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GOD AND MODERN MAN

by

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Part 1 of 3

I. INTRODUCTION

A. 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 or the Christian religion. (New Yorker, Time, Look, the Sunday supplements, etc.)

1. If theology and religion are living things, they, like everything else alive, must be subject to change and growth. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the effort to modernize them.
2. Nor is it surprising that the recent discussions of the death of God should have aroused such widespread interest or at least attention.
 - a. 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.
 - b. Add to that the fact that the phrase “death of God” is a catchy slogan that Madison Avenue would have been proud to have invented, and the popular excitement about the new theology is neither surprising nor difficult to understand.
3. What is surprising and difficult to understand is that the discussion of the new theology—not only in the popular press, but also in learned circles—should be so uncritical.
 - a. From all the sound and fury that has attended the “death of God” movement, one might be led to expect a great intellectual event: some new truths in theology, some new insights some advances or reforms in religion
 - b. As I shall try to show you as plainly as possible, this is simply not the case.
 - c. I find it difficult to understand why, in the presence of so much loose talk—or worse, double-talk—no one seems willing to call a spade a spade.
 - d. I propose to do just that in this brief critique of the new or radical theology that has taken for its slogan the Nietzschean aphorism about the death of God, and has coined some new slogans of its own, such as “religionless Christianity,” “atheistic religion,” and “secularized Christianity.”

B. *What is new about this new theology?*

1. Atheism is not new. Nor is irreligion. Nor is secularism.
2. 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.
3. What is new is a set of completely phony excuses for atheism—what is new is extraordinary ignorance in high places, in men who profess to be

teachers or at least students of theology—not to mention bishops and others who regard themselves as religious leaders.

4. *You detect some passion behind these remarks of mine?*

You are right. I cannot deal with this subject without passion.

a. But the passion is not against atheism or irreligion.

(1) I respect the honest, clear-minded atheist, who denies that God exists, and tries to offer us arguments or reasons for his denial.

(2) I respect the honest, critically-minded agnostic, who denies that we can ever know whether God exists or not, and treats religious belief as a pure act of faith incapable of being supported or challenged by rational analysis or empirical knowledge of the world.

(3) I even respect the person who, in his horror of all the superstitions that have attended the practise of religion, rejects religion itself as something from which man should emancipate himself.

b. But I cannot respect ignorance pretending to be learned or wise. I hate loose-talk and double-talk. Above all, I abominate the intellectual irresponsibility of those who, about such important matters as those with which theology and religion are concerned, take positions that they cannot defend;—or, worse, make assertions for which they do not even offer cogent reasons or evidence.

c. So much for my passions. (I hope you will recognize—and frankly confess, to yourself at least, your own passions about the subject of this evening’s discussion). Now let me tell you how I propose to proceed:

First: Since I claim that the new theology is not theology at all but atheism, I am going to try to explain the conception of God that is the pivotal term in this discussion,
the conception of that which is
denied by the atheist
affirmed by the theist
believed in by the religious
thought to be beyond the grasp of our knowledge by the
agnostic

Second, in the light of this analysis, I am going to give you three interpretations of the slogan “God is dead,” which, I hope, will clarify for you the death of God movement in contemporary thought and discussion.

Third, I will then try to point out the errors and the ignorance that underlie this movement in contemporary thought and discussion.

Fourth and finally, I will deal with what is for me the most difficult subject of all—the meaning of religion itself.

II. THE CONCEPTION OF GOD

A. Three Preliminary remarks:

1. In what follows, I will be talking purely as a philosopher, not as a man of religious faith, not as a dogmatic theologian, but as a natural theologian. (Natural theology is a chapter in metaphysics, and a branch of philosophy—quite apart from religious belief—from faith, from dogmas.)

2. I am not speaking as an apologist for the traditional religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity, Mohammedanism—thought what I have to say as a philosopher about the meaning of God—will accord with the conception of God in the three religions of the West, and will seriously raise the question whether that conception is present in any of the so-called religions of the East.

Please make the effort to understand what I have just said:

a. I said only “raise a question”; I did not say how that question should be answered.

b. I said “so-called religions,” because here, too I am raising a question—a most serious question—about the nature of religion itself, which, as I hope to show you, is so radically different East and West, that the term “religion” is almost equivocal when we speak of Western religion and Eastern religion.

3. In this effort to explain, philosophically, the meaning of God, I am going to try to state the conception in its barest, minimal terms.

a. I am going to state three points that are essential—indispensable—to any conception of God, no matter what else it adds.

b. I am not going beyond this bare minimum to develop more fully the conception of God, nor am I going to undertake to prove that God, so conceived, exists. (That would take another lecture much longer than this one.)

c. I am only trying to make clear what is affirmed by those who affirm God’s existence, and what is denied by those who deny it.

B. First point: *God is other, i.e., transcendent*

1. Let us begin with a hypothetical question: IF God exists (IF, IF, IF), what is God like ?

2. There are only three possible answers to this question, and they are exclusive as well as exhaustive.

- a. *Totally unlike* everything else in nature which we know or are able to know. God is like the knowable natural universe in *no respect whatsoever*.
- b. *Totally like* everything else which we know or are able to know. God is like the things of the knowable universe in all respects
- c. *Both like and unlike*: God is like everything else in nature that we know, in certain respects, and unlike everything else we know, in other respects.
3. Now let us examine these three answers, and see which one we must accept, and why we must reject the other two.

a. *Totally unlike*. What are the consequences of saying this?

(1) God is a totally meaningless word, for any meaning that we attach to the word “God” will conceive an object that has something in common with the objects referred to by other meaningful words in our vocabulary.

(2) Atheism, then, is meaningless as theism, for it is as senseless to deny the existence of God as to affirm it. No meaningful questions can be asked about God, except, perhaps, how men ever came to use so meaningless a word, and still everywhere continue to use it (as the new theology and all other current forms of atheism do.)

b. *Totally like*. Consequences?

(1) God must be conceived as corporeal, finite, sensible, mutable, imperfect—for these are the attributes of all the other natural things we know—

(2) In which case, God should be as knowable, and knowable in the same way, as all the other things we know. But this does not seem to be the case. God cannot be investigated by the natural sciences.

c. *Both like and unlike*. If the first two alternatives are not tenable, as I think they are not, we are left—by exhaustion—with this third alternative.

What does it mean?

(1) That God is like everything else we know or try to know with respect to being and whatever properties belong to anything that is conceived as a being.

Note: I am not saying that God exists. I am only saying that God must be conceived as a being, about which we can meaningfully ask whether or not it exists. Since everything else about which we can ask, whether or not it exists, must also be conceived as a being. God and everything else are alike in this basic respect.

(2) But, while like everything else with respect to being, God is unlike everything else with respect to mode of being.

(a) Thus, everything else is conceived by us

material or corporeal being

mutable being

sensible being (directly or indirectly)

finite being (this is difficult and needs` explanation later: in re cosmos)

(b) Now if God were like everything else in mode of being as well as in being, God would be totally like everything else, in which case we would be giving the second answer, that we have seen we must reject.

(c) Hence God is both like everything else in respect of being and unlike everything else in mode of being, that is,

incorporeal being

immutable being

non-sensible being

infinite being

4. *Further explication of the third answer*

a. God must be conceived as a transcendent being—as a being that is apart from the whole of the known and knowable cosmos (from elementary particles to galaxies).

(1) This statement about God’s transcendence does not preclude or deny God’s immanence in the world by his power or action.

(I am not here concerned with all the difficult problems raised by questions concerning God’s immanence.)

(2) I am only saying that God cannot be conceived as totally immanent in the world—as either a part of it or as identical with the whole of it.

(In short, I am saying that pantheism is atheism, for pantheism denies God’s transcendence. The Jewish community in Amsterdam was quite right in excommunicating Spinoza as an atheist.)

b. To understand the conception of God as a transcendent being is possible only for those who understand the analogy of being.

(1) Brief explanation: two things are analogous in any respect if they are at once the same and diverse in that given respect.

(a) Ordinarily, if two things are both the same and diverse they are the same in this particular respect and diverse in some other particular respect. We then call them similar or different, not analogous.

(b) They are analogous in a respect only if in that one respect they are at once both the same and diverse.

(c)

One example will suffice: a sharp sound, a sharp point, and a sharp taste.

All three are sharp but diversely so.

And you cannot ever say what it is to be sharp, apart from your understanding of what it is to be a sharp sound, a sharp point, a sharp taste.

So you cannot understand what it is to be apart from your understanding of mutable and immutable being, material and immaterial being, etc.

(2) The failure to understand the analogy of being has been the pivotal inadequacy in all of modern Protestant theology.

One example:

Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity*

The attributes of God and man are the same.

Hence God and man are the same.

Six generations of German Protestant theologians from Schleiermacher to Karl Barth and the present day, tried to answer him. They all failed.

No Protestant theologian, not even those who have rejected the Christian humanism to which Feuerbach's thesis leads, has ever pointed out the simple error made by F.

C. *Second point: God is not only a transcendent being, but also a necessary being.*

1. The discovery of this essential or indispensable element in the conception of God is the great accomplishment of St. Anselm's ontological argument concerning God.

Let me read you his own statement of the argument.

2. This argument was misunderstood by St. Anselm himself, and it has been misunderstood by almost all who have criticized it.

- a. It does not prove the existence of God, as St. Anselm thought.
- b. What it proves is that you cannot conceive God except as a being that cannot not exist (i.e., a necessary being).
- c. All other beings are contingent beings, beings which as you conceive them, you conceive as capable of not existing.

(Here again we have the analogy of being: necessary and contingent)

- d. The crux of the argument:
 - (1) Among the things you can conceive, there is at least one than which nothing greater can be conceived.
 - (2) None of the things of the knowable cosmos corresponds to this concept, for with respect to any of them, a greater can be conceived.

- (3) Only God, a transcendent being, not apart of the cosmos, corresponds to the concept of that which nothing greater can be conceived.
 - (4) Hence, God—than which nothing greater can be conceived—must be conceived as the supreme being, and the supreme being, unlike all others, is the only necessary being, the only being that cannot not exist.
- e. But remember, please remember, once God is thus conceived, the question whether God exists still remains as open as before.
- (1) I know that this is difficult to understand but you must try.
 - (2) I am saying that we must still ask—about a being that is conceived as necessarily existing—whether or not it actually does exist.

DOES THERE EXIST A BEING WHICH CANNOT NOT EXIST?

To ask this question is simply to ask whether there is in reality—outside our minds—anything that corresponds to the conception of God that we have formed in our minds.

Because the conception of God that we have formed in our minds is the conception of a supreme being and one that necessarily exists,

that is no reason at all to suppose that anything actually exists that corresponds to our conception.

- D. *Third point: God is not only a transcendent being and the supreme being, but also the cause of the being of whatever else exists.*
- 1. First of all, I must ask you to try to understand a difficult distinction between cause of change or becoming and cause of being
 - a. All natural things when they operate as cause only cause effects in the order of change of becoming.
 - (1) No natural thing causes the being of any other natural thing.
 - (2) Progenitors—parents—do not cause the being of their offspring, but only their coming to be, their generation.
 - (3) If they had the power to cause being, they could exercise that power to prevent non-being, which obviously they cannot do.
 - b. Either the being of whatever exists in the world has a cause or it has no cause.
 - c. If it has a cause that cause must be God, because no natural things can cause the being of any other natural thing:
 - 2. If I were arguing for the existence of God, I would try to show you that contingent beings need a cause of their existence, and that only God can cause existence; therefore, since contingent things exist, God exists as the cause of their being.

3. But I am not arguing for the existence of God. I am only trying to show you that the third indispensable element in the conception of God is the notion of God as *cause of being*.

Why is this so? The answer is in terms of the principle of parsimony that governs all scientific and philosophical thinking, even thinking in natural theology.

- a. The principle says that we have no justification for any theoretical construct—whether it be the conception of elementary particles or the conception of God—unless we can show that it has some explanatory value.
 - b. There is absolutely no need to appeal to God in order to explain all the changes that take place in the world of nature.

Natural causes—causes of becoming and change—suffice to explain all the processes of nature.
 - c. Hence, God as theoretical construct—a philosophical conception in the sphere of natural theology—can have explanatory value only if God is conceived as cause of being—the one and only cause of the existence of all natural things.
 - d. Unless God is so conceived, the principle of parsimony tells us, we have no justification for conceiving God at all.
4. Again let me be sure to remind you that the necessity for conceiving God as cause of being, or not conceiving God at all, is no argument for the existence of God.

For when we have conceived God as cause of being, we still have to argue that everything which exists needs a cause of its being;

and this, I could show you, is by no means easy to prove.

I am acquainted with several very difficult obstacles in the way of proving this.

E. *Summary:*

1. All that I have shown so far is that clear thinking in natural theology leads to a conception of God as a transcendent being; as a supreme being that exists necessarily, not contingently; and as the cause of the being of all the natural things that exist.
2. This involves a fundamental disjunction in being between nature and the supernatural,

between the world of things in space and time and that which exists out of space and time—no where and eternally.
3. The atheist is one who denies the supernatural; the theist is one who affirms it.
4. I have not told you that the atheist is wrong or that the theist is right.

I have only told you what it means to be a theist and what it means to be an atheist.

5. The so-called “new theologians”—
 not only such confused young men as Hamilton, Van Buren,
 Altizer, and Vahanian,
 but also their more eminent predecessors, such as
 Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
 are all atheists who deny that God exists and still
 persist in talking about God.
6. We are now ready for an analysis of their views on the subject,
 but before we engage in that, let me call your attention to one
 thing:
 the writers I have just mentioned, together with
 a great many Protestant theologians from the 19th
 century on,
 are simply ignorant of the points I have just made
 concerning the conception of God—points that
 are indispensable to the barest minimum of clear
 thinking about God.
 (If I had the time, I could document this to the
 hilt by an appalling array of quotations
 revealing this ignorance.)



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