

As is customary for a circumspect thinker, Kurnig confronts himself with a remarkable series of objections against our ‘exodus from being’ via abstention from procreation:

1. Consider: No one has seen behind the curtain hiding the essence of the development of the world as a whole.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the depopulation of the planet would have to be postponed until further insights are gained: First of all, we are to understand the world as a whole in much more detail. Now, as Kurnig explains, science has already lifted the curtain and found nothing worthy of perpetuation.<sup>74</sup>

2) One must not tamper with God. This presupposes a faith in which Kurnig is not rooted. – As opposed to the arch-pronatalist Hans Jonas, who as a philosophical theologian would later formulate that we must not abandon God even if we wanted to abandon ourselves.<sup>75</sup>

3) One aspect of what was later to become known as ‘deep ecology’ is anticipated in the following hypothesis: ‘Nature needs mankind as an integral part of its essence...’<sup>76</sup> Kurnig labels the perpetuation of suffering for the sake of an imaginary system of nature (which is an integral component in which man would have to persist) as immoral and sinful.

4) In one of Kurnig's numerous replicas to reviews of his Neo-nihilism we read: ‘Referent is of the opinion that I bring in nothing as proof of the sentence that suffering outweighs

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<sup>69</sup> Zapffe (1996) 239f

<sup>70</sup> Kurnig (1903), last part, 8

<sup>71</sup> Zapffe (1996) 402. For more translations from Zapffe see my blog For the Propagation of Non-Propagation at [www.antinatalismblog.wordpress.com](http://www.antinatalismblog.wordpress.com)

<sup>72</sup> See Akerma (2000), chapter 14: Philosophische Anthropologie, p. 153–167.

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly I raised the very same question in Akerma (1995) where I pointed to parapsychological phenomena as an indicator for the possibility of man’s being imbedded into something and being an integral part of something we do not yet understand. Cf. Akerma (1995, p. 84ff), chapter XI: Motive der Parapsychologie als Argument gegen das Verebben (Motives of parapsychology as an argument against mankind’s ebbing away).

<sup>74</sup> See Kurnig (1903), last part, 7

<sup>75</sup> See Akerma (2000) chapter 19: Der Mensch als Hüter des Seins (Man as guardian of being), p. 250–292.

<sup>76</sup> Kurnig (1903) 102

pleasure in life. He overlooks the fact that I had (and am still having) the experience personally – isn't that proof enough to him?'<sup>77</sup>

Here Kurnig for his part overlooks the fact that he cannot extrapolate from his own experience of existence to that of others, and that one cannot force anyone – to put it bluntly – to realise their own objective misfortune. Today, cognitive psychology confirms that cognitive distortions are oftentimes the parents of our beliefs. An example of such a cognitive distortion is a systematic misinterpretation, which Eduard von Hartmann in his day called 'memory glasses'<sup>78</sup>: It is a psychological mechanism that causes the remembering memory to shed a better light on negative events of the past. The existence of Hartmann's memory glasses is confirmed by modern cognitive psychology<sup>79</sup>, and they are capable of unmasking rampant optimism as involuntary self-deception from our psychological constitution. This is of utmost importance for the evaluation of Kurnig's antiprocreationism, since he claims: 'The real driving force that keeps human life going on everywhere is optimism.'

## Conclusion

As an author, Kurnig described his experiences by saying: whoever tries to expand the Christian and Buddhist basic teachings and whoever is 'constantly working towards rapid depopulation', will be 'hushed up at all costs'<sup>80</sup>. This prophecy has come true. It may have been facilitated by the fact that 'Kurnig' is a pseudonym. While in his time his writings were discussed in numerous reviews, his memory seems to be erased from the cultural tradition except perhaps for one reference in Jean-Claude Wolf's book 'Eduard von Hartmann. A philosopher of the Gründerzeit'.<sup>81</sup> Kurnig deserves better, as we can see in him a progenitor of a secular antinatalism that, unlike Schopenhauer's proto-antinatalism, manages without will metaphysics appealing only to man's commiseration. Concessions to Schopenhauer's doctrine of will in Kurnig's text can only be found inasmuch as Kurnig has a gutted concept of 'blind will' which corresponds to the reproductive instinct, the desire for survival and the mechanically unconscious origin of the world as a whole. While it is widely assumed that modern antinatalism first took shape during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kurnig is its early herald at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After Kurnig, modern antinatalism was formulated, especially towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by a series of thinkers who worked independently from one another, almost like intellectual islands. And it is only now that they are becoming aware of one another. Here, Zapffe is an early exponent followed by Martin Neuffer<sup>82</sup> (1924–2004) e.g. with his book 'Nein zum Leben' (No to life) which was published in 1992.

In Kurnig we will have to honour a thinker who – animated by Schopenhauer's writings –left behind Schopenhauer's metaphysics early on. It is a metaphysics of the will under the spell of which the anthropofugal Eduard von Hartmann explicitly rejected antinatalism since the primal ground (the persisting unconscious) by means of evolution would again produce a human type. This does not hold for Kurnig, who achieved a breakthrough to a new secular antinatalism: 'The only possible progress of the whole is to stop procreation – as I said before,

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<sup>77</sup> Kurnig, last part, 15

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Akerma (2017), p. 210f.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Daniel Kahnemann (2011)

<sup>80</sup> Kurnig (1903) 157

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Wolf (2006), p. 24f. In the three sentences which Wolf dedicates to Kurnig, he presents it as a fact that Kurnig was a medical doctor. Wolf continues: 'Perhaps Kurnig saw the meaning and his mission life in pleading for pessimism and its practical consequence of contraception and the prevention of birth.' Kurnig makes it clear, though, on almost every page of his writings that this is definitely the case.

<sup>82</sup> See Akerma (2017) 476.

the gentle depopulation of our globe. Anything that benefits a gentle, and the fastest possible definitive depopulation must be supported. This will be the moral of the future.<sup>83</sup>

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