

## 1966 — THE YEAR OF THE DEATH OF GOD

The year 1966 called the attention of the public and those in academic circles, believers and non-believers alike, to the presence in America of a group of radical thinkers who styled themselves the death-of-God theologians. Although their number is insignificant (in fact most writers seem to be agreed that only three are worth really noticing — they are Thomas Altizer of Atlanta's Emory University, William Hamilton of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and Paul van Buren of Temple University)<sup>1</sup>, nevertheless they achieved national prominence and stature because of the wide coverage of their views afforded them by leading weeklies and magazines. The *Time* magazine of April 8, 1966 (Asia Edition), for instance, featured a cover article entitled "Is God Dead?". It was expected as a matter of course that Catholics should react, and so the deluge of literature in Catholic magazines on the subject that same year came as no surprise. The death-of-God theologians welcomed heartily the national and international attention directed to them and they had, in fact, an explanation to justify it. Thomas W. Ogletree who wrote a book appraising the new "leftist" theology quotes Hamilton and Altizer as claiming that the sensationalism and publicity surrounding the death-of-God theology forms the "journalistic phase" necessary in the develop-

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<sup>1</sup> Paul van Buren and the American sociologist Gabriel Vahannian are at times not regarded strictly as death-of-God theologians because the former seems to approach the question of God merely from the viewpoint of linguistic analysis, whereas the latter approaches it as a cultural historian describing the temper of the age. For a delightful treatment of Vahannian's views, see John L'Heaureux's "On the Eighth Day: The Death of God in Contemporary Literature", *The Critic*, June-July, 1966. For a short discussion of van Buren, see Boniface A. Willems, O.P. "The Death of God Phenomenon", *The Catholic World*, October, 1966. See also: E. L. Mascall, "Reflections on the 'Honest to God' Debate", *Thought*, XLI (Summer, 1966).

ment of this radical theology.<sup>2</sup> And now that preliminary tussels have occurred between these ultra-radical theologians and the zealous guardians of the Christian faith, both camps will naturally look and attend to their defenses, and one will expect more records of their theological skirmishes in the future.

The tenets of the death-of-God group (or groups, because apparently the leaders also maintain theological differences with one another) might strike one as surprising, to say the least. What is not surprising, however, is the fact that this group grew its roots in America, not anywhere else. One might even expect it of America. Someone could point a finger at Europe which has already produced a Bultmann and a Bonhoeffer as a natural breeding-place of this new theology. But then one could just as easily point out the social and economic situations in America as pre-disposing elements to such a revolutionary theological perspective. American social life is characterized by mobility and anonymity, the necessary off-shoots of urban life. The hustle and bustle of city life and the attendant strains on persons that it entails—all these have contributed to the breakdown of *personal Comunicacion*, an element so vital in any relationship, and perhaps, more so in the case of a relationship with God. The economic situation, on the other hand, seems to demand only efficiency, and therefore, technology is oriented towards speed and precision, practicability, maximum output at minimum input. This fixation has given rise to the distinctly American brand of philosophy known as *pragmatism*, whether found in its cultivated and refined form as in the philosophy of William James and John Dewey, or in any of its bourgeois forms like moonlighting, get-rich-quick-schemes or plain whatever-works-attitude. I think that from pragmatism the death-of-God theology is not too far removed. I do not mean to say that anyone who is an avowed pragmatist necessarily slides on to death-of-God theology. But there are indications that the proponents of the death-of-God theology suffer from a lack of *living experience* of God, and it is this empty feeling that has

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<sup>2</sup> *The Death of God Controversy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 12.

Some of the leading Catholic magazines in the US that featured articles on the controversy are: *America*, *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, *The Critic*, *The Catholic World*, *The Catholic Mind*, *Ave Maria*, and *Jubilee*.

led them to explain God away. One then wonders whether this lack of experience of God is in turn precipitated by the pragmatic outlook of the individual as well as that of society. So much is hinted at when they claim, for instance, that it is the "recognition of common ends and values, not religious belief, which holds society together".<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Hutchins, a former president of the University of Chicago, has summed up the situation very well by arguing in his book *The Learning Society* that Americans have failed in making a distinction between *training* and *education*, and that they have also made the mistake of setting as their goal "the exaltation of manpower over mankind, and the relegation of men to the status of servants of their culture".<sup>4</sup>

I will confine myself in this discussion to a treatment of William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer, in whose writings the experience of the absence of God seems to be more pronounced than in any of the other advocates of death-of-God theology.

William Hamilton is not a classical atheist, if by classical atheist one understands someone who says God never was, is not, and never will be. He admits that God *existed*—a transcendent being who deserved praise and adoration. He was, however, incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, and since Christ suffered, died on a cross and buried, never to resurrect, God is therefore dead.<sup>5</sup> That is in short the crux

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Copleston, "Man, Transcendence and God", *Thought*, XLIII (Spring, 1968), p. 25.

In an article, Father James V. Schall claims that the death-of-God theology stems from the rejection of Aristotle and reveals the Classic Protestant dilemma: a conflict between loyalty to God and loyalty to the world. I do not see an essential conflict between Father Schall's statement and my own view as developed later. I find in fact in Father Schall's view a confirmation. When in a person the experience of the world becomes too real and begins to overshadow the experience of the transcendent, then one can understand how such a conflict is resolved by the pronouncement "God is dead". See "The Secular City and God", *The Catholic World*, October, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> *Time* (Asia Edition), August 2, 1968, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Bado, "Is God Dead?", *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, June, 1966, p. 731. This article contains a short summary of distinctions be-

of his theology. The confirmation of this speculative aspect of his theology lies in an existential condition, that of "a very real experience, a feeling that God is not there".<sup>6</sup> Hamilton himself expresses it thus: "But it is not a simple not-having, for there is an experience of loss. Painful for some, not so for others, it is loss nonetheless. The loss is not of the idols, or of the God of theism, but of the God of the Christian tradition".<sup>7</sup> This experience is not founded on the individual level alone, but on the level of world society as well. Again Hamilton says in "The Death of God Theologies Today" published in the Spring 1965 issue of the *Christian Scholar*: "It is not just that a capacity has dried up within us; we do not take all this as merely a statement about our frail psyches, we take it as a statement about the nature of the world and we try to convince others. God is dead. We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God".<sup>8</sup> The lack of experience of God (or the experience of the absence of God, as he chooses to call it) in world society is attested to by revolutions and wars, occurring in such rapid succession since the French revolution. This fact, according to Hamilton, cannot be reconciled with the idea of a transcendent God, who, with power, wisdom, justice, and love, directs the destinies of men. Father Robert Adolfs quotes Hamilton as having remarked, as early as 1961, in his book *The New Essence of Christianity*, that "when we speak of the death of God we speak not only of the death of idols or of the falsely objectivized Being in Heaven: we also speak of our own vanished capacity to "fasten onto any traditional image of God... and we wonder if God himself has not vanished".<sup>9</sup>

tween the death-of-God theologians, the classic atheists, and the *secularists*.

For the differences between the death-of-God group and the so-called "process theologians", see Richard E. Weingert's "Process or Decide?", *Encounter*, XXIX (Spring, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Anthony T. Padovano, "The Death of God and the Life of Man", *Ave Maria*, October 1, 1966, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> "American Theology, Radicalism, and the Death of God", in *Radical Theology and Death of God*, with Dr. Thomas Altizer (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), p. 6. I shall refer to this work in succeeding citations simply as *Radical Theology*.

<sup>8</sup> *Radical Theology*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> "Is God Dead?", *Jubilee*, July, 1966, p. 34.

The view I have expressed, namely, that it is only his inability to come to a live experience of God that has moved Hamilton to declare God is dead, is further bolstered by the fact that he does not completely close the door on God but leaves it slightly ajar. Father Bado says that Hamilton "leaves open the possibility that further questioning on his part will lead him personally to the re-affirmation of the transcendent God—but only on condition that this transcendence play a meaningful role in his experience".<sup>10</sup> If Father Bado is right when he points out, too, that Hamilton, in proposing his *Christian atheism*, demands that one of man's important tasks is to *rethink* man and human culture not so much in terms of sin as in terms of man's confidence and prospects of facing the worsening future, then one can detect in his preoccupation with the reality of sin the dried up oasis within the soul from which his theological speculations originate. The Broadway playwright William Alfred expresses it thus: "People who tell me there is no God are like a six-year-old boy saying there is no such thing as passionate love—they just haven't experienced it".<sup>11</sup>

Now let us turn our attention to Dr. Thomas Altizer. He agrees basically with Hamilton in saying that God "emptied Himself" in Christ, and since Christ no longer rose from the dead, God did not "jump back to heaven". He claims that this truth had been received by him in a vision.<sup>12</sup> This revelation is right from the start suspect and subject to doubt; even his colleagues in the death-of-God theology have a few words of criticism which are rather damaging. William Hamilton describes Altizer's views as "logically imprecise"; he further thinks that Altizer "finds it a painful thing to have to affirm the death of God, and it is clear he wishes things were otherwise".<sup>13</sup> Paul van Buren confesses that he simply does not understand him.<sup>14</sup> On the Catholic side, Paul Hallinan, bishop of Atlanta where Dr. Altizer teaches, presents him as "an evangelist, appalled and dismayed at the heartless-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 732.

<sup>11</sup> *Time* (Asia Edition), April 8, 1966, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Bado, *Ibid.*, p. 731.

<sup>13</sup> "Death of God Theologies Today", in *Radical Theology*, pp. 29-31.

<sup>14</sup> Paul J. Hallinan, "God is Dead But Jesus Christ Lives?", *The Catholic Mind*, October, 1966, pp. 2-3.

ness of men.<sup>15</sup> From an article entitled "*Theology and the Death of God*" comes Altizer's claim that man can no longer know "the reality of God's presence nor understand the world as his creation; or, at least, he can no longer respond—either interiorly or cognitively—to the classical images of the Creator and the creation".<sup>16</sup> Translated into the layman's terms, what Altizer means would amount to this: "I feel that man is cold and heartless, and this indicates God is dead". We discern that in this instance, too, the cry "God is dead" springs from the inability to experience God not only within oneself, but also in others or through others. It seems to stem from an arid soul, empty of the dewdrops of God's grace; and becoming aware of the darkness within him, he projects it into the world as the darkness of contemporary man and then calls it "the body of the dead God". God's death, he goes on to proclaim, means liberation from the threat of some unknown and uncertain world, liberation from the threat of mystery.<sup>17</sup> If these are the essential elements in his *radical immanence*, then he has drawn an excellent portrait of himself as a worthy successor to Schopenhauer's title as "The Pessimist".

In an article originally published in September, 1963, entitled "*America and the Future of Theology*", Dr. Thomas Altizer said: "A theology that chooses to meet our time, a theology that accepts the destiny of history, must first assess the theological significance of the death of God. We must realize that the death of God in an historical event, that God has died in our cosmos, in our history, and in our *Existenz*."<sup>18</sup> Two years after this pronouncement, the Lou Harris poll

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Radical Theology*, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Bado, *Ibid.*

Dr. Altizer says: "Surely it is not possible for any responsible person to think that we can any longer know or experience God in nature, in history, in economic or political arenas, in the laboratory, or in anything which is genuinely modern, whether in thought or experience. Wherever we turn in our experience, we experience the eclipse or silence of God. To refuse to accept the death of God is to evade our actual condition." *Journal of Religion*, April, 1963, pp. 106-107. Quoted by James J. Schall, S., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Radical Theology*, p. 11. Cf. James V. Schall, *Ibid.*

showed that 97 per cent of Americans maintained a belief in God.<sup>19</sup> One of course may question the validity or accuracy of such a survey, and we are quite willing to give allowances. But the survey does show that God has not died, in the judgment of a great majority of Altizer's countrymen. There is no need then for a watered down version of Christianity as these death-of-God prophets have been proposing. As far as Christians and believers are concerned, God is dead in Altizer's cosmos, in *his* history, and *his* existence. If deicide or secularization or what-have-you must come, then it will come, as Richard Clancey says,<sup>20</sup> "only over the bodies of aroused faithful and religious, only after battling the ghosts" of the millions of Christian believers and deists who have made this world what it is—still fit to live in.

What we have said of Hamilton, namely, that the awareness of sin and evil in his experience has driven him to shout "God is dead" from the rooftops, can also be said of Altizer. Otherwise what leads him to conceive of the Christian God as "the God who in his transcendence stands over against man, and before whom man is reduced to an abject condition of guilt and dread"?<sup>21</sup> Since God's death lies in a subjective experience, then as Richard Weingart says, the movement's emphasis falls on multiplicity and individualism and does not provide a unified field of experience, thus vitiating its import.<sup>22</sup> A theology

<sup>19</sup> *The Sign*, "Current Fact and Comment", June, 1966, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> "The Death of God in the American Catholic College", *Thought*, XLIII (Spring, 1968), p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> "Process or Deicide?", *Encounter*, XXIX (Spring, 1968), pp. 153-157.

In an article, Robert L. Richard made an appraisal of the death-of-God theology, and finding that its generalization is founded on non-exegetical and non-historical grounds, called it "reductionist". Perhaps we could borrow his term "subjective projection" to apply what we have been trying to describe as the root cause of this theology without *theos*. See "The Challenge of 'God is Dead'", *America*, August 20, 1966.

In a similar manner, Professor van Buren has also been branded with the charge of letting "his own secular cast of mind become normative for judging theological validity". Martin E. Marty, "American Protestant Theology Today", *Thought*, XII (Summer, 1966), p. 175.

that has its origins in inner "feelings" overlooks the real nature of faith wherein the believer must *seize* the truth by an act of firm assent and personal commitment, and not wait rather passively to be seized by the truth. We cannot, therefore, agree with Hamilton that a theologian today is "a passive man, trusting in waiting, silence, and in a kind of prayer for the losses to be returned".<sup>28</sup> Above all, the affective motions of the soul must not be permitted to lord it over the rational, or this will result in mass hysteria and not *koinonia*, that fellowship of a community characterized by the virtue of charity and unity under the same conviction of one Yahweh, wise and true.

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<sup>28</sup> "Thursday's Child", in *Radical Theology*, p. 92.