

NOTES

SOME RECENT DEATH-OF-GOD LITERATURE

Tossed by the tides of rapid change, theology, as William Hamilton remarks in the first article of *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, is seeking new modes of communication. What has hitherto been a slow-moving discipline, purveyed by hardcover tomes and solid quarterlies, is making increased use of paperbacks, weeklies, private letters, and oral media. But as the paperbacks and collected articles accumulate, the more deliberate quarterlies may be expected to contribute some assessment of the progress achieved. This report will deal with seven recent books which have been submitted for review.¹ It is indicative that all of them are either brief paperbacks or collections of previously published articles.

We may begin with two programmatic presentations of the death-of-God theology by two of its most publicized heralds, William Hamilton and Thomas J. J. Altizer. Their joint volume, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, is a collection of essays reprinted from a wide variety of periodicals.

Among Hamilton's contributions to this collection, the survey article, "The Death of God Theologies Today," deserves special mention as a helpful introduction to the movement. In general, Hamilton's pieces amount to little more than a travelogue of his own spiritual wanderings in the five years since the appearance of his *The New Essence of Christianity* (1961). In that book he accepted the "death of God" in the sense that contemporary man was oppressed by a feeling of God's absence and of the difficulty of speaking about Him, but not in the sense that God did not exist or was utterly beyond our knowledge. In the newer essays here collected Hamilton vacillates between a mood of lonely, trustful waiting for the absent God and a conviction that God has gone forever and that His absence is a blessed

¹ RADICAL THEOLOGY AND THE DEATH OF GOD. By Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966. Pp. xiii + 202. \$1.85.

THE GOSPEL OF CHRISTIAN ATHEISM. By Thomas J. J. Altizer. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966. Pp. 157. \$1.75.

NO OTHER GOD. By Gabriel Vahanian. New York: Braziller, 1966. Pp. xii + 114. \$4.00.

REVOLT AGAINST HEAVEN: AN ENQUIRY INTO ANTI-SUPERNATURALISM. By Kenneth Hamilton. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965. Pp. 193. \$2.45.

GOD IS DEAD: THE ANATOMY OF A SLOGAN. By Kenneth Hamilton. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1966. Pp. 86. \$1.25.

THE DEATH OF GOD CONTROVERSY. By Thomas W. Ogletree. Nashville: Abingdon, 1966. Pp. 127. \$1.45.

THE NEW THEOLOGIAN. By Ved Mehta. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. Pp. 217. \$5.95.

liberation. He does not make it clear what God formerly was or in what sense He has really died. These essays are notably lacking in sustained argument; they appeal to no recognized theological or philosophical criteria. Instead, Hamilton is content to register his own moods and those which he attributes to contemporary America, as reflected in novels, plays, and films. While the student of culture may well contest some of Hamilton's generalizations, the theologian finds little material here which falls within his proper competence. One can only sympathize with a Christian who is so evidently and frankly perplexed by the questions what has happened to God, whether He may be expected to reappear, and whether His absence should be cause for grief or celebration.

Altizer shares almost nothing with his coauthor beyond a verbal acceptance of the formula "God is dead." While Hamilton is tentative and uncertain, and leaves the reader—at least this reader—limp and depressed, Altizer is confident and bracing. His articles in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* overlap to a great extent with *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, which will be examined next in order. But the shorter essays in the present volume are valuable for their fuller discussion of other theologians and theological movements. Altizer is critical of Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich on the ground that they were not sufficiently dialectical and therefore failed to come to terms with the radical immanentism characteristic of contemporary man. His observations on Teilhard de Chardin will be of special interest to Catholic readers. While saluting Teilhard for having engaged in a real encounter with the world, Altizer finds that "virtually the whole body of Christian belief either disappears or is transformed in Teilhard's evolutionary vision of the cosmos," and that the prayer and meditation of Teilhard were necessarily directed to a divine "center" which has no existence apart from the movement of the cosmos itself (p. 128). Convinced Teilhardians will feel, on the contrary, that their master's success in reconciling an evolutionary world view with Christian orthodoxy proves that many of Altizer's best insights can be incorporated in an orthodox theological scheme.

Altizer's *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* presents a general view of world process heavily dependent on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Spirit alone, according to Altizer, is ultimately real, but it exists "for itself" only when it negates itself and becomes its own other. This passage from essence to existence, from primordial to actual being, is a "death" of God in His divine form, but not a simple annihilation. In fact, Altizer holds, "It is crucial to maintain that God remains God or the divine process remains itself even while in a state of self-estrangement" (p. 88). The divine self-

alienation merely puts an end to the God "who remains distinct and self-enclosed in his own primordial Being" (p. 89).

The Incarnation of the Word in Christ brings in a new era, for it effects "the absolute negation of the primordial or essential being of God" (p. 69). The kenosis, as Altizer conceives it, is not simply the action whereby omnipotence assumes human weakness as an additional form; it is a real movement in which God Himself abandons His transcendent mode of being. The radical Christian can therefore say with Blake, "God is Jesus" (p. 44). In this perspective the Crucifixion appears as the direct completion of the Incarnation; when Jesus dies on the cross, God Himself dies.

But this is not the end. Thanks to the Crucifixion, the true Jesus "has passed through his death from a particular to a universal form, and continues to be present in a forward-moving and transfiguring Word" (p. 56). To accept a totally incarnate Christ, therefore, means to open oneself to radically new manifestations in the present and future which may negate all previous epiphanies of the divine (p. 138). The radical Christian, far from clinging to a past which is canonized as sacred, must plunge into the actual present and immerse himself in the profane. As Nietzsche would have it, "Being begins in every Now" (p. 154).

This analysis of the self-emptying of the divine Spirit, as set forth in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, is supplemented by the eschatological stress found in several of Altizer's essays in *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Here he makes it clear that the present phase is merely the negative moment of the dialectic. The process points forward to a final synthesis in which God will be united with man as "Humanity Divine" (Blake) in a renewed cosmos. By accepting the radical darkness of the profane, the Christian expresses his faith that "Christ has overcome darkness, that God will be all in all" (*Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 21).

Altizer's positive presentation of radical Christianity is accompanied by a vigorous protest against traditional orthodoxy. In the footsteps of Hegel and Nietzsche, he maintains in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* that man's religious instinct has projected the illusion of an alien, abstract deity (p. 45). Orthodox Christianity, in a reactionary reversal of the Spirit's movement into history, carried this tendency to the maximum, "confronting a broken humanity with a wholly other God who demands a total submission to his numinous and judgmental power" (*ibid.*). But the contemporary consciousness finds this projection no longer credible. All about us Altizer sees evidences of the decomposition of this solitary, estranged God. The Christian today, he concludes, has no alternative but to bet on a totally incarnate Christ "fully present in the actuality of the present moment" (p. 155).

At first sight Altizer, with his prophetic dialectical mysticism, appears to live in a completely different universe than his fellow death-of-God theologians van Buren and Hamilton. But all of them are motivated by certain common concerns which they share with other radical theologians of our day. They emphatically desire to be fully contemporary men, faithful to the present and critical of the past, faithful to their personal insights and critical of institutional loyalties, including loyalty to the organized Church. They are in rebellion against an ethic of law and prohibitions, ritualism and taboos, anxious to promote responsible freedom, convinced of the dignity of man's secular calling. Distrustful of religious sentiment and of abstract metaphysical thinking as guides to truth, they are equally removed from scientific positivism or crude materialism. All of them are keenly aware of the demands of authentic subjectivity and sensitive to the power of poetry.

Altizer's own system is highly personal and will scarcely win acceptance as a whole, except perhaps on the part of a small band of convinced Hegelians. He writes in an exuberant, undisciplined style, subjecting himself to no recognized norms or methodology. He merely asserts, without pausing to demonstrate his points or answer even the most obvious objections. His picture of traditional theism with its repressive deity is certainly a caricature, as is his portrait of the Church as a grasping imperialistic power. But the fact that he can paint such pictures with a certain prima-facie plausibility should itself give food for reflection. Have we Christians made it quite clear that we really believe in a God who is Love and belong to a servant Church?

For all his antipathy toward traditional Christianity, Altizer is perhaps closer to it than he overtly admits. He borrows from this source, at least by way of Hegel, most of his key terms and concepts: Word, Spirit, flesh, fall, incarnation, kenosis, eschatology, etc. Most importantly, the historical Christian message furnishes him with the leitmotiv of his entire system—that of self-sacrificing, incarnate Love. A deeper meditation on the best traditions of the past and a wider appreciation of the evolutionary currents within contemporary theism might enable Altizer to strengthen his ties with the mainstream of Christian thought and to correct the one-sidedness of his present views. His work is valuable because, in spite of his lack of equilibrium, he develops a theology which takes God's loving self-involvement in history with the utmost seriousness.

Gabriel Vahanian, who published in 1961 a book entitled *The Death of God*, has sometimes been reckoned among the "God is dead" theologians. But in his new collection of theological essays, *No Other God*, he clearly reaffirms his stand that while the death of God is an indubitable fact of our

cultural history, it should not be erected into an article of faith. To make it normative for faith, as the Christian atheists do, is to make an absolute out of human culture, and thus to fall into a new idolatry. In the name of Christian iconoclasm, Vahanian sets himself against secularism, whether religious or irreligious. He does not, however, propose to isolate the Church from the world in some supposedly sacred sphere—a tactic which would irresponsibly abandon the world to its demonic secularism. On the contrary, he practically merges the Church into the world, leaving little room for any doctrinal or cultic activity on the part of the Church as such. But his treatment of these points is very incomplete and at times, to this reader, unclear. Certain stylistic obscurities, added to the fact that the articles in this collection do not coalesce into any real unity, make it difficult to distil from this work the author's full mind on the complex questions he raises.

Kenneth Hamilton in his two recent paperbacks provides a highly schematic but incisive account of the theological ancestry of contemporary Protestant radicalism. Writing from the standpoint of a conservative evangelical who admires both Barth and Bonhoeffer, he champions a frankly supernaturalistic view of God's transcendence.

The first of these books, *Revolt against Heaven*, gives a conspectus of the varieties of antisupernaturalism in Protestant theology since Schleiermacher, who is portrayed as the evil genius behind liberalism and neo-liberalism. Hamilton argues that the whole tendency of this theology has been to reduce God to an immanent force within the universe, whether in the depths or at the summit. In place of this earth-bound deity, Hamilton opts for the God who exists autonomously and manifests Himself at His own good pleasure. In the theologies of immanence, Hamilton maintains, Jesus is presented as the archetypal human being, and history as the progressive self-manifestation of the Spirit within nature. Like Barth and others, Hamilton holds that Bultmann's view of redemption as self-understanding makes it impossible to defend, as Bultmann would wish to do, the indispensability of Christian revelation. He is likewise critical of J. A. T. Robinson's efforts to make teammates out of Bonhoeffer (a supernaturalist) and Tillich (an immanentist). Van Buren too, he maintains, is unfaithful to Bonhoeffer and in the end falls back into the positions of the liberal reductionist school which Bonhoeffer execrated. These criticisms of recent liberal and radical theology are not new, but they are keenly stated and deserve serious consideration.

The main weakness of Kenneth Hamilton's protest is its excessively negative and polemical character. He fails to set forth any clear positive view of what revelation is, how it comes to man, and how it is recognized. In order to vindicate the supernatural, he feels obliged to repudiate every

effort to gain natural or rational knowledge of God. Rejecting all links between reason and faith, between the quest for meaning and the hearing of revelation, he confronts the reader with very harsh alternatives. He declares, for example, that the neo-liberals, even when they admit God's word, "do not regard it as absolutely supernatural—that which 'comes down' from heaven—but merely as the unprecedented, or a leap forward in the progressive manifestation of Spirit within Nature" (p. 110). But in order to affirm that the word "comes down," is there any need to deny—as Hamilton would seem to do—that it is also an unprecedented forward leap? Is there no room for the concern of a Teilhard de Chardin to synthesize the Upward and the Forward, the *En-Haut* and the *En-Avant*? So too, one wonders why Hamilton has to find a "complete contrast" between "theological writings which take their stand on a theory of meaning, on the one hand, and those acknowledging supernatural revelation, on the other" (p. 183). This book does nothing to alleviate the tension. It apparently confronts the reader with a choice between meaning and supernatural revelation. Although he mentions Bonhoeffer's objections against Barth's "revelational positivism," Hamilton does not seem to protect himself against the same charge.

Kenneth Hamilton's other paperback, *God Is Dead*, is an "interim report" on the new Christian atheism. Intended partly as a continuation of the survey of antisupernaturalism in the book just discussed, this brochure retraces some of the same ground. The critique of Tillich, Robinson, and van Buren is much the same, as is the insistence on the Barthian residue in Bonhoeffer. Hamilton's presentation of the other radical theologians is less satisfactory. Of William Hamilton he has little to say, perhaps because his namesake's theological positions are so ill defined. His sketch of Altizer is more confusing than the subject himself demands, and on some points misleading. Altizer, in his opinion, denies that Jesus has come in the flesh (p. 83) and regards the present era as post-Christian (p. 64). But in fact, Altizer builds his whole system on the real passage of the Word into the flesh of Jesus and considers it blasphemous to assert that ours is a post-Christian era (cf. *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, pp. 136 f.). Hamilton, moreover, accuses Altizer of Gnosticism without taking cognizance of Altizer's own fulminations against the same heresy.

The effort at the close of the book to answer the death-of-God theologians seems unnecessarily weak. A few quotations from Martin Buber and Michael Novak can scarcely do the job. Hamilton ends on a note of warning that the new radicalism is likely to fall back into the old liberalism. While this may be true, the fear of such an eventuality will scarcely prevent its occurrence

unless theologians can propose a more convincing alternative than Hamilton does in either of these books.

A far more satisfying treatment of the problem, less polemical but at the same time more devastating, is Ogletree's *The Death of God Controversy*. In successive chapters devoted to Hamilton, van Buren, and Altizer, this little paperback provides a clear and sympathetic exposition of their respective views, followed by a moderate but firm critique. In treating of Hamilton's writings, Ogletree points out that their fragmentary and autobiographical character to some extent shields them from theological criticism; but Hamilton is deficient in failing to give a theological justification for the unconditional loyalty which he professes toward Jesus. In response to van Buren, Ogletree questions the adequacy of his disjunction between "cognitive" statements—those verifiable by public and objective examination of the empirical data—and "noncognitive" statements—those which have meaning only in reference to the kinds of behavior they imply. Such a dichotomy, Ogletree observes, is by no means supported by Wittgenstein, to whom van Buren appeals. More basically, it arbitrarily rules out in advance the very possibility of using the term "God" to say something about the ultimate character of reality. Altizer, whose theology Ogletree presents in a generally favorable light, is likewise charged with various shortcomings: notably, his unwillingness to treat the past as anything but an enemy, his failure to develop the notion of grace which his system calls for, and his quiescent notion of transcendence, which owes more to Oriental mysticism than to traditional Christianity. At the heart of Altizer's own system Ogletree discerns an unacknowledged preoccupation with transcendence which brings Altizer closer to the theological tradition than his own statements on the matter would lead one to suspect. All in all, this luminous and persuasive little guide to the death-of-God theologians will provide many students with just the book they need.

The last item in the present roundup, Ved Mehta's *The New Theologian*, reproduces, with some altogether minor changes, his famous *New Yorker* articles by the same title. A landmark of theological journalism, this survey conveys in vivid and interesting prose both the views and the personalities of those working at the distant outposts of theological exploration. In his chatty style Mehta shows up the human side of the theologians and in so doing gives an admirable introduction to their thought. The interviews—mostly in the form of direct quotations—bring into clear relief the central intentions of some of the most abstruse contemporary thinkers. Although he reports with great objectivity, Mehta allows it to appear that the logician in

him is put off by the mystical propensities of Tillich and Ian Ramsey. He seems distressed by the fuzzy comprehensiveness of the Bishop of Woolwich and uneasy at what he regards as van Buren's philosophical naïveté. The interviews with Michael Ramsey and some of the Cambridge theologians, showing up the idiosyncracies of their subjects, lend humor to the book. Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann appear as fragile old gentlemen sustained by loving and attentive wives. Bonhoeffer, the principal subject of the last chapter, is seen through long quotations from the Prison Letters and the fond recollections of the modest and amiable Pastor Bethge. Although this book is somewhat disorderly and ill proportioned, Mehta succeeds in staging a successful all-star show which exhibits both the confusions in today's radical theology and the earnest dedication of its foremost practitioners. In some future edition this work might advantageously be illustrated with photographs of the principal protagonists.

It is scarcely surprising that none of the authors here reviewed and none of Ved Mehta's witnesses are Catholics. The new radical theology, culminating in the death-of-God movement, is the outcome of developments which have been occurring within Protestantism for the past century. But in the present ecumenical climate it is neither possible nor desirable for Catholic theology to seek to isolate itself from such trends. Whatever the shortcomings of the death-of-God theologies, they are a symptom and a challenge which cannot be ignored. Vatican II, especially in the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, calls for a deeper theological involvement with the secular concerns of contemporary man; and it is precisely from such an involvement that the new radical theology has sprung. Within the Catholic Church we are beginning to hear voices—I am thinking especially of some of the younger lay theologians this side of the Atlantic—that are addressing themselves very forthrightly to the same concerns. Catholics as well as Protestants must face the task of bridging the gap between a religion which is churchly and archaic, on the one hand, and a pattern of life which is secular and contemporary, on the other. This task will call for a searching reappraisal of many conventional institutions and traditional ways of speaking. Some of the superstructures of medieval and baroque Catholicism will have to be dismantled. But as a result it may be hoped that our faith will be brought into closer relationship to our experience of life. Only by taking this risk can we hope to find God's presence in our own history and to speak a liberating message to the bewildered men of our day. The radical theologians, even if their systems conserve all too little of the ancient Christian patrimony, are to be praised for their courage in facing the issues.