

CHANGING TRENDS IN RADICAL THEOLOGY: COUNTERATTACK ON THE NEW POLYTHEISM

To read less of the great unbelievers—Nietzsche, Marx, Freud—and to return to Elijah (against the prophets of Baal), Origen (against Celsus), and Athanasius (against Arius) may not be the most expected proposal to come from William Hamilton, but it does so come. The suggestion occurs in Hamilton's paper ("No Place to Go: Neither Up, Nor Out, Nor In," adapted from a book soon to be published) prepared for the Caucus of Radical Theologians, an informal nonorganization having its third annual gathering during the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, October 31, 1971. The theme of the caucus was the current "religious revolution," and Hamilton's paper, along with that of Thomas J. J. Altizer, launched a sharp counterattack on what was called the "new religiousness" or "new polytheism," meaning the recent attempts to identify various aspects of man's experience and his world, ranging from play, wonder, and "nature" to drug-induced mysticism and the occult, as *sacred* in quality or significance.

On an ideological level, this quasi-biblical and orthodox counterattack marks a clear division within the radical movement and an ironical fulfillment to the anticipation about the "next phase" of the death-of-God theologians. The distinction between the "secular" or "monotheistic" death-of-God radicals and the "religious" or "polytheistic" radicals is not wholly new, of course, since the differences of viewpoint have been present all along, and their differences are not to be taken as a split of the caucus. Discussion was cordial and agreement was reached to meet again next fall, and in any case the caucus is far too informal a gathering to be capable of an organizational split; yet the caucus and its papers brought into focus the fundamental conflict within the radicals in a striking way.

Three quarters of an hour from the end of an all-day caucus, Altizer brought the discussion around to the focus of his and Hamilton's papers by asking Hamilton (and agreeing under prompting that the question applied equally to himself) if Hamilton's refusal to go along with the new polytheism might not constitute a betrayal of the radical movement. Hamilton answered that it was possible, but that he was surer of his fear of the normlessness of the new consciousness than he was of his commitment to the radical movement—which prompted Altizer's further question as to whether both of them might no longer be part of the radical movement. The question reflected the extent to which a day's discussion had ignored the thrust of their twin challenge and

focused on themes more representative of the religious radicals, and it elicited Richard Rubenstein's suggestion that the three of them were too "Establishment" (with easy access to publishers, etc.) to be radical; but fundamentally the question concerned Hamilton's prior remark about the totally different relation to Christianity on the part of themselves and some of the "younger" radicals. Hamilton and Altizer are, as they have claimed, "Christian" atheists (and a parallel point can be made about Rubenstein). They are secularized "Christian" theologians, operating within the conceptual world of historic Christian theology and the philosophy of modern Western "Christendom," and they still consider Jesus of Nazareth, however interpreted, as a norm to which their theology must be oriented. The younger radicals, raised on the theology of the death of God, may be genuinely post-Christian (and postmodern), never having had, in maturity at least, any strong orientation to a Christian commitment or a Christian theological methodology. Presumably Hamilton meant that the younger radicals, although they may be genuinely "religious," possibly even in some cases "supernaturally" so, give no necessary priority to Christian symbols as representatives of the mysteries of which they speak. There is a great deal of truth in this observation, and it compounds the irony of Hamilton's and Altizer's intended conceptual alliance with Christian tradition that they are unlikely to be welcomed as warmly as the religious radicals whose "symbolic consciousness" might indeed be only the Trojan horse with which they enter the theological citadel.

I

For Hamilton and the "polytheistic" radicals alike, it was the death of God, i.e., their experience of loss of faith in the transcendent and personal father-God of Jewish-Christian tradition, which made possible the return of the "gods." Without God to exercise his iconoclastic function of desacralizing the world, a multitude of elements of nature and experience are quickly redivinized. God's iconoclastic function Hamilton sees man as having now to do himself, yet Hamilton remains, he says, a "monotheist." He means, presumably, that the God who has died remains the only conceivable (although still not actual or existing) one worthy of man's faith and devotion. Sacral qualities *may not* be attributed to anything immanent, being appropriate only to the absolutely transcendent reality to which they *cannot* be attributed because the category is null.

Whether the "theism" in the new polytheisms is to be taken any more literally than the "theism" in Hamilton's monotheism surprisingly does not much matter. Hamilton is disturbed by "symbolic realists" (Robert

Bellah) of all types, even where (as with David Miller) the dimensions or mysteries of life celebrated in "ludic consciousness" (the theology of play), in wonder, in Dionysian ecstasy, are clearly not smokescreens for a divine being(s) still lurking in the theologian's yearning, as well as by those for whom such symbolism and such mystery clearly is a way of keeping alive the God of the tradition (Peter Berger) and those for whom this issue is not absolutely clear (Harvey Cox). Symbolic consciousness itself is the problem; for it makes men slaves of myths which attribute more significance to movements (perhaps "black messiahs" or Consciousness III?) or objects than they can bear, and it is to resist symbolic consciousness that Hamilton calls on the already mentioned precedents of Elijah, Origen, and Athanasius. Appropriately, Hamilton's model of such resistance is the bitterly iconoclastic recent music of John Lennon, and his paradigm of symbolic consciousness is Melville's Captain Ahab, whose self-destructive insanity consists in seeing a physical object (the whale) as representative of "another" reality.

There is irony in, but there are also understandable grounds for, Hamilton's finding himself ideologically allied with the biblical tradition he has left while being personally and "organizationally" identified with the people of the radical movement he more than anyone else has brought into being. What is really at stake for Hamilton is not literally theism, whether atheism or monotheism or polytheism. At root he is dismayed at the so-called consciousness revolution, which he justifiably takes as being essentially "religious" in quality. What repels Hamilton in the "new polytheism" is its repudiation of the traditional consciousness of Western civilization. Hamilton's fundamental loyalty is to the historical, pragmatic, autonomous mode of consciousness "come of age" in modern scientific culture, a consciousness perfectly expressed in his approving story of the night his son cut short his awe-tinged astronomy observations with the remark "Which ones did we put up there?" Hamilton's derivative alliance with historic monotheism assumes the validity of the common contention that Western secular consciousness is at least partially rooted in the thought world of historic monotheism. Western consciousness presupposes biblical faith's desacralization of nature and its emphasis on history, meaning goal-directed human activity, as the sphere of human fulfillment.

Specifically, Hamilton is alarmed at the repudiation of work, self, and the significance of time in the new consciousness. Work as the primary or at least as an indispensable mode of man's relation to his world is under attack by a passive mode of consciousness exalting play and receptivity, not just in terms of redressing an imbalance (as the theology of play intends) but as a general ideal. The attack on the self,

the separate ego, takes the form of submersion into a group identity (the new left) or a "cosmic" consciousness (drug mysticism), a phenomenon irreconcilably different from the dialectical tension of the gospel saying that "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39).

Perhaps most serious to Hamilton is the new consciousness' loss of a sense of a significant past and of a future of true potentiality. Without memory, without historical identity, without guilt and equally without hope, without responsibility to the future, the new consciousness has nothing to experience but the joy or terror of the present, abandoning the self to the unstructured intensity of the senses or the thinly disguised despair of apocalyptic politics. Historic Christian monotheism in its exclusivist aspect rejected the divinization of anything in man or nature, and in its incarnational faith insisted that the fully human life of Jesus was the actual presence of transcendence under the conditions of immanence (not just "giving the appearance of immanence" as in pagan theophanies), thus giving history significance as the bearer of ultimate meaning. A Christian death-of-God theology would have continually to return to Jesus as the paradigm of ultimacy conceived historically and immanently.

Hamilton's stress on the relation of incarnation to historical consciousness leads naturally to Thomas Altizer (his paper was titled "A Theological Understanding of Religion in Our Revolutionary Age"), for whom the significance of incarnational theology to represent the transformation of transcendence into immanence has long been the major insight of Christianity. In place of Elijah and Athanasius, it is Karl Barth whom Altizer is reading in allying himself with the Christian tradition over against the new religiousness. For Barth, referred to by Altizer as "the greatest theological master of our age" and quoted at some length, religion is sin, that is, religion establishes the separation of man from his primal union with God. Religion or worship is conscious alienation from God, reducing God to another object or being over against oneself. Likewise for Altizer, the world of religion is the world of the fall. He sees man as doubly alienated, first from the consciousness of his identity with (or participation in) the divine, and secondly from the exercise of that divinity proper to himself as he sacrifices his rightful autonomy to the divine will he sees as against and superior to his.

Religions generally institutionalize the alienation of man and God, providing the rites and rules by which men sacrifice their freedom and promising restoral of union only in flight from earth and historical consciousness. The new religiousness, however, seeks to overcome alien-

ation by canceling the fall and returning to the primal union, sacrificing individual, historical self-consciousness to chaotic ecstasy. What is needed instead, according to Altizer, is an "eschatological" overcoming of the fall—a regaining of the union of man and God not in return to the undifferentiated and unconscious primal union but through time and history—in the investment of time and history with all the ultimacy of the divine. Christian incarnational theology has testified to such a historical actualization of God, although confining it to one person, and Hegel has translated that insight into a general theory of the actualization of the divine through human consciousness, but it remains subjectively the project of each person to repeat the incarnation (and the murder of God), overcoming the alienation of God and self by transforming every vestige of the transcendent into immanence.

Altizer's point of view was most vividly expressed the day before the caucus during a debate with Richard Rubenstein on the interpretation of Melville's *Moby Dick*. To Altizer, authentic humanity is to become Ahab, wholly committed to the destruction of the realm of mystery even at the cost of self-destruction; for only in conquest of the divine-demonic forces outside himself can he actualize his own divinity. To Rubenstein, on the other hand, Ahab is not only mad, he is Hitler—the modern technological man whose means are rational but whose ends are insane, as Ahab himself admits. For Rubenstein, as for Hamilton, the whale is only a whale, and authentic humanity is represented by Ishmael, the one who survives because he accepts the limits on human understanding and achievement and disassociates himself from the mad quest for divinity.

In contrast to Hamilton's secular consciousness and Altizer's Hegelian self-realization of the divine in human consciousness, Rubenstein remains *homo religiosus*, but not, he insisted, a "polytheist." Man as *homo religiosus* necessarily asks ultimate questions of meaning and origin (although there are no answers—which led Rubenstein during the caucus to define theology as "reflection on religious existence in a world without God"), and man retains the religious awareness of the primal reality from which all things come, which enables him to measure himself in true context. Rubenstein has never been a polytheist, since a major function of that mystical monotheistic naturalism he described as early as *After Auschwitz* was to preserve Hebrew monotheism's desacralization of everything finite—including, of course, Altizer's view of man as himself the immanent divine.

Rubenstein's caucus paper, actually a chapter from his new book *My Brother Paul*, entered less directly into the issue of religious and secular consciousness, but it was a stimulating autobiographical and

psychoanalytical probing of his and St. Paul's mutual problem of overcoming psychic slavery to the "performance principle" represented by the Torah but also by modern culture's glorification of success. He sees the root of one's enslavement in the hope, conscious or unconscious, that through good behavior one might be rewarded by exemption from death. Paul's solution was a doctrine of salvation not dependent on performance; Rubenstein's remaining alternative is freeing oneself by accepting death—by psychically purging the hope of immortality.

II

In striking contrast to Hamilton's and Altizer's rejection of a new "religious" consciousness and symbolism was Harvey Cox's suggestion ("People's Religion and Radical Theology: Toward a Ludic Liberation") that the next project of the radical theologians might be a "radical Mariology." Cox began with the Magnificat's imagery of "casting down the mighty from their thrones" (revolution) and "sending the rich empty away" (confiscation) as an embodiment of Marx's analysis of religion as an oppressed people's protest and yearning as well as opiate for their pain. Any genuinely "radical" movement, said Cox, must start with the emerging third-world consciousness which expresses the pain and the hope of the poor. A New Man, determined to exercise freedom and agency, determined "to be the subjects rather than the passive recipients of history," is being born, particularly in South America. Any theology which presumes to claim the term "radical" must orient itself to the religion of those involved in the birth of the new consciousness, both to demythologize those elements of the symbolism of the religion of the poor which serve as opiate and to transmute the elements which can serve as the symbolic focus of protest and rebirth. The exploitive emphasis on the receptive, passive side of Mary's feminine symbolism is criticized, and the constructive elements—the primacy of life and flesh (the Assumption) and emotion over male intellectualism, repression, and authoritarianism—are celebrated in a ludic/mythic symbolic consciousness. By ludic (play) consciousness Cox does not intend a quest for fun. He means rather the attitude toward reality which we have in "games." We do not confuse the rules of games with an immutable reality. They are conventions of our imagination subject to change (in baseball, for example, when the pitchers got too far ahead of the hitters, the strike zone was narrowed) according to the will and needs of the self. A similar consciousness toward the social order would create and continually transmute the moral and social myths, models, and projections, rather than enslave the self (which is real in a way the game and its rules are not) to its own creation. The player values the

rules for what they are, without regarding them with cowed submission, and when they must be changed he avoids the fanatical violence of those who think that by revolution an absolute and final order of justice is established.

For Cox, the death of God was the death of Western bourgeois culture, and the basic metaphor of a contemporary radical theology must be birth, not death. Let the dead bury the dead—to be a radical theologian is to articulate the new radical consciousness. To be sure, Cox did not mean for this ludic consciousness to be identified with the American counterculture consciousness, but affinities to the latter plus the “symbolic realism” and the “messianic” tendencies of ludic consciousness seem sufficient to maintain Hamilton’s apprehensions.

Cox’s paper gave rise to the two lengthily discussed themes of the caucus. The morning session was dominated by Michael Novak’s Cox-inspired question as to whether the radical movement was not entirely too “provincial”—too wealthy and too Western—to assume that it had something to teach the rest of the world at next year’s International Congress of the Learned Societies in the Field of Religion. Half the afternoon was taken with discussion of “the feminine” in religious symbolism and human psychology, over the articulate but ineffectual protests of Adele McCollum and several other women, who insisted that women, like the poor, would define their own identity without the help of provincial male-chauvinist theologians with their virgin and/or fertility goddesses. Among them was Betty (Mrs. Richard) Rubenstein, who incisively summarized the secular radicals’ critique of the “new polytheism” by asking why the men’s discussion of authentic womanhood dealt with the Virgin Mary, Astarte, and the Earth Mother rather than with Jane, Carol, and Alice.

In other papers, David L. Miller contributed a study (“The Theology of Play and the Death of God”) sharply critical of most “theologies of play,” which, he argued, assume the integrity of the theological discipline without really facing the issue of the death of God. In the fashion of some theologies of literature, these take theology as a relatively unproblematic whole to the phenomenon of play in order both to illuminate play and to receive illustrative reinforcement from it. Miller distinguished from “theologies of play” the more promising “play theologies,” which, it turned out upon inquiry, meant the articulation of a ludic consciousness in a sense very similar to that of Cox. Adele McCollum contributed a technical paper (“A Time for Revolution”) on the concept of time which did not enter the discussion, and Kathleen Dwyer, a student from Portland, read an impressionistic invitation to share counterculture consciousness (“Counterculture Theology or the Getting-

It-Together Dance”) with enough freshness and enthusiasm almost to persuade one to be a believer. She could say “polymorphous perversity” with an innocence which made it sound like a child’s game—which, of course, is exactly the connotation she thinks it should have. A final paper, cryptic, technical and highly evocative, was John Dixon’s analysis of the logic of religious conceptions, symbols, and experience (“Structure and Process in Theology”). Dixon distinguished “monotheistic,” “polytheistic,” and, as he preferred, “trinitarian” forms of consciousness—the last doing justice both to unity and to process and avoiding the intolerant authoritarian exclusivism of the monotheistic form of consciousness. Taking the side of the symbolic consciousness of the religious radicals, Dixon called the death of God “the death of rhythm,” that is, the triumph of a purely pragmatic, utilitarian consciousness. Dixon’s promising analysis was unfortunately not distributed in time for prior reading and could not be done full justice.

III

If one may speculate on the outcome of the controversy, the advantage probably lies with the “religious” radicals. The disappointing fashion in which the caucus largely ignored the real issue posed by the secular radicals’ challenge reflected this, but, more fundamentally, their advantage is that their theologies are concerned with the “religious”—with symbols, rites, mystery, sacraments, divine dimensions of reality or consciousness, or whatever else, which, however “unorthodox” according to Elijah or Barth, is in some sense what the average person takes Christianity (as a religion) to be about. The Church has, after all, plenty of experience in assimilating paganism, and any experience or explication of “the sacred” can be seen, and perhaps legitimately so, as reinforcement at least of the view of reality the Church has intended, and within this view of reality the particular Christian doctrines have plausibility. Put another way, the religious radicals have the advantage of an unmeasurable history in which man has been *homo religiosus*, desiring and celebrating fundamentally human experiences of wonder, awe, mystery, cosmic relatedness, self-transcendence, thanksgiving, adoration, symbolic/mythic consciousness.

The secular radicals have their advantage too, in that their counter-attack ties in with a general and probably successful cultural counter-attack on the new consciousness by Paul Goodman and many others. Indeed, Peter Berger’s recent review of Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America* (titled “The Blueing of America”) may be correct in its cynical suggestion that every white-collar Ivy-League child who drops out of the new technological-bureaucratic elite will be replaced by a blue-

collar community-college child without in any way slowing the pace of the technocrats' domination, and that the only effect of the new-conscientiousness revolution on technology's new recruits will be their picking up a few sexual positions (polymorphous perversity again) of which their parents would not approve.

Still, our question concerns the possible success of the secular and religious radicals within academic theological circles and religious communities, for if they are to be successful *as radical theologians* it must be in one or both of these areas. In that respect the caucus discussions indicate that young theologians find the articulation of nonsupernatural but "religious" dimensions of human experience to offer more convincing evidence (to themselves as well as to those who employ them) that they are still practicing their profession ("doing theology") than do avowedly secular as well as atheistic points of view. Likewise within the Church the religious radicals, however "heretical," are more likely to be considered allies and candidates for assimilation than are Christian atheists, however firmly based in biblical and neo-orthodox iconoclasm. Whether such "religiousness" is that previously-mentioned Trojan horse or an authentic articulation of Christian symbols in a post-literal and pluralistic world remains to be seen.

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