

WHERE IS MODERN THEOLOGY GOING?

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Ours is a generation of gyrating theology that seems to have spun off any sure Word of God. Neo-Protestant religious currents are losing force and nearing an end of their special impact, while classic modernism, though politically a volcano, is theologically now but a bag of wind.

What significant developments define the theology of the recent past, and what can we say about them from the evangelical Protestant point of view?

1. *Reigning neo-Protestant religious theory has collapsed for the third time in the twentieth century.* First, classic modernism broke down; then, neo-orthodoxy; and most recently, existentialism.

Classic modernism was the theology of radical *divine immanence*. Predicated on Hegelian pantheism, it assimilated God to man and nature, and banished miracle and special revelation. Its most influential theologian was Schleiermacher, who eagerly shifted the case for theism from supernatural revelation to religious experience—supposedly as an absolute requirement of the modern mind. But modern thought proved more transitory than the early modernists dreamed.

Neo-orthodoxy was the theology of radical *divine transcendence*. In the context of dialectical theology it reasserted divine initiative, special revelation, and miraculous redemption. Its courageous spokesman was Karl Barth, who later intoned funeral rites for the modernist message in Europe.

Existentialism was the theology of *subjectivity*, heir to the dialectical denial of objective revelation and redemption. Rudolf Bultmann was its champion, insisting that the modern mind demands, not a modernist, not a neo-orthodox, but an existentialist reading of reality. Demythologize the supernatural! Existentialize God's activity! Dehistoricize the kerygma! But Bultmannian scholars soon fell into internal disagreement and were hard pressed by external critics. Like modernism and neo-orthodoxy, existential theology has lost control at the formative frontiers of theology in our day.

2. *The survival span of recent modern alternatives to evangelical Christianity is shrinking.* Anyone who scans the decades of the twentieth century with an eye on the dominant theological traditions will soon note the shortening of intervals between newly emerging neo-Protestant religious theories. It is probably accurate to say that classic modernism

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reigned over the influential formative centers of theological thought from 1900 to 1930, dialectical theology from 1930 to 1950, and existential theology from 1950 to 1960.

Some theologians speak of a "compression of time periods for the development of theological traditions"—from a thousand years, as in medieval times, to as little as a decade in our own day. Such continuing theological reconstruction, some observers would say, is a necessary result of the knowledge-explosion in our time; others even depict all theological formulations as fallible human theories or tentative religious models subject to constant revision.

But surely such endorsement of theological revisionism is not shared by biblically oriented Christians, who insist on a core of revealed truth by which all human traditions must be judged. One may recall the well-worded sign on a country-church bulletin board: "Our God isn't dead—sorry about yours."

European theology is now an open field; none of the many contenders has control. The revolt of Bultmann's disciples, which began in 1954 with Käsemann's rebellious critique, marked the beginning of a decade of unending theological dissent and division. The growing disagreement among post-Bultmannians over the significance of the historical Jesus was only one aspect of the religious ferment. Among those involved in the widening search for a satisfying alternative were the traditional conservatives, who insisted that divine revelation is both intelligible and historical; salvation-history scholars, who asserted that revelation is historical but that we are left to extrapolate its meaning; revitalized Barthians, who supplemented the early Barth with quasi-objective elements in the mood of the revised *Church Dogmatics*; independent thinkers like Thielicke and Stauffer; and, at the frontiers, newer figures such as Pannenberg and Moltmann. But in all this turbulence, it is noteworthy that more radical thinkers like Braun and Mezger, who reduced the reality of God to interhuman relationships and inverted "God is love" into "love is God," offered but one of many alternatives in the pluralistic theological milieu. By contrast, radical secular theology in the United States won wide attention and created a special situation.

3. *The death-of-God theology gained prominence in American religious discussion and was openly welcomed within the ecumenical dialogue...*

The death-of-God writers gained their importance, not through Gabriel Vahanian's assertion of a modern cultural alienation from the Christian heritage whereby God has died existentially, but especially by their affirmation of the literal death of the Deity. The new radicals misappropriated and distorted the *Letters from Prison*, which Bonhoeffer never intended as a prolegomenon to religious positivism. In their common projection of a secular theology that gave centrality to Jesus

in order to displace a supernatural personal God, Altizer insisted on God's ontic death, Van Buren shared his rejection of the realm of divine transcendence, and Hamilton forfeited its significance.

4. *Scholars are increasingly aware of the depth of the current religious crisis. Neo-Protestantism today is readily described as a situation of theological chaos.*

Some relativists speak approvingly of the "pluralistic character" of the present religious scene, as if open-end diversity were preferable to theological consensus. But many interpreters realize that theology is now in a state of confusion, even anarchy; some characterize our era as a theological shambles. Frederick Herzog describes the present situation as one of baffling consternation (*Understanding God*, 1966). He characterizes it by an ancient Greek term revived in the last century to describe the vagaries of primitive religions in the Pacific islands: *aporia* (*a + poros*—"without passage," a state of distressing doubt about what course to take—where to begin, what to say, where to end).

5. *There is growing realization that the force of the biblical view of God was broken through compressed and fragmented presentations that obscured important aspects of the scriptural revelation.*

The present generation was proffered a Twiggy-theology, styled to make one forget that its essential form was little more than a skeleton; a mini-theology that offered high style for the new season but had to run for cover when winter came.

Man's *primal ontological awareness* of religious reality is stressed by some theologians, and in a variety of ways: as precognitive awareness that insistently raises the question of God (Herzog); as precognitive awareness that *is* awareness of God (Tillich); and as precognitive awareness of the mystery of the universe, alongside which God the Mystery assertedly reveals himself only in personal encounter (Hordern).

But others deny any point of contact whatever in man for God's revelation in order to concentrate the case for the reality of God in dialectical confrontation (Barth, Gollwitzer). Still others retain general revelation, while repudiating natural theology (Brunner).

Some revive a species of natural theology (Hartshorne, Cobb).

Then there are those who rely on the new quest for the historical Jesus (Robinson, Michaelson).

Linguistic theologians contend that religious language has functional utility but is not conceptually true. (This semantic obfuscation is in part a reaction against the endless and exasperating neo-Protestant redefinition of who and what God is. If the Christian concept of God must be as radically changed as it is in Whiteheadian, Tillichian, and Bultmannian reconstructions, in order to make it meaningful to modern

man, would it not be more honest simply to assign to language about God a psychological significance only?)

The theology of the recent past has characteristically attempted take-off on too short runways to get airborne. The vain attempt to support the case for theism by a fragmented theology is especially evident in Barth's concentration on divine-human encounter as the locus of revelation, and in Tillich's concentration on God as the immanent Ultimate. To overcome the immanentist loss of God in man and nature, with its notion that the all-inclusive Absolute is *more* than we are, Barth insisted that God confronts men individually as the sovereign *Other*. But his assertion of personal confrontation involved also a denial of the universal dimension of divine revelation in man, nature, and history. Tillich, on the other hand, emphasized the universal dimension of revelation by anchoring the case for theism in everyman's back yard; he denied a supernatural personal God, presumably to protect the universal access to divine revelation through the Ground of all being.

So each formula goes to its own radical extreme to compensate for the compromises of another, while none incorporates in itself the comprehensiveness of the biblical revelation of God. In view of this reduction of the content of theology to isolated and distorted fragments of the scriptural view, the successive alternatives in recent neo-Protestant thought gain the unhappy character of reactions to reactions to reactions. In this connection it is noteworthy to recall how death-of-God theologians like Altizer and Van Buren depend on the theology of individual confrontation for their comprehension of the Christian religion (Van Buren completed his Ph.D. under Barth, and Altizer misunderstands historic Christianity in the neo-orthodox sense of radically transcendent individual confrontation).

6. *A vast number of highly tentative religious writings reject traditional formulations, reflect the modern spirit, refuse to concede that they are anti-Christian, restate the biblical view in novel forms, and insist that the new statements express what the biblical writers really intended to say.* These speculative reconstructions stretch all the way from panentheistic Christification (Teilhard de Chardin) to God-is-dead speculation (Altizer).

Three patterns of speculative religious thought are now emerging as alternatives to historic Christian theism. All of them represent a critical withdrawal from biblical controls. All reject the reality of the supernatural or of a personal God distinct from the universe. All disown miraculous divine revelation and redemption. These three patterns are:

a. *Theories of sociological salvation.* Here politico-economic structures are emphasized as the key to human felicity. Alongside the familiar Marxist version (dialectical materialism), so-called Christian versions have been projected in the context of a secular theology by Cogarten

in Germany, Van Leeuwen in Holland, Ronald Gregor Smith in England, and Harvey Cox and Paul van Buren in the United States.

b. *Theories of cosmological salvation.* These espouse a religious ontology wherein mankind gains redemption by cooperating with divine cosmic forces. Anticipations of such views were projected by Bergson in France and Berdyaev in Russia. Current examples are Teilhard de Chardin's panentheism, Whitehead's pan-psychism, and Tillich's being-itself in which all men participate.

c. *Attempted syntheses of the sacred and secular.* These diverse elements are compounded in a variety of ways by A. M. Ramsey, John A. T. Robinson, and sometimes Harvey Cox.

All three patterns agree in several basic respects in their revolt against biblical theology:

Reality, as they see it, is one-layered; rejected as a divine supernatural-moral realm antecedent to and independent of the world of nature.

Only within the immanent natural process do they accommodate the dimension of transcendence.

Cognitive knowledge of the super-sensory is excluded.

Many theological antitheses are rejected, including the traditional contrasts of Creator-creation, eternity-time, infinite-finite, supernatural-rational, good-evil, church-world, belief-unbelief, salvation-judgment.

Yet for all their common disagreements with biblical theology, the new trends nonetheless also differ significantly from one another.

The latest attempts to synthesize the ebb and flow of the sacred and the secular proceed in contrary directions. Harvey Cox works Teilhard de Chardin in a secular direction and Bishop Robinson works secular theology in Teilhard's panentheistic direction; meanwhile A. M. Ramsey's correlation (*The Sacred and the Secular*) is more mediating.

Cox locates the "transcendent" (God's special activity) at revolutionary frontiers of social change and regards centrality for I-Thou personal relations as a threat to the fundamental importance of justice, which is no respecter of persons. But Robinson considers the personal as the decisive category for interpreting reality. Here, again, antithetical views have predictably emerged from an earlier dilution of justice to love.

Noteworthy is the fact that current expositions increasingly shroud the personal dimension in ambiguity. Neo-orthodoxy had elevated the I-Thou encounter to decisive centrality, correlating this emphasis with the supernatural revelation of a personal God wholly other than man and nature. Existentialism diluted and restated this relationship in terms of transcendent personal encounter. But recent mediating writers weaken it still further by discarding the reality of a personal God and

the emphasis on revelational confrontation. Teilhard, Whitehead, and Robinson, rejecting transcendent personal individual revelation, speak of Divine-human relations in mystical and experiential terms only, and see the whole of reality as one field in which the All and the personal constitute a single cosmic movement toward interpersonalization in love.

The theological consequences of this surrender of biblical terrain are grave. In at least four respects the new views signal a strategic loss of Christian perspective:

a. The loss of God as *other* (and revival of a view of God as merely *more* than we are)—hence the forfeiture of an independent Creator of the universe who is antecedent to it and sovereign over it.

b. The loss of God's special once-for-all manifestation in revelation and incarnation. The new Christology discards the doctrine of the two distinct natures in Jesus of Nazareth.

c. The loss of an absolute distinction between good and evil. If, as secular theologians assert, "God is where the action is," must we not look for a revelation of God in Hitler as well as in Jesus? And does any reason then remain for preferring peace to social revolution? What authentically evangelical interpretation can possibly be placed on Bishop Robinson's emphases that "God is in everything and everything in God—literally everything . . . evil as well as good" (*Exploration into God*, 1967, p. 92) and that "no aspect of history, however resistant to personal categories, is not ultimately to be seen in terms of spirit, freedom and love" (p. 102)? Does this not undermine a lively sense of moral conscience in the presence of evil—and quite understandably breed a "new morality"? In the name of a Christian view of God are we to expect the six million Jews who died in Hitler's Germany to discern God's spirit and love in Nazi bestiality? Could such speculation ever have evoked the indignation that shaped the Barmen Confession over against Nazi tyranny?

d. The loss of a final judgment and separation of the righteous from the wicked.

In short, the emergence of the frontier tendencies signals the collapse of the neo-orthodox attack on modernism and the reappearance of a pre-Barthian theological mood. The influence of Schleiermacher is once again registering its force. Defection to pre-Barthian modernism is attested by several features of the current trend:

Its vague concept of divine personality, not as wholly *other* personal Creator and Redeemer of man and the world, but as a loosely defined quality structuring the whole of reality.

Its evasion of a metaphysical objectification of the God-idea and confinement of the content of religious affirmations to statements about God-in-relation to us. Here one finds a revival of emphases in Kant

and Schleiermacher. God becomes a postulate demanded by man's moral nature, but the reality of God is asserted without the existence of God as an objectively metaphysical being. The mood is anticipated in Kant's *Opus Postumum*: "The concept of God is a concept of a subject outside me *who imposes obligations* on me. . . . This Imperious Being is not outside man in the sense of a substance different from man. . . . The All, the universe of things, contains God and the world. . . ."

Its shift of emphasis away from divine initiative to human exploration in the theological arena. This trend so adjusts Christianity to one segment of the contemporary mind by removing the reality of revelation and by conforming theology to speculation that it makes revealed religion superfluous. It rejects the religion of the Bible as a form of mental bondage to the culture of the past, while enslaving itself to modern prejudices as a true mirror of the Divine.

The new theories, in short, sacrifice what biblical theism preserves: an authentic view of a supernatural, personal God and of his relations to man and the world—the living, sovereign Creator and Preserver of men and things and moral Judge of the universe, who became incarnate in Christ to offer redemption to a fallen race.

7. *The case for theism is now "up for grabs"; issues are pressing to the fore that reach back through the long history of philosophy and theology and demand a comprehensive depth-investigation of theological concerns.* Disciplined students are becoming impatient with short-shrift, emaciated approaches promoted out of all proportion by denominational publishing houses, and advanced in ecumenical discussions that are shaped to preserve a certain "theological mix" in dialogue but that routinely underrepresent the existing support for historic Christian theism. The proliferation of subjectivistic theories about God has lost its excitement and is becoming wearying; scheme after scheme now has only a half-day popularity or a one-campus visibility.

In any generation, the truly influential theologians are not the clever itinerants who pick and choose which issue to attack and which to avoid but those who spell out their views comprehensively and systematically in a classroom context, and in relation to the history of ideas (e.g., Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Whitehead, Tillich, Teilhard; among evangelicals, Machen, Berkouwer, Clark, Dooyeweerd, Van Til, Carnell).

The death-of-God theology is increasingly seen not as merely a radical deviation, nor as simply a malignant surface growth, but as a conjectural development rooted in the basic concessions of recent theological speculations and rising from them as a matter of logical inescapability. The unifying negation in the entire tradition connecting Ritschl-Barth-Bultmann-Altizer and the linguistic theologians was supplied by Kant: Man can have no cognitive knowledge of the supernatural. The predictable result is metaphysical agnosticism. Whoever overturns that premise (and neither Isaiah nor Paul would have changed his mind about the

truth of God had he read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*) strikes a knock-out blow against the basic bias in contemporary theology.

There is now a growing demand for a comprehensive investigation of theological concerns in which the prejudices of our present age are compared and contrasted with those of earlier ages, and assessed anew in the context of the biblical exposition of God.

8. *The sacred religious motifs to which Judeo-Christian revelation gave a decisive meaning are now used in so many senses by theologians and clergymen that institutional Christianity has become almost a modern Tower of Babel.* The term "God" is so diversely employed that *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) declares it "very difficult—perhaps impossible—to give a definition... that will cover all usages" (III, 344).

Gerhard Ebeling says we are dying of "language poisoning"; I prefer to say, of Word-distortion.

Consider the lessons so clearly taught by the drift of twentieth-century religious thought:

The disjunction of the self-revealing God from the word of prophets and apostles as the Word of God leads to the loss of the self-revealing God. Barth's bold effort to revive a theology of the Word of God faltered when he refused to identify the scriptural word with God's Word.

The dialectical dogma that divine revelation is never *objectively* given (in human concepts and words and in historical events) leads to the subversion of divine revelation into human self-understanding. Bultmann not only subverted dialectical divine disclosure into existential self-understanding but lost the incarnate Word as well.

The next move was inevitable—either the *wordless God* (the "silent" God, the "hidden" God) or the *"Word" without God* (secular Christianity).

Already the "death-of-God" theology as an option has exhausted itself and is ready for burial except by the faddists. Its proponents are divided internally: Vahanian's emphasis that God is existentially dead for modern man was misappropriated by some who argue for God's ontic death; Altizer's position is an embarrassment to other death-of-God theologians because it lacks significant epistemological underpinning. According to Van Buren, the empirical scientific method "excludes" miracle and the supernatural; yet he inconsistently condemns the unique values associated with Jesus to the same guillotine. The truth is that the scientific method is an impotent arbiter of these concerns. Scientists who must live daily with the scientific method are as "modern" as Altizer, Hamilton, and Van Buren, yet many recognize the limits of their method and confess that it cannot settle the issue of the reality of the supernatural.

But that is not yet the terminal stage of a sick theology. Con-

temporary theology cannot stop with God-is-dead bulletins, for that headline has already exhausted all possible reader interest. What more can one say about God, once he has said that God is dead? People don't care to linger long around a corpse. Books sales are falling off, and publishers are looking for new trends on which to capitalize.

9. *"The resurrection of theism" after the death of God can be a live option if the evangelical vanguard becomes theologically engaged at the frontiers of modern doubt.*

The time is ripe to recanvass evangelical rational theism with its emphasis on the revelation and manifestation of the Logos as the critical center of theological inquiry. A new prospect for systematic theology is at hand, and a growing demand exists for a comprehensive world-view that does full justice to the real world of truth and life and experience in which man must make his decisions.

In the Western world today only three major options survive. Sooner or later one of these will carry off the spiritual fortunes of the twentieth-century world. Each of these views, significantly, holds that man can know the ultimately real world. But each differs from the others in important ways about ultimate reality.

One view is Communism, which dismisses the supernatural as a myth.

The other views, to which neo-Protestant agnosticism has forfeited the great modern debate over the faith of the Bible, are Roman Catholicism and evangelical Christianity. The really live option, in my opinion, is evangelical rational theism, a theology centered in the incarnation and inscriptionation of the Word (a theology not of the distorted Word but of the disclosed Word). This, I feel, offers the one real possibility of filling the theological vacuum today.

Evangelical Christianity emphasizes:

The universal as well as once-for-all dimension of Divine disclosure.

Authentic ontological knowledge of God.

The intelligible and verbal character of God's revelation.

The universal validity of religious truth.

10. *The problem of God is the critical problem of the next decade (1968-1978), and is the fundamental issue for all mankind.* For Americans, the problem of God is more decisive for human life, liberty and happiness than the issues of the American Revolution two centuries ago.

For Protestants, the problem of God is more decisive than the issues of the Protestant Reformation four and a half centuries ago. For Christians the problem of God is as decisive as the confrontation by Christ's disciples of the polytheistic Greco-Roman culture of their day, and of their own preparatory Hebrew heritage. For modern man come of age,

the problem of God is no less decisive than was that ancient conflict between man's trust in the gods of pagan superstition and trust in the revelation of the sovereign Creator-Redeemer God. The problem of God now stands before us as the critical problem of the next decade, and it is the fundamental issue for all mankind. □