

Is God Dead?

Cornelius Van Til

Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company

Philadelphia, PA.

1966

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

1. What Do They Mean?

(A) True Iconoclasm

(B) The Help Of Science And Philosophy

(C) Cox's The Secular City

(D) Altizer's "Creative Negation"

(E) Hamilton's "Radical Theology"

(F) Van Buren's Secular Meaning Of The Gospel

(G) A General View

(1) Jesus, The End-Man

(2) The Messiah Of The Secular City

(3) Jesus Or Martin Luther King

2. "In Defense Of God," By John C. Bennett

(A) Bennett's God Is Also Dead

3. The Great Debate

(A) Is There An Answer?

(B) The New Metaphysic

(C) The Suffering Child

(D) The New Ecumenism

Appreciation is hereby expressed to the following publishers for the use of quotations from their books. Additional acknowledgment is made in the text:

Doubleday Publishing Company for Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*; Braziller Publishers for Vahanian's *Wait Without Idols*; Macmillan Company for Cox's *The Secular City* and van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*; Oxford University Press for Collingwood's *The Idea of History*; Prentice-Hall for Altizer's (ed.) *Truth, Myth, and Symbol*; and Bobbs-Merrill Company for the book *Radical Theology and the Death of God* by Altizer and Hamilton.

That the God-is-dead theology is presently a popular subject for discussion is obvious. Not only religious magazines such as *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* but also secular magazines such as *Time* (April 8), *Newsweek* (April 11), *Look* (April 19) and even *United States News and World Report* (April 18) devote a good deal of discussion to it.

The three outspoken proponents of the God-is-dead theology are Dr. Thomas J. J. Altizer of Emory University, Dr. William Hamilton of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and Dr. Paul van Buren of Temple University. These men have spoken and written of their convictions for some time in their lecture classes and in religious journals. Each of these men has also written an article in *The Christian Century* in the series "How I Am Making up My Mind." Altizer writes on "Creative Negation in Theology" (July 7, 1965). Dr. Hamilton discusses "The Shape of a Radical Theology" (October 6, 1965), and Dr. van Buren deals with "Theology in the Context of Culture" (April 7, 1965).

Besides this, each of these men has written one or more books in which he has set forth his views more fully than can be done in a magazine article. "But now," said the editor of *The Christian Century* (December 1, 1965, p. 1467), "through the ministrations of the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and the *New Yorker*, thousands of pulpits and hundreds of newspaper editorials the general public has been made aware of these men. Debate now rages: it looks as if we shall have a long, hot winter." That hot winter is now past but there are no signs of any cooling off.

Each of us is bound to have some reaction to the debate that now "rages." But lest our reaction be merely emotional and in terms of our accepted traditions alone, we must seek for an intelligent appraisal of the whole situation.

With this in mind we shall first make an attempt to understand what the God-is-dead theologians mean when they say that "God is dead." Following this we shall note some of the current reactions to them and finally give our own evaluation.

1. What Do They Mean?

The God-is-dead theologians are serious and responsible "Christian" theologians and seminary teachers. We shall not dismiss them as "God-is-dead boys." We shall not speak of their theology as a fad, like the fad of the hula-hoop that soon made room for another fad.

That the God-is-dead theology is not a fad is evident from the fact that each of its proponents has, from his student days, been deeply immersed in, if never fully committed to, neo-orthodoxy in so far as neo-orthodoxy went beyond liberal theology. Now they even want to go beyond those that have already gone beyond neo-orthodoxy in a new search for, and a new understanding of, the historical Jesus.

But to say this will not help us much if we are not familiar with modern theology. We therefore add at once that the God-is-dead theologians want to go beyond current neo-orthodox theology because this theology is not sufficiently against historical orthodox theology.

Are these theologians then, you ask, perhaps followers of Friedrich Nietzsche? Do they wish to establish a "transvaluation of all values" by a belligerent attack on the meek and lowly Jesus and on his followers, followers who carve out a heaven of eternal glory for themselves so that upon their arrival there they may look down with malicious glee on those below who writhe in the torments of an eternal hell? "At any rate," says Nietzsche, "the inscription over the gate of the Christian paradise, with its 'eternal bliss,' would read more fittingly, 'Me, too, eternal hate created'—provided that it is fitting to place a truth above the gateway to a lie."¹

No, the God-is-dead theologians are not direct followers of Nietzsche. Theirs is not a theology merely of negation. It is a theology of constructive negation. Theirs is not a theology of hate but a theology of love, even of universal love. Theirs is a theology that looks to Jesus of Nazareth as the one through whose life and death men may be set free. Theirs seeks to be a theology that springs from the picture that the Bible gives of Jesus.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Frances Golfting, New York, 1956, p. 183.

A truly biblical and a truly Christ-centered theology must therefore be as iconoclastic as was Nietzsche, but iconoclastic in the spirit of universal freedom and love.

(A) True Iconoclasm

As true followers of the Jesus of the New Testament, the God-is-dead theologians are also, they say, followers of the best in Christian tradition. The best theologians of the past, they contend, have been the iconoclastic critics of "religious isolationism, of Christian ethnolatry."² Augustine was a true iconoclast. The Reformers were true iconoclasts. The followers of the American revolution were true iconoclasts. But what has happened to this iconoclastic tradition? It has died out today. Let us revive it again. Let us revive it in the interest of the gospel of the freedom of man through Jesus.³

(B) The Help Of Science And Philosophy

But we cannot really revive the true iconoclastic attitude of the best of the Christian tradition unless we do so with the help of modern science and modern philosophy. We cannot call upon the multitude to tear down the images to all the gods of particular peoples with special privileges, unless we set before them the knowledge of the true "God." No, of course we do not mean that there is a true God of whom we have true, verifiable knowledge. We mean precisely the opposite of this. We mean that no one can know God. Immanuel Kant has taught us this and we have learned the lesson once for all: nobody knows or ever will be able to know anything of a God who is transcendent above the universe.

Kant has taught modern science to come of age, to live in terms of its own resources, in short, to do without God. Kant has shown us that the facts of the space-time world reveal the ordering activity of man instead of the providence of God. Kant has shown us more than that. He has shown us that the space-time continuum cannot reveal the activity of a God who himself transcends it. We are now free from the fear of possible intrusion of all that is called supernatural and all that is called miraculous. We are now free from the fear of any such thing as a coming judgment. It is not God's law but our own that we have broken. And for us to break our own law is to say that we have not lived up to our own ideals. We

² Gabriel Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols*, Braziller Publishers, New York, 1964, p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*

can always try again, and no punishment awaits us except that which we inflict upon ourselves.

But in speaking of breaking our own law we have unwittingly left the realm of science and have entered upon the realm of ethics. We spoke of having freedom to obey or not to obey laws did we not? But there is no freedom in nature so far as law is concerned. There is contingency there, but this contingency does not meet us except it be in terms of the category of causality and this category of causality springs from our own mind. So we are still safe. God cannot reveal himself in the realm of causality because this realm of causality is the compound of the idea of pure contingency and the impression of our own categories upon it.

But have we not then, in speaking of the realm of science as the realm of contingency that is correlative to the categories of the human mind, lost our own, as well as God's, transcendence over nature? Is it not a foregone conclusion then that I, as a death-to-God theologian, have to say what I say about the obsolescence of the idea of God? Am I not, so far as I am an empirical self, determined by the causal scheme of things?

Well, here exactly appears the greatness of Immanuel Kant! He has shown how we may and must postulate our ethical freedom at the same time that we, as empirical selves, are involved in the determinism of the laws of nature. According to Kant, our noumenal self is free while our phenomenal self is determined. In saying this, Kant has relieved us from the age long puzzle with respect to freedom and determinism. In one stroke Kant has set us free from the laws of nature and from the laws of God. Not only has Kant set us free from the laws of God as they might affect us through the laws of nature, but he has also set us free from the law of God as it might appear and fetter us in our own moral constitution. As Kant has shown us that the laws of nature spring from the category of causality which springs from ourselves so he has also shown us that the laws of God appearing in our moral life are actually the projections of our own moral ideals. He has shown us that God himself, insofar as he is conceptualized, is a projection of our own ethical consciousness. If we speak of a transcendent God at all after this, we do so with the awareness that we are speaking of him in a figurative sense.

As they thus look back to Kant, the death-of-God theologians can rightfully claim him as their father. But then as they do so, they at once see that the liberal theology of the nineteenth and the neo-orthodoxy of the twentieth century have also claimed Kantian paternity. Modern science, modern philosophy, and modern

theology are equally indebted to Kant. The reason why there is so much harmony among modern science, modern philosophy, and modern theology is that they have a common problematic which derives from Kant.

How can we in any intelligible sense continue to speak of God as transcendent above ourselves and of the world as created and controlled by God when, in the nature of the case, our knowledge is limited to what is immanent in our consciousness? We have set ourselves free from the God who is transcendent, but to do so we have had to make ourselves transcendent. To keep the transcendent God from hemming us in through the laws of the created universe we must ourselves take the place of that God by acting as the source of all law in that universe. We must speak the language of freedom, of creation, of sin, and of ethical advance of the individual and of the race in terms of our own free self, that is, in terms of our self as wholly transcendent. We have now to learn to speak two languages, the language of faith and the language of science. We have to speak the language of pure indeterminate ethical freedom and the language of pure determinate science. Never these twain can meet! Or can they? Van Buren says they can.

The God-is-dead theologians realize full well that they have inherited this problematic from the post-Kantian view of man as he speaks through modern science, modern philosophy, and modern theology. Their own contribution as they see it lies in the fact that they, more than their predecessors and contemporaries, have come of age with respect to this matter. They point out the empirical foundation of the language of transcendence. Other theologians, they contend, have not fully escaped the illusions of a real Santa Claus. But, now the God-is-dead theologians are out to show that the *pater familias* fills the stockings. How much better it is that mature men, men who have to play Santa Claus to their children, should not themselves be the victims of the illusion that there is a real Santa Claus. In particular, how much better it is if Christian theologians learn to come of age and frankly demythologize the gospel. To be sure, men like Rudolph Bultmann have spoken of demythologizing the gospel in order to make it effective in the lives of modern men. We cannot help but admire Bultmann, these theologians argue, since he frankly accepts the purely temporalistic philosophy of Heidegger. On this basis he tries to reinterpret the meaning of the *kerygma* so that it is meaningful for modern man. But even Bultmann did not have the courage of his conviction. He did not carry his demythologizing program far enough. In not carrying his demythologizing effort far enough, he never fully escaped the entanglement between a language of faith and a language of science as he spoke of the gospel. Even a man like Schubert

Ogden, who seeks in turn to go beyond Bultmann by speaking of *Christ Without Myth* (Harper and Row, New York, 1961), has not altogether escaped illusionism.

Perhaps the man who came nearest to seeing the vision that the new theologians see was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. From the prison where he daily faced the threat of death by execution he wrote to the effect that if all being is not to be being unto death, then we must have a gospel that speaks to man in his predicament as he knows it. If the gospel is to have meaning it must be the gospel of Christ, but the gospel of the secular significance of the life and work of Christ. The gospel introduces us to the Secular City.

(C) Cox's The Secular City

Before looking more particularly at the gospel that each of the three death-of-God theologians offers us, we shall take a brief glance at the total picture as it appears to their contemporary, Harvey Cox.

Dr. Cox, though not himself a death-of-God theologian, describes his vision of *The Secular City*. As a true visionary he opens to us the gates of the New Jerusalem as it will be when the death-of-God theologians have finished building it.

Cox speaks first of the coming of the Secular City. Cox finds the story of the development of the secular city in the history of Israel. First Israel learned of the creation of the world. "The Genesis account of Creation is really a form of 'atheistic propaganda.' It is designed to teach the Hebrews that the magical vision, by which nature is seen as a semi-divine force, has no basis in fact... Yahweh, the Creator ... allows man to perceive nature itself in a matter-of-fact way."⁴

Next comes the story of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. In the story of the Exodus we have the "desacralization of politics" as in the creation story we have the "disenchantment of nature." The Exodus "symbolized the deliverance of man out of a sacral-political order and into history and social change, out of religiously legitimized monarchs and into a world where political leadership would be based on power gained by the capacity to accomplish specific social objectives."⁵

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, Macmillan Co., New York, 1965, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

After the Exodus comes Sinai. At Sinai the "deconsecration of values" takes place. "Beginning with the prohibition against 'graven images' which is part of the Sinai Covenant, the Old Testament is characterized by an uncompromising refusal to allow any replication of deity." The commandment against idolatry is the clue to Yahweh's essence. Attaching himself at this point to Vahanian's remarks, Cox says, "It was because they believed in Yahweh that, for the Jews, all human values and their representations were relativized."⁶ After this, says Cox, the question is how "is it possible to avoid a dizzy descent into pure anarchic relativism? How can secularization, if it results in the deconsecration and consequent relativization of values, lead in the end to anything but nihilism?"⁷ Or again, "Historical relativism is the end product of secularization. It is the nonreligious expression of what the Jews have expressed in their consistent opposition to idols and Christians in their sporadic attacks on icons."⁸ Henceforth we must learn to live in the land of broken symbols.

What then will be the shape of the Secular City? This is the second question to which Cox gives his attention. "Every college sophomore knows that modern man is a faceless cipher." Here is "mass man." He is "reduced to a number or a series of holes in an IBM card, wandering through T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* starved for a name."⁹ Modern man fears nothing so much as anonymity. Where does this fear originate? How shall this faceless cipher communicate with other men as faceless and voiceless as himself? Here he "sits at a vast and immensely complicated switchboard. He is *homo symbolicus*, man the communicator.... A whole world of possibilities for communication lies within his reach." As *homo symbolicus* this faceless man is at the same time urban man. "Urban man is free to choose from a wider range of alternatives" than previous man ever was.¹⁰ How perfectly urban man resembles the biblical man. For Israel, says Cox, "Yahweh was a God of history, not of nature."¹¹

The same is true of post-Kantian man. We must learn to make the leap from biblical man to modern post-Kantian man. We must learn to see that the traditional Christian doctrine stands between these two and opposes both. Traditional Christian doctrine had no eye for the true freedom of man as, among others, Albert Camus did. "Camus knew that there is an essential contradiction

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

between the traditional Christian doctrine of God and the full freedom and responsibility of man.”¹² “A God who emasculates man’s creativity and hamstringing his responsibility for his fellow man must be dethroned.”¹³ The story of Adam giving names to his fellow creatures should have led the theologians of the past to the insight of man’s true freedom. Whatever man called every living creature, that was its name.¹⁴ Cox sees modern post-Kantian man, with his creative ordering of a world of pure contingency as foreshadowed in the naming of the animals by Adam. How wonderful it is that a theologian like Karl Barth has seen something of this vision. “As the last stages of myth and ontology disappear, which they do in Barth’s theology, man’s freedom to master and shape, to create and explore now reaches out to the ends of the earth and beyond.”¹⁵ What is true of Karl Barth is also true of Paul Tillich. Yet we shall have to go beyond both. Fortunately “there is no pathos in this. Theology is a living enterprise.” The call of the present is to an “imaginative urbanity and mature secularity.”¹⁶ And “here Bonhoeffer drops an invaluable hint.” He tells “us that in the biblical tradition, we do not speak ‘about God’ at all, either ‘in a secular fashion’ or in any other. When we use the word God in the biblical sense, we are not speaking about name but ‘naming,’ and that is an entirely different matter. To name is to point, to confess, to locate something in terms of our history.”¹⁷ This brings with it finally the fact that “in the last analysis it is not a matter of clear thinking at all but a matter of personal decision. Luther was right: deciding on this question is a matter which, like dying, every man must do for himself.”¹⁸ And herewith we come to the heart of what Jesus was trying to do. “Jesus had to defeat both the demons and the Pharisees. In order to make men free for concrete obedience and responsible decision-making, men had to be liberated both from the ‘archaic Heritage’ which distorted their vision of reality and from the anxious legalism which constricted their behavior.”¹⁹ In opposing both the devil and the Pharisees “Jesus calls men to adulthood, a condition in which they are freed from their bondages to infantile images of the species and of the self.”²⁰ It follows that the ministry of the church in the secular city must include a contemporary extension of exorcism. “Men must be called away from their

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

fascination with other worlds—astrological, metaphysical, or religious—and summoned to confront the concrete issues of this one, 'wherein alone the true call of God can be found.' " ²¹ The true church of the secular city then "requires a community of persons who, individually and collectively, are not burdened by the constriction of an archaic heritage." ²²

Such then is the picture of the Secular City and a "celebration of its liberties and an invitation to its discipline." ²³ In his description of the secular city Cox still uses the word "God." Is it this which separates him from the death-of-God theologians? If the litany used in the first Congregational Church in July of 1965 was actually, as it was said to be, based on the views of Cox, then the difference between him and the death-of-God theologians seems to be little more than one of words.

"O God who is pregnant without husband, who is child without parent, who has no place to play, as the snow falls gently outside Andover Hall" would seem to be adequate as an address to the Jesus who remains when God has been extracted from the writings of the death-of-God theologians. But let us now turn directly to the writings of these men. ²⁴

(D) Altizer's "Creative Negation"

We consider first the position of Altizer. He speaks of creative negation in theology. His point is that we must learn to negate, to reject, even the last vestiges of any positive knowledge of any God or Christ as absolute.

If we would understand what Christianity is, in distinction from other religions, we must see that it alone makes no pretensions to knowing anything about God.

If we realize the true nature of Christianity, then we are set free from anything that might come into the space-time world from above and at the same time from any control of our present life by something that has taken place in the past. Christian theology speaks "only to the moment before it." ²⁵ This fact cuts us loose and sets us free from all the bonds of tradition. "If Christian theology can speak only to the moment before it, then the contemporary theologian is forced

Ibid.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²³ dust jacket of *The Secular City*.

²⁴ cf. *The National Observer*, January 31, 1966.

²⁵ *The Christian Century*, July 7, 1965, p. 864.

to address a moment that dissolves the very possibility of the traditional form of faith. Lament as we may its vanished glory, the whole established order of Christendom is eroding about us. As its foundations disappear into the dark ocean of the past, we can experience only the receding ripples of its dying waves."²⁶ When, under such circumstances modern theology makes an heroic attempt to save a little island of faith, in order to plant a lighthouse upon it that is safe from the fury of the pounding waves, we will only see this island also disappear in the darkness of the night.

How foolish for us to look for light and help from the inhabitants of such an island. The island, sad to say for those who fix their hope upon it, is only a mirage. Instead of "desperately clinging to a past moment of the Word" let us open "ourselves to a radically new form of faith." Theology "can preserve a Christian form only by speaking an incarnate Word that fully confronts the concrete time and space before it."²⁷

Here then, argues Altizer, we have a theology that is free from any God that is above, as well as from any God that has spoken in the past. God is dead. The past is dead. Let us bravely live in the moment; let us face the future as men who are free at last. Oh, yes, we may still look to the past but only so as to find comfort from it for the moment. Think then, for a moment, of the Jews in their Babylonian exile. They had "lost everything which was the source of order and meaning to an ancient people."²⁸ Israel was in a crisis similar to our own. But "today we know that a new form of faith was born out of that crisis."²⁹ A new form of faith is being born now out of our own present crises. "Just as the Jew was born out of a passage through the death of his own sacred history, we may hope that a new Christian will be born out of the death of Christendom?"³⁰

We may indeed. But then if the "new Christian" is to appear, he must take Paul Tillich's call for "theological contemporaneity" with full seriousness. The "Christian theologian" seems to be bewildered. "He knows it is impossible either to recollect or to repeat the words of Christian history. Like a victim of amnesia, he has forgotten his name, his place of origin, and his past. Nevertheless he knows very well who he is not. For he knows that he is not a Christian in any sense that could be drawn from the creeds and confessions of the historic church. This is the past

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 865.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

that he has lost. Being unable to find the past alive in the present before him, he has gradually but decisively said No to a past which he cannot live and in so doing has given his own witness to a Word demanding to become incarnate in the present. Strangely enough, such a theologian does not hesitate to confess his faith in the Christian Word itself. It is the very necessity of that confession which impels him to negate all past forms of faith. Having already chosen a living Word, he has no choice but to negate every word that cannot become incarnate in the present."³¹

Wherever then true contemporaneity is present in theology there we have a "mute witness to the death of God."³²

Here then is Altizer's creative negation. If theology is to be a living creative theology, a theology speaking to the present, then it must not cling to the decaying corpse of a God who spoke to men in any final form in the past. Altizer knows that his negation of all creeds of Christendom and of the Scriptures on which they were built is radical. But the new Christian must be thus radically negative in order to be truly relative to the present. The old building must be completely demolished and its rubbish removed, every bit of it, if we are to build solidly for the future.

(E) Hamilton's "Radical Theology"

We turn now to the Radical Theology of William Hamilton. We shall refer chiefly to Hamilton's book, *The New Essence of Christianity* (Association Press, 1961). But to speak of the essence of Christianity takes us back to Ludwig Feuerbach's book on *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and to *Das Wesen des Christentums* by Adolph Harnack (1900). But surely Hamilton is a theologian of act not a theologian of essence. The essence theology, says Hamilton, ground "to a painful halt" at the turn of the century³³ Ernest Troeltsch delivered its "funeral oration." "Neither philosophy nor historical method, he claimed, can give us any theological residuum that we can adopt from the past, without change."³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Is there then any escape from the “theological relativism” of our age? Certainly not by seeking anything permanent in history. “All our theology, even our essences of Christianity, must be done afresh in every generation.”³⁵

A radical theology then must, according to Hamilton, consist largely of a “series of fragments that may serve, if at all, only for a limited time and place.”³⁶ “We cannot objectify God, but we must speak about him.... If we objectify him, we make him a part of the world, but a part we cannot see. We make him part of the causal sequences of the world, and try to fit him into the order and disorder that we see.”³⁷

How distressing our condition if we, in any wise, use the traditional, objectifying language about God. Look at all the evil, all the suffering in this world. On the traditional view “we have on our hands either a capricious tyrant causing evil as well as good, or an ineffectual thing, impotent before evil and causing only the good.”³⁸ Hamilton sees this objectified God expressed in the “Augustinian-Reformed portrait of God in our time.”³⁹ And this Augustinian-Reformed theology cannot adequately meet the problem of suffering.⁴⁰

Albert Camus’ novel, *The Plague*, expresses modern man’s view of human suffering. In his novel Father Paneloux, a priest, and Reux, a doctor, “have just witnessed the drawn-out and agonizing death of a child ...”⁴¹ Neither claims to understand. Father Paneloux wants still to “love what we cannot understand.” But Reux responds, “No, Father. I’ve a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.”⁴²

Of course, says Hamilton, we all stand with the doctor. But Father Paneloux’s sermons were quite changed after the death of the child. He no longer had any answers. He did not even dare to say “that even an endless bliss could compensate for a moment of suffering here.”⁴³

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 41–42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Perhaps then in “the tortured body of Christ on the cross” we should see “the impotent God, suffering with men.”⁴⁴ At any rate, the God of the Augustinian-Reformed tradition is “irrelevant.”⁴⁵ The Augustinian-Reformed portrait of God itself is a picture of a God we find more and more elusive, less and less for us or with us.” We no longer have any power “to affirm any of the traditional images of God.”⁴⁶ Jesus seemed to have the same trouble that we have.

In our God-forsakenness then we turn to Jesus. Now the dawn lights upon us. In Jesus, the Lord, we see for the first time what Christian “divinity” must be taken to be: It is God withdrawing all claims to power and authority and sovereignty, and consenting himself to become the victim and subject of all that the world can do. The afflicting God of our previous chapter becomes now the afflicted God. Divinity in Jesus is not withdrawal from the world; it is a full consent to abide in the world, and to allow the world to have its way with it.⁴⁷ Thus “the fact of Jesus is essential.”⁴⁸ Through him we understand the meaning of “forgiveness.”⁴⁹ From him we learn the proper “style of Life.” Following the example of Jesus means that we have “a sense of reserve or reticence in our dealings with others.”⁵⁰ Following Jesus means that we show a “combination of tolerance and anger” in relation to men.⁵¹ The New Testament gives us, Hamilton says, in its portrait of Jesus “a figure of sufficient clarity ... so that discipleship to him—to his life, his words and his death—is a possible center for Christian faith and life.”⁵²

It is this “godless Christology” to which Hamilton commits himself. Hamilton knows well enough that men will ask him: “Why have you chosen Jesus as the object of your obedience? Is there some special reason it is he and not Albert Camus, Martin Luther King or Francis of Assisi? May it not be that radical theology is in fact not theology and not even Christian but at most a thinly Christianized humanism of a fairly banal variety, and that you have put Jesus in the center of things to observe this fact?”⁵³ His answer is that when he looks at Jesus he finds that “there is something there, in his words, his life, his way with

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵² *The Christian Century*, Oct. 6, 1965, p. 1221.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

others, his death," that he "does not find elsewhere." His choice, he says, "is a free choice, freely made."⁵⁴

Now this Jesus theology thus freely chosen is an optimist theology, such as is found, for instance, "in today's Negro revolution." So the group of death theologians is "buoyant and full of spirit for it is really excited by the direction in which it is having to move."⁵⁵

(F) Van Buren's Secular Meaning Of The Gospel

When we turn to Paul van Buren's *Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (Macmillan Co., New York, 1963), we find that he too, as well as Altizer, seeks for a constructive negation and that he too, as well as Hamilton, wants a radically new theology.

Van Buren, as well as the two other men of the God-is-dead group, rejects the possibility of knowing a transcendent God. He, as well as they, denies that by turning to the past, notably to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth do we learn anything about what such a God has done in history. And like the two other men, van Buren's positive gospel is that only if we make a radical negation of all traditional Christianity can we really understand the gospel of the freedom of man which may be found by saying "Jesus is Lord." To understand the gospel really, argues van Buren, we must start with Bonhoeffer and then go beyond him. Says van Buren, "How can a Christian who is himself a secular man understand the Gospel in a secular way?"⁵⁶ "We intend to answer this question with the help of a method far removed from Bonhoeffer's thought. The answer will be reached by analyzing what a man means when he uses the language of faith, when he repeats the earliest Christian confession: 'Jesus is Lord.'⁵⁷

"Our proposal to answer Bonhoeffer's question by analyzing the language of faith has been suggested to us by the work of philosophers, of whom there are now many in the English-speaking world, who practice linguistic analysis."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1222.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

There is on the one hand the language of faith. With it men speak of a realm in which freedom reigns. Kant calls this the noumenal realm. Then there is the language of science. It speaks of a realm in which necessity reigns. Kant speaks of this as the phenomenal realm. Recently the realm which Kant called noumenal is spoken of as the realm of person-to-person relations, the I-Thou dimension. The realm which Kant called phenomenal is called the realm of impersonal relationships, the I-It dimension.

The I-It and the I-Thou dimensions are said to be absolutely distinct from one another. Kant placed complete dualism between the two. He did so in the interest of saving science and of making room for religion. But ever since his day the problem has been how to overcome the dualism between the two worlds. Kant himself overcame the dualism by asserting the primacy of the practical (ethical) over the theoretical (scientific) reason. But this was a matter of pure assertion, of pure faith. It was language taken from the realm of faith. How can we intelligently understand what is meant by the primacy of the personal over the impersonal unless we can discover a language that bridges the gap between them?

Well, here the philosophy of linguistic analysis comes to our assistance. Let Anthony Flew, a British philosopher, show us how. Flew tells us a parable. "Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees. 'There is no gardener.' So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So they set up a barbed wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds.... But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movement of the wire ever betrays an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the Sceptic despairs, 'But what is left of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?' Flew concludes, 'A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death of a thousand qualifications.' " ⁵⁹

Flew is suggesting that the modern believer and the modern unbeliever differ from each other only in words. "Flew's point is that the Believer has said no more than the Sceptic about 'how things are.' His implied question, then, is reasonable

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

and straightforward: Can the Christian today give any account of his words? Can he say what he means, and does he mean what he says, when he repeats the ancient apostolic confession? The unbelieving philosopher has spoken more sharply than the believing theologian, but their questions are closely related. Taken together, they pose the central question for contemporary faith and theology."⁶⁰

Well, then what is the believer to say to the unbeliever? The believer must, above all, be honest. With Bonhoeffer he must say: " 'We stand continually in the presence of the God who makes us live in the world without the God-hypothesis.' "⁶¹ And the believer must, with Bultmann, demythologize the gospel. We as believers must agree with Bultmann to the effect that "the whole tenor of thought of our world today makes the biblical and classical formulations of this Gospel unintelligible."⁶² But then there are other ways than those proposed by Bultmann "to pose the contemporary question for faith and theology which may prove more fruitful to investigate."⁶³

The one thing necessary is that we have a gospel that modern man can understand and appreciate. In maintaining this Bultmann was right. But, if man really understands the gospel, is the gospel then any longer an object of faith? Karl Barth insists that in the interests of understanding the gospel Bultmann has virtually eviscerated it. Bultmann, says Barth, has practically nothing objective left for us to believe. Barth therefore begins with the *Kerygma* as an "event" and "if faith seeks understanding, it must begin by seeking to understand that event."⁶⁴ Barth therefore joins the fathers of the Church in confessing Jesus Christ to be very God and very man. But in doing so Barth simply forgets modern man and his demand for an intelligible gospel. Barth does not worry that the gospel of the fathers as he states it is likely to be literally nonsense to modern man. The gospel deals not only with a problem of transcendence but also with the problem of the past. How can anything that has happened in the past, how can anything that happened to and through Jesus of Nazareth, have anything to do with a gospel which modern man can understand? There are those who therefore criticize not only Barth but even Bultmann "for binding faith to a particular incident in the distant past ... " By so doing Bultmann has not carried out his demythologizing far enough. Fritz Buri in Europe and Schubert Ogden in the United States speak

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

therefore of the necessity of going beyond Bultmann in this respect. Ogden speaks of *Christ Without Myth*. Thus there must be a deeper negation of the traditional way of statement of the gospel than was offered even by Bultmann. And then there must, of course, be a new and positive statement that modern secular man can understand. Van Buren quotes Ogden on this point in the following words: " 'I henceforth understand myself no longer in terms of my past, but solely in terms of the future that is here and now disclosed to me in my encounter with the church's proclamation,' so that 'to believe' means to have this self-understanding, and to understand oneself in this way is to exist authentically." ⁶⁵

This understanding of myself in the present in terms of the church's proclamation implies that the love of God is everywhere revealed to men. Authentic existence is a universal responsibility. The gospel must therefore appeal to that which is universally understood to be true. "Authentic existence, therefore, cannot depend only on the event of Jesus of Nazareth. Even the apostolic conception of authentic existence may be discovered apart from the Gospel, in the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger. As Ogden reads the New Testament, the apostolic claim that God is revealed 'only in Jesus Christ' means not that God can be found, or faith realized, only in him, but that the God made known in Jesus Christ is the only one there is: the God who is to be found everywhere. The logical conclusion would be that Christian faith is not dependent on the event of Jesus Christ." ⁶⁶

But by thus following Ogden as he seeks to go beyond Bultmann we have lost all contact with the event of Jesus Christ. Thus the solution of the theology of the left represented by Ogden and the solution of the theology of the right represented by Barth lead to mutually exclusive conclusions. ⁶⁷ We need something that relieves the deadlock between Barth and Ogden. Here is where modern linguistic analysis comes to our help.

Linguistic analysis challenges the Christian to "think clearly, speak simply, and say what he means without using words in unusual ways, unless he makes it quite clear what he is doing." ⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

We begin by remembering that our English speaking tradition has an empirical foundation.⁶⁹ We also recognize the fact that the world today is "increasingly being formed by technology and the whole industrial process."⁷⁰ A basic decision must therefore be "made by any one who feels himself claimed by the Christian gospel." "Either, 'being a Christian' is something 'religious' and quite distinct from secular affairs, or Christian faith is a human posture conceivable for a man who is part of his secular culture. What a Christian thinks about a given situation, the conclusions to which he comes, and the actions which he performs, may differ from those of one who is not a Christian. Whether they always will remains to be seen. The question is whether a Christian is to be distinguished from an 'unbeliever' by a different logic or thinking."⁷¹

The answer is, of course, that the Christian today must choose to bring the gospel in language which modern secular man understands.

What then must the Christian do today? He has been brought up with the traditional Christ. The Chalcedon creed speaks of this Christ as truly God and truly man without mixture and yet with genuine union. Certainly modern man can understand no such language. For Chalcedon assumes two distinct worlds, the world of the unchangeable God who yet comes into the world of change, a God who controls the issues of life and death for all men in this world, including the suffering of little children.

Shall we then, with Barth, actualize the incarnation and say that it is God's nature to change wholly into the opposite of himself and that it is man's nature to participate in the very deity of God? For van Buren this is not enough. For him Barth is not sufficiently modern. Barth's deep sympathy with the patristic fathers and their way of stating the doctrine of the incarnation, says van Buren, makes him insensitive to the needs of modern man. To be sure Barth "insists more radically than the Fathers did, however, that the divine Word accepted all the consequences of his assumption of human 'nature' and the whole burden of human sin."⁷² Even so Barth's language is not that of modern secular man. Barth does not succeed in bringing the language of faith down to the language of modern secular man.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Finally, as we must go beyond both Bultmann and Barth, so we must, and this is important for van Buren, also go beyond Ogden. Ogden wants to speak the language of faith and the language of understanding when he speaks of experiencing non-objective reality. But to speak of an "experienced non-objective" world is meaningless.⁷³ It is simply meaningless to speak analogically about God.⁷⁴ In spite of all his stress on the necessity of demythologizing, Bultmann still thinks it possible to do something with the word "God." But this word belongs to a world of which man can say nothing.⁷⁵ Similarly Ogden says that " 'statements about God and his activities are "statements about human existence," and vice versa.' " ⁷⁶ Ronald Hepburn, says van Buren, has pointed out the impossibility of doing what Ogden is trying to do. Hepburn says that "if in the language of faith a statement about God is really a statement about man, if what faith speaks of is, 'exhaustively and without remainder,' man and his self-understanding, then to say that this is equally language about 'God and his activities' is to assert that the same words refer to man, where they are verifiable, and to God, where they are not." ⁷⁷

From this deeper negation of van Buren we now turn to the radical alternative that he offers. We need an alternative in which all need for speaking of a transcendent God and of his revelation as past event in history is done away with. "Because the situation of 'modern man' is in us and not outside of us, our analysis of the theological 'left' as well as of the 'right' leads us to reconsider the language of the New Testament concerning Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷⁸

The only logical position, if we are to follow language analysis, is silence about the realm of transcendence—and its influence in the space-time world. Of course we may continue to speak in parables about another world, a world that is above and beyond the world we know. T. R. Miles recommends to us " 'the way of silence qualified by parables.' " ⁷⁹ For modern man has learned that the primary question he faces when he hears religious language, is not " 'whether a religious statement as that a personal God created the world is true or false but how it

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

could be known to be true or false.' " ⁸⁰ Religious assertions as well as moral assertions are neither logically necessary nor empirical.

It is now realized that a moral or religious assertion expresses " 'the intention of the asserter to act in a particular way specified by the assertion.' " ⁸¹ Thus we have reached a "non-cognitive, 'blik' conception of faith." "The cognitive approach requires speaking of that which it admits is ineffable." ⁸² This is meaningless. We must no longer speak of a certain area of experience as over against another area which is not religious. ⁸³

And herewith we have come to what van Buren thinks is an intelligible way of speaking of Jesus. To do so he needs not only the help of logical analysis but also the philosophy of history of a man like Robert Collingwood. Logic analysis by itself would involve him in the question of making internally consistent assertions about a transcendentally existent non-empirical realm of eternal being. But this is the last thing van Buren wants. So he employs the philosophy of Collingwood in order with it to supplement the idea of logical analysis.

Collingwood is genuinely empirical in his approach to the problem of history. The historian, says Collingwood, "is his own authority and his thought autonomous, self-authorizing, possessed of a criterion to which his so-called authorities must conform and by reference to which they are criticized." ⁸⁴ What Jesus says about himself is therefore for the historian a datum which together with other data he must seek to relate to the idea of history as a whole. Bultmann also appeals to the position of Collingwood in the construction of his theology, but van Buren thinks that we must go further than Bultmann did.

Now we must find the proper empirical basis for the faith-language of Scripture. In particular we must do this with respect to the Easter event. For without the Easter event there is no Christianity. How do we set about preparing the Easter message so that the secular mind will appreciate it?

In the first place, van Buren says, we must see the historical Jesus as speaking and acting with "singular freedom." ⁸⁵ But "if we would define Jesus by his

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92, citing Braithwaite's *An Empiricists View of Religious Belief*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸⁴ *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 236.

⁸⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

freedom" then "we must emphasize its positive character."⁸⁶ He had compassion for those who suffered. There was in him an "openness to all whom he met." He was willing "to associate with those whose company was avoided by respectable people."⁸⁷ He was "free to give himself to others, whoever they were. He lived thus, and he was put to death for being this kind of man in the midst of fearful and defensive men."⁸⁸ But his death was not the end. Easter came. Of course "the resurrection does not lend itself to be spoken of as a 'fact,' for it cannot be described."⁸⁹ "The statement 'Jesus is risen,' however, is linguistically an exceedingly odd assertion.... The linguistic oddity of the statement 'Jesus is risen' comes from the juxtaposition of words from two dissimilar language-games. The word 'Jesus' is a proper name ... " It is intelligible to us. But how about that little word is? Can you apply that to anyone who has died? Of course not. But when we use it in the sentence "Jesus is risen" we know that this fits in with Jewish eschatology. Therefore "the assertion 'Jesus is risen' takes the name of a historical man and says that he was of the realm of 'the end.' " Now how could we verify such a statement? We ask: "Is it even a proposition? Clearly it is not a straightforward empirical one."⁹⁰

"It seems appropriate," therefore "to say that a situation of discernment occurred for Peter and the other disciples on Easter, in which, against the background of their memory of Jesus, they suddenly saw Jesus in a new and unexpected way."⁹¹ For them "the history of Jesus, which seemed to have been a failure, took on a new importance as the key to the meaning of history."⁹² "Easter faith was a new perspective upon life arising out of a situation of discernment focussed on the history of Jesus."⁹³ The significance of this Easter faith was "they found that Jesus had a new power which he had not had, or had not exercised before: the power to awaken freedom also in them."⁹⁴

Easter was not then a "merely subjective" experience. On Easter "the freedom of Jesus began to be contagious."⁹⁵ We say that a child's laugh is contagious. "It is in this figurative sense that we say that Jesus' freedom from himself and

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–131.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

freedom to be for others became contagious on Easter. It carries the sense of our 'catching' something from another person, not by our choice, but as something which happens to us. We use it to point to the event of Easter, not of course to describe it."⁹⁶

The gospel then is the "good news of a free man who has set other men free."⁹⁷ These other men are now " 'in Christ,' which is to say that their understanding of themselves and their lives and all things is determined by their understanding of Jesus. They are a 'new creation' in that this orientation to the whole world is new for them."⁹⁸

Of course, "there is no empirical ground ... for the Christian's saying that something of this sort could not happen to a disciple of Socrates." Some men may become new "in Socrates" instead of "in Christ." But this fact only points up the fact that we, as free men, base our faith on free conviction.⁹⁹ "That which sets Jesus apart from all other men for the Christian is Easter, as the result of which the Christian finds himself committed to understanding all other men in the light of Jesus, and not vice versa."¹⁰⁰ This fact does justice at once to the particularity and to the universality of the gospel. Our gospel is based upon the life, death, and resurrection of a particular man, named Jesus. But our faith in Jesus enables us to see the vision of all men as free in him as the universal end-event.

Here then we have by the help of language analysis and by the help of a genuinely empirical view of history come to the point of being able to bring the gospel to modern secular man. We are now able to be "agnostic about 'otherworldly' powers and beings" while we understand "that people matter" and that we live in a world in which "I" is not "you" and neither is completely assimilable to "it" or even to "he." "We are urging that Buber's distinction matters more than distinctions between eternity and time, infinity and finite, and many other distinctions that mattered to Christians in another age. It is this difference between us and our ancestors to which we wish to call attention when we speak of secular Christianity."¹⁰¹

By "exploring the empirical footing of the language of the Gospel and Christian faith" we are able to call attention to the " 'this-worldly' aspect of the

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Gospel.”¹⁰² “When Easter is in the center of the picture, however, we can say that the meaning of the Gospel is to be found in the areas of the historical and the ethical, not in the metaphysical or the religious.”¹⁰³

We know that Paul the apostle is concerned with the “glory of God” instead of with the “freedom of man.” But “what exactly is the difference?”¹⁰⁴ Paul sees the light of the glory of God in the fact of Jesus Christ. Now, “we would agree that the ‘glory of God’ may be spoken of only in terms of that man. Being concerned for that ‘glory’ means being concerned with that man.” Surely the Gospel wants us to love our fellow men. Thus “the verification principle shows that theological statements which are meaningless in a secular age when they are taken as straightforward empirical assertions about the world, nevertheless prove to have a use and a meaning as the expressions of a historical perspective with far-reaching consequences in a man’s life. In the last analysis, a tree is known by its fruit. While much may still be unknown about the dynamics of freedom and of the effect of a liberated man upon other men, enough is known of this effect to indicate what the Christian means when he says that he sees all of life in the light of the Easter proclamation concerning Jesus.”¹⁰⁵

(G) A General View

As we now look at the picture as a whole we see that we must begin our evaluation of the death-of-God theologians by considering their constructive effort. These men are, to be sure, iconoclasts, but they are iconoclasts in the interest of a humanitarian ideal. They deny the relevancy of God, because they think that belief in God interferes with man’s freedom to be himself and, in being himself, to seek the freedom and welfare of his fellow man in the only world they know.

The only world any man knows is the world of empirical experience “insofar as ‘empirical experience’ can be reached ... through rational thinking.... Rational thinking dissolves man’s openness to myth.”¹⁰⁶ In the period of its infancy man thought of myths as actually telling them “how things are.” Traditional Christian

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁰⁶ Altizer, “The Religious Meaning of Myth and Symbol,” *Truth, Myth, and Symbol*, Englewood Cliffs, 1962, p. 97.

thought therefore "assumes an ultimate identity between reality and the sacred."¹⁰⁷ But now that man has come of age, man follows *logos* rather than *mythos*. At least he should do so. Mature men should realize that Santa Claus does not really fill the stocking. A *pater familias* believing in an actually existing Santa Claus becomes indifferent to his responsibilities. Santa Claus will provide, he thinks.

It is a pity, argues Altizer, to see that all of the higher religions are "world-negating, world-dissolving, world-reversing, or world-transforming, and that all of them are in tension with the rational consciousness (and with the practical historical consciousness as well) insofar as consciousness pursues a knowledge of and power in the world."¹⁰⁸ It is only if we have the courage to leave all myth behind and as mature men turn to the work of the world will the gospel have meaning. Modern man wants and has every right to want the "Secular City" realized in the world. They are not interested in the New Jerusalem until it has actually come down from heaven to become the "Secular City."

(1) Jesus, The End-Man

Therefore as Christian teachers, the God-is-dead theologians want Jesus to be their Commander-in-Chief, leading them into the "Secular City." But then, if Jesus is to be their leader he too must be seen as a follower of *logos* instead of as a victim of *mythos*. When Jesus said: "I and the Father are one" he knew that this was true because all there is of the Father was his own type of self-sacrificing love for mankind. When Jesus said: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me" he knew that whatever there was of God, was, in him, as in all men, subject to pure contingency. God was, he knew, with him, the true man, wholly hidden in stygian darkness. And when God "hid his face from him" this meant for him that, with him, God became faceless and voiceless man. God, with him, became the irrational man.

Then, too, Jesus knew that when God forsook him this meant that God, in him, was entering into utter impotence with respect to all the tragedy of human experience. Jesus knew that whatever of God there is must be found in his own and in man's suffering at the hand of relentless fate.

(2) The Messiah Of The Secular City

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

How brave then this man Jesus! How we must rejoice, argues van Buren, that he was our chief example as a follower of *logos* instead of *mythos*. He was still, while being irrational man, the true follower of the rational consciousness of the human race. Jesus knew that a true following of the rational ideal of mankind involves absorbing the wholly irrational into this ideal. As wholly hidden in irrationalism, Christ reveals to us the wholly rational ideal of man. All men through him must be saved. All men, as true men, are fellow-men with Jesus, fellow-Saviors with Jesus of the human race.

How thankful then we ought to be that Jesus, the faceless man, rose from the dead with a new face. As we look at him, we can help to put a new face upon the world.

Of course, when we speak with Paul of Jesus and the resurrection we do not mean, says van Buren, that a resuscitation of a human corpse took place. All we know is that after the "resurrection," of which we ourselves cannot speak in other than mythological language, the disciples' were new brave men. Something had happened. We know not what. But we know that through that "event" of which we cannot speak in terms of intelligible human concepts, the sense of freedom which Jesus had become contagious. Things like that do happen. We say that a child's laugh is contagious. So why should it be thought a strange thing to say that the idea of freedom inspired men to seek freedom for themselves and for others because of the example of Jesus?

If then Jesus says: "if the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed" he meant that men are now free to love their fellowmen and sacrifice their goods, their life, their all for him.

(3) Jesus Or Martin Luther King

And what difference does it make if we can give no reason for our choice of Jesus instead of Martin Luther King as our Messiah? We ourselves are free as in and as a part of a universe of pure contingency. So our choice of Jesus as over against other men is a purely contingent choice. Where else could we find Jesus than as incarnate in pure contingency? As faceless and voiceless men, as amnesia victims, we see the face, hear the voice, and remember the figure of the great captain of our soul.

We are lost and fallen men, but we are lost and fallen in him who is wholly lost and wholly fallen. We are reprobate and forsaken, but we are reprobate, rejected, and forsaken in Jesus, and therefore we are elect and accepted in him.

We are alcoholic and homosexual, we rape and are raped, but we are and do all these things in Christ, our older brother, in whom our love of all men as brothers will ultimately be victorious.

Now thank we all our God who died in Jesus and rises anew each day, taking all men with him into the Secular City. There shall be no night there!

2. "In Defense of God" By John C. Bennett

Having now looked at the *Civitas terrena* which is being erected by the God-is-dead theologians, we ask what is currently being said in reply to them. As typical as many we take the article by Dr. John C. Bennett, the president of Union Theological Seminary, New York, with the title "In Defense of God." This article appeared in *Look* (April 19, 1966).

"This Easter," says Bennett, "many Christians are puzzled and some are deeply disturbed by strange voices within the church proclaiming 'God is dead.' " Now these people should realize that the death-of-God theologians are not atheists who have blundered into the Church. "They mean to be Christian, to be loyal followers of Jesus." ¹ Even so these men have gone too far in their denial of God. When they appeal to Bonhoeffer they should realize that all Bonhoeffer said must be understood in the light of such of his words as this: "The God who makes us live in this world without using Him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with Him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the Cross." ²

To this Bennett adds: "There is a baffling paradox here, but it would be false to Bonhoeffer to break the paradox and leave us with a suffering Jesus apart from the God of the world." ³

In other words, Bonhoeffer allows the world to have its way with God. God does enter into pure contingency, but then in Christ God also arises from the dead.

To be sure, says Bennett, there are no proofs for God's existence. We must not, in defense of God against the death-of-God theologians, return to the outmoded natural theology of the past. Then, secondly, "We must also recognize the precariousness of the absolutely independent and unsupported revelation of God that comes only through the person of Jesus Christ." ⁴ Even so, though we must admit there are no proofs for the existence of God and though we must admit as well that our belief in Jesus as the Son of God involves God in pure contingency, we must none the less hold that there are intimations that the world of our experience is not self-sufficient without him. There are pointers to God

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

that will not of themselves convince the unbeliever, but may at least prepare the way for the vision of God made possible by revelation. What are they?

These intimations are found in the fact that the world of our experience is neither a monotonous succession of disconnected sights and sounds, nor is it without structures of moral and aesthetic values. The memories and imaginations of men grasp ideas and visions endlessly, and there is at least a partial organization of the ideas and visions of large communities of men.

Do you think that the whole of human experience and history with all "its greatness and misery" could become a lost memory at last? "This may be the case, but to believe it taxes my credulity more than faith in God."⁵

Again, do we not all admit that Plato was right when he said that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it? How can we, without the hypothesis of God "explain the conscience of the individual who chooses to oppose the society that surrounds him at cost to himself."⁶ And since the ideal of the victory of goodness over evil has never yet been realized on earth, do we not all look to some power above us that makes for righteousness to help us on toward this ideal? And finally, are there not intimations of unmerited grace in our world which all of us regard ourselves receiving?

Now add to these intimations of God's action in the world the "full revelation" that has come to us through the Bible and "especially through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, allowing for much freedom of interpretation of what such words as 'resurrection' mean. If this revelation is the bearer of truth, many more of the pieces of our life fit together than if this is not the case."⁷

Surely this belief in God ought to satisfy anyone who is concerned about the traditional view of God as threatening the freedom of man. The great theologian Karl Barth has shown us that, on the contrary, it is through the Christ-Event that manhood is taken up into participation with God and thereby true humanity is established. "God does not threaten the humanity of man. On the contrary, the humanity of man can be threatened if the final word is that he is alone, that he is unknown to any being other than his fellows, that he is responsible to no authority above the state of the other powers of the world that claim his

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

allegiance. The deepest source of his freedom may still be that he knows that he must 'obey God rather than men.' " ⁸

If now we look at Bennett's defense of God we observe at once that the "God" he is defending is little, if anything, more than a projection of a would-be autonomous man. Bennett's God is the God of Kant's "primacy of the practical reason." Bennett's God is based on the idea that the world of space and time does not manifest God's presence; on the contrary, for him this world is what it is as the result of man's impression of the category of causality upon purely contingent raw stuff of experience. Bennett, as well as the God-is-dead theologians, assumes that in coming into the world, Christ as the Son of God went down in utter contingency. Bennett, with the death-of-God theologians, as they together follow Kant, holds that somehow man must be postulated as being above, i.e., transcend, the world of pure determinism and pure contingency. The only difference between Bennett and the God-is-dead theologians appears to be that Bennett does, while they do not, impersonate and hypostatize the ideal that man projects for himself into a world above and beyond the phenomenal world. Bennett, no less than the God-is-dead theologians, is committed to what they call the rational and historical consciousness of man as the final arbiter of what man can call false and true.

Bennett, as well as those whom he now seems to oppose, starts from the free man who is free in terms of his own organizing activity with respect to an ultimate realm of pure contingency.

Moreover, what is true of Bennett is true of the great theologians of our time, like Bultmann, Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr. None of them, any more than Bennett or the God-is-dead theologians, believe either in the God or in the Christ of the historic Christian creeds. They all agree with one another in being truly iconoclastic, i.e., they maintain over and over again, with precisely the same arguments which the God-is-dead theologians use, that the God and the Christ of the Scriptures must be spoken of as limiting concepts. All of them are equal opposed to what van Buren calls the "Augustinian Reformed" point of view in which God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer tell us truly how men may actually attain to peace of mind and acceptance with God forever.

We can therefore scarcely speak of a debate as raging between the believers and the disbelievers in God so long as the god in which men believe is the sort of god in which such recent theologians as have been mentioned believe.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Our final task in relation to these theologians of our day is to ask ourselves whether we should follow them. If God is dead, then we should bury him and go on with the business of the day. We are told that it is the first time in history that man is undertaking the cultural task that he knows to be his without the help of the God-hypothesis. But not all are convinced that this is a wise undertaking. As noted, Dr. Bennett says that more of the pieces of life hang together if we hold to the God-Hypothesis than if we do not.

(A) Bennett's God Is Also Dead

But surely it is not Bennett's God who is said to be dead. It is not the God of liberal or of neo-orthodox theology that Altizer, Hamilton, and van Buren are out to bury. They have no good reason to be concerned about whether this God lives or is dead. In fact, all that they have said with respect to the kind of God that Bennett and his modern colleagues say exists is that he is not quite dead enough. The whole import of their complaint against such a God as is worshiped by Tillich, Bultmann, Barth, and others is that this God has not completely annihilated the God of the historic Christian creeds. It is the God of the historic Christian creeds whose non-existence the God-is-dead theologians are out to establish. Van Buren speaks constantly of the God of "Augustinian-Reformed" theology. It is this God that is said to be dead. This God is simply irrelevant to modern man and his problems. Man is much better off without him than with him. He never was anything more than idea in the mind of man. He has never had any more reality than has Santa Claus. Man, come of age, should frankly admit to himself that Santa Claus is not real.

But why not keep believing in the existence of this God even as we keep believing in the existence of Santa Claus? Does it do any harm to continue believing in this sort of God so long as we know that he is just an idea which stands for the spirit of good will to all men? Are we not all carried away with a spirit of optimism when we hear a theologian like Barth tell us that in Jesus Christ God turned into the opposite of himself, that he died unto his own eternity and became one with us, in order to rise from the dead and then take us up unto himself? We know that this is eschatological language. And we know that this sort of language has nothing directly to do with the facts of space and time. Yet, in another way, it does have to do with our daily life. If we believe in Barth's God-idea, we think of all men as being our brothers. We no longer go out to the "mission fields" of the world calling men to repentance and belief in some strange event that happened in the past in Palestine, lest not repenting and believing, they be cast out into darkness forever. We do not believe that the so-

called Christian story of man's creation, his fall, and his redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in history is anything more than an idea that points symbolically to some sort of something of which no one can pretend to have any intelligible understanding. According to modern theologians and modern churchmen, man is *homo symbolicus*. His proper attitude to the beyond is that of silence. Events may point toward something that may be there, something which may hopefully cause what we call "right" to triumph over what we call "wrong." Surely Bishop Pike would welcome the death-of-God theologians to his church! Surely, too, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States will also welcome them officially as soon as it has buried the God of the Westminster Confession!

The magazines speak of a great debate that is raging. *Look* publishes Bennett's article "In Defense of God." Others have asked whether such men as the God-is-dead theologians have a rightful place in the Christian church. But have there been any heresy trials? Does anyone expect any? Modern theologians who assert their belief in the existence of God cannot find any foundation for any such thing as a heresy trial as over against the God-is-dead theologians. The modern believer, as well as the modern "atheist," believes that there is no such thing as a direct and finished revelation of God through Christ in history. The modern believer, as well as the modern non-believer in God, is opposed to those who, with Luther and Calvin, hold to the self-existence of God and his finished revelation of himself to man in history. Modern churchmen do indeed still hold heresy trials. But such heresy trials are carried on in the name of a God and of a Christ that is their own projection into the unknowable beyond, a god who forgives all men all their sins because sin is not the breaking of the law of God, the Creator and Redeemer of men. In such trials of the future the God-is-dead theologians will be glad to join with the modern churchmen to exorcise those who believe in the God of Luther and of Calvin.

3. The Great Debate

We know then that it is not the God of modern theology but rather the God of orthodox theology, the God of Luther and of Calvin, that the God-is-dead theologians are out to destroy. In this they may claim the support of modern theology, of modern philosophy, and of modern science, even if this support often consists only of supplying weapons and ammunition. In *Greater Philadelphia* (April, 1966) van Buren is reported to have said in the article "Is God Obsolete?": "I am exploring the problem of what goes on when an intelligent, educated American in 1966 asks himself questions about religion. Of course there are a great many people happily satisfied with the faith of their fathers—and I have no quarrel with them. They tell me that they literally believe in all the things they say on Sunday mornings—and I believe them when they say this. One of the features of our day has been the astonishing growth of the fundamentalist faiths. I am not, then, investigating the problem of their religion—for they tell me they have no problems."

"But I go to church myself to have the boundaries of my mind stretched. To find a question on top of another question. To reach out beyond the obvious answer to the thing not so obvious, which lies just beyond. But perhaps the thing I am reaching for, the goal I'll eventually reach and write my newest book about, is the conclusion that there are no answers. Only more questions!"¹

(A) Is There An Answer?

But van Buren is concerned with the fundamentalists, i.e., he is concerned with those who believe what they say on Sunday morning in church. He is not basically concerned with those who give a Pickwickian sense to the creeds of Christendom.

Van Buren and his colleagues are concerned to keep the part of these creeds which speaks of Jesus Christ and him crucified, but they want to keep this only in order to have a foundation for saying that God is dead.

We note then what the nature of the issue in the Christian churches today is. There are in these churches two classes of people. There are those who believe the creed they confess in the traditional sense of the words, and there are those who, though using the words of the confession, interpret them so as to convey the modern post-Kantian world-view.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117–118.

It would greatly clarify the issue if the new or modern Christian would simply deny having any faith in the God or the Christ of these historic confessions. The God-is-dead theologians have now frankly expressed their conviction with respect to the meaning of the word "God." If they were but a little more radical, they would add that Christ as well as God is dead.

The new Christian of which van Buren speaks is new because he has a Christ whose words, "I and the Father are one," cannot be true. The new Christian has reinterpreted Christ as well as God. When Paul the Apostle says "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" this means, for the new Christian, that the man Jesus found his freedom and that, in some wholly inexplicable fashion, men may "catch" their freedom from him. To be sure, van Buren speaks of the resurrection of Jesus as an event which changed the apostles from fearful to free men. But van Buren should, to be consistent, demythologize the narrative of the New Testament a little more thoroughly than he has done. He does, to be sure, say specifically that the resurrection cannot have been an event in the phenomenal world. This would seem to be adequate to immunize himself against all influence from the noumenal realm. But, though he knows that Santa Claus does not exist, he still rests his whole expectation for the success of the "gospel of the true freedom of all men" on the existence of a Santa Claus God.

But then, if Jesus is to set us free, he must not claim to have any final answer for any problem. When Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life," he could not have meant anything more than a suggestion that to love is better than to hate.

When Jesus said that the Father had given him all authority and that he would return to judge all men according to whether they had or had not accepted him as their king, this was, at most, eschatological language by which he was urging people to love one another in the phenomenal realm.

According to the God-is-dead theologians no such thing as a visible return of Jesus of Nazareth will ever take place. The God-is-dead theologians know that no such event can take place. When van Buren uses Collingwood's concept of the modern historical consciousness as his starting point, he throws out every vestige of claim to authority on the part of Jesus. Is not Jesus truly human? Then is he not, with us, lost in the cave of pure darkness where there are no absolute answers? If Jesus claims to have an absolute answer to anything, he therewith claims to be God. But God is dead. So if Jesus wants to be our Messiah, then he must first affirm that he is not God, that God dies in him.

We may now ask how the God-is-dead theologian himself knows that Christ cannot appear visibly in the future. The God-is-dead theologian has said or assumed that man cannot know anything beyond that which he can check by his sense-experience. On his view nobody knows or can know anything that transcends temporal-spatial conditions.

The first and most basic question we must ask van Buren is how he identifies himself. In the New Testament Jesus identifies himself as the Son of God and Son of Man. All his predication about anything else is based upon this fact of his self-identification. He says that he can do this inasmuch as he knows whence he came and whither he is going. And John, speaking for him, says that all the world was made through him and that nothing exists that was not made through him. The New Testament also says that all things are upheld by him. The New Testament pictures him as coming again to judge men on the basis of this question: have they or have they not accepted, at its face value, this self-identification of Jesus as the God-man (Jn 12:48–50).

According to the New Testament all men are, as sinners, out to resist Jesus Christ as the one who alone can identify himself. All men must identify themselves in relation to and in dependence upon this self-identification of Jesus. The Pharisees illustrate the length to which men will go in order to suppress the truth about Jesus and therewith about themselves. They projected an abstract principle of unity above all possible space-time facts in order to charge Jesus, in terms of this principle, that he blasphemed in making himself the Son of God. They said that this could not be true. It was against logic. It was against experience. How can the God who says he is one Lord also be two?

But where did the Pharisees get this notion that no man in history could at the same time be God through whom all things were made? Jesus tells them where they got it. He says that Moses and the prophets spoke of him. Moses said that at the beginning of history man tried to identify himself without God. At the beginning of history man listened to Satan, who suggested that he need not submit himself to the commandment of love and obedience to any God who calls himself his Creator. On the contrary, man must realize that the claim of any God must be tested by the "verification principle" that rests upon the assumption of man's ability to identify himself. Any claim that cannot be verified or falsified by our own sense experience, or, indeed, by any verification criterion of human origin, is, *ipso facto*, to be set aside. We must first eat of the forbidden fruit. Only after that can we see what happens.

On this view then, reality is, in the first place, wholly contingent. No one can tell anyone, in advance of actual experience, what man's nature is or what kind of gods may possibly exist. God himself is surrounded by mystery. God never lived as man's Creator and therefore never died. But, on the other hand, man who says that God in Christ cannot identify himself does claim to be able to do so with respect to himself. The Pharisees said that Jesus, being a man, could not be the Son of God. This is to say that ultimate reality is wholly rational as well as wholly irrational. It is to say that man who says this, in effect, claims that he can, while God cannot, identify himself as the one who can tell us of the nature of reality.

When therefore the Pharisees were saying that Jesus could not be the son of God, they were simply saying what the Greeks had in effect said before them. Modern thinkers are simply following the example of the Greeks in assuming that man can identify himself without reference to the self-identification of Jesus as he speaks of himself in the New Testament. In all their philosophical constructions, apostate man is rationalizing his hatred of God and of Christ as the Son of God. Paul says that, as sinners, men want to resist or hold back the truth about themselves. Rom 1.18 They are creatures of God and know that they are. They are sinners against God and know that they are. Without knowing themselves to be creatures of God and sinners against God they cannot make even one assertion about anything intelligible. This is not to say that all their assertions are, as such, directly and immediately demonic. Men are sincere in their beliefs. They are honest about them. But they are sincerely and honestly self-deceived. God's preserving grace bears with them so as to call them to repentance. God gives them rain and sunshine and success in their experiments with nature so as thereby to make it all the more apparent to them that none of all man's culture is intelligible to himself except in terms of the self-identifying Christ of the Scripture.

The God-is-dead theologians are therefore no worse and no better than are other men. They are simply doing a little more openly what has been done throughout the course of history. Men have always, since the Fall, tried to make themselves believe that God as their Creator and Redeemer does not exist. Who wants to admit that he is a sinner and that he is worthy of eternal death? What self-respecting man wants to admit that he needs to beg forgiveness for his sins, lest he, at last, be cast into outer darkness? So let us prove this story of the Bible untrue. Let us reinterpret it so that all it says is a myth, in the way that Santa Claus is a myth. Surely no God and no Christ can exist who does not allow us our sovereign freedom and who does not want his words and claims to be tested by

the criteria of truth that we have devised in our long effort to find some light in the stygian darkness of our existence.

As those who believe what is said on Sunday, we must continue to ask the God-is-dead theologians how they identify themselves. How do they provide for the possibility of self-identification in a man who, as they themselves have asserted, is what he is apart from all dependence on God and on Christ as the Son of God? Before we submit the story of Scripture to their principle of verification we must ask on what this principle of verification rests.

René Descartes tried to explain how he himself was the final source of predication when he said "*Cogito ergo sum.*" But soon enough he found that he could say nothing about himself except in terms of God and the world which he had first excluded. Mindful of this failure of Descartes, Kant sought for his self-identity by asserting his freedom from all dependence upon the laws of the space-time world or of the laws of morality as revealed by God. But then he found that his freedom was merely a negative freedom. As a result he could not find himself. His noumenal man is free but free in an unintelligible vacuum.

When, after that, Kant, too, sought for a renewed relationship of his free self with God and the world, it was in both cases at the expense of his freedom. The famous aphorism of Goethe, the great German poet, illustrates the predicament of the free self who wants to be free by being a law unto himself. Goethe said, "When the individual speaks it is, alas, no longer the individual that speaks."

Kant is the father of all modern activist or functional thinking as over against ancient or substantialist thinking. And the modern functionalist thinks that he has escaped the dilemma which he insists ancient substantialist thinking, as it derives from the Greeks, had. The Greek view appears clearly in the philosophy of Plotinus, the last of the great Greek thinkers. On the view of Plotinus man as an individual hovers between a world of pure abstract rationality and a world of pure abstract non-being or contingency. To be himself, man must, on this view, be constantly torn in opposite directions. He is drawn upward toward pure rationality, lest his individuality, derived as it is from pure non-being, lead to his annihilation. But he is, at the same time, drawn down toward non-being, lest his individuality be swallowed up into abstract impersonal rationality and he thereby lose his identity.

It appears then that even on the substantialist view, man's ability to identify himself depends on an ever-recurring interaction of two equally ultimate interdependent forces, namely abstract rationality and abstract irrationality. How

then do the modern activist's views as they derive from Kant differ from the ancient view on this matter of man's self-identification? They differ only in that the interaction between the abstract principle of rationality and the abstract principle of irrationality is now more clearly, than was the case with Plotinus, seen to be what it is because of a swifter interaction of the two principles. There is now, since Kant, nothing left of the idea of a supposedly static eternal being. When God is revealed he is now wholly revealed. All being has, since the time of Kant, been thought of as "process." Naturally, the God-is-dead theologians, as the true heirs of the modern post-Kantian view of the nature of ultimate reality, have every right to say that God is dead. He was dead even in the philosophy of Plotinus; nevertheless he is, if possible, more dead in the philosophy of Kant. He is therefore in no true sense alive in any form of modern theology so far as it is based upon the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions of Kant.

On this basis the first and most basic thing modern man should be able to do is to, identify himself. But how can he? He is lost in the cosmic pendulum swing between pure irrationalism and pure rationalism. He is an aspect of a God who himself or itself is wholly revealed and wholly hidden at the same time.

Altizer, Hamilton, and van Buren do not look into this critical question. They are dogmatists on this point. They have no problems on this point. They have less excuse for having no problem than does the non-educated fundamentalist who accepts his faith on the authority of the self-attesting Christ. The God-is-dead theologians owe us a critical analysis of their principle of language and an intelligible statement of their principle of historical and rational consciousness on which, for them, all that they say depends. How can they say that there cannot possibly be an ultimate answer to the problem of life, unless they have an intelligible starting point and an intelligible principle of verification?

Having shown us how a self that is simultaneously torn in two directions—the direction of absorption into pure rationality and of absorption into pure contingency can identify itself, they will naturally be able also to tell us how they can assert simultaneously that nobody knows ultimate truth but that Christians, who think that Christ does know, are wrong and that those, who are sure that he does not know, are right. They will then be able to show how a philosopher such as Sartre, who asserts himself to be nothing but a whitecap on a bottomless ocean of chance, can, nevertheless, make a universal negative with respect to what can and cannot possibly happen in all future time. Sartre says, in the same breath, both that God cannot exist and that he himself is a product of chance. The God-is-dead theologians are sure that when Jesus said that he would return

visibly to earth to judge the quick and the dead, he could not have been telling us truly about a future real state of affairs.

(B) The New Metaphysic

One thing that stands out in the thought of the God-is-dead theologians is their rejection of the Christ of the historic Christian creeds because of the determinism that is involved in believing in him. The apostle Peter said that it was by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God that the Jews by wicked hands had slain the Lord Jesus. But how could that be? How can man be said to be free if his action is determined by God? Surely the assertion of man's true freedom is his right. How can he be responsible if he is not free?

The God-is-dead theologians need but to point to Bennett, who defends the freedom of man in the same way they do. They need but turn to a member of the committee that formulated the Confession of 1967 (United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.), Dr. George Hendry, to discover that he, too, as well as they, thinks of the God of the Westminster Confession as a God of pure determinism, a God in which no truly free man can believe.

Now, then, we may expect to have an answer to this problem of the supposedly positive nature of freedom in terms of the freedom wherewith Kant has made modern philosophy free. We shall have the answer as soon as modern post-Kantian man, including the God-is-dead theologian, can show how man can be free positively and how he can identify himself as he goes off simultaneously in the direction of absorption into pure determinism and in the direction of absorption into pure indeterminism. What we have heard so far is that men do not like the idea of being creatures of God and his Christ in terms of an overarching plan of God. All that we have heard amounts to simply saying that man is free only if he is free from everything, including the responsibility of saying who he is. The God-is-dead theologians have said nothing new on this point. They are therefore not worse than other men who, together with them, merely assert their own autonomy as the foundation of all predication without being able to show how human language can speak intelligibly about anything at all. If the God-is-dead theologians will show us how they can make one intelligible assertion in terms of this principle, we shall follow them. So far they have not done so. They have merely followed the authority of Kant when he asserts that there can be no metaphysics. They have, with him, avowed their belief in another metaphysic, one which in advance excludes by authority the possibility of the truth of the claim of the Christ of the New Testament.

(C) The Suffering Child

Finally the God-is-dead theologians have, together with modern post-Kantian thought, solved the ethical as well as the metaphysical and the epistemological problem. As together with modern theologians in general, they reject the idea that the Christ of the Scriptures does have the answer to life's questions. They, together with modern theology, reject the idea that Christ has the answers to anything because he really tells us how things are. Now, finally, they reject, with modern theology, the idea that right is right because Christ calls it right and that wrong is wrong because Christ calls it wrong. In the place of the authority of Christ, they have substituted the assumption that right is right because man, as ethically autonomous, says it is right and that wrong is wrong because man, as ethically autonomous, says it is wrong.

When the Christ of the New Testament speaks of those on whom the tower of Siloam fell as not being greater sinners than were other men, he did so in order to make plain that, in ways that man the creature cannot fully understand and man the sinner will not approve, God accomplishes his goal in and with history. In all things, and in every field, man must live by the previous interpretation of Christ as God. This fact the New Testament, as the Word of Christ, asserts. Over against this, the God-is-dead theologians, together with modern theology, modern philosophy, and modern science, working out ever more consistently the principle of human apostasy introduced into history through the insinuation of Satan, are positing man's ethical self-sufficiency.

According to the New Testament, sinful man, who seeks to hold back the truth about himself as a creature of God and as a sinner who needs to flee to a God for help who says that he shed his blood for sinners, will in the day of judgment call upon the mountains to cover him from the wrath of the Lamb. But the God-is-dead theologians, together with modern theology, repress this truth, as well as all other truth, as they, with the Pharisees, assert the expendability of Jesus. Throughout, they reinterpret the Christ of Scripture with all his claims about the present, past, and future into a projection of man himself. In the nature of the case they do so by means of a supposedly intelligible principle of verification which they have discovered independently of the Christ of the Scripture. But the point is that this principle of verification is itself based upon the assumption of the ultimate or absolute authority of man as autonomous in the field of knowledge, of being, and of behavior. All reasoning and all verification in which any man engages rests ultimately either on the authority of man himself as autonomous, as ultimately self-interpreting, or upon the authority of the Christ of

the New Testament who says that he alone knows whence he came and whither he is going.

Those who believe what they say on Sunday morning do not claim that they can prove the truth of their belief by appealing to some principle of interpretation that is agreed upon by all rational men, a principle somehow independent of their faith. Christians frankly believe in Christ as God on the authority of Christ himself. They have plenty of problems when they thus believe. This would appear as complicated to a simple believer as a computer appears to a child. But a child trusts his father who runs the computer. Likewise the simple believer trusts God as in Christ controlling whatsoever comes to pass. The believer in the self-attesting Christ of the New Testament, whether educated or not, bows before the judge of all the earth who, he accepts by faith, will do right. He rejoices in the great grace whereby he has been taken out of the darkness into which he, with all men, had cast himself when, following Satan's advice, he asserted himself to be autonomous. He is deeply conscious of the fact that he is no better than others who still have not escaped from the blindness and hardness of heart by which they continue to assert and rationalize their belief in themselves as autonomous. Having been saved by grace and having accepted Christ as the Lord of all and the judge of all on the authority of his Word, followers of the self-attesting Christ now also see that those who will not thus live by faith in Christ must find reasons for defending their faith in themselves as being their own savior. The self-attesting Christ is the presupposition of all intelligible predication. The God-is-dead theologians have helped us to see this fact more clearly than ever. Their negations negate themselves. Or, we may say that their negations cannot even negate themselves because they have nothing to stand on when they make their predications. The Christ of the Scriptures as the Son of God upholds them in his hand even as they deny him.

(D) The New Ecumenism

The modern ecumenical theologian now has before him a clear exhibition of the full significance of his principle. "Modern theology, as we shall understand it," says Altizer, "was founded by Søren Kierkegaard ... " ² It was by Kierkegaard's dialectical method that Kierkegaard pointed out the way to the construction of a theology that is truly relevant to modern man.

² Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Bobbs-Merrell Co., 1966, p. 95.

However, Kierkegaard's method never "moved beyond the level of negation."³ "Kierkegaard knew the death of God only as an objective reality; indeed, it was 'objectivity' that was created by the death of God. Accordingly, faith is made possible by the negation of objectivity, and since 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' are antithetical categories, it follows that faith can be identified with 'subjectivity.' Today we can see that Kierkegaard could dialectically limit 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' to the level of antithetical categories because he still lived in an historical time when subjectivity could be known as indubitably Christian. Less than a hundred years later, it will be little less than blasphemy to identify the truly 'existential' with existence in faith. But in Kierkegaard's time the death of God had not yet become a subjective reality. Hence authentic human existence could be understood as culminating in faith, the movement of faith could be limited to the negation of 'objectivity,' and no occasion need arise for the necessity of a dialectical coincidence of the opposites. Yet no dialectical method can be complete until it leads to this final *coincidentia oppositorum*."⁴

We now see, says Altizer, that true dialectical thinking as "reborn in Kierkegaard ... was consummated in Friedrich Nietzsche ... "⁵ With his concept of Eternal Recurrence he "shatters the power of the old order of history, transforming transcendence into immanence, and thereby making eternity incarnate in every Now. Eternal Recurrence is the dialectical antithesis of the Christian God. The creature becomes the Creator when the Center is everywhere."⁶

But, of course, we must go beyond Nietzsche. We need a deeper negation than that of Nietzsche. Only when we have a deeper negation than that of Nietzsche can we attain to a "form of faith that will be authentically contemporary and eschatological at once."⁷

A truly eschatological faith is a faith "that calls the believer out of his old life in history and into a new Reality of grace."⁸

Having now reached the stage of history "when the death of God has become ... fully incarnate in the modern consciousness" we have attained to a "true

³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*

coincidentia oppositorum."*Ibid.*, p. 103 We are at last ready for a "fully dialectical form of faith."⁹

Theology "must now accept a dialectical vocation."¹⁰ We may now experience "the ecstatic liberation occasioned by the collapse of the transcendence of Being, by the death of God ... "¹¹ We now know "the power of an eschatological faith that can liberate ... from the inescapable reality of history."¹² But, of course, the "negation of 'history' must always be grounded in an affirmation of the 'present.' "¹³

Only by this affirmation of the present do we see that "Eternity has been swallowed up by time itself ... "¹⁴ Only thus are we prepared to understand "the true uniqueness of the Christian gospel."¹⁵ We now understand the "Christian meaning of Incarnation."¹⁶ For we now have the idea of a *coincidentia oppositorum* of which the center is pure act. Buddhist logic comes short at this point, because it has never known the negation of negation. "Only an acceptance of the reality of a negative or fallen reality can make possible a *coincidentia oppositorum* that is a coming together of the dual reality of the sacred and the profane. It is precisely this *coincidentia* of the opposing realms of the sacred and the profane that makes possible Christianity's celebration of the Incarnation as an actual and real event, an event that has occurred and does occur in concrete time and space, and an event effecting a real transformation of the world."¹⁷

Thus we have reached the idea of a Kingdom of God that "is a dynamic epiphany of a Godhead in process of realizing itself."¹⁸ We now have a God who is identical with "a forward-moving process effecting an absolute transformation of the world."¹⁹

Here then we have a "Christian" theology in which Karl Barth's idea of a God who is wholly identical with a Christ who is wholly identical with his work of

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109–110.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

saving all mankind no longer needs to concern itself with Judas Iscariot as representing the "open situation in preaching." All men simply must now be men in Christ.

If faithful to its purely activist principle the modern ecumenical church will, ere long, together with Altizer and his colleagues, identify Christ with the idea of a cosmic process. More and more this ecumenical church will, with the God-is-dead theologians, negate the remnants of any idea of God or of the Son of God as in any discernible way prior to man.

But there is a negation that is deeper than the negation of the modern ecumenical church and of the God-is-dead theology. This deeper negation is that which rests upon the self-affirmation of the Christ of the Scriptures. The modern ecumenical church, including in itself the God-is-dead theologians, must, in effect, affirm this Christ in order to deny him.¹

[Back To Contents](#)

¹Van Til, Cornelius ; Sigward, Eric H.: *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895-1987*. electronic ed. New York : Labels Army Co., 1997