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DID GOD DIE IN *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY*?

IN 1984 AN INTRIGUING INSTANCE of historical and theological revisionism occurred which rivals the Stalinist's excision of now uncomfortable events from recent history. What is interesting is that this occurred in an act of celebration, as part of a series of public statements attempting to show just how important, crucial, formative, in-step, in-touch and even up-to-date a popular journal of Protestant theology had been. Celebrating its centenary, *The Christian Century* ran a series in which crucial events and topics of various decades were revisited showing the changing theological culture of America from 1884 to that present day. So it came to James M. Wall,¹ editor of the journal since 1972, to address the issues of the period 1962-1971.

The title of Wall's review gives a signal of its contents: "Adopting Realism: *The Century* 1962-1971." ²But "realism" can be read in different ways. Is Wall's realism a facing up to the place of Christianity in a decade of secularization? Is it a realization that the "Christian Century" had been lived after Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, a century where Christianity was challenged by political ideologies and consumer capitalism? Is this review a noting of the theological ferment that had placed theology on the cover of *Time* magazine, spawned new catchphrases and produced theological bestsellers? Wall does make an oblique note for the initiated, briefly noting the impact of Karl Barth on American theology and Christianity during this period. However the main focus of his review is politics: Vietnam, civil rights and student un-rest.

Anyone who had not read the *Century*³ over that decade would have gained the impression from Wall's review that the magazine had been uninvolved

¹ *The Christian Century* Foundation Archives described Wall on his appointment in 1972 as a "Methodist minister, liberal Democrat and editor of *The Christian Advocate*." His editorship is described as "a period of cautious optimism and recovery" that instituted "a more realistic analysis of religious and secular events honed from on-the-spot coverage..." 5. *Christian Century* Foundation Archives 1939 -1975. Special Collections/Morris Library Southern Illinois University Carbondale. My thanks to Kimberlee Soo, Administrative Assistant, *The Christian Century*, who, in response to my email inquiry regarding circulation figures, provided the Archival information in an emailed PDF.

² James M. Wall, "Adopting Realism: *The Century* 1962-1971," *The Christian Century* vol. 101 no. D12, 1984), 1170-1173.

³ Hereafter in the text and endnotes the abbreviated version of *Century* will be used. Such usage follows the conventions used by the magazine in discussing itself.

in, unimpressed by, and uncommitted to the theological rupture of the 1960s “God is dead” and secular theology. Yet for those who had been reading and writing in the *Century* over that decade, the issues of the death of God, Christian Atheism and secular theology were a constant, and often dominant, presence. The *Century*, it could be argued, in many ways led the charge, taking the ideas of young theologians who, grappling with the legacy of Nietzsche, Barth and Bonhoeffer, were attempting to theologically critique what was seen as a secular society, and granting them nationwide (indeed international) coverage, debate and discussion⁴.

Yet such a revisionist stance is true of theology generally. The theological ferment of the 1960s has been hastily written out of theological memory, occupying a place in the theological wardrobe similar to molding old tie-dye shirts, love beads and macramé waistcoats. Liberals and some evangelicals have tended to take the “worship Jesus” option seemingly proposed by William Hamilton while other evangelicals have refused to note the legacy of Barthian transcendence and turned to pneumatics. Fundamentalists have put van Buren on the pyre and continued to read literally in their own image. For the majority of theologians, the “death of God-ers” were firstly too young, and then, later, too old and out of step with a charismatic/evangelical revival. While for many in secular society they turned out to be not secular enough.

At a recent international conference in Dunedin, New Zealand on “The Future of Christianity in the West”⁵ I stressed the point that for those of us (albeit a distinct minority) of a liberal/radical theological position under the age of forty (I was born in 1967) “the death of God” is neither an end point, nor a resolution, nor a departure point out of theology and Church, nor is it a static plateau - but rather it is only our starting point. We began with, were born into, absence and loss. For us it is not the collapse of a previous life and belief, the apocalypse of our theology- nor the invitation or justification to “be with it.” Rather it is a Jacobean moment, similar to how James Der Derian has described Paul Virilio’s techno-theological writings: “...like Jacob, he wrestled with the angel of technology not to prove his disbelief, but to prove his freedom to believe.”⁶

Although Gabriel Vahanian had published *The Death of God* in 1961 and Paul

⁴ In 1965 the *Century* had reached a subscription peak of 40,000 subscribers. As the *Century* archives “Historical Sketch” notes, during the 1950s and 1960s the *Century* “grew to enjoy the distinction of being the most respected religious journal in North America.”⁴ Christian Century Foundation Archives 1939-1975. Special Collections/Morris Library Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

⁵ *The Future of Christianity in the West: An International Conference 2002*. The School of Liberal Arts, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, 5-8 December 2002. The Keynote speakers were David Martin (LSE) and Robert Wuthnow (Princeton).

⁶ James Der Derian, “Introduction” in James Der Derian (ed) *The Virilio Reader* (Oxford & Malden, Mass: Blackwells, 1998), 6.

van Buren, Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton were all writing and teaching in American Universities and seminaries, they failed to make a popular impact. What did was J.A.T. Robinson's popularization of "secular theology" in *Honest to God* (1963) - and more specifically, the arrival the following year in America of Robinson for a lecture series⁷. Robinson arrived as a theological and pop culture celebrity⁸- a best-selling Bishop who seemed to be more secular than religious, a bridging point between worlds in tension. Here was a Bishop from an England that suddenly seemed the repository of new ideas, a nascent "swingin' London." Here was a clerical version of the British Invasion, the Beatles as biblical scholars, the Stones with a "dog collar."⁹ That deference was paid to this clerical visitor over local scholars who had already taken things further was and is no surprise. As Christopher Hitchens has noted, there is a strong tradition in Anglo-American relations of seeing England as acting as Greece to America's Rome.¹⁰

Robinson arrived at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut to give the Purdy Lectures. The invitation had been extended to him as a New Testament scholar. But, in the interim, he had written *Honest to God* and gone from New Testament scholar to public figure. The *Century's* correspondent, Harland Lewis,¹¹ was determined to present him as the embodiment of a cultural and theological tension. Claiming that dress embodies the man and noting the Bishop's mix of attire, Lewis stated:

So it seemed clear that so far as his attire is concerned the world is a somewhat stronger shaping force than the church. And so it is with his thought. Trying to be loyal to the church yet break out of it, the bishop personified the problem he discussed.¹²

The symbol of this intra-world figure, a secular bishop, the doubting bishop, the man from the heart of the Establishment, expressing contemporary concerns is what gave "secular Christianity" and the "death of God" movement its initial cachet—and what became the reason for its excision. The fact that theological speculation could be so accessible, so popular outside the Church, enabled those who opposed it to personify their rejection in terms of rejecting the stock, anti-clerical English figure of the secular cleric with roots back to the "huntin', swearin', drinkin' and wenchin' country parsons" of Georgian England. Robinson needless to say was nothing of the sort- yet the

⁷ H.G. Lewis, "An Honest To God Reformation", *Century* (3 June 1964), "Special Report," 736-7.

⁸ See Douglas John Hall's and Rowan Williams's discussions as to the impact of *Honest to God* in John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* 40th Anniversary Edition, with essays by Douglas John Hall and Rowan Williams (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press 1963/2002).

⁹ "dog collar" is a colloquial description of a clerical collar.

¹⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *Blood, Class and Nostalgia; Anglo-American Ironies* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990). See especially Chapter One: "Greece to their Rome." Hitchens notes that such a sentiment is especially strong also within a WASP sensibility.

¹¹ News Correspondent for Connecticut and pastor at First Community Church in Farmington. I have included the locational by-line from the *Century* for the writers cited as this provides an interesting way to track where interest and dissent was located.

¹² Lewis, "An Honest To God Reformation", 736.

dismissal of him mimicked the high-minded evangelical revulsion of the nineteenth century.

Lewis' initial "Special Report" is important for noting that this new theology of the "incognito Christ" is a counter to both seminary and Church theology - a correction to and of both those institutions.¹³ Yet, as the American debate came to be played out, increasingly it became a battle between the seminary and the Church. For while Robinson was, it seemed, happy to locate revelation in secular society, the American experience saw secular society mediated *through* the seminary and university. Thus it was the intellectual, academic nature of the American experience of secular experience that allowed for its dismissal, marginalization and later excision.

The *Century* had obviously decided to "run with the bishop,"¹⁴ in publishing, within a fortnight of Robinson's visit, a major review article, "The Bishop and the Debate" by Martin E. Marty.¹⁵ Marty notes the legacy of Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer in Robinson's work, asking why work of thirty years ago is suddenly seen as such a novelty and so newsworthy? He concluded that the Bishop's stance appealed not so much to those who were already secular as to those who were Christian and attempting to understand the secular world. Therefore Robinson and his counterparts¹⁶ as a type of intellectual Christian who engages in naval gazing and fails "at carrying an apology toward the modern primitives who surround them."¹⁷

Marty also notes the Barthian background and influence of many "nonreligious interpreters of Christianity" and wonders if they are undertaking a similar attack upon the theistic background of the Gospel as Barth does upon natural law?¹⁸ This Barthian link¹⁹ is important for what

¹³ Ibid, 737.

¹⁴ Not so much "running with God," as Malcolm Boyd asked, as deciding to promote debate and discussion out of the interest occasioned by Robinson's visit. The Anglo-centric focus continues for the next year.

¹⁵ Martin E. Marty, "The Bishop and the Debate", *Century* (24 June 1964), 830-832. Marty reviews *The Honest To God Debate* (David L. Edwards), *For Christ's Sake* (O. Fielding Clarke) and "Honest to God: A Theological Appraisal", a symposium in *Religion in Life* (Winter 1963-4).

¹⁶ Marty explicitly cites Werner Pelz, John Taylor, Richard Acland, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, Richard Luecke and Frederick Ferre (831). It is important and interesting to note that Vahanian and Altizer are not included. Altizer's omission is especially interesting given the later widespread impact and coverage he is given by the *Century*.

¹⁷ As Marty states, "The modern world is indeed 'secular' but it is also primitively religious, fertile in producing faiths and pseudo-faiths, ersatz religions and intact ideologies and mythologies." 831.

¹⁸ Marty, "The Bishop and the Debate", 832.

¹⁹ In Ved Mehta's *The New Theologian*, both Paul van Buren and Bonhoeffer's biographer Eberhard Bethge note the link between the 'death of God' and Barth, with Bethge stating that Barth "...in a sense opened the door to the death of God movement when he made Christ the unique and final revelation and ruled out any metaphysical speculation about God." Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (London: Pelican 1968/1st pub. Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1966/orig.in serial form in the *New Yorker*), 204.

Mehta's book was reviewed in the *Century*, 14 December 1966. In a dismissive attack Deane William Ferre calls the book a "witty yet uninformative conglomeration... [where] theological

later happened in the rejection of the “God is dead-ers.” On the one hand, the 1980s saw a rise of a retro neo-orthodoxy, based, often strongly, within the legacy and language of the Barmen declaration as a way to counter the rise of various contextual, sexual, ecological and political theologies. Such a position was determined to challenge the legacy of what was seen as liberal theology arising out of 1960s secular theologies. The resurgent neo-orthodoxy saw the secular theologians as apostates, heretics and deviants who needed to be excised. Conversely, for those promoting the various contextual, sexual, ecological and political theologies, the fact that those who had done the ground work in the 1960s were, at some stage, often academic Barthians proved an embarrassment. These new theologies were often strongly pneumatic or conversely Jesus-centred in a way that took the secular as primary reference over the theological. For them the “death of God-ers” were too theological and academic... (not to mention white, western and male).

Early in the debate Langdon Gilkey attempted to address and proscribe the theological ferment that seemed to be erupting. Professor of Theology at University of Chicago Divinity School, Gilkey was to play a constant part in the *Century's* attempt to understand, promote and critique this new theological environment. Paul van Buren, in conversation with Ved Mehta went as far as to imply that what was taken as an existent, cohesive “God is dead” movement or school was actually the creation of Gilkey:

Well, in America, there is supposed to be Altizer, of Emory University, and then there's Bill Hamilton, and then there's me. Langdon Gilkey says that we are the Radicals, and I suppose we are. But Altizer and I have never met, and Bill Hamilton and I met for the first time only in 1964...Langdon Gilkey says we belong to a “god is dead” movement, but I think Altizer and Bill Hamilton and I are saying different things.²⁰

In an earlier review article, Gilkey had already outlined his position as one of seeking the grounded, defensible reality of Christian faith in God in a secular age; this reality of God being opposed to God's death.²¹ For Gilkey the meaning of “making up his mind” in 1965 was that, in a changing world, no longer was a “young theologian's mind” already made up for him[sic] in reference to one of the Twentieth Century “greats” [Bultmann, Barth, Niebuhr, Tillich or Whitehead]. No longer would years of crisis welcome the old assurances. Now in “peace and prosperity,” new issues arose of how and if God could be experienced. These were questions of existential angst and clerical self-doubt and alienation.

substance and acuity get lost...To my mind the latter-day trinity of Altizer, Hamilton and van Buren presents a sterile metaphysics mated to a virile Jesus.” D.W. Ferme, “Review of The New Theologian”, *Century* (14 December 1966), 158.

²⁰ Paul van Buren in Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian*, 71. It is interesting to note that van Buren does not include Gabriel Vahanian in his list.

²¹ Langdon Gilkey, “Is God Dead?” *Century* (6 January 1965), 18-19. The review was of Daniel Jenkins' *The Christian Belief in God*.

For Gilkey, the reality of the secular environment provided the challenge to rethink and reformulate theology, not the reason to abandon it. Seeking a basic onto-theology of love, he linked Augustine and Schliermacher into a Tillichian “depth” experienced in secular society, but which reflects and responds to something more.²² While Gilkey had sympathy for what the “younger theologians” were attempting, he implied they were ultimately limited by their context. That is, having only attempted to express theology in a time of plenty, they lacked the experience of the “reality” of a theology of crisis. Therefore to abandon God may be, in the end, actually the result of letting context dictate theology.

Paul van Buren, informing the readers of the *Century* of how he was “making up his mind,” noted the problem of the journal labelling the current century “Christian.” He stated that his theological discoveries shook him from assurance back into critique: “I discovered Schleiermacher, Feuerbach and Nietzsche long after I had discovered Barth.”²³ This statement is crucial for understanding what was occurring in the “death of God” movement and why it has been so misunderstood. Typically, the “death of God”/radical theology movement has been viewed as part of a modernizing, progressive, secularizing strand in theology. Yet its proponents did not look forward for their rationale, but rather they looked back. Because they were first strongly influenced by Barth and neo-orthodoxy [growing up when the theology of crisis was dominant] they sought a new rationale of crisis in the secular age.²⁴ The problem was that the “death of God-ers” in writing the death of God in opposition [dialectic?] to [primarily] Barth often seemed to fail to appreciate that Barth himself had been writing of [and against] secular society *after* the death of God. In reality the mid-century “death of God-ers” actually were reacting to a God who was *already* dead- yet restored; in a sense they were attempting to reassert a modernity over and against Barth's postmodern medievalism. So while van Buren stated “I am trying to see the role and nature of theology in the context of the plurality and relativity of contemporary culture”²⁵ the response to this was actually more modernist than the statement may first appear.

It is modernist in two ways; firstly using the claim the death of God borrowed from Nietzsche and co. to expand Bonhoeffer's call for a “religionless Christianity,”²⁶ opposing not only contemporary Christianity,

²² Langdon Gilkey, “Dissolution and Reconstruction in Theology”, *Century* (3 February, 1965), 135-139. [Second in a series 'How I Am Making Up My Mind']

²³ Paul van Buren, “Theology in the Context of Culture”, *Century* (7 April 1965), 428. [Fourth in series 'How I Am Making Up My Mind'.]

²⁴ This point is also noted by Van Harvey in “The Nature and Function of Faith”, *Century* (August 4 1965), 962-966. As he states of the neo-orthodox theologians, “they shared our lost idealism... [and] made it possible for many of us to be Protestants again in the sense of believing – seeing the relevance of- the doctrine of justification by faith alone.” 962.

²⁵ Paul van Buren, “Theology in the Context of Culture”, 429.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press Ltd 1954), 122-124.

but also, crucially, the transcendence of neo-orthodoxy. This means transcendence now becomes part of "religion." Therefore the neo-orthodox call against religion is now secularized and revelation occurs not against but within human culture and society. This leads into the second point. As van Buren notes, religion and theology are seen as a solely human activity in response not to God but rather to "our rapidly changing technological culture."²⁷ The referred to "plurality and relativity" are viewed as part of a modernist progression within a culture where technology, not theology, becomes the new onto-reality. What are viewed as "pluralist and relative" are those claims traditionally located in the singular transcendence of God. The death of God relativizes them and puts them in a welter of competing pluralist claims for truth- now crucially encountered in a new progressive frame of technology.

The problem of how to talk theologically in such an environment is addressed by the appearance of a second major figure in this debate, Thomas Altizer. It is interesting to note that van Buren, Altizer and Hamilton were all given the opportunity of expressing their views in feature articles in the *Century* in 1965, in the series "How I Am Making Up My Mind." Altizer's mind is concerned not with the issue of speaking meaningfully or relevantly "but rather of overcoming the root impediments to speech itself!"²⁸

The major impediment appears to be a sense of the prescriptive modernist turn towards the present in which God is experienced as absent. It is only by acknowledging this absence that we can be open to the "always present" Christ "that has actually become united with our flesh."²⁹ This unity occurs in the kenotic Christ, "a fully kenotic Word" which is forward moving by both negating and transcending its past.³⁰ Altizer's "death of God" is therefore a real death, a form of time-inspired patricide in which the Son responds by an emptying into the new focus of revelation: contemporary humanity. The location of authenticity is the present age which is lived in negation of a past seen to limit a future expectation.

To understand the focus on the "death of God-ers" two marginal figures need to be noted. While Bishop Pike receives some attention, the editorial line locates him as an iconoclast not a heretic³¹. Similarly, Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* is noted as "significant" and Cox is assumed into the mainstream as "an inverted Paul Tillich with all the assets and liabilities this suggests."³²

²⁷ Paul van Buren, "Theology in the Context of Culture", 430.

²⁸ Thomas Altizer, "Creative Negation in Theology," *Century* (7 July 1965), 864. By 3 November 1965 it is noted that there have been more letters on Altizer than on any earlier "Making Up My Mind."

²⁹ Ibid, 866.

³⁰ Ibid, 867.

³¹ Kyle Haselden "Pike: Heretic or Iconoclast?" *Century* (1 September 1965), 1051.

³² George Brett Hall, Review of *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox, *Century* (25 August 1965), 1038-1039.

In terms of printed pages they are relegated to the sidelines in favour of debates on “the modish faithlessness” which is actually responding to Bonhoeffer's question, “How may Jesus Christ become the Lord even of those who have no religion?”³³ Hamilton's colleague, Charles M. Nielson, offers one response. He states it is the liberal protestant seminary that actually has no religion; or at least it seeks to make the seminary so in-step and pertinent to modern culture that the church is made irrelevant. As such, the theological turn represents “an individualistic and layman's protest against the Church.”³⁴

William Hamilton forcefully and thoughtfully articulates this protest in his outline of “The Shape of a Radical Theology.”³⁵ In this confessional piece, Hamilton charts the stages of his move from “the good old world of middle-of the road, ecumenical neo-orthodoxy.” Being a radical is not enough for Hamilton. One can either be a soft radical or a hard radical. For soft radicals, like Harvey Cox, which the medium of expression is the problem, but not the central message. For Hamilton and other hard radicals the message is problematic and God is experienced as real loss; God is not just absent or hidden, but dead.³⁶

Yet this time of loss is a time of a new optimism, of a new obedience to Jesus, in which “a decisive halt should be called to the pervasive “modern” hostility to technology, speed and urbanization.”³⁷ In this passage Hamilton displays a curious understanding of “modern” which sees modernity as a form of alienated Romanticism. Hamilton's Jesus is the ultimate secular man, an enlightenment Christ who finds fulfilment in liberal culture and liberal causes, an ultra-contemporary, ultra-present Jesus. This tension within Hamilton's understanding of modernity is more fully expressed in his contextual rhetorical question:

If “Empty Bed Blues”, Tennessee Williams and “Guernica” are the sights and

³³ Lloyd J. Averill “On A Certain Faithlessness”, *Century* (8 September 1965), 1087-1090. Averill [vice president and dean of chapel at Kalamazoo College, Michigan], while supporting the attempt, locates the central issue in a presentism that becomes preoccupied with evil and injustice without being able to discuss the underlying issue of human sin. Without God there is no sin - but also no explanation for contemporary issues of the human predicament that can be discussed and understood in reference to both a past and future. In other words, without God history loses its meaning-and so does human identity.

³⁴ Charles M. Nielson, “The Loneliness of Protestantism or More Benedictine, Please!”, *Century* (15 September 1965), 1120-1121. Nielson was Professor of Historical Theology at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, New York.

³⁵ William Hamilton, “The Shape of a Radical Theology”, *Century* (6 October 1965), 1219-1222. [Tenth in the series “How I Am Making Up My Mind.”] Hamilton's move could be read as a mid-life crisis. Encountering Bonhoeffer's prison letters in 1952 then being “the Christian” on a television program and being unable to defend Christianity as “problem solving and need-fulfilling.” He became concerned with the question of the plausibility of God. Upon turning forty and realizing that he could no longer be “young and promising,” he turned to introspection and concentrated his writing on what was happening to him and a few friends.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1220.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1221.

sounds of neo-orthodox theology, perhaps radical theology is closer to “We Shall Overcome”, Saul Bellow and Robert Rauschenberg.³⁸

This contextual radicalism is challenged by Michael Novak's question: “How radical is a theology that changes when a mood, even a national mood changes?”³⁹ The national mood for Novak is one where “agnosticism is exceedingly close to authentic belief.”⁴⁰ Such a philosophical response is also offered by the Hungarian theologian, Alexander Czegley. His critique is partially cultural and partially intellectual. His central point is that the issues under debate, especially those raised by Altizer, are ones that Continental philosophy had been and was grappling with. These issues of existentialism, natural theology and the depersonalization of humanity after the death of God all need to be addressed through the Protestant tradition of paradox.⁴¹ The implication is that Altizer and co. were not saying something new, and the reaction to them exposed the lack of a wider perspective and understanding by many outside Continental Europe. For while “death of God-ers” might have a connection into the Continent through their legacy from Barth and Bonhoeffer,⁴² many of their critics, both theological and philosophical were Anglo-American in focus, and the questions being asked and the answers being offered were not even concerned legitimate in the Anglo-American tradition. A similar, yet contrasting view was later offered by W.M. Alexander. He argues that radical theology is not actually radical enough - and that is its principal weakness. Its proponents were radical in attempting to introduce a new way of thought to America, but they failed to challenge four illusions “peculiar to American thought”: a pagan mythology, “unoriginal and facile interpretations” of meaninglessness, “the absolutizing of the present” and “a Pelagian metaphysics.”⁴³ What occurred in radical/“death of God” theology was the articulation of something that fitted easily into an American myth of a national identity of progress and of freedom from history:

... a new mythology which announces a negation of the past and the possibility of a civilizing and humane future does not constitute a radical attack upon our

³⁸ Ibid, 1222.

³⁹ Michael Novak, “Where Is Theology Going?” *Century* (3 November 3 1965), 1342. Novak was at this time described as a *Century* editor at large, a Roman Catholic layman and a staff member of Stanford University's special programmes in humanities.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Alexander Czegley, “Creative Negation in Theology? A Hungarian Theologian Speaks Out on the ‘God is Dead’ Vogue”, *Century* (3 November 1965), 1351-1352. Czegley was a theologian at The Reformed Theological Academy, Debrecen, Hungary.

⁴² John Phillips notes the need “to understand the content of Bonhoeffer's theology as a source, corrective and alternative to more radical programmes.” He also notes that “1967 looks like being Bonhoeffer's year: Counting two German works and the important new translation of his prison letters, I know of seven recently published or imminent books by or about Bonhoeffer.” John Phillips, “Review Article,” *Century* (5 July 1967), 869-70. Phillips was on the faculty of Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri.

⁴³ W.M. Alexander, “Death of God or God of Death?”, *Century* (23 March 1966), 364. Alexander was associate professor of religion and philosophy at St. Andrews College, Laurinburg, North Carolina.

American faith.⁴⁴

Alexander's point that the "death of God" is a comforting message for an affluent society provides a hint as to why the apocalyptic Word soteriology of Altizer prompted the most challenges. For Altizer's message is *not* the retreat into secularization but rather the challenge of the negation of God - *and* the negation of a secular society. In his own way Altizer is claiming alongside Alexander that:

The radical message is the prophetic message that God is not only life but death [for] in the death of Jesus as the incarnation of God both the death of God and the God of death ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?") are mysteriously united in one event.⁴⁵

The philosophical location of Altizer is noted in a letter by Charles English O.C.S.O. of the Monastery of the Holy Ghost, Conyers, Georgia. He commends to the *Century's* readers the importance of Altizer in forcing the Christian Community to rethink certain fundamentals:

This evaluation he has forced upon us demands a minimum background: the man who attempts to make it must possess a metaphysic, a knowledge of anthropology and comparative religion and their relationship to theology, plus a feeling for history...I suspect Dr. Altizer's critics lack any background in any or all of these disciplines.

English also notes that Altizer is less of an affront to Catholics than to some Protestants because he is aware of the necessity of tradition and recognized "that the great religious problem is that of the transcendence-immanence of God."⁴⁶

That the message and challenge of the "death of God-ers" was not properly understood in either its American context - or in a wider context of Continental theology and philosophy is certainly the impression given by some respondents "all under the age of forty-five." Warren Moulton's dismissal of the "death of God-ers" as too smart, too sophisticated, too cool, too clever is typical: "...we would ask of these men humility rather than resignation, compassion rather than indulgence."⁴⁷ J. Robert Nelson is more circumspect, noting the importance of what is being claimed, linking it to Bonhoeffer, but in the end preferring the humanistic appeal of Hamilton over the philosophical post-theology of Altizer:

Hamilton's appeal to the example of Jesus as the despised and rejected one makes sense, as do all sincere, humanistic commendations of the Good Man of Nazareth. But Altizer's Incarnate Word is, to me at least, a *Logos alogikos*, a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 364, 365.

⁴⁶ Charles English, "Letter," *Century* (1 June 1966), 721.

⁴⁷ W. L. Moulton, "Apocalypse in a Casket?", *Century* (17 November 1965), 1413. Moulton taught at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Kansas. This article was later republished in Ice and Carey ed. *The Death of God Debate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967).

wordless Word, an incarnation without flesh.⁴⁸

Both Hamilton and van Buren, he notes, have turned “by an angle of approximately 180 degrees” from their mentors [Hamilton from Reinhold Niebuhr and Donald Baillie, van Buren from Barth) while Altizer remains a “devoted disciple” of Mircea Eliade. Yet Nelson raises the important question of whether Bonhoeffer, if he were still alive, “would join the death of God club?”⁴⁹ His position is that Bonhoeffer would not- for does “religionless Christianity” necessarily mean “Godless Christianity?”

David Miller seeks to critique (and condemn) Hamilton and Cox as both being “prophets of optimism.” Hamilton, representing “the theological left,” gives “an American version of post-Bultmannian theology”, while Cox, representing “the theological right” writes *The Secular City* “in which the hero seems to be Barth.”⁵⁰ Yet in the end they are both condemned as representing what Miller sees as the general evolution of religious consciousness into “A New Shamanism.”⁵¹ As such their concerns are portrayed as part of a counter-cultural revolution and not as part of a tradition of theological and philosophical enquiry.

Kyle Hadelsen attempts to put the debate in perspective in a lead editorial entitled “Why This Non-God Talk?” Noting that this had become a public event now that the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker* and *Time* had noticed it, he asks why the response had been so much greater outside the divinity schools and seminaries than inside? He calls attention to the fragmentation of theological schools (into “neo-orthodoxy, neo-liberalism, neo-evangelism”⁵²) and points out that this had taken place at a time when the world was being experienced in a new way, and so the “death of God” became an individual response to secularization out of limited experience. For Hadelsen this fragmentation means that those responding to the claims of the “death of God” should seek to unite across this fragmentation in a careful and clear way and begin to engage with the issues raised. His hope is that the debate will soon return to the institutions to be carefully debated and challenged.⁵³

Yet Hadelsen's editorial seems to ignore the record of his magazine. The *Century* did not leave off debate and discussion, but rather continued to promote it, running articles both for and against the issue.

Two differing critiques of the “death of God” appeared at the end of 1965 and the beginning of 1966. The first, by Gabriel Vahanian, is a continuation of

⁴⁸ J.R. Nelson, “Deicide, Theothanasia, or What Do You Mean?” *Century* (17 November 1965), 1415. Nelson was Professor of Systematics at Boston University School of Theology.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1416.

⁵⁰ D.L. Miller, “False Prophets in the Secular City”, *Century* (17 November 1965), 1417. Miller was assistant professor of Religion at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1418.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

his Barthian-derived critique of those who had attempted to remake the death of God into either soteriology or Christosophy. For Vahanian, both these attempts turn Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" into a "Godless Christianity or, more exactly, a non-Christian religion."⁵⁴ The second article, by Harvey Cox, locates the death, not in God, but rather in theology, which had lost its prophetic edge and calling and become more focused on "religion" and "the religious," thus becoming stuck in either the ecclesiastical or existential⁵⁵ issues that had dominated the Nineteenth Century. The alternative, Cox argues, is the recovery of the revolutionary, Jewish Jesus as our theological starting point.⁵⁶ Both Cox and Vahanian were given greater support in the *Century* than the "death of God-ers" [Altizer, Hamilton and van Buren]. Vahanian gained support because he rejected not only what was termed the "immanentist idolatry" of much "death of God" theology but also what was seen as the atheistic legacy of nineteenth century liberal thought⁵⁷. Cox had credence, partially, it appears, because he was a Harvard professor, but more, in the words of Martin E. Marty, because "Cox knows he is a theologian and not a humanist."⁵⁸

The marginal location of many who were writing on and about the "death of God" was noted in the *Century*. J. Phillips remarks that if nothing else "one undoubted achievement of radical theology has been its smoking out of some good, young minds hitherto buried in obscure religion departments south of New York and Chicago and east of California." He points out that while no movement as such existed, there had been a lot of letter writing by young

⁵⁴ Gabriel Vahanian, "Swallowed Up by Godlessness", *Century* (8 December 1965), 1505-1507. Vahanian was associate professor of Religion at Syracuse. This article was later reprinted as Chapter 1, "The Poverty of Theology" in Vahanian's third book *No Other God* (New York: George Braziller, 1966). Although in one sense he had ignited this debate with his book, *The Death of God* (1961), he often seemed to be sidelined from the debate. This was because his involvement in the radical programme of neo-orthodoxy put him at odds with what he termed "either secularism or a watered down Christianity." He claimed that orthodoxy needed to be more radical, first by taking root in the secular world and then by proclaiming the Christian universe as normative. Gabriel Vahanian, "Review of *The Christian Universe* by E. L. Mascall", *Century* (18 January 1967), 86.

⁵⁵ Lloyd Averill asked a similar question as to whether a statement of unbelief is "not so much an intellectual conclusion as it is an existential confession?" Lloyd Averill, "The Dynamics of Unfaith", *Century* (12 January 1966), 43.

⁵⁶ Harvey Cox, "The Place and Purpose of Theology", *Century* (5 January 1966). [The thirteenth in the series "How I Am Making Up My Mind"]. Cox was associate professor of Church and Society at Harvard Divinity School.

⁵⁷ R. Goetz, "Review of *No Other God* by Gabriel Vahanian", *Century* (24 May 1967), 691-2; 694. Goetz was assistant professor in the Department of Religion at Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, Illinois. Robert Kysar, in his defence of a proposed Christian Humanism critiqued Hamilton and van Buren for their similarities to Nineteenth Century liberalism's appeal "to the person and work of the historical Jesus." Conversely, Kysar's proposed Christian Humanism looked not only back to the Jesus of History, but also to a Christ of Faith. However he rejected transcendence, locating the Christian in the tradition and "the Christ idea" encountered in our own existence. Robert Kysar, "Towards a Christian Humanism" *Century* (21 May 1969), 706-708. Kysar was associate professor of Religion at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁵⁸ Martin E. Marty, "Review of *The Secular City Debate*, ed. Daniel Callahan", *Century* (18 January 1967), 85.

theologians who now felt free “to do some work of their own.”⁵⁹ A few years later, John Robinson, who had really ignited the wider perception of a new theological mood, warns that the problem is not that these “death of God” theologians “went too far” but rather “that they were pushed (and almost gleefully allowed themselves to be pushed) into a position of isolation by the conservatives, liberal as well as fundamentalist.”⁶⁰ Already, it seems, the attempt to write out the impact of the “death of God” from mainstream theology and theological history was underway. The battle was now located mostly in the challenges of a radical theology [from Hamilton’s “soft radicals”] to the institutional Church. As Robinson noted:

Certainly, I would now speak of the death and resurrection of the church, rather than simply its reformation and renewal, in a way that I regarded as irresponsible when I first became a bishop in 1959.⁶¹

That the debate was reaching a new level of intensity⁶² is shown in the publication of Altizer and Hamilton’s *Radical Theology and the Death of God*.⁶³ Dedicated to the memory of Paul Tillich, the book is a collection of both new and reprinted essays by the authors over the period 1963-1966. None of the essays had previously appeared in the *Century*, appearing instead in *Christianity and Crisis*, *The Centennial Review*, *The Christian Scholar*, *Journal of Religion*, *Nation* and *Theology Today*. In their preface the authors note the primary location of radical theology within Protestantism and particularly within students and “the younger ranks of pastors and teachers.” Its aim is “in effect, an attempt to set an atheist point of view within the spectrum of Christian possibilities...to strive for a whole new way of theological understanding.” Altizer and Hamilton note radical theology’s links to the death of God in the nineteenth century, the collapse of Christendom and the rise of secular atheism. They also note its debt to Barth and neo-orthodoxy, to Tillich and Bultmann and also, its location in an American context. As such:

It reflects the situation of a Christian Life in a seemingly neutral but almost totally secular culture and society. Hopefully it also reflects the choice of those Christians who have chosen to live in Christ in a world come of age. ⁶⁴

⁵⁹ J. Phillips, “review article”, *Century*, 5 July 1967, p.870.

⁶⁰ J.A.T. Robinson, “Not Radical Enough?” *Century* (12 November 1969), 1447. [First in series “How My Mind Has Changed.”]

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 1449. Robinson, no longer Bishop of Woolwich, was now Dean of Chapel at Trinity College, Cambridge.

⁶² The back page (1176) of the *Century* for 13 September 1967 was a full page advertisement for books on “the death of God furore” published by Westminster Press. Against a background of a fractured cross were advertised *The Death of God Debate* (Ice and Carey), *The Roots of Radical Theology* (J.C. Cooper), *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Altizer), *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Altizer), *The New Theologian and Morality* (H.H. Cooper), *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (A. Richardson), *The Existence of God as Confessed By Faith* (H. Gollwitzer) and, “coming soon,” *New Directions in Theology Today Vol. III-God and Secularity* (J. Macquarrie) and *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing* (N. F.S. Ferre).

⁶³ T.J.J. Altizer and W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and The Death of God* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1966).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, “Preface”.

The review of the book by Frederick Ferre⁶⁵ seeks, as so often occurred, to differentiate between Hamilton and Altizer. Hamilton, Ferre contends, is a seer, more literary than theological, whose vision struggles for substance and connection to life and experience after its initial vividness. Altizer, in contrast, is a theologian who, though guilty of prose that is “needlessly murky”, is struggling and attempting something theological. Ferre, “as a secular philosopher”, finds something worth exploring in radical theology. He believes that Altizer, rather than Hamilton, will produce work of substance. However, Ferre also notes that only a prophet, not a philosopher, can tell if radical theology can grow “with weeding and training,” into a Christian faith adequate for “postmodern life and thought.”⁶⁶ Ferre's linking of radical theology/ “death of God” into postmodern life and thought was an important prophecy of what has occurred in the following thirty years. For it has been the postmodernist as a/theologian, philosopher and cultural critic who has been wrestling with the issues - and possible implications of the “death of God.” Yet the predominance and influence of Continental Europeans (or at least Continental Philosophy) in this pursuit and the fact that postmodernity is itself a debated (or more often rejected) topic within the Anglo-American academy has meant a failure by many within Christianity to attempt to take the starting point offered by Hamilton and Altizer.

In the 1960s the problem was still primarily seen as that of attempting to make and articulate a Christian faith perceived as adequate for a late modern life and thought.⁶⁷ As Altizer stated:

If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century, it is a passage through the death of God, the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.

Altizer, of course, focuses on attempting to express just what incarnation means and how it can be experienced in what he terms Christian Atheism, which has as its central thesis the claim:

...that the Christian, and the Christian alone, can speak of God in our time; but the message that the Christian is now called to proclaim is the gospel, the good news or the glad tidings, of the death of God.⁶⁸

The response in the *Century's* review of Altizer's book is that “his book is important...It should be read with appreciation and scepticism.” The review notes “two fundamental weaknesses:” first, Altizer's failure to demonstrate his claim of the *necessarily* repressive character of a transcendent God; and second his failure to show how its utter transcendence, seen as similar to

⁶⁵ Frederick Ferre, “Review of *Radical Theology and the Death of God* by T.J.J. Altizer and W. Hamilton,” *Century* (11 May 1966), 622-624. Ferre was Associate Professor of Philosophy at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 624.

⁶⁷ T.J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1966), 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

Barth's view of transcendence, is "alien to the empirical and historical consciousness of our time."⁶⁹ For many this was too radical: they preferred a reconstructionist view which argues that perhaps in radical theology God is attempting to speak to a godless world. They felt that the "death of God" could be seen as a challenge to contemporary Christianity to revisit the paradox of the death of God in the context of the incarnation and to find God to and in the context of a godless world.⁷⁰ Yet conversely, the demythologizers and the secular theologians were also criticized for what was claimed to be an uncritical appeasement of "four modern myths": the wicked bourgeoisie, revolution, twentieth century man and the world come of age.⁷¹

The claims of the "death of God" were being read as either too great a concession to contemporary societal mores or, in its Barthian lineage, too alien, as too located in contemporary American society or as, implicitly, "anti-American."

Yet what were the contemporary issues that needed to be dealt with? Warren Ashby had spent two years serving with the American Friends Service Committee "in remote South and South East Asia." On his return, to catch up theologically he read back issues of the *Journal of Religion*, *Commonweal*, the *Century* and "pertinent books." He saw, with the benefit of detachment, that the contemporary theologians were "the pioneers of a promising and unpredictable intellectual era."⁷² He outlines five contemporary issues that impacted upon contemporary theology: a questioning of symbolic meaning and the acceptance of religious pluralism, the loss of Christianity's formative force in society, the generation gap⁷³ and the triumph of technology which erodes a sense of progress and the past.⁷⁴ Ashby carved a middle path between the concession to American society and what was seen as an anti-American ethos. For while American theologians were attempting to locate Christian theology in the "contemporary world" [read America], that contemporary world needs the critique that "European intellectuals have long been asserting: that we live at the end of an era...[where] we face crucial

⁶⁹ S. Keen, "Review article of *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* by T.J.J. Altizer", *Century* (1 June 1966), 715-716. Keen was Associate Professor of Philosophy and Christian Faith at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary.

⁷⁰ M. McDermot Shidler, "God Speaks to a Godless World", *Century* (25 May 1966), 676-678.

⁷¹ W.B. Glover, "Demythologizing the New Theology", *Century* (13 July 1966), 882. Glover was Professor of History at Mercer University, Macon, Georgia.

⁷² Warren Ashby, "Theological Existence Among The Ruins" *Century* (22 March 1967), 368. Ashby was Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

⁷³ As one review stated:

Theology today is an up-tight happening. To groove it is really to blow your mind. But if its "radical" speed is not your bag, if you haven't the time or inclination to explore the whole stack, the result may be a hang up or a bad trip.

Richard E. Wentz, "review article", *Century* (14 February 1968), 202. Wentz was in the division of Student Affairs at Pennsylvania State University.

⁷⁴ Warren Ashby, "Theological Existence Among The Ruins", 368-369.

questions about the quality of human life but are unable to reach clear answers."⁷⁵

One European intellectual who offered a salutary challenge to all perspectives in this debate was Jacques Ellul. His Barthian links placed him in a position similar to Vahanian's - not only challenging those who sought a pietist continuation of the church in culture as a "Christian System" but also challenging those radical theologians seeking a radical conformity to secular culture. Ellul's clear answer is "to structure the church so it can live and speak as an *unassimilated foreign body* in our society."⁷⁶ But his statement on the role of the Christian intellectual as sentinel who foresees and gives warning, but then is silent, prays and repents for all⁷⁷ was strongly out of tune with the mood of radical activism that intellectuals and theologians, both conservative and radical, were embracing in America at that time. Ellul implicitly criticizes the American propensity to state clear answers...

Harvey Cox was perhaps the only major American figure thinking along similar lines when, in an imaginative "Interview with himself," he asked, "Is the Theologian then just a theologically articulate cultural critic?" His reply was, "No. A Theologian is an unapologetically *normative* critic of religion, whether it is in the churches or outside them."⁷⁸

By 1970 the debate on the death of God was, to all intent and purposes, over. Interestingly, a feature of the Jesus-focused evangelical revival that has come to dominate a major part of American Christianity since the 1970s was, in a sentinel mode, foretold by Robert Kysar and intriguingly located in the "Jesuolatry" of Hamilton and van Buren. This is the "veneration of the Jesus figure as a kind of naive substitute for God."⁷⁹ Perhaps this is the great unmentioned, unthought of, unacknowledged secret of the legacy of the "death of God:" that the rise of "Jesuolatry" is a form of idolatrous Christian rejection to the challenges of the "death of God" which takes the god-substitute reductionist ideas of radical theologians, especially Hamilton and van Buren, and recasts them in evangelical, experiential piety. Has the focus of theology since the 1960s been on attempting to articulate the soft radical position that emphasizes the absence of the experience of God in modern society? And have the churches responded by reconfiguring their forms of worship to create a forum and a format in which a collective experience of "God" is found within enclaves (the "Christian community," the Church, the Bible), in which a "personal Jesus," or an "encounter with the Holy Spirit," is

⁷⁵ Ibid, 369.

⁷⁶ Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years", *Century* (18 February 1970), 203. [Fifth in series "How My Mind Has Changed."] Ellul, a French Protestant, was Professor of History of Law and Social History at University of Bordeaux.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 201-202.

⁷⁸ Harvey Cox, "Tired Images Transcended" *Century* (1 April 1970), 384. [Seventh in series "How My Mind Has Changed"].

⁷⁹ Robert Kysar, "Christology without Jesuolatry" *Century* (2 September 1970), 1035.

mediated in opposition, not only to secular society, but also to more traditional, mainstream churches? On the other hand, have liberal Christians in some degree taken up “Jesusolatry” in the form of Jesus the guru, the best man ever, the radical human, the ethical teacher, which secularizes him in a manner similar to the Jesus oft proposed by the Jesus Seminar? Yet both these responses fail to engage with the central, crucial, difficult issue that was raised and too easily dismissed: the experience of the absence of God.

So to re-examine the “death of God” may yet force the death of “Jesusolatry.” Is the time ready for a radical neo-orthodoxy?⁸⁰ God may indeed have died in the *Christian Century*; but perhaps Christ is still awaiting the resurrection...

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⁸⁰ A radical neo-orthodoxy would be one that attempts to consider what neo-orthodoxy means *after* postmodernity, without the reduction to a foundationalist Aquinian position that so often seems implicit in Radical Orthodoxy. Part of the challenge for a radical neo-orthodoxy would be to re-read the “3 B’s,” Barth, Bonhoeffer and Brunner, “against the grain” as a process of deconstruction seeking a post-postmodern reconstruction; that is, to use them as the basis of a “midrashic” commentary in which the Bible is read in conjunction with neo-orthodoxy to create a dialectic articulation as commentary for today. It would also be involved in attempting to think theologically first and foremost— not philosophically and then theologically as is seemingly often the wont of Radical Orthodoxy. It would also take seriously, but critically, the claims and traditions of the Reformed Church. As of yet no such movement exists.