

Why this non-God talk?

From the Editors

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What had long been contended in secret is now shouted from housetops. A number of young men who call themselves death-of-God theologians or "Christian atheists" had for a time stated their cases in those relatively secret and secure corners of universities called divinity schools, in those serene pockets of academia called seminaries and on the pages of staid theological journals or of religious magazines, including this one. So long as theologian talked to theologian no one seemed very much concerned. But now through the ministrations of the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, the *New Yorker*, thousands of pulpits and hundreds of newspaper editorials the general public has been made aware of these men. Debate now rages: it looks as if we shall have a long, hot winter.

The general public cares and has a right to care about this debate, even though it reacts emotionally and without a broad or deep understanding of the issues. Fewer than one per cent of the American people think of themselves formally as atheists. Atheism has always been and remains something less than socially respectable. So, since almost no one in or outside the churches is atheist, why do custodians of Christian teaching identify themselves as death-of-God theologians?

One way to answer this question is to ask why professors of theology who do not belong to the God-is-dead coterie — men who have much at stake in thought about and talk about and witness to God — have been so unexcited by the non-God-talk of the newcomers. In our series on "How I Am Making Up My Mind" William H. Hamilton, Thomas J. J. Altizer and Paul M. van Buren — the three most frequently mentioned death-of-God theologians — spoke their minds in articles which drew little more than the usual amount of mail, most of it negative but little of it emotional. The other young theologians who have expressed themselves in the series have either ignored or answered or — at least in intention — have "gone beyond" these men in their attempt to reconstruct theology. Few theologians agree with the non-God trio and apparently at crucial points they do not agree with each other.

Why were there no calls for heresy trials, no pleas for dismissal, so long as the professionals had the question in their hands? Some would answer that theological faculties, making an idol of academic freedom, do not want to raise a dispute that could boomerang on their own enterprises. Others say that professors, having grown soft, liberal and impotent, are incapable of recognizing heresy or of attacking it. Whoever has spent five minutes over coffee with a theologian — be he young Turk or aging seer — knows that these explanations do not explain.

The various schools of theology of our century (neo-orthodoxy, neoliberalism, neoevangelicalism: always "neo," significantly) were creative attempts to piece together constructive Christian thought around various theisms which had served well in the past. But each of these schools broke up, in part because none of them faced at sufficient depth the ways men think (in formal schools of philosophy or in commonsense informal circles) and act in our world. Attempts to push man back into old molds did not work. Yet theologians wanted to be loyal to Jesus Christ and in less defined ways to his church even though their God-talk failed to satisfy them or the demands of a new age. In this ideological cauldron "God-talk" became for some "non-God-talk."

No one yet knows what will come of the theological disintegrations and restructurings which are now occurring. We do know that in the past Christianity survived equally traumatic experiences in fashioning its thought systems. Was it easy to relate the scandal of the cross to Greek philosophy? Men did, and they gave us the creeds. Was it easy to present a summa of offensive Christian teaching in relation to an alien philosophy imported to the West by enemies of the faith? Men did, and they gave Catholicism its classic synthesis. Was it easy to relate Christian particularity to modern man-centered philosophies of change and relativity? Men did, and they provided a new charter for theology one and two-thirds centuries ago. Is it easy to relate Christian witness about God and transcendence to characteristic thought in an empirical age when men seek language of verification? Men are trying.

Almost all reflective theologians are trying. The death-of-God theologians are those who have rather uncritically bought one of our age's analytic tools; they are men who witness to the meaning of secularity out of too small a matrix —their own limited experience. Most of their colleagues, spurning heresy-hunting, have taken a Gamaliel-like attitude of wait and see, watch and help and criticize. Some are quietly enraged when they see in Christian atheists what appears to be brashness, flippancy, affectation or casual disregard for vital elements of the Christian past.

Others are noisily patient over the need to give men who are trying something difficult, perhaps impossible, a chance. If theologians could put up alternatives to the God-is-dead school immediately and clearly, none of them would shut up. But they know the technical difficulties involved in the task. They know the hazards, the false starts, the slippage, the mistakes. They know the dangers of personal and vocational problems involved when men express themselves radically. So they have chosen to argue the case in faculties and in professional journals.

We hope that after the first big phase of publicity has passed and the first easily exploited flurry of attention has died down, the larger debate will again return to the faculties and the journals. We hope that the radical thinkers will take greater care in expressing themselves and that their colleagues will be clearer and bolder in presenting alternatives. We hope that both diseased cravings for novelty and sickly loyalty to convention will give way to a healthy search for the truth.

The "death-of-God boys" — as they are often patronizingly referred to — are mishandling the issues, but no one should question the appropriateness or seriousness of the issues they raise. If we were trustees or patrons, alumni or students, of the schools where the new breed of Christian atheists teach, we would want the issues tested not by inquisition or ordeal but by empathic and reasoned reply. The living God cannot be imperiled by men who say he is dead, and he needs no defense by those who say he lives. Reality cannot be threatened by ideological debates about reality. Whether God lives is not an issue that can be settled by the *Times* or *Time* or the *New Yorker* or by livid patrons of universities or pewsitters acquainted with no part of the issue except the headlines. Nor can it be settled ultimately by theologians. But witness to the living God has always been clearest and most courageous in the face of opposition and challenge, whether from within or without the circle of those called by the name of Jesus Christ.