

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## **GOD AND MODERN MAN**

by

**Mortimer J. Adler**  
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Part 2 of 3

### III. THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE STATEMENT THAT GOD IS DEAD.

A. *Preliminary:* The three interpretations are:

1. The existential interpretation: *that God does not exist.*
2. The conceptual interpretation: *that we must discard the old and adopt some new conception of God.*
3. The pistical interpretation: *that man's belief in God has died—or is dying, diminishing, vanishing.*

*Let me now comment briefly on each of these three interpretations.*

B. *The existential interpretation:*

1. First of all, let us dismiss as utter nonsense—as the most revolting double-talk—the literal meaning of the statement that God is dead.
  - a. Understood literally, this would have to mean that God was once alive, as your grandfather was, and that he is now dead—that at some moment in historical time, God passed from the living to the dead.
 

—In the light of what I have said earlier, I hope I do need to spend a moment—not even second—to tell any of you why that is preposterous.
  - b. It would certainly not be theologically correct to regard the death of Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary as the death of God in a strictly literal sense.
    - (1) There is, of course, a metaphorical sense in which that historical event can be spoken of as the death of God, but only by those who adhere strictly to the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and understand them as profound mysteries.
    - (2) This can hardly be what the new theologians mean by the death of God in view of their denial of the orthodox dogmas just mentioned.
    - (3) But if it is not what they mean, then there is no other historical event that can be referred to as 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.
2. What existential meaning remains for the statement, *God is dead?* Only one: *God does not exist.*
  - a. This is not a temporal statement; it is not a statement about an historical event.
  - b. It must be understood as asserting that there is no God, not now, not ever in the past, nor ever in the future.

- c. 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.
  - (1) But the clear-headed, honest atheist then does not go on using the word “God” for other things.
  - (2) He does not declare God non-existent and then build a theology around the non-existence of God.
- d. All of our new theologians—our death of God theologians are atheists.
  - (1) They all deny the existence of the supernatural.
  - (2) They admit this. But since, if they simply admitted this and stopped right there, there would be nothing new at all, nothing startling or attention-getting about their position, they are loath to leave the matter in such a clear light.
    - (a) Instead, they indulge in the most outrageous double-talk to try to persuade their readers that with the death of God, a new theology has come into existence; or what is even more absurd, a new era in man’s religious life.
    - (b) If we wipe out the double-talk, what do we have:
      - atheism—no God
      - secularism—no religion

Atheism is not a theology, but the denial of theology.

Secularism is not religion, but the exact opposite of religion.

The “death of God” movement should be described as the death, not of God, but of theology and religion.

### C. *The conceptual interpretation*

1. It is not God that is dead, but rather the old and traditional conception of God—the conception that I have presented earlier in this lecture. That dead conception of God must now be replaced by a new and living one, one that has some vitality and viability in the modern world.

Listen to what some of our modern theologians have to say on this score. I quote from a book by Altizer and Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*.

“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”

2. 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 our thinking about God—this is not new—not in the least.
  - a. It is as old as Western theology itself.
  - b. The doctrine of analogy (of which the new theologians are completely ignorant) is the great safeguard against claiming too much for our understanding of God.
  - c. Gnosticism which makes exorbitant claims for man’s knowledge or understanding of God has always been regarded as a profound theological error.
3. Here, then, it would seem, the novelty of the new theology is at most a specious novelty, born of vast ignorance of traditional theology.
4. 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.
5. One of the new theologians, Paul Van Buren, bases his dismissal of the traditional conception of God as meaningless, on current vogues in analytical or linguistic philosophy.
  - a. I am as well acquainted with the accomplishments of the analytic and linguistic philosophers as Mr. Van Buren—I daresay more so—and I find their critique of metaphysical discourse and natural theology naive in the extreme, based in part on their ignorance of the subtleties of metaphysics and theology; and in part on their misunderstanding of metaphysics itself.
  - b. I have examined Mr. Van Buren’s critical effort, as well as the philosophical work on which he bases it, and I must report that I find nothing that would cause me to alter in the slightest respect the philosophical conception of God that I have presented to you.
 

... There are no rules of precision and significance in the use of words,

...there are no logical principles of soundness in concept-formation or governing theoretical construction in science and philosophy

that are violated by the conception of God presented earlier or that would call for any modification in that conception.

#### D. *The pistical interpretation*

1. According to this interpretation of “God is dead,” what is being said can be expressed in one or more of the following statements:
  - a. Not God, but the belief in God has died.

- b. Whereas atheists in the past may have been troubled by their denial of God's existence, the new atheists are not in the least troubled by their atheism, for men now find that they can get along perfectly well without God.
  - c. We live in a secular society in which God plays no significant part in the lives, thoughts, or actions of men; men today find that they can get along practically, emotionally, and intellectually without reference to God.
2. If we separate assertions about God's existence or non-existence from statements about the role that God plays in human life and thought, then Martin Buber's phrase "the eclipse of God" would be more accurate here than the phrase "death of God. "
- a. There is no incompatibility between affirming the existence of God, on the one hand, and recognizing the sociological and psychological fact of the eclipse of God in the contemporary Western world, on the other hand.
  - ... Traditional theists and the atheists of the new theology might very well agree about the eclipse of God in contemporary life, though they probably would not offer the same explanation of it.
  - b. However, the sense in which Buber means "the eclipse of God"—a temporary phenomenon that will eventually pass—is incompatible with atheism.
3. What concerns us here is the explanation offered by the death of God theologians for the disappearance of God from human life—for the increase of atheism or disbelief in God and for the spread of secularism.

Let me deal, first, with the question of atheism or disbelief in God;

and, second, with the difficult question of secularism and religion.

#### IV. THE QUESTION OF ATHEISM OR DISBELIEF IN GOD

- A. The question about atheism, as raised by Bishop Robinson (in *The New Reformation*) is, in my judgment, the only clear and sensible question raised by the new theologians.

*CAN A TRULY CONTEMPORARY PERSON NOT BE AN ATHEIST?*

Let me spell this question out more fully, in the following manner:

Must a truly contemporary person—

a person fully acquainted with all the genuine advances in science and philosophy—

and one who lives under the conditions of contemporary society, with its atomic bombs, its technological and other explosions, its moral corruptions, etc.

must not such a person, in order to be honest  
and clear-headed,

be an atheist?

B. The question as thus restated has two parts.

1. One refers to the incompatibility of belief in God with the present state or scientific and philosophical knowledge.
2. The other refers to the incompatibility of belief in God with the present state **of** our lives in the world as it is today.

Let me deal with the second of these two things first.

C. *The state of contemporary life*

1. It is true that great changes have taken place in this century,  
especially in all the external features and arrangements of our human environment—  
produced mainly by technological and institutional changes.
2. 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 furthermore grant that such multiplicity and rapidity of change in the external aspects of life are discomforting, even upsetting, certainly challenging and perplexing.

3. 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 the past.

In some respects, it is much easier than ever before. In some respects, it may be harder.

But on balance we cannot say that, faced with the problem of how to make a good life for'ourselves, the problem is more difficult than it was in the past.

And we certainly cannot say that it has now become an impossible problem to solve—

or that we are doomed to defeat before we even try.

4. All around us we hear—especially from our intellectuals, from our avant-garde writers, and from our disaffected and alienated college students—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.

- a. They indulge themselves in intense self-pity, almost despair, over the torment of having to be alive and carry on in the world as it is today.

- b. It is not what life has done to them, but what they have made, or failed to make, of it, that leads them to despair, to anguish, and to a general nihilism.
5. I have said all this quite explicitly in order to say that there is nothing about the conditions of contemporary life that calls for atheism as the proper response.
- a. I claim that life is no more difficult to live well now than ever was in the past, and
    - so if belief in God ever played a role in the living of a good life on earth, that role is unchanged.
  - b. Even if life were now more difficult, that would not require the contemporary person to become an atheist.
    - On the contrary, it might more reasonable lead him in the opposite direction;
      - since, if God exists, belief in him might help a man to overcome the difficulties he is now confronted with.
  - c. The crux of the matter must, therefore, rest with the present state of our scientific and philosophical knowledge.

It must be this that Bishop Robinson has in mind when he suggests that a truly contemporary person cannot avoid being an atheist.

Let's look at that side of the picture.

D. *The present state of our scientific and philosophical knowledge*

1. I have reviewed everything that I know about our most recent discoveries in
- cosmology*: the vast expanses of the galactic universe\_the competing hypotheses: big-bang vs. steady state
  - atomic physics*: our new knowledge of elementary particles and of quantum mechanics
  - biology, genetics, and the theory of evolution* especially the fossil species of man and the molecular biology of DNA
  - psychology and psychiatry*, including Freud's psychoanalytical theories of the genesis of man's belief in God

and I find nothing here—neither facts nor established hypotheses—that requires the denial of God's existence.

I would go further, and say that, in the whole range of our currently accepted scientific knowledge and understanding of the world,

I find nothing that introduces a single new difficulty into our thinking about God,

or presents an intellectual obstacle to our affirming God's existence.

In short, so far as science goes, nothing has been so far discovered about the world that would require me to alter in the least the philosophical conception of God that I presented earlier in this lecture;

and nothing that I can learn from science has any bearing on the thinking that I must do when I address myself to the question whether God, as thus conceived, exists or does not.

*Please note one qualification on what I have just said:*

I did not say that future discoveries which science may make may not be decisive with regard to the question of God's existence.

That is a possibility—and we must always be open to it, and keep it before our minds.

I am very much aware of one such possibility, that I will be glad to discuss if called upon after the lecture.

But possibilities are not facts; conjectures are not knowledge.

I am only saying that the present state of our scientific knowledge of the world does not warrant Bishop Robinson's thesis that a truly contemporary person must be an atheist.

2. *I turn now from science to philosophy. Are there any advances in philosophy that call for atheism?*

a. Materialism in metaphysics does require atheism. But there is nothing new about this. It always did.

There are some contemporary exponents of materialism who have refined that position and tried to resolve some of its inherent difficulties -but this does not alter the picture.

The present arguments for materialism still fall far short of demonstration or proof,

and so it cannot be said that a truly contemporary person cannot avoid being a materialist, if he is philosophically reasonable.

Hence if he can avoid being a materialist, he need not be an atheist on those grounds.

b. *Existentialism?* Existentialism is a philosophical novelty.

Is it this that Bishop Robinson has in mind when he says that a truly contemporary person must be an atheist?

If so, he forgets that there are two varieties of existentialism: *religious or Christian* existentialism (Kierkegaard, Marcel) atheistic existentialism (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre)

And in the latter, atheism is itself the root of the whole philosophical position, not its conclusion or consequence.



The despair or angst of this brand of existentialism stems from its denial of God's existence—its slogan that God is dead—not the other way around.

- c. Finally, *analytic and linguistic philosophy*, of the sort that dominates the English and American academic scene.

I have already commented on the irrelevance of this, in my earlier remarks about the work of Paul Van Buren.

As I pointed out, none of the semantic or logical principles of analytic or linguistic philosophy, would require me to alter the philosophical conception of God that I presented earlier, or would in any change the kind of thinking I would do in trying to answer the question whether God exists.

3. Hence I must conclude that the 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 or to disbelieve in the existence of God.

And I find no arguments or reasons—no facts or evidences—in Bishop Robinson's writings, or in Bishop Pike's, or in the writings of Tillich, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer, or in the lesser breed of new theologians—

which support the opposite answer.




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Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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