

AMERICAN UNBELIEF AND THE DEATH OF GOD

I. THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

It is impossible to evaluate accurately American belief or unbelief if one does not have at least some initial understanding of the American spirit and temper.

I would like first to speak of those factors in the American approach to life which, though not directly religious, will nonetheless influence religious expression. Then I would like to make a few observations directly concerned with the American attitude toward religion.

There are some elements in American psychology as such which will at least unconsciously modify our expression of belief. I think that five points will be sufficient to express the general idea I have in mind.

1. *Americans Do Not Easily Accept Transcendence or Mystery*

This is not something recently true of us. It was observable in our national character long before we became the mighty industrial-scientific complex we are today. Alexis de Tocqueville saw it in us when he visited this country in 1831. He later recorded his impressions:

As [Americans] perceive that they succeed in resolving without assistance, all the little difficulties which their practical life presents, they readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained and that nothing in it transcends the limits of the understanding. Thus they fall to denying what they cannot comprehend; which leaves them but little faith for whatever is extraordinary, and an almost insurmountable distaste for whatever is supernatural.¹

This led de Tocqueville to comment on the philosophical attitude of Americans:

¹ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (ed. and abridged by Richard D. Heffner), (The American Library, New York, 1956), p. 144.

I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States. . . . To evade the bondage of system and habit . . . to accept tradition only as a means of information . . . to seek the reason of things for one's self, and in one's self alone . . . such are the principal characteristics of what I shall call the philosophical method of the Americans.²

De Tocqueville felt that the democratic principle was partly responsible for this approach to things:

Equality begets in man the desire of judging of everything for himself; it gives him, in all things, a taste for the tangible and the real, a contempt for tradition and for forms . . . [Americans] mistrust systems; they adhere closely to facts. . . . As they do not easily defer to the mere name of any fellowman, they are never inclined to rest upon any man's authority; but, on the contrary, they are unremitting in their efforts to find out the weaker points of their neighbors' doctrine.³

2. *Americans Are a People on the Move, Ever-anxious for Change, a People Committed to the Perfectibility of Man*

Well over a century ago, de Tocqueville said it all in a sentence: "Every one is in motion."⁴

In proportion as castes disappear and the classes of society approximate . . . the image of an ideal but always fugitive perfection presents itself to the human mind. Continual changes are then every instant occurring under the observation of every man . . . he learns but too well that no people and no individual, how enlightened soever they may be, can lay claim to infallibility . . . he infers that man is endowed with an indefinite faculty of improvement.⁵

De Tocqueville gives an example of this which seems so modern that it easily makes one smile:

I accost an American sailor, and inquire why the ships of his country are built so as to last but for a short time; he

² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

answers without hesitation, that the art of navigation is every day making such rapid progress, that the finest vessel would become almost useless if it lasted beyond a few years. In these words, which fell accidentally, and on a particular subject, from an uninstructed man, I recognize the general and systematic idea upon which a great people direct all their concerns.⁶

What de Tocqueville called "the restless ambition which equality begets"⁷ another Frenchman found still typical of us. Maritain comments:

Americans seem to be in their own land as pilgrims. . . . They are always on the move . . . They are not settled, installed . . . A skyscraper in New York does not lay claim to brave the centuries any more than does a tent in the desert . . . And now Americans are demolishing houses and constructing new buildings all over New York . . . this American mood seems to me to be close to Christian detachment, to the Christian sense of the impermanence of earthly things.⁸

This same characteristic leads Harvey Cox to see mobility as a feature of the secular city. The American city is typified by the cloverleaf, the airport control tower, escalators, elevators, and subways. American literature, Cox observes, is filled with heroes on the move:

Americans have always been a mobile people. They had to be, even to come here . . . mobile people are generally tolerant of new ideas and possibilities.⁹

3. Americans Are Deeply Influenced by the Pressure of Public Opinion

The pressure was so prevalent that it was detectable even in the religious approach of very early nineteenth-century America. De Tocqueville observes:

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸ J. Maritain, *Reflections on America*, (Doubleday Image Book, Garden City, New York, 1958), pp. 54-55.

⁹ H. Cox, *The Secular City* (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1965), p. 51.

In ages of equality, kings may often command obedience, but the majority always commands belief: to the majority, therefore, deference is to be paid in whatsoever is not contrary to the faith. . . . All the American clergy know and respect the intellectual supremacy exercised by the majority: they never sustain any but necessary conflicts with it. . . . Public opinion is therefore never hostile to them: it rather supports and protects them . . . religion herself holds sway [in the United States] much less as a doctrine of revelation than a commonly received opinion.¹⁰

This tension leads Americans to want always to be thought part of a larger community of thought rather than to be separate from it. There is, Maritain maintains, a great dislike for being too individual.

I am thinking in particular of that kind of outshining others which can sometimes be observed in academic circles. Many an American professor seems to be anxious not to be more brilliant or more original than the average member of the teaching community. After all, is not genius always harmful to mutual tolerance and a good state of affairs in the community, and is not mediocrity of good standing preferable to any occasion for jealousy, strife, and rivalry?¹¹

This pressure, Maritain reasons, is partly responsible for American modesty:

The popular image of the Yankee boasting that he has the biggest car or runs the biggest business in the world is, in my opinion, utterly misleading. My experience with American students taught me quite another thing. I was struck by their modesty—even, sometimes, surprised at the slight value they seemed to attach to their own personal opinion as long as they had not examined the various views of all the experts in the matter.¹²

4. *Americans Are an Unmaterialistic People*

De Tocqueville once again gives us a starting point for this consideration and shows us how consistently unmaterialistic we have been.

¹⁰ de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-155 and p. 148.

¹¹ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

The love of well-being is there [in the United States] displayed as a tenacious, exclusive, universal passion; but its range is confined. To build enormous palaces, to conquer or to mimic nature, to ransack the world in order to gratify the passions of a man, is not thought of: but to add a few rods of land to your field, to plant an orchard, to enlarge a dwelling, to be always making life more comfortable and convenient, to avoid trouble, and to satisfy the smallest wants without effort and almost without cost.¹³

Not only is the search for material possessions moderate but it is a search limited by moral restraints.

. . . it is as difficult to depart from the common rule by one's vices as by one's virtues . . . good morals contribute to public tranquility and are favorable to industry . . . men wish to be as well off as they can in this world, without foregoing their chance of another . . . a kind of virtuous materialism may ultimately be established.¹⁴

Maritain spends much energy refuting what he calls "the old tag" of American materialism. He records what his first impression of Americans was, as he arrived in this country:

They were freedom-loving and mankind-loving people, people clinging to the importance of ethical standards, anxious to save the world, the most humane and the least materialist among modern people which had reached the industrial stage.¹⁵

Margaret Mead in her study *New Lives for Old* quotes the impressions of the Manus of New Guinea. A million Americans passed through the island of this primitive people during the Second World War. Their evaluation of the American character is quite perceptive.

The Americans treated us like individuals, like brothers. . . Americans believe in having work done by machines so that men can live to old age instead of dying worn out while they are still young . . . the Americans believed that every human being's life and health was of inestimable value, something for which no amount of property, time and effort was too

¹³ de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁵ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

much to sacrifice . . . From the Americans we learned that human beings are irreplaceable and unexpendable, while all material things are replaceable and so expendable. . . . From the Americans we learned that it is *only* human beings that are important.¹⁶

5. *Though Not Materialistic, Americans Are Instinctively Responsive to Secularity*

De Tocqueville noticed this in the early days of this country.

The American ministers of the Gospel do not attempt to draw or to fix all the thoughts of man upon the life to come; they are willing to surrender a portion of his heart to the cares of the present . . . whilst they never cease to point to the other world as part of the great object of the hopes and fears of the believer, they do not forbid him honestly to court prosperity in this.¹⁷

De Tocqueville was amazed at how quickly and enthusiastically Americans gave themselves to the construction of their secular city.

. . . a stranger is constantly amazed by the immense public works executed by a nation which contains, so to speak, no rich men. The Americans arrived but as yesterday on the territory which they inhabit, and they have already changed the whole order of nature for their own advantage. They have joined the Hudson to the Mississippi, and made the Atlantic Ocean communicate with the Gulf of Mexico, across a continent of more than five hundred leagues which separates the two seas. The longest railroads which have been constructed, up to the present time, are in America.¹⁸

Maritain seems to distinguish between secularity which is open to spiritual values and materialism which is closed to them. The fact that the American spirit forced the industrial regime in this country beyond pure capitalism to a more humane economic system is one indication of this distinction. Frequently, the secular American seems materialistic to Europeans because Europeans often identify spirituality with a contempt for material improvement.

¹⁶ M. Mead, *New Lives for Old* (New York: William Morrow, 1956). As quoted by Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁷ de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

These five observations give us some indication of how Americans will approach religion. There is something new and distinctive about the American spirit. A nation disinclined to transcendence, suspicious of fixed principles, responsive to public opinion, committed to secularity ought to be irreligious. Yet there remains in Americans a dissatisfaction with the material and a yearning for spiritual values. Hence, Americans, surprisingly, are unmistakably and irreversibly religious.

It is, I think, time for us to consider directly the American attitude to religion.

There was little doubt in de Tocqueville's mind that "the Americans are a very religious people."¹⁹ Not only religion but a Christian expression of it ran deep in the national consensus of the early nineteenth century.

Christianity has therefore retained a strong hold on the public mind in America. . . . Christianity . . . is an established and irresistible fact which no one understands either to attack or to defend.²⁰

Will Herberg, in his recent classic study on religious sociology in America, makes an observation which would seem contradictory if one did not know the American spirit.

America seems to be at once the most religious and the most secular of all nations.²¹

Americans who attend Church "are not fools or hypocrites," Herberg argues. "They are honest, intelligent people, who take their religion quite seriously."²² On the other hand, "Americans think, feel, and act in terms quite obviously secularist at the very time they exhibit every sign of a widespread religious revival."²³ Continuing American interest in religion would surprise those who, fifty years ago, felt that science and reason had all but killed religion in the United States.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²¹ W. Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Doubleday Anchor Book, Garden City, New York, 1955), p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

"Americans believe in religion in a way that perhaps no other people do."²⁴ There are a number of factors, I think, which enter into this approach, some of them encouraging, others troublesome.

1. *Americans Emphasize Deed Rather Than Creed.*
2. *Americans Often Have Faith Not So Much in God but in Faith.* What Americans seem to believe in when they are religious is religion itself. "Religious Americans speak of God and Christ, but what they seem to regard as really redemptive is primarily religion, the 'positive' attitudes of *believing*."²⁵
3. *Americans Want Results From Faith.* Chief among these is "peace of mind." Happiness and secular success also rank high. Religion is often viewed as a way of getting the most out of life.
4. *Contemporary American Religion Is "Man-centered."* American religiosity has little sense of transcendence. It is a kind of religion in which man, not God, is served and in which God is utilized for man's designs. American "religion, however sincere and well-meant, is ultimately vitiated by a strong and pervasive idolatrous element."²⁶ Religion in America must be especially careful not to identify itself so much with society's values that it finds itself unable to judge them in the light of the Scriptures.
5. *A Dogmatically Anti-religious Position Is All but Inconceivable in the United States.* The American people, Martin Marty writes, "carry a national self-image in which religion is somehow a prime constituting element."²⁷ In fact, only one percent of all Americans will admit they are atheists.²⁸ Many Americans find it almost impossible to name even one mature, outspoken atheist among their circle of acquaintances.

These basic observations reflect a search for spiritual values which is often confused but never absent in the American people,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²⁷ M. Marty, *Varieties of Unbelief* (Doubleday Anchor Book, Garden City, New York, 1966), p. 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

taken as a whole. Herberg observes that "particularly among the more sensitive young men and women" in America today "there are unmistakable indications of an interest in, and concern with, religion that goes far beyond the demands of mere social 'belonging' . . . there is a groping for a spiritual base."²⁹

Maritain, for his part, sees a "thirst for spiritual life which is deep in the American soul. . . . In a number of people it is more or less unconscious, more or less repressed by the conditions of existence and the tyranny of unceasing activity. For all that, it is real and alive . . ." ³⁰

Americans may not respond easily to transcendence but they remain inarticulately sensitive to it.

American literature, in its most objectively careful scrutinies, has been preoccupied with the beyond and the nameless . . . from *Moby Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter* to *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Requiem for a Nun*.³¹

The problem religion must face in America is not whether it shall survive but how much it shall contribute and how relevant it shall be to the deep spiritual needs of the American people.

As long ago as 1914, Walter Lippman could say that the Church . . . was answering questions that were not being asked and refusing to face those that were.³²

Americans love life deeply and they want religion to encourage this love for life and give it some direction. They want from religion something taught them by the American spirit, a vital, dynamic, active approach to the world. Under no circumstances do they want a religion which has lost its spirit of adventure. A post-conciliar adventuresome, encouraging Christianity has much to offer Americans.

. . . Americans are not patient with life. They are not patient with their own life, as a rule. And they get disturbed and discouraged very soon, if the work they have undertaken is slow to succeed.³³

²⁹ Herberg, *op. cit.*, p. 272. Herberg here quotes Norman Thomas.

³⁰ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³² Marty, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³³ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

An American doubts himself easily if not recognized. He easily thinks himself a failure, partly because of the inner insecurity which comes from his distaste for stable or dogmatic principles for life. An American must be re-assured that his idealism and his faith in good will and generosity is not a delusion. An American wants least of all a cynical outlook on life.

All these observations prove the truth of Maritain's conclusion:

. . . not only is faith in Christ still alive, but it is bolder . . . than it was in . . . the nineteenth century . . . a new Christendom is not only possible, it is also a focus toward which all really progressive energies at work in history . . . have actually been tending.³⁴

II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY EXPRESSION OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

In this section of the paper, I would like to give a few indications of how American philosophy and literature reflect the American spirit. If this spirit will influence the American approach to theism and atheism, then philosophy and literature can give us a better understanding of it.

I would like to consider, first of all, some reflections on American philosophy. There are two themes explored by American philosophy which will prove helpful for our later theological discussion.

1. *American Philosophy Shows a Disinterest in Transcendence*

Benjamin Franklin preached self-reliance and gave expression to a pragmatic philosophy in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Some of the precepts Franklin formulated have become familiar to us all. They are remembered partly because they reflect so well a basic American attitude.

"God helps them that help themselves."

"Get what you can and what you get hold."

"Keep thy shop and thy shop will keep thee."

"Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge."

This disinterest in transcendence found clearer expression in the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

writings of Thomas Jefferson. (I am using the term "transcendence" here in a wide sense of the word, to signify not only the opposite of immanence but all that is beyond measurability).

To talk of immaterial existence is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, God, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings . . . I cannot reason otherwise . . .³⁵

This interest in the observable and the comprehensible led Jefferson either to a refusal to be concerned with immaterial realities, as we have seen, or to an agnostic stance before them. Thus:

I am satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or troubling myself about those, which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.³⁶

The best spokesman for the pragmatic principle, however, are not Franklin or Jefferson but William James and John Dewey.

"The ultimate test for us of what a truth means," James explains, "is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires." Thus, he concludes that "the effective meaning of any particular proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence in our future practical experience."³⁷

James makes much of this insight: the practical consequence of a truth is closely allied with its inner meaning. It is this ability to perceive divergent practical consequences which leads to a distinction between truths.

. . . if, by supposing the truth of the one you can foresee no conceivable practical consequences to anybody at any time or place, which is different from what you would foresee if you supposed the truth of the other, why then the difference between the two propositions is no difference—it is only a spacious and verbal difference, unworthy of further consideration . . . there can be no difference which doesn't make a difference—no difference in abstract truth which does not express itself in a difference of concrete fact.³⁸

³⁵ *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (ed. Albert Ellery Bergh, 20 vols., Jefferson Memorial Association, Washington, 1903) v. XV, pp. 273-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, XV, p. 276.

³⁷ W. James, *Collected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Longmans-Green, 1920), p. 412.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

Pragmatism, as James envisioned it, does not stand alone but finds agreement with other philosophical approaches which are concrete.

[Pragmatism] agrees with nominalism, for instance, in always appealing to particulars; with utilitarianism in emphasizing practical aspects; with positivism in its disdain for verbal solutions, useless questions, and metaphysical abstractions.³⁹

Or, as he says on another occasion:

[Man] turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power . . . as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretense of finality in truth.⁴⁰

For James, God will be real only if he produces real, concrete, measurable effects.

John Dewey was influenced by James both in his philosophy and in his theory of education. Dewey insisted that little distinction should be made between culture and utility, between knowledge and practical achievement. He stressed strongly the principle of truth in use, emphasizing democracy and life adjustment in the educational process. Man could look for no guidance from above; he could hope for no direction from eternal values.

These four thinkers have had a significant influence on American thought. American philosophy seems to move instinctively in the directions they followed. Franklin's principle of self-reliance; Jefferson's distrust of immaterial realities; James' concern with practical consequences; Dewey's emphasis on utility and adjustment in education; all these give evidence of an American interest in the pragmatic rather than in the transcendent. This will influence American religious life as well.

2. The American Philosophy of Religion Emphasizes Man Rather Than God, Deed Rather Than Dogma

"What is serving God?" Benjamin Franklin once asked. "'Tis doing good to man."

³⁹ W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans-Green, 1921), p. 201.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51 (1907 edition).

Jefferson found himself impatient with dogmatic affirmation or definition.

Jesus has told us only that God is good and perfect but has not defined him. I am, therefore, of his theology, believing that we have neither words nor ideas adequate to that definition. And if we could all, after this example, leave the subject as indefinable, we should all be of one sect, doers of good and eschewers of evil.⁴¹

Jefferson reflects in his writings that ambivalent American attitude toward religion which finds religion quite acceptable if it does not emphasize a distinctive approach to life and yet somehow reprehensible if it does.

If by religion we are to understand sectarian dogmas, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation on them is just, "that this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it."⁴²

Yet, in spite of all this, the Declaration of Independence reflects the spirit of a religious people. And the Declaration, Jefferson explains, "was intended to be an expression of the American mind and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion."⁴³

Americans have difficulty, it seems, with an intellectual approach to religion. Ralph Waldo Emerson insisted that character counted more than intellect and that institutional religion was quite irrelevant anyway.

. . . the prayers and even the dogmas of our church are . . . wholly insulated from anything now extant in the life and business of the people.⁴⁴

William James was willing to accept only a God verifiable in some way through experience or practical results.

That the God of systematic theology should exist or not

⁴¹ *Writings*, op. cit., XV, p. 203.

⁴² *Ibid.*, XV, p. 109.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, XVI, pp. 118-119.

⁴⁴ *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Introduction and Notes by Edward Waldo Emerson: Centenary Edition): 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1903), p. 139.

exist is a matter of small practical moment. . . . The theistic controversy, trivial enough if we take it merely academically and theologically, is of tremendous significance if we test it by its results for actual life.⁴⁵

John Dewey, finally, saw religion as a phenomenon which must repudiate the supernatural. Religion, for Dewey, is not related to belief but to attitudes and adjustments. The faith one must live by is a faith in human intelligence rather than in inherited dogma. Dewey seems to move toward what we shall later call secularity rather than functionalism. For Dewey the supernatural is that which distracts man from the values of the human endeavor, from art and knowledge, education and fellowship, friendship and love. Supernaturalism, for Dewey, is an obstacle to the full and free development of natural human relations. It keeps man from the ability to make radical changes in man's relationships with his fellow men. Christian secularity will have sympathy for what Dewey is trying to say. His commitment to the human community is real and deep. His insistence that we accept the achievements of the human family and further them is admirable. His judgment however that faith in transcendence limits man's vision is questionable. His assumption that religious doctrine must, of necessity, compromise the human enterprise is valid only if one accepts Dewey's limited definition of religious doctrine.

American philosophy moves then toward man and toward unity, it seems. Democracy in religion and lack of sectarian divisiveness seems an ideal in the American philosophy of religion. God may be there but he must prove his usefulness before we pay him homage. He must baptize man's humanity and community before man will recognize God as existing and enriching. Religion must speak a language all understand and offer a faith all want before it will be accepted. For better or worse, American philosophy views God and religion in this fashion.

3. American Literature May Be Uncomfortable With Transcendence But It Is Critical of Any Materialism Which Is Not Open to Spiritual Values

⁴⁵ W. James, *Collected Essays, op. cit.*, p. 429.

It is possible to discover in our literature a development of the two themes we referred to in American philosophy. The American ideal lies somewhere between the spiritual and the material, somehow incorporating both.

Clyde Griffiths in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is a case in point. He exemplifies a number of American virtues and defects. He is filled with a passion for living and for living in the best way that human energy and resources can provide. In his search for this value, however, he attributes an overwhelming importance to money. His drive for success is too compulsive. It leads him to forsake Roberta Alden, whom he does not rescue from drowning, and to seek happiness with wealthy Sondra Finchley. Because money and success count too much in Clyde Griffiths' life, because ethical standards shape his destiny too little, he becomes restless, rootless, and eventually sees all come to ruin.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* develops the same message though quite differently. Willy Loman lives too much for flashy success and personal popularity. He is forced to do this by the system which produces him. Yet he is responsible too. He seeks material and social greatness without spiritual values, without honesty and diligent labor. He wants to achieve his objectives by strategem rather than by effort. He fails—not only economically but spiritually as well. He builds his life on false values, loses direction, and is destroyed by a system he allowed to dominate him too much. The saddest thing said of Willy Loman comes at the end of the play when someone comments: "He didn't know who he was."

Sinclair Lewis, in his writing, especially *Main Street*, shows forth the same concerns. Carol Kennicott tries desperately to call the town of Gopher Prairie from its mediocrity and lack of larger vision to a more exalted existence. She is like the typical American: restless with her surroundings, unsure of how "to conquer the world" yet certain she must, eager to give a greater sense of purpose to everything. The town of Gopher Prairie misunderstands and resists. Carol, however, goes on groping for what she cannot attain, striving when all the odds are against her. She tries to tell Gopher Prairie a message Americans want to hear: mediocrity and small concerns are all wrong. We need something more.

F. Scott Fitzgerald perhaps better than all those we have mentioned thus far portrayed the conflict between the spiritual and the material in the American spirit. In *Tender Is The Night*, Dick Diver intensely wants to be good, kind, and brave. More than anything else he wants to be loved. He is eager to please but fails because he has so little knowledge of self or of where he is going. He suffers distress and disappointment when he finally realizes he cannot bring people happiness.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald portrays the ambivalent American attitude toward material success with rare skill. A conflict develops between Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan. Both are ambitious for material advantages though they are ambitious for vastly different reasons. Buchanan represents a brutal materialism. He is wealthy but he is also vicious and shallow. Gatsby, however, remains an idealist. There is a spiritual strength beneath his materialism, even though his spiritual energies are confused and wasted. He searches for the ideal in reality, for the promise life seems to offer, for the innocence that materialism must not destroy. He becomes a tragic figure, however, because he cannot communicate his idealism. Somewhat like Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, he dreams too great a dream for man.

The American ideal then as it emerges from our literature is not materialism. It is a search not merely for material improvement but for some spiritual purpose in life. Clyde Griffiths, Willy Loman, Carol Kennicott suffer either because they have no vision or because they find their vision incapable of realization. Dick Diver and Jay Gatsby are wealthy but unable to achieve spiritual serenity. Gatsby especially shows forth the compulsive optimism and faith in the goodness of man which is typically American. Yet his lack of self-knowledge, his blindness to the pitfalls before him, his impossible dream for an earthly Paradise, these eventually undo him. For life is not only what we dream it to be but what we can actually make it.

4. When the American Search for Spiritual Values Is Expressed Religiously in Our Literature, it is a Religion Which Emphasizes Man Rather Than God, Deed Rather Than Dogma

Perhaps the best way to exemplify this, is by a consideration of the Christ-figure in American fiction. Christ is more evidently man

than God; the deeds of his life have inspired men even when the dogma of his message has proved problematic. He is then a perfect object for the American religious effort. I would like to consider the Christ-figure in three works by major American writers: *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville, *A Fable* by William Faulkner, and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway.

Herman Melville completed *Billy Budd* five months before he died. In the character of Billy, Melville clearly sketches a Christ-figure. Billy is so innocent that "virtue went out of him." He is a "peace-maker" whose father is not known by men. Budd's innocence is complete and, like that of Christ, it is a fatal innocence. He comes into conflict with John Claggart, a symbol of evil whose evil comes not from vicious training but his very "nature." Claggart is born evil, a man "apprehending the good but powerless to be it." The trial and hanging of Budd are much like that of Christ. When Claggart's calumny is hurled at Budd, the shock brings to Budd's face "an expression which was as a crucifixion to behold." Budd is found guilty not because he has sinned but because of "a mystery of iniquity," which captures Billy helplessly in its web. Budd dies under a law which cannot take the measure of his innocence. His last words invoke a benediction on his judge: "God bless Captain Vere!" As he dies, nature mourns his passing and birds hover over the place in the ocean where his casket disappears from view. Those who knew Billy refuse to consider him a traitor as the law and the record decree. A chip from the mast from which Billy was hanged is "as a piece of the Cross," in their estimation. The story of Billy Budd and the legend of his innocence, we are assured, will not die.

A Fable by William Faulkner is a modern version of Christ's life and death. It is the story of a French corporal during World War I. He is a man of remarkable goodness, someone who refuses to fight and is executed. The corporal is surrounded by twelve men. One denies him and another betrays him. The corporal is executed on Friday with two others, one a robber, the other a murderer. After his death, three women take away his body. Following an artillery barrage, his body disappears.

Faulkner seems to be saying many things in this parable. The story points to man's lack of brotherhood and his ignorance of the common bond he shares with others as his greatest threat. The story

at times gives the impression man will never fully overcome his own evil tendencies. Yet there must always be those who, like Christ, will say "no" to man's egoism. There must always be someone, like the corporal, who will offer himself for the goodness of his brethren. Although the soldier dies, Faulkner is not pessimistic. Even if evil cannot be eradicated, goodness can at least exist if men care enough. Nothing more terrible could happen to man than an incapacity for faith. Modern man wants to believe. But he does not know any longer how to believe. This is his tragedy. To help him back again to faith, other men like Christ and the corporal must live and die.

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway is the story of Santiago's struggle with a great fish he has caught and the story of how it is taken from him. There is obvious Christological imagery here. Santiago is three days and nights on the water. His hands are marred, first the right, then the left as the fish pulls the line rapidly through them, causing them to burn and to bleed. At one moment of disappointment, he cries "Ay" and Hemingway adds it was "a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood."

When Santiago returns, defeated, he climbs the hill to his home with the mast on his shoulder. At the top of the hill, he falls from weakness and finds it impossible to get up immediately. When he does reach his home, he lies face down on his bed and sleeps with his arms straight out.

Hemingway's hope in man comes through in this story. His call for brotherhood is continuous. He asks many times through Santiago: "What is against us?" We struggle against something incomprehensible and we must all take our chances. Santiago battles with the fish a long time before he sees what it is he is fighting. "Man is not made for defeat," Santiago declares. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."

Santiago is Christ-like but his story is not so much one in which he does things for others but one of deep attachment to the concrete conditions of life in this world and of the inevitability of struggle and conflict. Santiago senses kinship with all creatures, even the fish, and with all of nature. All must battle for durability in existence and for those things life urges us to accomplish. Hemingway seems to be saying of Santiago what he had a soldier say of Christ in

Today is Friday: "He was pretty good in there today." Hemingway is impressed with the human achievements of Christ in a world where God is dead.

What Hemingway seems to say of Santiago and of Christ and of Everyman is what he says of the bullfighter in *Death in the Afternoon*.

A bullfighter is not always expected to be good, only to do his best . . . he is expected to have off-days but he is expected to do the best he can with the given bull.⁴⁶

Thus, American literature shows a deep interest in some spiritual interpretation of life. It does not choose materialism as much as a secularity which is open to spiritual values. It does not seek transcendence, yet it is inspired by Christ, by man, by human brotherhood, by a search for something larger than the individual, larger even than one's culture or country. There seems to be a sincere yearning for belief, yet difficulty with any dogmatic interpretation of how that belief should be specified. There is an admiration for Christ but the Christ America wants is one who enobles secularity.

I would like to conclude this section with words written by Thornton Wilder in *Our Town*. It says in an American idiom something which touches the American heart.

I don't care what they say with their mouths—everybody knows that *something* is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.⁴⁷

III. THE SEARCH FOR A NEW DEFINITION OF GOD

I would like in this section of the paper to focus attention on the search for a new definition of God, especially in Europe. A few words

⁴⁶ E. Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1932), p. 91.

⁴⁷ T. Wilder, "Our Town," in C. Simpson, ed., *The American Reader* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1941), pp. 489-490.

about Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer can help us understand better the "Death of God" theologians. There is, I believe, an affinity between Barth and Bonhoeffer, and between Bultmann and Tillich. Barth and Bonhoeffer try to confront us with the "otherness," and stark reality of God, with the costliness of discipleship. Bonhoeffer concedes considerably more to culture and to man in doing this, so much in fact that Barth would not care to be identified with him. Yet I think Bonhoeffer concedes so much to man because he wants him strong enough to face the divinity of God. Bultmann and Tillich, on the other hand, seem to be almost totally preoccupied with man in his existential situation. There is more concern with what man is going to do about God than with man's need to accept God in His objective otherness.

Karl Barth is deeply concerned with giving man a sense of how different God is. In doing this, he de-emphasizes considerably the role of reason and the human contribution in the search for God. Thus, he is rather proximately responsible for Bonhoeffer, more remotely, for the "Death of God" theologians. With prophetic power, Barth preaches that the Word of God cannot be identified with any fragile human effort to grasp. In fact, the cross is the sign which shouts "no" to every human approach to God. God is the utterly other One who hurls the biblical message at man like a stone. There is nothing comfortable about it. It is a challenge which demands acceptance. In the construction of his system, Barth insists that human reason is powerless. And, he warns, that religion can be man's way of escaping God. It can become a new idol, thereby keeping us from God. Barth's fear of idolatry is reminiscent of strong influences in his thought: the Old Testament and Calvin's vigorous rejection of idols.

Where Barth begins with God, Bultmann begins with man. In the final analysis, Bultmann may be more an anthropologist than a theologian. Although Bultmann has called his "de-mythologizing" a method of hermeneutics, he seems concerned with much more than this. He seeks by his method to search out the value the Gospel may have for a deeper meaning of human life. He wants to catch man in his existential situation with a message that will be personally decisive for him. To achieve this, he feels necessitated to minimize the historical elements in Christianity not only, it seems, because

they may not have happened but, more, because man today cannot accept them. Inherent in Bultmann's message is the valid assumption that historicism is neither a proper way to God nor productive of faith. His rejection of history, however, seems extreme.

Bultmann's approach to God is almost the direct antithesis of Barth's. He relies on philosophy. Barth does not. He wants the Gospel to sound as much as possible like a twentieth-century composition. Barth does not. The object of Bultmannian theology is man; of Barthian theology, God.

When Barth writes of God, God is so aloof that man cannot reach him, even analogously, with human means. The concept of God, however, in Bultmann, is shaped by science. We must be guided not by the message but by a vigorous de-mythologizing of it in terms of the needs of the moment. It is not the data we have inherited but the idiom of this century which determines the shape of God, and the structure of faith. The answer to Bultmann does not lie, obviously, in a naïve interpretation of the Scriptures. Yet his overly existential and severely un-historical approach seems defective. For this reason, the post-Bultmannians call for more interest in the historical Jesus and more attention to objective thought in theology.

Paul Tillich is somewhat akin to Bultmann in his approach to God. He is anxious, first of all, about man. He searches for a new language for faith. Yet he is not as much concerned with a re-interpretation of the revealed message as he is with helping us find the courage to say "yes" to God. Like Bultmann, he is preoccupied with man's existential situation. Man must be brought to decision and to Ultimate Concern. The way in which this is done is unpredictable. The symbols of God and Revelation are quite dispensable, or at least quite arbitrary, in the search. The affirmation of Being over non-being, the sense of acceptance, the courage of saying "yes" when "no" is easier, the dedication to something ultimate which is worthy of infinite concern, these are the themes which run continually through the thought of Paul Tillich.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is certainly the man of the hour in contemporary theology. As I mentioned earlier, I find him somewhat akin to Karl Barth in his general approach, though with important reservations.

Bonhoeffer's life had much to do with his thought and with his

popularity today. In the Germany of Bonhoeffer, both God and man seemed helpless. It was an hour when a secularity which was not open to spiritual values prevailed. The Christian role at that time was one of suffering, of witness, for some, as for Bonhoeffer, a call to martyrdom. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he argues persuasively against cheap grace and insists that real grace is costly and demands brave deeds. When he could easily have lived a safe life in America during the Hitler period, he elected to return to Germany, writing:

I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.

At an ecumenical meeting in Geneva in 1941, he said: "Only in defeat can we atone for the terrible crimes we have committed against Europe and the world."

We are by now so familiar with Bonhoeffer that we can restrict our comments to four aspects of his thought.

He maintains, first of all, that we have learned and must learn to cope further with the world without recourse to the God-hypothesis. "What we call 'God' is being more and more edged out of life." Man must use the world and life without recourse to the God of explanations, the God who is there to fill in all our gaps of unintelligibility. God has not made man in His own image and set him free in the world only to be dependent upon God. Man must face man's problems humanly. God will not solve man's problems for him nor will he allow man to use Him as a way of running from life, from responsibility, and from freedom.

Secondly, Bonhoeffer summons us to a full realization that the world has "come of age." Therefore, any attack on the adulthood of the world is "in the first place pointless, in the second ignoble, and in the third un-Christian." We must not force the world back to adolescence to create a space for "religion." Nor can we. The world will no longer listen. We cannot raise the questions of the past or the questions men never really ask in order to keep "religion" alive. The

church must not compete with this world "come of age" but aid it and serve it.

This leads to Bonhoeffer's third major thesis. If we have no need of the God-hypothesis and if the world has out-grown the God on whom it relied to solve what men were supposed to solve, then it is clear that "we are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all." The task of the moment, as Bonhoeffer saw it, was to discover in what way we are "in a religionless and secular sense Christians." It is important for us to realize what Bonhoeffer meant by religion. Bonhoeffer seems concerned not with a total rejection of religion but with a search for a religion beyond pietism. What seems all wrong to him is a religion of dependence and weakness, a religion at the borders of life, one which fills in gaps, and seeks to give men answers in life which men must find for themselves. This type of religion seeks the divine beyond the world instead of as the "beyond in our midst." It sees salvation as a refuge from the world and "God" as someone who keeps us from dealing with life as it is. This religion has no place in a world "come of age." Bonhoeffer asks us what we are really willing to stake our lives on. Certainly, an adult world will not give its life and energy to "religion." To be a Christian in the twentieth century is not to be religious in this adolescent fashion but to be human. One wonders what Bonhoeffer's assessment of post-Vatican II, biblical, ecumenical, liturgical religion would have been. It is difficult to see such religion as refusing to meet the world "come of age."

The last theme in Bonhoeffer's writing I wish to comment on is his concept of God. "God is teaching us," Bonhoeffer writes, "that we must live as men who can get along very well without him."⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer calls us to accept a God who is strong, different, someone who will not let us weakly depend on him, a God who does not accommodate but demands we grow up.

The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. 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.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (E. Bethge, ed.; R. H. Fuller, trans.) (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 219.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

There are echoes of Barth in Bonhoeffer's concept of God. Bonhoeffer does not deny the transcendence nor the eternity of God. One must not repudiate God to affirm the world in Bonhoeffer's thought. For this would make the penultimate (the world) the ultimate (God). And this is idolatry.

Bonhoeffer writes:

God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.⁵⁰

God allows himself to be edged out of the world, in Bonhoeffer's thought, I believe, because he is so clearly a transcendent God.

I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life but at its center, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man's suffering and death, but in his life and prosperity.⁵¹

Bonhoeffer then, and Barth, though partly responsible for the "Death of God" thinking are the direct antithesis of it. Christ is quite divine in Bonhoeffer's thought. And God is necessary for us since he alone can free us to live for others, responsibly.

IV. THE THESIS: GOD IS DEAD

Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, each in his own way, contributed to the "Death of God" theology which no one of them would find acceptable. Barth's insistence on the terrifying distance between God and man; his warning that "religion" can become a new idol; Bultmann and Tillich in their anthropocentric theologies; Bonhoeffer's suggestion that we live as if there were no God; all these approaches were incorporated into the "Death of God" synthesis.

There are three men most frequently named as originators of the "Death of God" theology. They include William Hamilton of Colgate Rochester Divinity School; Thomas J. J. Altizer of Emory University, Atlanta; and Paul Van Buren of Temple University. They differ considerably in their reference to the problem of God's existence but they agree in this: a theology which does not take God

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

into account must be written for modern man. Hamilton feels this is necessitated because of the way things are today; Altizer feels it is necessitated by the intrinsic logic of a Word seeking to become incarnate in the present by a denial of the past; Van Buren feels it is necessitated because the word "God" is meaningless and propositionally unverifiable. All three men are deeply Christological and all speak eloquently of the place Christ must have in the new theology they envision.

I would like to say a few words about each of these men and then make some general comments on the movement as such.

I find William Hamilton the least profound thinker in the group. He is also the most consciously American. At times, he is capable of truisms. His approach to the problem of suffering is cliché-ridden. He can sometimes call our attention to problems so obvious that one wonders why a responsible theologian should care to comment:

We would do well to be careful in using the approach to Christian apologetics that seeks to place man in extreme situations of suffering or despair so that the impossible word of faith may be spoken.⁵²

Hamilton expects the birth of a new, radical theology which will be structured, as he sees it, around three key themes.

1. The first of these is the death of God.

The first motif has to do with the common experience of loss . . . referred to as the death of God.⁵³

Hamilton mentions frequently that this "experience of loss" is what forces us to a "death of God" stance.

We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God.⁵⁴

Barth's influence on Hamilton is evident when he writes:

⁵² W. Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York: Association Press, 1966), p. 48.

⁵³ "The Shape of a Radical Theology", *Christian Century*: October 6, 1965, p. 1220.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

It is a very short step, but a critical one, to move from the otherness of God to the absence of God.⁵⁵

Hamilton seems saddened by the fact we have lost God. He seems confident too that God exists and shall one day return to us. In his absence, however, we need a theology which is not built around the idea of God.

Faith is, for many of us, we might say, purely eschatological. It is a kind of trust that one day God will no longer be absent from us.⁵⁶

For many of us who call ourselves Christians, therefore, believing in the time of the 'death of God' means that he is there when we do not want him, in ways we do not want him, and he is not there when we do want him.⁵⁷

This leads us to the second theme Hamilton sees in the new theology.

2. The time of the death of God is also the time of obedience to Jesus.

There is a great emphasis in the new theology on Jesus as Lord and center of history. It is this adherence to Christ which makes this theology Christian.

The Christian is defined, therefore, as the man bound to Jesus, obedient to him . . .⁵⁸

Though one is "bound to Jesus," it is a freely-chosen decision:

Jesus is the one . . . whose way with others is also to be my way because there is something there, in his words, his life, his way with others, his death, that I do not find elsewhere . . . I have chosen him. . . . It is a free choice, freely made.⁵⁹

3. The final factor mentioned by Hamilton is a "new optimism."

This is an optimistic theology. It has a doctrine of sin, but it is not a central doctrine . . . radical theology is . . . re-

⁵⁵ *The New Essence of Christianity, op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ *Christian Century*: October 6, 1965, p. 1221.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

lating itself to a new feeling of hope and optimism in American life today, a conviction that substantive changes in the lives of men can and will be made.⁶⁰

This optimism stresses the present, substitutes hope for faith, and sees love as the only thing worth the effort. The world today has become godless, in Hamilton's estimation. We search for a new language, a new style, perhaps a new God. While we search, the Christian is totally immersed in the world. He is "the one beside the neighbor, beside the enemy, at the disposal of the man in need."⁶¹ He is a man who belongs to no church.

I do not see how preaching, worship, prayer, ordination, the sacraments can be taken seriously by the radical theologian.⁶²

Thomas J. J. Altizer

Thomas Altizer is the most difficult of the "Death of God" school to understand. His approach is one not easily identified with atheism nor with Christianity. It seems more akin to religious Pantheism or Oriental mysticism.

One of the reasons why we must confess the death of God according to Altizer is because God represents an absolute. And this is a time when all absolutes are relative:

. . . modern historical consciousness itself is grounded in the death of God, in the eclipse of all absolutes . . .⁶³

No longer can the idea of God bring us security in the world; no longer can the Christian know God as the Absolute who is the source of all meanings, order, and reality in the world.⁶⁴ This situation demands our acceptance of the death of God.

"In very truth, the Christian God is dead . . ."⁶⁵

The Christian admission that God is dead is only his response to the absence of God. In his absence, the very speaking of his name is

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1221.

⁶¹ T. Altizer and W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 37.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶³ T. Altizer, "Nirvana and the Kingdom of God," in M. Marty and D. Peerman, ed., *New Theology: No. 1* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 158-159.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

blasphemy. We must, rather, announce the death of God and do this willingly:

. . . we are called upon not simply to accept the death of God with stoic fortitude but rather to will the death of God with this passion of faith . . . Christian theology must proclaim the death of God if it is to witness to the Word of faith.⁶⁶

If the Christian God is dead, then Christianity, which until now has preached the existence of God, must forsake its past. Its past has not prepared it for the proclamation it must make in the present.

. . . theology . . . can now be meaningful only when it speaks against its own historical identity . . . the contemporary theologian . . . has discovered again and again that he cannot even speak the words of the Christian past. . . . Like a victim of amnesia, he has forgotten his name, his place of origin and his past . . . he knows that he is not a Christian in any sense that could be drawn from the creeds and confessions of the historic Church . . . 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.⁶⁷

The reason why God is dead is not only because there are no absolutes today nor because God is absent. The reason lies in something deeper. It is necessary that God be absent if the Word of faith is to endure.

The Christian Word moves by negating its own past expressions . . . only by negating and thus transcending its previous expressions can the Incarnate Word be a forward-moving process.⁶⁸

For Altizer, then, the proposition "God is dead" does not mean modern man cannot believe or even that God is silent. It means that God is truly absent, truly dead. Something necessitates this situation. Contemporary Christianity simply accepts this state of affairs and proclaims God's death. We can affirm nothing concretely, historically, really of God if we are to be men true to our age.

⁶⁶ "Creative Negation in Theology", *Christian Century*: July 7, 1965, p. 866.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 864-865.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 867.

Paul Van Buren

Paul Van Buren is the most systematic thinker of the "Death of God" group. He is also the clearest writer of the three and admits quite frankly that he cannot understand Altizer.

He raises, first of all, the all-important question: "whether or not Christianity is fundamentally about God or about man."⁶⁹ His answer is clear: "I am trying to argue that it is fundamentally about man."⁷⁰

The problem which confronts Van Buren is basically the ambiguity of the word "God." It is so subtle, so unverifiable, so in need of continual clarification that it is really quite meaningless. Society has no experience and language, no formula to justify the use of the word.

. . . when we use the term "God" we are talking about something which no longer connects with anything in most people's minds except whatever happens to be left over after all the vital connections are made.

The norm which Van Buren employs is not the Gospel or the Councils but the twentieth century. Yet strangely he tries not only to give theology a twentieth-century interpretation but to demonstrate that this is essentially how the Scriptures and the church always thought of "God." In this, he is very much unlike Altizer who wants to say "no" to the past. Van Buren wants to preserve the past but on the basis of his contemporary analysis. His thesis is weakened then not only because of the linguistic empiricism he makes use of but also because of his awkward attempt to convince us the church always thought this way. The meaningfulness of the word "God" must be judged, he argues, in the context of contemporary linguistic analysis and in the idiom of a scientific and technological age. Van Buren concludes quite succinctly: "the problem now is that the word 'God' is dead."⁷¹

Since this is so, we must set about an interpretation of the Gospel

⁶⁹ V. Mehta, "Profiles: The New Theologian", *The New Yorker*: November 13, 1965, p. 153.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ P. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 103.

which Van Buren calls "secular Christology."⁷² The church will be responsive to the call to Christology since the Christian is "the man haunted by the image of Jesus." Contemporary society, furthermore, will be responsive to the call of secularity from the church.

Theology . . . is responsible to human society, not to the church. . . . Its norms must lie in the role it performs in human life.⁷³

In the theological reconstruction Van Buren envisions Jesus is so central that there is no place for the word "God." This viewpoint led William Hamilton in his review of Van Buren's book to title the article: "There is no God and Jesus is His Son."

CONCLUSION

There are some obvious virtues in the "Death of God" theology. It brings us to terms with the problem of God which is quite literally the most profound and fateful question we must answer. The movement is praiseworthy also in its striking references to Christ. It works with a defective Christology and yet it bears witness once again to the ability of the life of Jesus to inspire and impress. I think the movement has merit in this also: it will give new impetus to the construction of a contemporary natural theology. The last century asked if we could prove the existence of God. This century wants to know rather what it means to say God is or is not.

I see a number of problems, however, in the "Death of God" approach which remain unanswered.

The first problem I see comes from the inability of the movement to handle the consequences of its radical position. It leaves us with a world that has no purpose and with human consciousness which has no reasonable source. These questions will not go away. A theology which makes no reference to God must explain life more intelligently than these theologians have done so far, if it hopes to be taken seriously. One wonders too whether they do not reflect not a new tension in human life but a very old one and a very valid one.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁷³ "Theology in the Context of Culture", *Christian Century*: April 7, 1965, p. 430.

The tension Marcus Dods talked of when he said: "If only one could be sure of God!"; the one Luther wrote about when he reflected: "I will say one thing boldly and freely—nobody in this life is nearer to God than those who deny him."; the one Job anguished over when he complained: "Behold, I go forward but he is not there; and backward but I cannot perceive him."

The second problem I see in the movement is its Christological perspective. However admirable Jesus is, he is basically mistaken about God if these theologians are correct. For, one of the most fundamental factors in the life and style of Christ is his relationship to the Father. If this was all wrong, then one wonders how much of an enduring impact Christ can have upon us. He may lead us to lofty ethical standards or to selfless social concern. He is not, however, the only way, the ultimate truth, or life itself for those who accept him. Even if we freely choose Christ, the choice is arbitrary. If he is basically mistaken, another may have a better answer. Syncretism may be the best solution of all.

A third problem of the movement is its cavalier dismissal of religious language. It is not content to say language is partly symbolic, partly inadequate. With this we agree. It dismisses, however, the gravity with which men have used religious language. It declares hopeless our attempt to say something significant about God. Religious language may not be empirically verifiable, we agree, especially when subjected to a contrived analysis. Yet it articulates a quest. It tells of what countless men have felt. It is frequently our way of saying that life is meaningful and has some intelligent direction even if we do not perceive the whole system. Religious language is often our way of saying that there is mystery about the human person and his destiny. It speaks to that within us which finds a measure of happiness here but which senses that we are pilgrims in search of another homeland. Something about our being here is unsettled and unfinished. It remains so in spite of all we say or do. This is what religious language is talking about. It seeks to speak what the heart of man vaguely but hauntingly feels. Religious language never says all perfectly and clearly but what it does say rings true enough to man's heart and intelligence for him to say there is something valid about it. And he admits this, century after century. If we wait until

we find the perfect words, we shall never speak. Although it may sound incongruous, a Catholic theologian wishes to remind these Protestant theologians that faith is not only an acceptance of intellectual formulas and verbal precision but it is also an experience and a personal engagement.

We are aware, then, that as we use "God-language" our words never capture everything. The words "I love you" say something we do not comprehend only intellectually, certainly not by analysis. Yet what they say is true. Their truth comes, I think, not only from empirical verification (one can deceive another about his love) but from an apprehension of their truth at a very real but very intuitional level. There are some truths which do not bring certitude but demand risk.

The fourth and final problem I see with the movement is its radical secularity. A totally secular life is shallow. It is not completely untrue nor completely unproductive of happiness. It avoids, however, that something in us which questions and wants reasonable answers, that something in us which we feel not only in childhood or emotional stress but all through our mature lives, that something in us which never really goes away and which tries to tell us we are, at heart, religious creatures.

The movement stems, I think, in part not only from its European ancestry, which we referred to in the last section of the paper, but more immediately from those American qualities we talked of in the beginning. It is a movement attractive to some Americans because it moves away from transcendence. It is man-centered and deed-oriented. It has little dogma and an emphatic distrust of any life beyond that which man lives empirically. It is pragmatic. "God" is dead because he does not work any more or do things for us or explain things. Therefore, he is dispensable. The movement will attract some Americans also because it has a certain secularity about it and because it permits a humanitarian materialism of service while condemning selfish materialism. It lends a certain spirituality to life without demanding over-much. The movement stems from these American attitudes and will therefore be sufficiently meaningful to some of our countrymen.

I do not think, however, if I may be permitted a prediction, that

it will run deep nor that it will last long, unless, of course, it changes direction. The Pelagian idea it works with has always been attractive and always proved insufficient. The idea that man can achieve a totally secular salvation is just not true enough for man to rest content with this.

I believe the movement is also too closely identified with American affluence to be sufficiently distinctive or sufficiently demanding or sufficiently spiritual for the vast majority who respond religiously to life. It will fail, finally, because it works with the naïve assumption that all would become Christians if we could only find the right formula.

Yet for all this, these men have confronted us with ideas which violently contradict us. Thus, they may be doing us a service. The worst fate of all is indifference to God. God can do much, however, with a generation which takes him seriously.

V. CHRISTIAN SECULARITY

In this final section, I would like to say some things about the notion of Christian secularity. I think this concept is our best answer to the "Death of God" movement and our best approach to American civilization.

There are some basic principles which contribute to the secularity of which I am now speaking.

1. We must first of all state quite unequivocally that the world and created goods must be valued in themselves. They have a dignity apart from their explicit reference to God and apart from any religious interpretation of them.

Chardin summed it up well when he noted that "in the name of our faith, we have the right and duty to become passionate about the things of the earth."

This is a point Catholic spirituality has not taken enough into account, Protestant theology even less so. There were times in Christian history, especially in the Middle Ages, when earthly realities may have been given too quickly a religious orientation before they were allowed to declare their own intrinsic goodness. Economics, politics, science, sexuality—all may have been baptized before they came fully to birth. A neglect of the intrinsic value of earthly

realities can lead us to place or force on life a dimension it may not be ready for or one which is not suitable. This was not the way of the Incarnation. Christ did not only show us he was God. He showed us also what human nature was able to do. Christianity's mission is not to force on the world an alien system. It is rather a search for the deeper dimensions of the world, a bringing to reality of all those possibilities the world unknowingly has. In much the same way, friendship draws from us values and virtues we never knew were there. Christianity must give the world the acceptance it needs to achieve the glory of which it is capable but cannot realize on its own. Christianity cannot do this unless it accepts the world as good in the situation where the world is. It cannot do this if it merely *uses* the world to find God. Christianity comes into the world, the way Christ came, not as a stranger but as an ally. "For God loved the world so much . . ."

2. The world looks to man for its development and direction.

The dignity of the world derives not only from its creation in love but from its having been given to man as a gift and a task. Man must redeem the world from chaos by assuming responsibility for it and by humanizing it. In man, the world meets itself and achieves consciousness. Man is that being the world must turn to for intelligibility. Thus, man has a serious obligation to the world. He can create it into something worthy of man or he can destroy it. We have not explored sufficiently the gravity and the reality of this alternative. If man decides to create the world, he must bring order into it the way God first gave the world its fundamental constitution—in love and freedom.

3. Man must look to God for assistance in man's mission to the world.

The biblical message is quite clear: the world cannot be transformed without God. This is so not only because man is not fully human without God and therefore cannot humanize the world as he must. It is true also because, after sin, something hostile to God took its place in the world and became active in our midst. Man needs God because God gave man a heart so soundlessly deep that he can love even those things which undo him and those things which return the world to chaos. We are discovering more and more today

that God has given us fewer answers than we realized. What we must be careful of, however, is neglecting the urgency and indispensability of the answers he did give us.

4. The ultimate purpose of Christian secularity is a Christian worldliness, an order which is not only for time but for eternity.

Since Christ united in himself the divine and the human, he is the guarantee of the possibility of our enterprise and the promise of its ultimate accomplishment. In Christ, who was more human than we can ever be, we learned what humanity is capable of when it is totally accepted by God. On the cross and in his redeeming death, Jesus brought about the destruction of those things in the world which would have demanded our forsaking it had he not come. Christianity tells us Easter took place on this planet, in a land we know, and that we can overcome those things in the world which must be overcome.

A Christian secularity then faces the world with confidence but with no illusions. It is at home in the world (for the world was made for us) even if it is not perfectly at rest. The world is not God, it knows. And the future, which is so new and thrilling, this future in which man will learn to do more than he ever dreamed possible, this future, a Christian knows, is still finite. Man shall never redeem all his promise or declare all his purpose as long as he lives in the world. He shall never say, with only worldly wisdom, this is exactly what I am and what I was for.

Christian secularity tells us we can never have it all. Some values must be sacrificed for others (the pearl of great price demands the surrender of all the others). Christian secularity tells us that sometimes life may have to be sacrificed for Resurrection and that one must, after all, seek first the Kingdom of God. Yet a Christian knows that, for all this, he can call the world from mere worldliness and from estrangement in sin to a new freedom of grace. The world is his partner. He knows he can take the world with him into the Kingdom of God, the way Christ took his humanity back to heaven. He knows that the world's search for unity will lead it into a new discovery of the universal power of the Christian message. He knows all this and he is happy. For he loves the world and he yearns to save it. He knows that God is here and that man lived out all his tragic and glorious history on this planet.

He knows all this and that is why he finds the words of George Bernanos so beautiful:

When I shall be dead, tell the kingdom of the earth that I have loved it much more than I ever dared to say.

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