



GOD AND MODERN MAN

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Everyone is aware of the attention recently given by the daily newspapers, the weekly news magazines, and the popular press generally, to books and writers who claim to be “modernizing” Christian theology. That itself is not surprising. Of all the great ideas, the idea of God has always been—and still is—the one that evokes the deepest interest and the greatest concern in the widest assortment of men. But what is surprising is that the discussion of the “new theology”—not only in the popular press but also in learned circles—should be so uncritical. I find it difficult to understand why, in the presence of much loose talk or, worse, double-talk, no one seems willing to call a spade a spade. I propose to do just that in this brief critique of the new or radical theology which has taken for its slogan the Nietzschean aphorism about the death of God, and which has coined some new slogans of its own,

such as “religionless Christianity,” “theistic Christianity,” and “secularized Christianity.”

Atheism is not new. Nor is irreligion. Nor is secularism. What is new is the double-talk that tries to make old-fashioned atheism appear to be a new-fangled form of theology; or that tries to preserve some of the religious meaning of Christianity while secularizing it and combining it with atheism.

The authors and books I have principally in mind are: Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God*; Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*; Thomas Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*; William Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity*; Altizer and Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*; Bishop John Robinson, *Honest to God* and *The New Reformation?* But, I should add, I also have in mind the works of Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer which are listed by Altizer and Hamilton, in their bibliography, as “preparation for radical theology in Protestant neo-orthodoxy.”

I propose to limit myself in this brief essay to an examination of the meaning of such phrases as “the death of God” and “God is dead.” But before I consider what seem to me the three most likely interpretations of this perplexing form of speech, I would like to comment on two characteristics of the contemporary mind, or perhaps I should say the state of mind of those in the contemporary world who appear to welcome religionless Christianity and to rejoice in the notion that God (once alive?) has at last passed away.

(1) *Novelty and progress.* A passion for novelty seems to obsess many of our contemporaries, leading to a frenzy of innovation in all things and a love of novelty for its own sake. But progress and novelty are not the same. The new as such, simply as new, is neither good nor bad, neither true nor false, neither better nor worse than the old. Progress, as any schoolboy knows or should know, is not just change, but change for the better, change measured by a standard that enables us to judge both the new and the old, and to compare their merits in the light of the same set of values. Furthermore, progress is conservative, because it is cumulative, not substitutional. It does not consist simply in replacing the old with the new. The substitution of one thing for another would leave us going around in a circle, neither advancing nor declining. To constitute a genuine advance, progress must conserve whatever was good or true in the old and transform it by the addition of the new, resulting in a greater good or a larger truth.

These things being so, the only sound judge who can say that a change is genuinely a step of progress is one who is thoroughly and sympathetically acquainted with the achievements of the past, and one who can formulate and defend the moral or intellectual standards by which he assesses the new as an advance in goodness or truth. If one is ignorant of the past, as so many of our contemporaries are (even those who regard themselves as educated men and women), one is likely to treat as a novelty something that is really not a novelty at all. And if one does not have clear standards by which to evaluate the changes that are taking place, one cannot defend the judgment that the change, even if it involves a genuine novelty, is really an advance.

Here we see that a paradox exists: namely, that many of our contemporaries who applaud novelties in thought lack or deny the very standards to which they would have to appeal in order to claim that the novelties they applaud constitute genuine progress. Let me say in passing that I am for progress in human affairs and that I think progress has been made, not only in technology and in science, but also in philosophy, and even in theology and in religion. (The ecumenical movement and the work of the Council are cases in point.) But many of the novelties that are applauded by our contemporaries—especially in the arts and in philosophy and theology—are not progress. Many of them are not even novelties. They only appear to be so to those who are ignorant of the past.

(2) *Self-pity and despair.* A second characteristic of the contemporary mind is its sense that the plight or situation of man today is unique, *and uniquely difficult*. This is accompanied by intense self-pity, almost despair over the torment of having to be alive and carry on in the world as it is today.

It is true that great changes have taken place in this century, especially in all the external features and arrangements of our human environment, changes produced mainly by technological and institutional advances. It is true that this is the century in which such changes have taken place at an accelerated pace and in ever increasing volume. Let us grant that the multiplicity and rapidity of change in the external aspects of life are discomfoting or upsetting—certainly challenging and perplexing. But it is not true that the essential features of human life have been greatly altered, or that life is any more difficult to live or to live well than it ever was. In some respects, it is easier; in some respects, it may be harder. But, on balance, faced with the problem of how to make a good life for ourselves, we cannot say that the problem is more difficult. And we certainly cannot say that it has now become an impossible

problem to solve—that we are doomed to defeat before we start.

Nor is it true to say that human life has been so radically altered by the external changes that have taken place in this century that the past no longer has anything to say to us that is worth listening to—no wisdom from which we can learn, no relevant truth or insight. (The present generation of college students appears to regard anything before 1945 as strictly Neanderthal! Their almost total disregard—more than that, contempt—for the past is rearing a generation of barbarians.)

All around us—in our colleges and among our avant-garde artists and our intellectuals—we hear that life has become meaningless, purposeless, absurd, vile, intolerable. They project their own failures, failures of thought and character, upon the world around them, and upon life itself. Life is no harder today, no more difficult than it ever was. It is not what life has done to them, but what they have made of it, or *failed to make of it*, that leads them to despair, to anguish and to a general nihilism.

The two points I have just made about the state of the contemporary mind bear directly on the new theology being publicized under the slogan “God is dead,” and the new Christianity that aims to be a religionless or completely secular Christianity.

Let me now ask: What is new about these things? What is true about them? To answer these questions, I am going to examine three possible interpretations the statement “God is dead.” The first is the existential interpretation: *that God does not exist*. The second the conceptual interpretation: *that we must discard old and adopt a new conception of God*. The third the pistical interpretation: *that man’s belief in God has died—or is dying, vanishing*.

THE EXISTENTIAL INTERPRETATION

First of all, let us dismiss as utter nonsense the literal meaning of the statement “God is dead.” Interpreted literally, the statement would have to mean that God was once alive and that at some moment in history God died. It would certainly not be theologically correct to regard the death of Jesus on the cross at Calvary as the death of God in a strict literal sense. There is, of course, a metaphorical sense in which that event can be spoken of as the death of God, but only by those who adheres strictly to the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation. This can hardly be what the new theologians mean by the death of God; but if it is not what they mean, then there is no other historic event that can be referred to

the actual death of the God in whom Christians, prior to his death, believed, and whose existence they had, up to that moment, correctly affirmed.

What existential meaning remains? Only one: *God does not exist*. This is not a temporal statement, not a statement about an historic event. It must be understood as asserting that there is no God, not now, not ever in the past, nor ever in the future. This, of course, is the position of the atheist—the man who clearly denies the existence of God, and even sometimes tries to advance arguments in support of his denial. But the clear, hard-headed atheist does not then go on using the word “God” for other things. He does not declare God nonexistent, and then build a theology around the nonexistence of God. Our new theologians—our “death of God theologians”—are atheists. They admit this, or at least some of them do; but since, if they simply admitted this, there would be nothing new, or startling, or attention-getting about their position, they are loath to leave the matter in such a clear light.

Listen to their manner of speech. I quote two passages, interpreting the meaning of “God is dead,” from *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, by Altizer and Hamilton:

...There is no God and...there never has been. This position is traditional atheism of the old-fashioned kind, and it does seem hard to see how it could be combined, except very unstably, with Christianity of any of the Western religions.

...There once was a God to whom adoration, praise, and trust were appropriate, possible, and even necessary, but now there is no such God. This is the position of the death of God or radical theology. It is an atheist position, but with a difference. If there was a God, and if there now isn't, it should be possible to indicate why this change took place, when it took place, and who was responsible for it. (p. x.)

What we have here, in short, is almost incredible: one has to see the words in print in order to believe that anyone could write such Orwellian double-talk. “Slavery is freedom,” the slaves are taught to say in 1984. “Atheism is a new theology,” the new theologians are trying to persuade us to say in 1966. If we get rid of the double-talk, what have we left? Atheism is *not* a theology, but a *denial* of theology. The “death of God movement” should be described as the death, not of God, but of theology.

THE CONCEPTUAL INTERPRETATION

Let me begin by offering you some more statements from the book by Altizer and Hamilton:

...The idea of God and the word God itself are in need of radical reformulation. Perhaps totally new words are needed: perhaps a decent silence about God should be observed; but ultimately, a new treatment of the idea and the word can be expected, however unexpected and surprising it may turn out to be.

...Certain concepts of God, often in the past confused with the classical Christian doctrine of God, must be destroyed: for example, God as problem solver, absolute power, necessary being, the object of ultimate concern. (pp. x-xi)

That the difficulties of human discourse about God and that the weakness of man's efforts to understand God require us to observe a decent modesty and a proper humility about the very best we can achieve in thinking about God—this is not new, not in the least. It is as old as Western theology itself. We find this attitude controlling the theological approach of Augustine, Maimonides and Aquinas. Gnosticism (claiming too much for our understanding or our knowledge of God) is one of the great traditional theological errors. Here the novelty of the new theology—to the new theologians themselves and to those who are taken in by them—is at most a specious novelty, born of vast ignorance of traditional theology.

On the positive side, I wish to make only two points, both of which can be defended to the hilt against all comers.

(1) If we affirm the existence of God, *we cannot do so without employing the notion of being or existence*. That notion cannot become irrelevant or inappropriate to our conception of God *if we affirm God's existence*. And even if, as atheists, we deny God's existence, the central notion remains the notion of being or existence; for what are we denying except that God exists? And what are we refusing to assert except that God has being, that God exists? To affirm God in any other way—*in any way that omits reference to existence or being*—is to deny God's existence; and this is atheism

(2) The affirmation that God exists requires two notes to be present in our conception of God. Unless these two notes are present in our conception of God, it is meaningless to assert that God exists. One

is the note of *supremacy* in the order of being. God must be conceived as the supreme being: *that than which no greater being can be conceived*. To conceive of God as being less than this is again tantamount to denying God's existence.

The other element that must be present in our conception of God is the reference to God as the cause of being. If everything else that exists could exist just as it does without being caused to be by God, then—though God might still exist—we would have no grounds whatsoever for asserting his existence. In short, I am saying that the assertion of God's existence is meaningful only if we conceive God (1) as the supreme being and (2) as the cause of the existence of all the other beings that exist.

These two points being granted, many difficult theological questions remain unanswered, of course; but the new theology, unlike the old, contributes nothing to answering them. One such question is the question concerning the immanence and transcendence of God. Here the old theology helps us to understand why and how God is *both* immanent and transcendent; but the new theology tries to insist exclusively upon God's immanence in the world, and entirely to deny his transcendence. I suspect that the new theologians would be surprised to learn that in doing so, they had become pantheists. And they would probably also be offended by the view of this matter taken by the Jewish community in Amsterdam when they condemned Spinoza as an atheist—rightly, in my judgment—precisely because he, as a pantheist, denied God's transcendence.

The new theologians make much of the fact that “our language about God is always inadequate and imperfect.” Anyone who has read Maimonides or Aquinas must wonder at the novelty of this remark. Consider the pages in Maimonides about the care we must take in speaking of God—God the ineffable, the not-to-be-named. Consider the subtle distinctions of Aquinas with regard to the names we use in speaking of God.

I would like to add just one observation here, based on these distinctions. In the sense in which we, and other corporeal things, *exist*. God does *not* exist. In the sense in which God *exists*, we—and all other finite things—do *not* exist. Yet there is an analogy of being that permits us to understand the affirmation that, in some common sense of the term, both God and we do exist, though not in univocally the same sense.

THE PISTICAL INTERPRETATION

According to this interpretation of “God is dead,” what is being said is that we live in a secular society; that, for many men alive today, God plays no significant part in their lives, their thoughts, their actions, their hopes; that many men today find, or think they have found, that they can get along practically, emotionally and intellectually, without any reference to God. In short, God is dead for them; or, more strictly, *the belief in God has died in them*. They declare, as atheists, that God does not exist, and they are *not in the least troubled by their atheism*.

What is new about such secularism? About such disbelief or unbelief? It has always existed—in every age—beginning, most dramatically, perhaps, with the Jews whom Moses found worshipping the Golden Calf when he came down from Mt. Sinai with the Tablets of the Lord. In every generation, there are probably far fewer men who are genuinely religious than may appear upon the surface. The fact that in prior generations there *appeared to be* many more “religious men” than now may be simply due to our failure to distinguish between *superstition* and *religion*.

In other words, the rise of secularism, and its spread in our time, may not actually be a reduction in the small number of men who, in any age, are truly religious, but rather a reduction in the number of those whose superstitions may make them *look as if* they are religious, but who really are not. (In the 20th century, such men have other superstitions—the superstitions that constitute all the pseudo-religions of our secular society.)

This is not the place to go into all the many and varied causes of the secularism that seems to be so rampant today. Among them, undoubtedly, is the increase of atheism, which may result from the current misunderstanding of the relation of science to theology.

Whatever the causes, the question we must consider here is this: What should be the attitude of religious men—and especially of theologians—to secularism, to disbelief or unbelief? Should they adopt it and embrace it, as the new theology and radical or secularized Christianity tries to do? Or should they try to correct and overcome it, as the old theology and orthodox Christianity tried to do?

The answer, it seems to me, is obvious, and without need of explanation, argument, or defense, except to say that what we have here is some more double-talk “Religionless Christianity” (or “secular-

ized religion”) is as much self-contradictory double-talk as “atheistic theology.”

Moral philosophy is not religion. Social do-gooding is not religion: working for peace or for racial integration is not religion. Being a follower of Christ as one might be a follower of Socrates or of Gandhi (whose lives and precepts deserve to be imitated and followed)—this is not religion. Just as affirming God’s existence requires, us to conceive of him as supreme being and as cause of being, so nothing can claim to be religion—distinct from philosophy, from worthy conduct, etc.—unless it appeals to God’s revelation of himself to man, and to the operation of God’s grace in human life. Religion, so conceived; cannot be secularized.

THE REAL QUESTION

I come finally to the only clear and sensible question that is raised by the new theologians—the question about atheism itself. Let us consider the question in the form in which Bishop Robinson puts it in his book, *The New Reformation?* Can a truly contemporary person *not* be an atheist?

Let me restate the question just a little: Must a truly contemporary person, a person fully acquainted with all genuine advances in science and philosophy, and one who lives under the conditions of contemporary society, with its atomic bombs, its moral corruption, etc., must such a person, to be honest and clear-headed, be an atheist?

I have already commented on one part of this question. There is nothing about the conditions of contemporary life that calls for atheism—not in the least. Life is now no more difficult to live well than it ever was in the past. But even if it were, that would not require contemporary persons to become atheists. On the contrary, it might lead them in the opposite direction; since, if God exists, man might then obtain the divine help he needs to surmount the difficulties inherent to the present situation.

What remains to be considered is whether modern science and philosophy require us to be atheists. I have reviewed everything that I know about our most recent discoveries in cosmology, in atomic physics, in biology and genetics, in the theory of evolution, in psychology and psychiatry, and I find nothing here—not a single fact nor a tenable hypothesis—that requires the denial of God’s existence; nor even one that introduces new difficulties into our thinking about the existence of God, or that puts obstacles in the way of


our affirming His existence.

As for recent advances in philosophy, let me make three brief observations. (1) Materialism in metaphysics does, of course, require atheism. It always did. There is nothing new about this. There are some contemporary exponents of materialism who have refined that position and tried to resolve some of its inherent difficulties, but that does not alter the picture. The present arguments for materialism are not so absolutely and finally binding on the contemporary mind that it must be said that a truly contemporary person cannot avoid being an atheist.

(2) Existentialism? There are two varieties of existentialism: (a) religious or Christian existentialism and (b) atheistic existentialism. In the latter, atheism is itself the root of the whole philosophical position, not its conclusion or consequence.

(3) Finally, there are all the Anglo-American forms of analytic and linguistic philosophy which Paul Van Buren makes the source of his atheism, or perhaps I should say his agnosticism. I am as well acquainted with the accomplishments of the analytic and linguistic philosophers as Dr. Van Buren—more so, I dare say—and I find their critique of metaphysical discourse, including natural theology, and their analysis of the use of the term “God” and of the arguments for God’s existence, naive in the extreme. It is based in part on their massive ignorance of the subtleties of traditional theology, and in part on their misunderstanding of metaphysics itself. The great theologians of the past were greater masters of the liberal arts—the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, the arts of manipulating words and making distinctions in modes of discourse—than the linguistic and analytic philosophers of the present day.

I would suggest to Dr. Van Buren, if he is concerned about the use of words in discourse about God, that he devote his attention to the language of the new, not the old, theology. It is more in need of therapeutic analysis.

Hence my answer to Bishop Robinson’s question is simply and flatly *No*. No, it is *not* necessary for a truly contemporary person to be an atheist; and I find no arguments or reasons, no facts or evidences, in Bishop Robinson’s writings, or in those of the other new theologians, which support the opposite answer. 

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It may interest those of you who are not aware that at the time he wrote this, Dr. Adler considered himself a pagan. His definition: *one who does not worship the God of Christians, Jews, or Muslims: irreligious persons*. He subsequently converted to Christianity in 1984. He devotes an entire chapter of his conversion, in his second autobiography *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror*.

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