

## WHAT ABOUT THE MISSIONS...AFTER "THE DEATH OF GOD"?

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What happens in the heart of theology with regard to how we try to explicate our faith about the relation of Christ and God will gradually affect our ecclesiology and missiology. Theology is now being challenged to face up to "the death of God" by the proclamation of "Christian atheists" that Christianity must embrace a Jesus without God if the Christian faith is to be meaningful in a totally immanent world. In this article, I would like to point out what I believe some of the effects of "the death of God" on missiology are likely to be, even though theology has only begun to come to grips with the problem of increasing atheism *within* Christianity.

If God is dead, it would seem clear enough that the people of God is dead and that Christianity has no divine mission in and for the world. However, neither the problem is so simple nor the result so drastic. The real question is: *in what sense* may we say God has died? And if we can more nearly determine that, then we can attempt to say in what sense the Christian mission is affected. It will be necessary first to outline how various meanings of God's death have affected the missiological thinking of some of the radical theologians who merit the paradoxical title of "Christian atheist"<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Our sketch will be limited to the three acknowledged leaders of Christian atheism: WILLIAM HAMILTON, PAUL VAN BUREN and THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER. We will note their principal works as each is treated. A longer summary and critique of their systems, as well as a consideration of the movement as a whole, may be found in *Is God Dead?* by THOMAS W. OGLETREE, SCM Press, London, 1966. William Hamilton gives a considerable bibliography of works he considers pertinent to the development of radical theology at the end of *Radical Theology and The Death of God* by THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER and WILLIAM HAMILTON, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1966. Two of the best studies of the historical background for this movement are: *The New Christianity*, edited by WILLIAM R. MILLER, Delacorte Press, New York, 1966, and *The Roots of the Radical Theology* by JOHN C. COOPER, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1967. Two anthologies of critical reactions to the God-is-dead theologians and further considerations of the theological problems involved are: *The Meaning of the Death of God*, edited by BERNARD MURCHLAND, Random House, New York, 1967, and *Radical Theology: Phase Two*, edited by C. W.



### *Hamilton: God's Death*

With the phrase "the death of God", WILLIAM HAMILTON<sup>2</sup> intends to describe the theological meaning of a radical change in human experience. Formerly, because of man's feeling of awe before everything mysterious in life, because of his needs and his own seeming incapacity to fill these, he experienced a real sense of belief in the existence, presence and activity of a God to whom adoration and trust were possible, even fitting and necessary. This experience has slowly withered and vanished — in Jesus and the Cross, in the scientific and political and industrial revolutions, especially in the irresistible development of atheism in every aspect of life throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today we experience only the absence or death of what we once felt was God. HAMILTON has even given up waiting for a new God whose presence we might enjoy as opposed to the God we once needed and used (an earlier Hamiltonian solution to "the death of God" experience). God's death is not the result of a scientific demonstration, it is "an emotional event, in the guts"<sup>3</sup>, composed of elements that are overwhelming when taken together. One of these elements is that God is less and less needed. As we solve our own problems and increasingly look to ourselves, we look away from the irrelevant God whose help we once felt we required. Another factor is the problem of suffering. This problem was always there, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century has magnified the problem until it has become impossible to believe in the monster that such an all-powerful God would have to be to allow these things. Further, he believes *we* can replace all that we once summed up under "God". This is the other experience that has arisen in connection with the demise of God, or better, the positive side of one and the same development in human experience. Technological man is in the process of

CHRISTIAN and GLENN R. WITTIG, Lippincott, New York, 1967. Two of the newest examinations of the debate are: *The Death of God Movement*, by CHARLES N. BENT, S.J., Paulist Press, 1967, and *Religion in Contemporary Debate* by ALAN RICHARDSON, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1967. Further matter is added from the side of the God-is-dead theologians in: *Toward a New Christianity*, edited by THOMAS ALTIZER, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967, and *The Death of God Debate*, edited by JACKSON LEE ICE and JOHN J. CAREY, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly a Baptist minister, WILLIAM HAMILTON, became well known during his years as Professor of systematic theology at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York. Recently he became a member of the faculty of New College in Sarasota, Florida. His principal works are: *The New Essence of Christianity*, Association Press, New York, 1966, and a collection of major articles with Altizer, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1966. Two very important articles are: "The Shape of a Radical Theology", *Christian Century*, vol. LXXXII: 40, Oct. 6, 1965, p. 1219—1222 and especially "The Death of God", *Playboy*, vol. 13: 8, August, 1966, p. 84 f.

<sup>3</sup> "The Death of God", *Playboy*, vol. 13: 8, August, 1966, p. 137, column 3.



increasingly mastering the world. There is still awe, mystery and the "sacred", but we can celebrate these more adequately in the arts, in the human sanctity of affirmed sexuality and in the power of positive human living to face death, thereby robbing it of the ability to surprise and hurt us. Since all we have known as God is gone, we, the human community, must take over the "divine" functions of rebuking and correcting — with unconditional healing, consolation and forgiveness. But decisive for us as *the* focus and center of obedience, trust and loyalty is the *man* Jesus, his way with others.

### *Hamilton: Mission after God's Death*

For HAMILTON, "the death of God" is not the death of mission, for it issues in an emphatic moving away from "monastery" and "church" into the world. The Christian is to be totally in and for this world on the pattern and inspiration of the man Jesus. The Christian man involves himself fully in the arts and politics, in social and economic revolution, in science and everything human in order to live for and love all his neighbors. One must push the movement from church to world as far as it can go, becoming a frankly worldly man — without religion or God, but alive for others. One must take this world with ultimate seriousness. We are called on to "unmask" or find and serve Jesus in our neighbor but even more to become Christ for our neighbor. Hamilton ends two of his most important essays with a missionary emphasis:

"We dechristianize no one, we make no virtue of our defects, and we even dare to call men into the worldly arena where men are in need and where Jesus is to be found and served<sup>4</sup>."

"It (the death of God) is a real event; it is a joyous event; it is a liberating event, removing everything that might stand between man and the relief of suffering, man and the love of his neighbor. It is a real event making possible a Christian form of faith for many today. It is even making possible church and ministry in our world<sup>5</sup>."

### *van Buren: God's Death*

PAUL VAN BUREN<sup>6</sup> approaches the problem of God in the modern world by asking how a Christian who is himself a secular man may understand the Gospel in a secular way. By "secular man" he means one who is

<sup>4</sup> "The Death of God Theologies Today", *The Christian Scholar*, Spring, 1965, p. 48. (This article is reprinted in *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1966.)

<sup>5</sup> "The Death of God", *Playboy*, vol. 13: 8, August, 1966, p. 139, column 3.

<sup>6</sup> PAUL M. VAN BUREN, ordained an Episcopalian clergyman, is the Associate Professor of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, Penn. His theory is explained in *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, Macmillan, New York, 1963. Quotes are taken from the SCM Press edition, London, 1966. Besides the summary



frankly empirical and pragmatic minded, interested and involved in this life, not in the "beyond" of a transcendental metaphysics or some post-mortem world. However, he wishes to find a way that will be responsive to the major concerns of both the theological right and left, to Barth and to Bultmann and Ogden, to the New Testament and Church tradition (especially Chalcedon) as well as to the demands of the modern empirical mind. Van Buren brings the method of linguistic analysis to the language of faith in order to discover what effective functions this language can have for the secular Christian today. His system is not completely synonymous with Logical Positivism in that he attempts to apply a "modified verification principle" (which judges the actual meaning of the words we use according to the realistic possibilities within the particular context in question). His major linguistic and philosophical sources are Ludwig Wittgenstein and Antony Flew<sup>7</sup>. He also calls on kindred studies of Christianity from T. R. Miles, R. B. Braithwaite, Ian T. Ramsey and R. M. Hare<sup>8</sup>. Van Buren's conclusions may justly be

and critique of Ogletree mentioned in our first footnote, there is a very fine critical review of the book in the *Journal of Religion*, vol. XLIV: 3, July, 1964, p. 238—243 by LANGDON B. GILKEY, who is one of the earliest and finest commentators on Death-of-God theology (cfr. also: "The God is Dead Theology and the Possibility of God-Language", *The Voice*, January, 1965). A more extended and very critical reaction to VAN BUREN may be found in E. L. MASCALL's *The Secularization of Christianity*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1965. An interesting summary and reaction to van Buren's translation of God-talk into talk about one's basic 'blik' on life appears in Bishop ROBINSON's *Exploration into God*, SCM Press, London, 1967, p. 63—72.

<sup>7</sup> LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN: *The Blue and Brown Books* (Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'), B. Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, and *Philosophical Investigations*, B. Blackwell, Oxford, 1953. ANTONY FLEW and ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1955. In a more recent book by FLEW, *God and Philosophy*, Hutchinson of London, 1966, he makes only two references to van Buren (both disapproving), N. 1.16 (p. 16—17) and N. 2.16 (p. 33—34), without trying to show that van Buren has misused FLEW's own earlier observations about God-talk and verification in *New Essays* (p. 96—99). It would seem that FLEW considers his answer there (p. 106—108) to R. M. HARE's theory of 'blik' (p. 99—103), which VAN BUREN has adopted, as sufficient. His arguments were two: 1) Such a view is "entirely unorthodox" (Flew thinks it clear that orthodox Christianity has intended to make some cosmological assertions about the nature and activities of a supposed personal creator) and 2) If religious statements intend only to talk about a 'blik' and say nothing about cosmos and the way it really is, then religious activities are made redundant — even fraudulent. Theological reasoning, e.g., becomes like trying to clear an overdraft by writing one's Bank a cheque for the same amount.

<sup>8</sup> T. R. MILES, *Religion and the Scientific Outlook*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1959; R. B. BRAITHWAITE, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*,



described as a radical translation of the New Testament and traditional Christian theology into completely secular terms. The word God is judged meaningless, unless it is boiled down to mean logically that one is speaking of some ultimate attitude on his own part. Commenting on G. BORNKAMM's consideration in *Jesus von Nazareth* of the two most important commandments, van Buren writes:

"He (Bornkamm) asks, 'Are love toward God and love toward the neighbor one and the same?' and answers, 'Certainly not... Whoever equates in this fashion the two commandments knows nothing of God's sovereignty and will very soon turn God into a mere word or symbol with which one might as well dispense.' In passing, we might say that this is closing the barn door several centuries too late. Bornkamm continues: 'Surrender to God means... being awake and ready for God, *who claims me in other men*. In this sense, love for the neighbor is the test of love for God.' Precisely. If love for the neighbor is the test of 'love for God', then by the verification principle it is the meaning of 'love for God'.<sup>9</sup>"

VAN BUREN contends that we have no need for the problematic God symbol, because we can find our ultimate in the historical man Jesus. Jesus and the pattern of his freedom to live and die for others is decisive for the Christian. The resurrection is interpreted as an event which happened to the Apostles rather than to Jesus. It was the very real experience of coming to see Jesus in a new way, a "contagious" way, that brought them to share in his wonderful freedom for others. A bodily resurrection would be incapable of any real empirical description and is not even essential for faith (one can assert a bodily resurrection without really being grasped by Christ's example). But the "Easter experience" is necessary for faith. Language about faith, then, for the secular Christian is language about the "blik" that has definitively claimed him — a view of himself and his fellow man that is a sharing in the contagious freedom for others which Jesus of Nazareth had.

#### *van Buren: Mission after God's Death*

VAN BUREN believes that once the Church and the known world became coextensive, the Church began to claim the world for herself rather than for Christ. And in order to retain the New Testament Church-world distinction, she found it necessary to distinguish secular from sacred, "this-worldly" from "otherworldly". The biblical "God in history" became ever more "above history" and "otherworldly", until today we no longer

Cambridge U. Press, Cambridge, 1955; IAN T. RAMSEY, *Religious Language*, SCM Press, London, 1957; R. M. HARE, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by ANTONY FLEW and ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, SCM Press, London, 1955, p. 99—103.

<sup>9</sup> *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 182—183.



know how to use the word God. But Christians can stand on their own feet and help their neighbor without the "God-hypothesis". The Christian mission can no longer be spoken of in any logical sense as really divine, but Christians are still grasped by the freedom of the man Jesus to take his perspective in their lives.

"The contemporary meaning of 'claiming the world for Christ' cannot be a return to medieval metaphysics and the confusion of the power of the church with the contagious power of the freedom of Jesus. The meaning of that claim now is simply that the whole world may be seen with the Christian's perspective. He need not ask nor expect the world to understand itself as he understands it. Since he has acquired this perspective in connection with a freedom which is contagious, he should be content to let this contagion work its own way in the world, without his taking thought for the morrow, especially the morrow of the church.

The mission of the Christian is the way of love upon which he finds himself, the way toward the neighbor, not the way of trying to make others into Christians. His mission is simply to be a man, as this is defined by Jesus of Nazareth . . . It is quite enough that he practices the liberty for which he has been set free<sup>10</sup>."

### *Altizer: God's Death*

THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER's<sup>11</sup> explanation of God's death is more difficult to summarize than that of Hamilton or van Buren. His explicit concerns are not the growing lack of any need for a God and the problem of evil

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 191—192.

<sup>11</sup> THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER, an Episcopalian layman, is the Associate Professor of Bible and Religion at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. His principal works are: *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1961; *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1963; *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1966; *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (a collection of essays in conjunction with William Hamilton), Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1966, and *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (actually written before *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, but ranking with it in importance for the thought of Altizer), Michigan State University Press, 1967. Other important works include: "Nirvana and Kingdom of God", p. 150—168, in *New Theology No. 1*, edited by Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, Macmillan, New York, 1964; "Creative Negation in Theology", p. 77—85, *Frontline Theology*, edited by DEAN G. PEERMAN, SCM Press, London, 1967; the very significant article: "Catholic Theology and The Death of God", which was given as a paper at Catholic University in Washington, D. C., during a conference on *The God-problem Today* in the summer of 1967 and has appeared in *Cross Currents*; the book *Toward a New Christianity*, edited by THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967. A sharp attack by ROBERT McAFEE BROWN on ALTIZER's *Gospel of Christian Atheism* can be found in *THEOLOGY TODAY*, vol. XXIII: 2, July, 1966, p. 279—



nor the requirements of empirical thinking and linguistic analysis. He contends that Christianity must be completely contemporary or "non-religious", i. e. it must reject every retreat into the past and any effort to transcend or devalue the world. All such maneuvers are betrayals of the Incarnation, which is the specific difference of Christianity's faith. To realize what such a fully contemporary and incarnate Christianity is, he calls for a radical acceptance of atheism's critique of Christianity's religious nature. Altizer uses Mircea Eliade's studies of religion only to identify and attack traces of religion within Christianity. His thought develops in strenuous opposition to his own Episcopalian background and to Barth. He protests the remainder of transcendence in Bultmann and Tillich, both of whom he does not find radical enough. He incorporates many 19<sup>th</sup> century atheistic ideas: Nietzsche's fury against the Christian God and his concept of Eternal Recurrence, Hegel's logic and ontology, especially Blake's Christo-atheistic theories (generally masked over with the esoteric symbolism of his poetry) about man as artist. He also employs what he can of Teilhard's evolutionary Christology. Altizer manages to mold his borrowings and inspirations into a surprisingly original and unified whole. He reports the death of God in a more ontological manner than Hamilton or van Buren. The latter two are talking about how all experience of responsible God-reflection has perished and how a critically reconstructed picture of Jesus without God can still definitively claim us as *the* inspiration for the way to treat our fellow man. Altizer contends that God has really died in the sense that all reality is a process of kenotic and dialectic evolution from a primordial simplicity through continuing complexification toward an entirely new coincidence or at-oneness. "The Original Totality" (or God as the primordial and simple whole of reality) denied himself by creative fall into evolution. "The Transcendent God" (God as other than world) appears with evolution's initiation, rather than being the presupposition of creation (Altizer rejects the idea of a transcendent God alone in eternity and the concept of "creatio ex nihilo"). The whole of reality, God included, is evolving and the entire course of its history has been a process of Incarnation, because a new kind of coincidence or identity is being reached. In this evolutionary Incarnation, God continues to deny himself and becomes identified with man. The process reaches a focal

290. A most lucid summary and reaction to ALTIZER appears in WILLIAM BRADEN's *The Private Sea*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1967, p. 155—177. In: *America and the Future of Theology*, edited by WILLIAM A. BEARDSLEE, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1967, there is another article of ALTIZER's: "Theology and the Contemporary Sensibility", p. 15—31, followed by two critical reactions: Rabbi RICHARD L. RUBENSTEIN (a Jewish God-is-dead theologian, cfr. *After Auschwitz*, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1966), "Thomas Altizer's Apocalypse", p. 32—40, and CHARLES H. LONG's article, "The Ambiguities of Innocence", p. 41—51.



point and conscious stage in Jesus of Nazareth. God became Jesus to the decisive extent that he died definitively to his otherness in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Resurrection means that what Jesus became (the total expression of God — the incarnate Word) continues in man universally (in *all* men) and completely (i. e., since Jesus of Nazareth, the Word exists in no other way except as incarnate). On-goingly one with us in our every now, the incarnate Word (also referred to as "Spirit", "Jesus" or "Christ") is bringing us progressively closer toward a final God-man identity. The name of Jesus as savior, therefore, is not simply to be identified with Jesus of Nazareth, but is used as a symbol of the innermost reality of faith: the present and continuing unification of God and man. The final identity or *coincidentia oppositorum* is a fully dialectical one. It will be at the furthest dialectical remove from either God as the Original Totality or God as other than man. It is not a mere juxtaposition or harmony nor even a close unity in which the opposites somehow retain their own identities. There is not a simple denial of one opposite (as Altizer claims is the case in a pure form of religion, such as Eastern mysticism, where the world and all conscious activity is simply reversed in order to achieve oneness with the perfect still that is before all motion, even that of thought). In true dialectical coincidence, both God and man cease to be what they were as separated. They become a new identity. Altizer is insistent that God as separate was real, that he has really died to this separateness in the process of evolutionary Incarnation. By this evolution man also is radically different from what he used to be — so different that he no longer depends on a God separate from himself, that he can no longer even realistically conceive of such a God. In a sense, God is still alive, *but not as separate from man*. The position is at least as much pantheistic as atheistic, though it is quite different from the classical forms of pantheism and atheism. Finally, he accuses traditional Christianity of being "religious" in that it tries to resist this incarnational evolution toward God-man identity by resurrecting Jesus as a cosmic Lord. It negates man's real present and future, because it returns to the past by trying to cling to the image of a separate and eternal God, by closing off revelation with the Apostolic times and by claiming that faith remains unchanged and autonomous despite the changing world. Altizer claims we are in a "Third Age", an apocalyptic time or the time of the death of God — one as different from the New Testament as the New Testament is from the Old Testament. The images of a transcendent God and a resurrected Christ are increasingly empty and dead, precisely in as much as the only real Word of revelation and faith is incarnate in man and steadily approaching the full apocalyptic identity of God and man. "The Apocalyptic Totality" (Altizer's "Omega Point") will be "the Great Humanity Divine".



### *Altizer: Mission after God's Death*

ALTIZER has been less concerned with morality or mission than Hamilton and van Buren. One reason is that their systems are largely moralities. Another is that Altizer has been intent on developing the theoretical basis of his incarnational evolutionism. What is perhaps most discouraging for mission in Altizer's system is the idea that the body of Christ is rather automatically the entire world, with the added assertion that the Word is even more present and active outside of the Churches than within them (because of their "religious" nature). However, since all of reality is a process of Incarnation by which "the Great Humanity Divine" arises, we should not retreat from the process nor obstruct this goal but should give ourselves completely to the evolving actuality of our present (which is the incarnate Word).

"The very name of Jesus embodies the promise of these final things while simultaneously calling for a total identification with our neighbor. Truly, to pronounce his name is to give oneself to Jesus as he is manifest in the weak and broken ones about us, and as he is present in the darkness, the anonymity, and the chaos of a fallen history; for the repetition of the name of Jesus is a repetition of God's eternal death for man, a reliving of an ultimate cosmic reversal, a participation even now in the End which he has promised"<sup>12</sup>.

### *"The Death of God"*

In what sense *has* God died? First of all, it is obviously true that Christendom has been collapsing since the time of the Renaissance<sup>13</sup>. In a growingly exclusive manner, our culture has become this-world centered, empirical-minded and scientized, positivistic and secular, pragmatic and humanistic. In inverse proportion with this, belief in God, Trinity, Virgin-birth, Incarnation, soul, afterlife, miracles and resurrection has diminished. None of the isolated elements of this increasing disbelief, perhaps even all taken together, is completely new, but there does seem to be forming an ever wider and more convinced and more sophisticated consensus that traditional Christian faith and theology is dead or dying. What is especially new about the death-of-God atheism is that now atheism has arisen not only among those who began as Christians but then chose to become "outside" opponents of Christianity; today we have the phenomenon of *Christian atheists*. Radical Christian

<sup>12</sup> *The New Apocalypse*, p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Outstanding on this theme are the books of GABRIEL VAHANIAN: *The Death of God*, George Braziller, New York, 1961 and *Wait Without Idols*, George Braziller, New York, 1964. For VAHANIAN's condemnation of radical theology's proposal of Christian atheism as the solution for our situation, cfr. *No Other God*, George Braziller, New York, 1966.



atheists stay more or less within Christianity<sup>14</sup>. They want to be atheists or totally secular — but remain as explicitly Christian as their viewpoint will allow. Even this is not altogether new. One can consider Blake, Hegel and others as precursors. Schweitzer, Bultmann, Tillich and even Bonhoeffer and Teilhard de Chardin prepared part of the more immediate scriptural and speculative groundwork for this development. In saying this, we intend merely to grant that the God-is-dead theologians appeal with some logic to these earlier thinkers as seminal for radical Christian atheism. An even more important preparation, however, has been the considerable number of church Christians who are *practical* agnostics, if not atheists. Radical theologians have gathered all of these factors together and systematized them around the man and symbol Jesus — without the God-baggage. This, then, is the sense in which “God” has died, and there are two principal sides to the event. The first is that

<sup>14</sup> A summary of their theological reactions to Christianity as organized Church would require a much more ambitious paper than this intends to be, even though there is little developed ecclesiology in Hamilton, van Buren and Altizer. The important point for our purposes here is to take note that they concur in making the individual Christian the direct and principal bearer of mission. Van Buren may be the most churchy of the three leaders of radical theology, and we have seen that he advises the Christian to act without thought for the morrow of the church. In a recent article (A Response: Good-by Chalcedon, Hello What?) in *Commonweal*, vol. LXXXVII: 8, November 24, 1967, p. 275—278, Hamilton (probably making a small bow to the chorus of critics who have complained of his subjectivism and extreme antidurchism) almost appears to revert his stance on the Church — but does not. He says that the big question today is the relation of Christology and ecclesiology, the question of how Christology can be liberated from ecclesiology. Then he says the answer is *in part* that it cannot and must not be, and that the problem is not one of individualism versus community. He says Protestantism will not again revert to its “perennial temptation” to construe Christology as the rendering of the relation of the solitary believer to Christ. However, as a Christian atheist, he immediately “falls into temptation” (the perennial one) by saying the Christian must seek and serve “the community prepared to be conformed to Christ”, and he implies that the “visible church” is neither the seeker nor the sought (but the Christian and the world). We think he has not departed essentially from his earlier position of saying that the Christian must move out of the church into the world (pushing that movement as far as it can go) in order to find Jesus there in the neighbor and “be Christ” to him. For his view of the church, cfr. “Thursday’s Child”, p. 87—93, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, especially p. 91, where he gives three understandings of the church, opting for the third: “But somehow he (the theologian) has had to come to define the church in a third way. The church is present whenever Christ is being formed among men in the world. This is a very vague way of describing his feelings about the community, even though it has no outlines, no preaching, sacraments or liturgy.” The traditional Church (and its claim to be the body of Christ) plays a very important, *fully negative* role in the thought of Altizer. Unfortunately, the *Gospel of Christian*



our evolving culture has thrust us into the complicated process of losing the joints to what was a more or less unified and viable thought-structure for the understanding and expression of the faith. Empirical thinking seems to reduce our faith and theology to a collection of pious stories and metaphysical assertions. That besieged faith remains alive and active, but our efforts to bring it to speculative understanding and expression in a way that is both responsible to it and for it in the modern world have fallen into many earnest but overly inadequate theological pieces. Christianity, however, has been in like, even if less serious, situations before. The second side is more important. Not only has our culture undeniably become more and more secular, but Christian theologians<sup>15</sup> have reacted to this situation by trying to transform Christianity into an atheism, a Christian atheism centering its attitude toward the world around the *man* Jesus without God. The novelty is their clear intention to be atheists *within* Christianity, their systematic efforts to maintain and develop this choice as *Christology*.

### *Missiology after "The Death of God"*

If this is the sense in which we may and indeed must acknowledge "the death of God", then we can begin to see how it should affect our missiology. The problem is a uniquely Christian one. Only Christians

*Atheism* is not indexed, but the reader will find the essence of Altizer's theory of Church on pages: 9—10, 12, 19—20, 24—27, 43, 132—133, 136—138, 151. (We apologize for the confusion of church appearing now with a capital and now with a small letter. Hamilton and van Buren speak of "church" and Altizer of "Church".) For a positive and practical death-of-God ecclesiology, cfr. ERNEST HARRISON's *A Church Without God*, Lippincott, Philadelphia/New York, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> There has been a tendency (passing now in the United States and Canada, but still strong in Europe) to represent "the death of God" movement as a small and ephemeral sensationalism spawned by its dramatic title and the Press fanning of the flames. That is a false "hope", or rather, an unhealthy kind of wishful thinking. The identification of Christ and the problem of God have dominated theology for a very long time. Some solutions to these problems have been inching toward this radical position. Bultmann and Tillich are certainly among its more immediate predecessors (Altizer names Tillich the "father" of modern radical theology — meaning Christian atheism. Cfr. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 10—11). In Germany, Herbert Braun may be numbered among the Christian atheists. In England, various Christian philosophers of religion (whose background is that of logical positivism or linguistic analysis) have stood close to this radical position also — and R. B. Braithwaite and T. R. Miles are indistinguishable from Christian atheists. In Canada, there is Ernest Harrison. In the United States, one must add Henry Malcolm, Maynard Kaufmann, Robert W. Jenson and John A. Phillips to the Christian atheist camp, besides Hamilton, van Buren and Altizer.



concern themselves with theologizing about Christ as our salvation and about the relation of Christ to God. The God-is-dead theologians are proposing various forms of what may be justly characterized as a kind of monophysitism in reverse, i. e. whatever God was supposed to be or mean is swallowed up in the *man* Jesus. They are right to return theology radically again to Christology<sup>16</sup> and to emphasize Christian mission and morality as streamlined Christ-witness and Christ-imitation. But they are wrong in reducing Christ to a mere humanistic model of the best way to treat our neighbor. We are simply not dealing with the real Jesus, when we claim to choose him, to judge and select about him what we will<sup>17</sup>. There is no Jesus without the Father, and the Father is not just another word for Jesus. Christian mission cannot be based on what becomes a humanistic "Jesusology" or "Christosophy", because on one hand it ceases to be meaningfully Christian and on the other hand it retains an exclusive symbolism and commitment that its mere humanism no longer logically justifies. Speculative theology will have to come to grips not only with the general condition of man today but also with this peculiar problem of a missionary-minded, Christological

<sup>16</sup> Some of the theologians addressing themselves to the God-problem today enjoy the appearance of greater orthodoxy than the God-is-dead theologians, because they remain theistic. However, when they consider theology as something above or other or prior to Christology, they tend to regard God less as the Father *Christ reveals* and more as "the Ground of being" or the ultimate "Thou" character of being or some other philosophical or psychological construct *which reveals itself* everywhere — also in Christ. The result of this is a reduction of Christ that *also* issues in considering him merely a man and finds it difficult to defend the uniqueness of his saving revelation of God. Representative of this position are the bishops J. A. T. ROBINSON, *Honest to God*, SCM Press, London, 1963, and JAMES A. PIKE, *A Time for Christian Candor*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964. Robinson exemplifies this stance even more clearly in *Exploration into God*, SCM Press, London, 1967, in which Christology is virtually absent on the plea that in a time of God's death we must first explore further the meaning of 'God' before we can develop the theme of 'God was in Christ' (p. 9). What? Know God first — and then we can know how God was in Christ? We find this the very opposite of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, that Jesus Christ is the way, the light and the truth. Jesus alone knows and reveals the Father (John 1:18). In all earnestness, we believe it may well be more Christian *in our time*, as the God-is-dead theologians have done, to throw over all such separate efforts to discover a God-concept (and then show it is active in Christ) and simply take Jesus alone as enough.

<sup>17</sup> John 15, 16; Matthew 12, 30 and Luke 11, 23. When one's commitments to a certain contemporary estimation of philosophy, linguistic analysis, science, evolution etc. require that he reconstruct the Jesus of Nazareth whom the Gospels witness as Christ on the pattern of these branches of learning (so that he can accept "Jesus" as the pattern for his life), what happens to the *logic* of his claim that it is Jesus who is the *ultimate focus* of his obedience, trust and loyalty?



atheism. This encounter should eventually impress on missiology with new force that sound Christology must be more than ever the touchstone of authentic Christian missionary thinking. Christians share in and continue the divine mission of their founder and head. They have no other mission that is not subordinate to this. The Christian is *not* sent merely to serve the world. This is a particularly widespread and well-meant but sadly humanistic and non-Christological idea. It is true that the Church's goal is to serve and not to dominate the world. *But the character of that service must be the extension of Christ's own servanthood.* In faithfulness to Christ that service must always remain in the end a "folly" and a "stumbling block", crucified to the world and an eschatological challenge to a merely world-centered present and future, because the world is not to dominate man either. Without ceasing to take the fact of his fallenness any less earnest, the Christian must embrace the world as created good and recreated in Christ, i. e. he must accept the world as sacramental (its reality and value is Father-ward through Christ) and not act as though he could be an imitator of and witness to Christ and still believe that the *whole* of salvation lies in "authentic existence" now or some distant but this-side-of-death future for a lucky generation to come. Every good work should and must be assumed by Christian mission: medicinal, educational, economic, social, cultural — even to the extent of supporting political revolution where justice and practical charity cry for its necessity. *But as Christ worked no sign for the sake of the sign*, but for faith in him and in the Father who sent him — that must be the source and goal of our continuation of Christ's mission. Missiology must be totally and soundly Christological, faithful to the real Christ of the kerygma.

But in order that missiology be totally and soundly Christological in this time "of the death of God", we must realize anew where Christological reflection and mission begin. It should not be so surprising that we have atheists within Christianity today. The cause does not lie alone in the collapse of Christendom and the steady rise of pervasive and one-sided secularistic thinking. The condition of the Christian *Church* is a dealy one<sup>18</sup>. And it is especially within the very heart of the Church, in the *liturgy*, that the Church has long been so lifeless. The Protestant character of the death of God movement up to this time might even indicate in part that this is truer in these Christian Churches. Christian reflection can only begin from Christian living. One of the most obvious characteristics of the death of God theologies in general is that they see no Christian life in the gathered community in liturgy — but only in the immediate secular service of the neighbor. Why have we allowed this

<sup>18</sup> In *The Grave of God: Has the Church a Future?*, Burns and Oates, London, 1967, ROBERT ADOLFS argues that the problematics about God and Christ are symptoms of a deeper problem: the sorry state of the Church. Cfr. esp. p. 26—27.



mortal separation between what we say and do "in church" and "in the world"? Christian liturgy must live — and it must be one with our total life. The seriousness of this can hardly be overstressed, for it is in the living experience of the Christian community come together in liturgy that Christianity is constituted, that the New Testament witness itself began to take oral shape, that sound Christological living and thinking and mission arise. One of Paul's most exalted Christological reflections (*Phil.* 2, 6—11) exemplifies this well. From prison he writes to the liturgical gathering, calling on words of their liturgical witness of Christ, to emphasize the moral and missionary meaning of their total situation (cfr. especially the wider context of *Phil.* 1, 1 — 2, 18). Christian mission originates with basic Christian witness. This emphasizes that mission is the fundamental business of every believer — even and especially as he is simply witnessing his faith within the gathered Christian community. Here is present the power of the risen Christ, in whose life and mission we are incorporated. Mission is communicated and received and shared in Word and Sacrament. If the members of the Christian body fail here, *they fail in mission to one another — they fail where mission begins*, at the living center from out of which Christian witness must be continually moving.

### Summary

What about missiology, then, after "the death of God"? 1) It must seriously and sympathetically reckon with atheism *within* Christianity. 2) And to do this, it must be thoroughly and soundly Christological. 3) Finally, to be thoroughly and soundly Christological, missiology in the time of God's death must spring more than ever before from a *vital* liturgical experience of our communal knowledge and witness of Christ.