

Death of God Theology

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General Information

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883 - 85), Friedrich Nietzsche introduced in eloquent poetic prose the concepts of the death of God, the superman, and the will to power. Vigorously attacking Christianity and democracy as moralities for the "weak herd," he argued for the "natural aristocracy" of the superman who, driven by the "will to power," celebrates life on earth rather than sanctifying it for some heavenly reward. Such a heroic man of merit has the courage to "live dangerously" and thus rise above the masses, developing his natural capacity for the creative use of passion.

Also known as **radical theology**, this movement flourished in the mid 1960s. As a theological movement it never attracted a large following, did not find a unified expression, and passed off the scene as quickly and dramatically as it had arisen. There is even disagreement as to who its major representatives were. Some identify two, and others three or four. Although small, the movement attracted attention because it was a spectacular symptom of the bankruptcy of modern theology and because it was a journalistic phenomenon. The very statement "God is dead" was tailor - made for journalistic exploitation. The representatives of the movement effectively used periodical articles, paperback books, and the electronic media.

History

This movement gave expression to an idea that had been incipient in Western philosophy and theology for some time, the suggestion that the reality of a transcendent God at best could not be known and at worst did not exist at all. Philosopher Kant and theologian Ritschl denied that one could have a theoretical knowledge of the being of God. Hume and the empiricists for all practical purposes restricted knowledge and reality to the material world as perceived by the five senses. Since God was not empirically verifiable, the biblical world view was said to be mythological and unacceptable to the

modern mind. Such atheistic existentialist philosophers as Nietzsche despaired even of the search of God; it was he who coined the phrase "God is dead" almost a century before the death of God theologians.

Midtwentieth century theologians not associated with the movement also contributed to the climate of opinion out of which death of God theology emerged. Rudolf Bultmann regarded all elements of the supernaturalistic, theistic world view as mythological and proposed that Scripture be demythologized so that it could speak its message to the modern person.

Paul Tillich, an avowed antisupernaturalist, said that the only nonsymbolic statement that could be made about God was that he was being itself. He is beyond essence and existence; therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him. It is more appropriate to say God does not exist. At best Tillich was a pantheist, but his thought borders on atheism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (whether rightly understood or not) also contributed to the climate of opinion with some fragmentary but tantalizing statements preserved in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. He wrote of the world and man "coming of age," of "religionless Christianity," of the "world without God," and of getting rid of the "God of the gaps" and getting along just as well as before. It is not always certain what Bonhoeffer meant, but if nothing else, he provided a vocabulary that later radical theologians could exploit.

It is clear, then, that as startling as the idea of the death of God was when proclaimed in the mid 1960s, it did not represent as radical a departure from recent philosophical and theological ideas and vocabulary as might superficially appear.

Just what was death of God theology? The answers are as varied as those who proclaimed God's demise. Since Nietzsche, theologians had occasionally used "God is dead" to express the fact that for an increasing number of people in the modern age God seems to be unreal. But the idea of God's death began to have special prominence in 1957 when Gabriel Vahanian published a book entitled God is Dead. Vahanian did not offer a systematic expression of death of God theology. Instead, he analyzed those historical elements that contributed to the masses of people accepting atheism not so much as a theory but as a way of life. Vahanian himself did not believe that God was dead. But he urged that there be a form of Christianity that would recognize the contemporary loss of God and exert its influence through what was left. Other proponents of the death of God had the same assessment of God's status in contemporary culture, but were to draw different conclusions.

Thomas J J Altizer believed that God had actually died. But Altizer often spoke in exaggerated and dialectic language, occasionally with heavy overtones of Oriental mysticism. Sometimes it is difficult to know exactly what Altizer meant when he spoke in dialectical opposites such as "God is dead, thank God!" But apparently the real meaning of Altizer's belief that God had died is to be found in his belief in God's immanence. To say that God has died is to say that he has ceased to exist as a transcendent, supernatural being. Rather, he has become fully immanent in the world. The result is an essential identity between the human and the divine. God died in Christ in this sense, and the process has continued time and again since then. Altizer claims the church tried to give God life again and put him back in heaven by its doctrines of resurrection and ascension. But now the traditional doctrines about God and Christ must be repudiated because man has discovered after nineteen centuries that God does not exist. Christians must even now will the death of God by which the transcendent becomes immanent.

Nontheistic explanations have been substituted for theistic ones. This trend is irreversible, and everyone must come to terms with the historical - cultural - death of God. God's death must be affirmed and the secular world embraced as normative intellectually and good ethically. Indeed, Hamilton was optimistic about the world, because he was optimistic about what humanity could do and was doing to solve its problems.

Paul van Buren is usually associated with death of God theology, although he himself disavowed this connection. But his disavowal seems hollow in the light of his book The Secular Meaning of the Gospel and his article "Christian Education Post Mortem Dei." In the former he accepts empiricism and the position of Bultmann that the world view of the Bible is mythological and untenable to modern people. In the latter he proposes an approach to Christian education that does not assume the existence of God but does assume "the death of God" and that "God is gone."

Van Buren was concerned with the linguistic aspects of God's existence and death. He accepted the premise of empirical analytic philosophy that real knowledge and meaning can be conveyed only by language that is empirically verifiable. This is the fundamental principle of modern secularists and is the only viable option in this age. If only empirically verifiable language is meaningful, ipso facto all language that refers to or assumes the reality of God is meaningless, since one cannot verify God's existence by any of the five senses. Theism, belief in God, is not only intellectually untenable, it is meaningless. In The Secular Meaning of the Gospel van Buren seeks to reinterpret the Christian faith without reference to God. One searches the book in vain for even one clue that van Buren is anything but a secularist trying to translate Christian ethical values into that language game. There is a decided shift in van Buren's later book Discerning the Way, however.

In retrospect, it becomes clear that there was no single death of God theology, only death of God theologies. Their real significance was that modern theologies, by giving up the essential elements of Christian belief in God, had logically led to what were really antitheologies. When the death of God theologies passed off the scene, the commitment to secularism remained and manifested itself in other forms of secular theology in the late 1960s and the 1970s.