



RADICAL THEOLOGY



From Honest-to-God to God-Is-Dead

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Thomas J. J. Altizer has recently published the clearest and most unequivocal statement of "death-of-God theology" that has yet to appear: *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster). Paul Van Buren, in his *Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, insists that the word "God" is meaningless, that we must be prepared to dispense with all forms of "God-talk." William Hamilton, even in his second, revised edition of *The New Essence of Christianity*, continues to speak of a God who has withdrawn from the world and he exhorts us to live *as if* God does not exist. Altizer alone proclaims the actual death of God.

According to Altizer, God is not absent. He is not merely in eclipse. It's not simply a question of language and terminology. The problem of images (whether God is "up there" or "out there" or "down there") is really beside the point. God is dead. He died in history, on the Cross. God once existed; he no longer exists. And it is time for Christians to recognize this fact. We are liberated *from* the power and restraining force of a transcendent God, a God who rules and a God who judges. We are liberated *for* a life of total engagement in the terrestrial and profane order. Christians can now be secular radicals because God is dead.

Much of the comment about "death-of-God theology" has centered its attention on the theological or doctrinal aspects of the movement. Is God dead or isn't he? In what sense is he dead? How can we re-think the reality of God in the light of modern philosophy and the present course of cultural history? Some theologians are pleased, no doubt, that the attention of the Church has been re-di-

rected to the central and fundamental question of God's existence, or that the "death-of-God" stir is challenging Christian theologians to adopt a more theoretical posture (as opposed to what might be described as a "creeping biblicism"). But others, who are more concerned with the impact and effectiveness of the Church's mission in the world, are annoyed by the introduction of another "religious" question, which is diversionary in character because it comes at the moment when the Church is preparing, at long last, to "move out" and to assume her responsibilities in and for the "secular city."

As a matter of fact, the primary concern of the "death-of-God theologians" is not doctrinal, but ethical. And their theological point-of-reference is not God (dead or alive), but Christ as "the man for others." To be faithful to the ethical stance of Jesus, to stand at his side in the service of humanity, demands the renunciation of religion and the repudiation of the Church. "Death-of-God theology" assumes, in other words, that commitment to the world cannot co-exist with a commitment to the transcendent Lordship of God in Christ, and that genuine secularity is an impossible posture for a Christian who continues to take seriously the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ.

For Paul Van Buren, all theology must be reduced to Christology (Karl Barth will be able thereby to recognize at least some vestige of his own influence on his former student). "God-talk" must be set aside. God, for us, is simply Jesus. And faith in Jesus is essentially an ethical stance. It means living as a "man for others," living without regard to self, and being caught up in the contagion of Jesus' own freedom. In this view, the Church cannot be called the "Body of Christ" in a descriptive sense. The theological and biblical designation is merely "a reference

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to the historical perspective which the members presumably have in common, and it suggests the harmony that would exist between people who shared this perspective.”

William Hamilton’s starting-point is different from Van Buren’s, but his orientation and ethical concerns are similar. What has occurred in our time, he argues, is that the biblical portrait of God (and, therefore, the Reformation portrait of God) has deteriorated to such a point that it is no longer meaningful or acceptable to modern man. The real significance of the Reformation is now becoming clear. It was not primarily a theological or psychological event, but an ethical revolution. The Protestant Reformation meant not so much the discovery of the righteous God (the *theological* dimension) or the victory of the autonomous religious personality (the *psychological* dimension) as the fact that the Church moved from the cloister to the world, toward the world and away from religion (the *ethical* dimension). We now find ourselves in the position of waiting for God. God has withdrawn, is absent. In the interim period, our obedience is to Jesus. But Jesus is not an object of faith. He is a *place to be*—at the side of the neighbor. And what is the relation of this radical theology to the Church? “I do not see how preaching, worship, prayer, ordination, the sacraments can be taken seriously,” Hamilton has written. The “Body of Christ” is irrelevant to the task of secular mission.

Altizer employs a more grandiose intellectual approach to the question of the death of God, although the ethical implications are not sharply or adequately delineated. Employing the dialectical system of Hegel, he suggests that Spirit had to negate itself to become its opposite other, Flesh. The process of negation began with creation and continued with each revelation-event in the Old Testament. The decisive moment occurred at the Incarnation, and specifically on the Cross. At that point, Spirit completely emptied itself and became fully identified with its opposite other. And somehow, at the end of history, there will be a reappearance of Spirit in a new synthesis of Spirit and Flesh. In the meantime, our task is to embrace the profane and the secular, to seek out “the epiphany of the Word in every human heart and hand.”

According to Altizer’s diagnosis, the twentieth century has seen the collapse of the idea of transcendence. The radical Christian must share the agony of modern man and live without God. He must renounce liturgy and doctrine. He must repudiate the sovereign Creator and the transcendent Lord. The Christian must seek, instead, a total union with Jesus, but not with the Jesus of the New Testament. He is beyond recall and is irrelevant, in any case. The manifestation of the Word is “in every human heart and hand.”

In all three instances, the line of thinking proceeds from the abolition of God (understood differently by each of the three men), through the affirmation of Jesus as “the man for others,” and on to the demands of our secular involvement, which is the distinctive ethical dimension.

The first assumption of “death-of-God theology,” and more specifically of “death-of-God” ethics, is that the ethical commitment depends upon, and flows organically, from, the doctrinal presuppositions: the negation of God and the repudiation of the Church. And, secondly, that it is, for all practical purposes, impossible to affirm the values of the secular order without making a declaration of independence from traditional theology; or, inversely, that “orthodox” Christian theology cannot support an authentic Christian radicalism. I am about to suggest that these assumptions cannot be sustained, theologically or empirically.

Is it really possible to adopt the doctrinal position of the “death-of-God” proponents without constructing an *ersatz* version of the Gospel? Can a Christian ethic simply dispense with Christian doctrine: the Trinity, original sin, grace, the sacraments, prayer, the Church—indeed, all transcendental reality? John Macquarrie, a Heideggerian and Bultmannian student of the first rank, notes in his recently-published *Principles of Christian Theology*, that “a Christian theology can no more fly in the face of the mainstream of tradition than it can in the face of scripture. To deny fundamental doctrines, like that of the Trinity; to reject the creeds; to set aside the beliefs of the early councils of the still undivided Church—these may be actions to which individuals are impelled by their own thinking on these matters, but they cannot take place in Christian theology, for they amount to a rejection of the history and therefore of the continuing identity of the community within which Christian theologizing takes place.”

What we are confronted with here, it seems to me, is a kind of Gnosticism, wherein it is asserted that for the first eighteen centuries or more the central truth of theology was not and could not have been known by the general body of Christians, that, in fact, it was not until the maturation of historical consciousness in the nineteenth century that this fundamental insight was achieved through the efforts of Hegel, Nietzsche, and William Blake. This is stretching things a bit.

Secondly, if “God-talk” is meaningless and irrelevant to modern man and an obstacle to his total involvement in the secular and profane order, then by what logic do we substitute “Christ-talk” or “Jesus-talk” for “God-talk”? On what basis, do we assign a unique function to Jesus? Why is he the ultimate point of reference at all? Must the secular humanist swallow “Jesus-talk” to make sense of his profane enterprises? Will he, indeed, accept “Jesus-talk” any more readily than “God-talk”?

Of course, Jesus must be central to theology. And his redemptive work cannot be understood adequately unless it is viewed as a fulfillment of the role of the Suffering Servant of God. The Christian cannot be faithful to Christ if he does not live as a “man for others,” as a suffering servant of God in the service of humanity. Nor can the Church be a truly priestly community if it is not, at the same time, a Servant Church. But must we jettison the

whole New Testament and the first eighteen centuries of Christianity to adopt this point of view? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to whom each of the "death-of-God theologians" lay claim, did not feel compelled to do so. And if the work of Bishop John A. T. Robinson proves nothing else, it demonstrates that it is possible to adopt a radical posture with regard to the mission of the Church and the task of the individual Christian, without thereby "selling-out" on the New Testament concept of the Church as the "Body of Christ." His writings prove further that what is theologically indefensible in the "death-of-God" hypothesis is also empirically invalid. The theological radicalism of Bishop Robinson renders implausible the assumption of the "death-of-God" group that traditional Christian theology, particularly with reference to the *nature* of the Church, is so hopelessly mythological, inflexible, and narrow that it cannot sustain any radical position with regard to the *mission* of the Church in the world.

Bishop Robinson's Latest

Robinson's argument, as developed especially in his latest book *The New Reformation?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), runs in this fashion: to larger and larger numbers of our generation the Christian Gospel, in the manner and form in which it is preached, is no longer the good news, and the Church, to the extent that she is identified exclusively with the function of preaching the Word and duly administering the sacraments, has become progressively more irrelevant. The world of today is *not* asking the question of the Reformers: "How can I find a gracious God?" But it *is* asking: "How can I find a gracious neighbor?" It begins not from revelation, in which it has no prior confidence, but from relationships, which it is prepared to treat with greater seriousness than any generation before it. And it proceeds inductively, from the evidence of experience, rather than deductively, from the certainties of authority. The question with which we are presented is this: "How *in this situation* is the Gospel of Christ to be preached and what is the place of the Church? Is it possible for Christians to accept this shift in the frame of reference—and not to sell out? This, I believe, is a very big question, the biggest question for the future of Christianity in our day. I should be foolish if I returned a confident or simple answer."

The theology which is demanded by this totally new situation is a theology that must start from Christ as the way to the Father. The central text of the old Reformation was the *sola fide* of Luther; for the new Reformation it will be John 14:9—"He who has seen me has seen the Father." But we cannot stop there, for this generation asks the further question: "But, Lord, when did we see you?" (Mt 25:37-39). And the answer to that question is given in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mt 25:32-33), in terms of the Son of Man *incognito*, that is, in terms of "the gracious neighbor." This is a generation of

which it might be said that Christ is no longer expected. The situation is similar to those on the road to Emmaus who look back, some with genuine regret, at the Jesus of history as the one who *might have been* the Christ. And yet on the road to Emmaus Jesus did not, and does not, confront us as the Christ, but simply as the stranger who comes alongside in our questioning and our sadness. And "it is only from there, as the man for others and with others, that he can make himself known to them as the Messiah of whom their Scriptures spoke."

The parable of the Sheep and the Goats and the passage depicting the final appearance of Jesus to his disciples by the lake-side in John 21 have a particularly compelling power for our generation, "for they all tell of one who comes unknown and un-invited into the human situation, disclosing himself as the gracious neighbor before he can be recognized as Master and Lord." With these passages, Robinson would link the story of the foot-washing in John 13, "where even to those who call him Lord and Master, he can make known the meaning of that lordship only by becoming the servant of all. . . . It is indeed central to the Christian revelation for any age. For the very meaning of the Incarnation is that the divine enters through the stable door of ordinary human history and everyday experience."

Bishop Robinson proceeds to suggest that the primary task of theology and of the Church in our time could be described as making such a meeting possible again. "For the effect of the Church's work has been to strip the Christ of his *incognito*. It has placarded him to men as the Son of God without allowing them to meet him as the Son of Man." The task of the Church, which is the Body of Christ, is "to *be* this Son of Man on earth, allowing its imperfect incarnation to be judged constantly by *the* Incarnation." And so the Church must be an open society, an "accepting community," whose chief characteristic is that it is prepared to meet men where they are and accept them for what they are. For mankind will ultimately be judged by its own humanity, by what it really means to be a man, and "it will understand that truth and accept it only as it *actually finds itself convicted by the Son of Man on earth*, that is, by the Church as she takes a towel and girds herself, by her ministers and her members as they 'do judgment' for the least of his brethren."

The Church, then, is not simply a circle of light bounded on all sides by darkness, a community of the elect—as the Reformers would have it—gathered apart from and over against the world. And the last thing the Church exists to be is "an organization for the religious," whose main function is "to make or keep men religious." On the contrary, "its charter is to be the servant of the world." And because the Church is not simply a circle of light surrounded by darkness—a circle of light into which as many people as possible must be drawn—our concept of the Church's mission must be re-examined and re-evaluated. The distance of men from Christ cannot be identi-

fied simply with their distance from the organized Church. "Indeed, it is religious presumption," Robinson observes, "to assume that Christ is in the center of the Church's circle and not in the dark world. Moreover, the question insistently posed by the Gospels is not how far men are from the manifest Church but how far they are from the kingdom of God."

The Church's Mission

The enlargement of the circle of light is not the primary mission of the Church, for this cannot be substantiated by the witness of the New Testament. While the New Testament does point toward the consummation of all things *in Christ*, it never suggests that all men will be *in the Church*, not within the present age at any rate. In fact, from beginning to end the Bible consistently visualizes the covenant people as a minority instrument of the Kingdom, whose minority status is not a scandal.

The Church, therefore, must make it possible for men and women to meet Christ where they are. It must preach the Gospel to the poor, and, if necessary, in the entirely non-religious terms announced by Jesus, i.e. the release of prisoners and the recovery of sight for the blind—even if they never say, "Lord, Lord"; even if they never make an explicit profession of faith.

Bishop Robinson has aptly described his own theological radicalism in these terms: "The revolutionary can be an 'outsider' to the structure he would see collapse: indeed, he must set himself outside it. But the radical goes to the roots of *his own* tradition. He must love it: he must weep over Jerusalem, even if he has to pronounce its doom . . . This means that the radical must be a man of roots." Those whose acquaintance with Bishop Robinson is limited to *Honest to God* (or to Eric Mascall's *Secularization of Christianity*) may be somewhat skeptical of the depths of his "roots" in Christian theology. It is fashionable to refer to Robinson as a superficial popularizer. The misinterpretation of his work stems, in large part, from the failure to view *Honest to God* in the context of all his writings and from the parallel failure to see that it is in his emerging doctrine of the Church that all his writings are to be evaluated.

Bishop Robinson was a competent and internationally recognized biblical scholar before his consecration as Bishop of Woolwich in 1959. His book *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (1952) established his reputation as a careful and responsible student of the New Testament. In an area of ecclesiology so central as this, he is quite comfortably "orthodox." In later writings on the Church as the eschatological community (i.e., a community set "between-the-times" in history and a community-in-the-Spirit), he expanded and deepened his ecclesiological perspective (see his *Jesus and His Coming* and his key essay, "Kingdom, Church, and Ministry," in *The Historic Episcopate*).

The Church is the instrument of the Kingdom of God. As the Son of Man Himself existed as a "sign" to "this generation" (Lk 11:30), a sign of the Kingdom, of what God was doing in its midst, so too the primary task of the Church is "to produce not settlements, but 'signs' . . . (and) exists to be the sign, the first fruits, of the New Humanity." The ministry of the Church, including the episcopacy, is a function of this mission and the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, is its summit and source (see his *Liturgy Coming to Life*). It is in the light of all this that we should understand Robinson's most recent definition of the Church in *The New Reformation?*: "It is indeed the dedicated nucleus of those who actively acknowledge Jesus as Lord and have committed themselves to membership and mission within the visible sacramental fellowship of the Spirit." This is a long way from the impoverished ecclesiology of the "death-of-God" triumvirate.

The task for a radical Christian theology in our time is to carry through with a program such as Bishop Robinson's, to deepen its theological foundations and to explore further ways of rendering effective service in the secular sphere. Others have addressed themselves to the question of the Church's mission, of her corporate ethical responsibilities, but few have achieved the balance of Robinson. This will seem an extraordinary statement to those who are more concerned with the possibility that Bishop Robinson might be, in the final analysis, a Cartesian. Philosophical nit-picking such as this is totally irrelevant and misses the whole point of Robinson's theological concerns.

Harvey Cox, for example, is superb in indicating the challenges and opportunities in the secular city, but he sits lightly to the notion of the Church as the sacramentally-structured Body of Christ. And, as Robinson himself has written, "it is impossible to be a biblical theologian without at the same time being a High Churchman." Karl Rahner has written of the Church in *diaspora* and Yves Congar of the Church as a minority community in the service of the majority. Both serve to complement and deepen Robinson's perspective, and while they are strong (especially Congar) on the question of the Church's nature, they are less specific in the area of the Church's mission.

"Death-of-God theology," under the guise of Christian radicalism, may be deflecting the attention of the Church from her mission of suffering service. "Rather than helping the prophets greet a religionless, revolutionary tomorrow," Harvey Cox has complained, "some theologians are more interested in dissecting the cadaver of yesterday's pieties . . . We repair to religion either by devoting our talents to the defense of 'God' or by staring in hypnotic fascination at the oblong cavity left by His presumed expiration." This is something of a "sham battle." The real work is being done at that "jagged edge" where even Anglican bishops grapple with the swiftest currents of the age.