

## THE FUTURE OF THEOLOGY AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

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"Of making many books," Ecclesiastes complains, "there is no end." And he voiced that complaint long centuries before Johannes Gutenberg invented movable type. In the day of the paperback revolution so many books are flooding the market that Ecclesiastes' complaint dies unspoken. One is left speechless as he watches this rising deluge. So who remembers a rather specialized religious-Christian-Protestant-evangelical-premillennial study published in 1898? Though Samuel J. Andrews was a respected scholar, he was not well-known outside a limited circle; and his somewhat wooden *Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict* failed dismally to achieve best-seller status. Still it was meaty enough to merit republication years later. Dr. James Gray, then president of the Moody Bible Institute, could not have praised it more highly than he did in his prefatory remarks to the 1937 revised popular edition:

After the Bible, a concordance, a Bible dictionary and, perhaps, an all-round work like Angus' "Bible Hand-Book," the next book I would recommend as indispensable for the library of the pastor, missionary or Christian worker of today is, "Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict," by Rev. Samuel J. Andrews. . . . Pastors, missionaries, Sunday school teachers and social workers, bear with me if I say, *you must read this book*. By Divine grace, I have a large acquaintance among you, wherever the Gospel is preached, and I appeal to you, by whatever spiritual tie unites us, to become acquainted with what this prophet of the twentieth century has to teach. Here are no wild fancies, no foolish setting of times and seasons, no crude and sensational interpretations of prophecy, but a calm setting forth of *what the Bible says on the most important subject for these times*.<sup>1</sup>

Why did Dr. Gray speak in such apparently fulsome praise of this book which passed relatively unnoticed when it appeared, a mere drop in the modern deluge of print? In his opinion, it presented "soberly and scientifically" an interpretation of "the tendencies which are preparing the way for the final climax of the age. . . modern philosophy, Biblical criticism, science, literature and Christian socialism, leading up to the deification of humanity."<sup>2</sup> In other words, from the perspective of re-

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1. Samuel J. Andrews, *Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1937), n.p. "A Commendation And an Appeal."
2. *Ibid.*, n.p.

vealed truth, Andrews was analyzing the future of the faith and the faith of the future, indicating what he envisioned as the probable course of development—degeneration, as he saw it, that Christendom would follow.

Reading Andrews' book in 1970, one is impressed by his insight and foresight, however much the reader may disagree with him over specific matters. Andrews was a man who ventured to be prophetic because of his conviction that in the Bible there is genuine prophecy. He talked about the ideas and concepts which are now in full flower—pantheism, humanism, secularism, relativism, communism, ecumenism, and universalism. His terms were not the same as those in vogue today, but he pinpointed significant movements with surprising accuracy. What was quietly latent in 1898 is screamingly patent today.

One hesitates to be impaled by the jibe flung at Israel's first king, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" One can admire the prescience of a Samuel J. Andrews and yet admit that he personally lacks the ability to prognosticate very definitely the shape of things to come, especially in the fog-covered territory of theology. It does seem possible, though, to update Andrews and impressionistically sketch the future of theology and the theology of the future. Suppose, then, we engage in this attempt, projecting the shape of the faith which tomorrow may be embraced by hosts of people as a modernized, demythologized version of Christianity.

This attempt is less haphazard than it might appear because in the past few years a small library of literature has been accumulating on the future of theology and the theology of the future. Thus boring as it is to scan a bibliography, please glance at these titles, their authors and publication dates.

- Altizer, Thomas J. J. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. 1966.  
 Altizer, Thomas J. J. *Toward a New Christianity: Readings in the Death of God Theology*. 1967.  
 Altizer, Thomas J. J. and William Hamilton. *Radical Theology and The Death of God*. 1966.  
 Beardslee, William A. (ed.). *America and the Future of Theology*. 1967.  
 Cauthen, Kenneth. *Science, Secularization and God*. 1969.  
 Dewart, Leslie. *The Foundations of Belief*. 1969.  
 Dewart, Leslie. *The Future of Belief*. 1966.  
 Dillenberger, John. *Contours of Faith*. 1969.  
 Fannon, Patrick, S.M.M. *The Changing Face of Theology*. 1968.  
 Greeley, Andrew M. *A Future to Hope In*. 1969.  
 Hamilton, Peter. *The Living God and the Modern World*. 1967.  
 James, Ralph E. *The Concrete God*. 1967.  
 Kliever, Lonnie D. and Hayes, John H. *Radical Christianity: The New Theologies in Perspective*. 1968.  
 Leary, Daniel J. *Voices of Convergence*. 1969.  
 Manschreck, Clyde L. (ed.). *A History of Christianity*. 1964.  
 Marciniak, Ed. *Tomorrow's Christian*. 1969.  
 Marty, Martin E. *The Search for a Usable Future*. 1969.

- Miller, William Robert. *Goodbye, Jehovah*. 1969.  
 Miller, William Robert (ed.). *The New Christianity*. 1967.  
 Ogden, Schubert M. *The Reality of God, and Other Essays*, 1963.  
 Peerman, Dean (ed.), *Frontline Theology*. 1966.  
 Pittenger, Norman. *Process Thought and Christian Faith*. 1968.  
 Rahner, Karl, et. al. *The Future of Man and Christianity*. 1969.  
 Robinson, John A. T. *Exploration into God*. 1967.  
 Robinson, John A. T. *The New Reformation?* 1965.  
 Rust, Eric C. *Evolutionary Philosophies and Contemporary Theology*. 1969.  
 Sontag, Frederick. *The Future of Theology*. 1969.

Several facts stand out in this bibliography which, by the way, could easily be augmented. It includes no book published before 1963. It mentions only scholars who are acknowledged authorities. It focuses on a common theme—the future of theology and the theology of the future.

Take one of these works and let it serve as a kind of introduction to our attempted prophecy. Turn to John Dillenberger's *The Contours of Faiths Changing Forms of Christian Thought*. Bear in mind that Dillenberger, a distinguished historian, is head of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California:

It is no longer possible to articulate a theological position which by accumulative elaboration, would be comprehensive in the old sense, or essentially valid for an indefinite period. The dynamics of life and history are such that what can be mastered today must take dramatically new form tomorrow. This is a startling fact with which we must learn to live. For example, until a half-century ago, a theological student could enter the ministry with a theological position worked out with the help of his teachers, and find that its basic shape was valid for his entire ministry. This possibility has disappeared, and it has become impossible to refurbish older conceptions. Most of the inherited theological systems were couched and formed in a world in which ways of thinking were relatively constant. . . . There is no turning back and no sure place to go. It is a winnowing time when the fainthearted lose courage and men of faith have nothing left but faith itself.<sup>3</sup>

Though garden-variety layfolk may find this passage somewhat difficult, its drift is plain enough. Today, Dillenberger thinks, there is no longer any possibility of working out a coherent, rational system of doctrine which will hold true tomorrow. Why be surprised at that? Nothing is nailed down tightly once-and-for-all-time. Instead of fixity, we have flux: all so-called truths are liquid and free-floating. Hence the sole foundation for faith is simply faith in the faith that, if we have faith, we need not worry about our inability to state what our faith is or why we have it.

Dillenberger may be rather hard for non-professionals to understand,

3. John Dillenberger, *Contours of Faith: Changing Forms of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), pp. 30, 31.

but he is the essence of old-fashioned lucidity when compared with Thomas J. J. Altizer of God-is-dead fame:

We cannot fail to note that our inherited theological language is increasing by becoming empty and silent, as the traditional Word of faith can now speak only in those diminishing pockets of our history that are isolated from the actuality of the present. Only by negating its inherited form will theology evoke to a new and contemporary language, for to the extent that theology remains bound to its established and given identity, it will be reduced to little more than an echo of its once living voice. We must not imagine, however, that the substance or the deposit of Christian theology is unchanging, with the reassuring corollary that a new theology will simply adopt a new style or an updated dress. Already the time has passed when the responsible theologian could believe that it is still possible to express the established doctrines of faith in a language meaningful to the contemporary sensibility, and while many of our most influential theologians now seem to believe that the resolution of this problem lies in abandoning dogmatic for kerygmatic theology, the simple fact remains that the event of proclamation can only be a deceptive mirage if there is a speaker but no Word, an act of proclamation but no Word proclaimed. Our problem as theologians is to unveil a new form of the Word or, rather, to engage in a radical reconstruction of the whole form and language of theology so as to make possible a living and contemporary theology, for only on the basis of a comprehensive and thorough-going rethinking of theology can a Word appearing in our history become thinkable as faith. Yet theology will continue to remain closed to our present if it remains bound to the Word of its own past; so long as it speaks the language of a past and now long distant form of faith, its speech will necessarily be hollow and unreal. Not until theology moves through a radical self-negation, thereby undergoing a metamorphosis into a new form, will it be able to meet the challenge of our present.<sup>4</sup>

Ignore, if you like, everything that Altizer says in this opaque passage, but hold fast to his major contention. A new theology is emerging, the theology of the future, a theology that will be as radically different from the theology of the past as the butterfly, rupturing its cocoon, is radically different from the caterpillar which months before wove itself into a silken prison.

And what will that future theology be like? While its shape is still ambiguous—a shifting cloud-mass glimpsed through a film of fog—it seems possible to discern the form of tomorrow's faith, that new Gospel which will be acclaimed, one suspects, as the legitimate issue of Christianity.

4. William A. Beardslee (ed.), *America and the Future of Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 26-27.

I

Whatever else may characterize the theology of the future, one of its structural principles will evidently be *an unbiblical evolutionism*. Reality as a process of ceaseless development with everything in the throes of change—that, it is safe to guess, will be a pivotal assumption. Among the eloquent propagandists of this dogma is a deceased member of the Jesuits, a palaeontologist or expert on fossil remains, a mystic of rare devotion and speculative daring, a Frenchman with a tongue-twisting name, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. But that tongue-twisting name has already become a household word among both Catholics and Protestants; it will no doubt occur repeatedly in the theology of the future. For Teilhardism is virtually a synonym for a baptized evolutionism of a poetic, visionary, quasi-Christian variety. In his introduction to Teilhard's book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, no less renowned a scientist than Sir Julian Huxley points out that here is a Roman Catholic priest who stresses

the absolute necessity of adopting an evolutionary point of view. Though for certain limited purposes it may be useful to think of phenomena as isolated statically in time, they are in point of fact never static: they are always processes or parts of processes. The different branches of science combine to demonstrate that the universe in its entirety must be regarded as one gigantic process, a process of becoming, of attaining new levels of existence and organization, which can properly be called a genesis or an evolution.<sup>5</sup>

On Teilhard's theory, then, which is the theory of twentieth century science and philosophy, reality is a process of ceaseless development. But since this is so, it follows that everything—literally everything—is caught up in the throes of change. Everything? Everything. Even God? Even God. Traditionally, of course, theology has virtually taken for granted God's changeless perfection as eternally self-existent and sufficient. In the majestic language of the Westminster Confession, for instance, God is defined as "a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." In the theology of tomorrow, however, that venerable definition is slated for the junk-heap. So Schubert M. Ogden, professor of theology at Southern Methodist University, is constrained to assert:

God is no longer thought of as utterly unchangeable and empty of all temporal distinctions. Rather, he, too, is understood to be continually in process of self-creation, synthesizing in each new moment of his experience the whole of achieved actuality with the plenitude of possibility as yet unrealized. . . . *That* he is everchanging is itself the product or effect of no change whatever, but is in the strictest sense changeless, the immutable ground of change as such, both his own and all others.<sup>6</sup>

5. Quoted in Peter Hamilton, *The Living God and the Modern World* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), p. 21.
6. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963), pp. 59-60.

Puzzling as this may be to uninitiated readers, Ogden is emphatically declaring that God, too, is somehow affected by time; He changes continually, creating Himself as He changes, and in the future He will therefore be richer in being than He is today. This radically unorthodox view of God, which is a corollary of evolution construed as an all-inclusive principle, has been persuasively espoused by two contemporary philosophers whom Biblicists must know at least by name, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. They and their growing school of disciples represent a formidable challenge to historic Christianity in its totality, a challenge so basic and devastating that it turns orthodoxy upside down. It proclaims an eternal God Who is nevertheless conditioned by time, an immutable God Who is nevertheless mutable, subject to unceasing change. Hartshorne affirms nothing less than this:

To attribute change to God, so far from conflicting with permanence or stability in his being, means rather that nothing positive that ever belongs to God can change, but only the negative aspect of *not yet* being this or that. Except in his negative determinations, his not-being, God is utterly immutable. Yet since negative determinations are inherent in positive, God really is mutable.<sup>7</sup>

No, this is not a pedantic jest, a mere toying with words. Nor is it simply professional gobbledegook. Serious beyond exaggeration, it is the concept of God which will probably dominate tomorrow's theology. Process philosophy, the Siamese twin of theological evolutionism, would have us believe that God "is not a finished product," if one may accept the verdict of Dr. Ralph James, assistant professor of Philosophy and Religion at North Carolina Wesleyan College. It would have us believe that God is Himself a Process of Imperfect, Primordial Becoming, to use Kenneth Cauthen's phrase, and Dr. Cauthen is professor of Christian Theology at Crozer Theological Seminary. It would have us believe that God is a God Who, one must imagine, has steadily improved with age, increasing in consciousness and wisdom and love, perfection growing more and more perfect, somewhat like a cosmic soapbubble that gets bigger and brighter (in two senses!) all the time.

Not in levity, therefore, but in earnestness one is tempted to inquire where the bubble ever came from, why it continues to expand, and whether one of these days it will burst! At any rate, the evolutionism of tomorrow's theology will make it an unrecognizable mutation of Biblical Christianity.

## II

Whatever else may characterize the theology of the future, one of its structural principles will evidently be *an unbiblical pantheism*. It will assert that God and the cosmos, God and nature, God and history co-exist, each dependent on and inseparable from the other. It will argue, however, that this view is not pantheism. And what is pantheism? It is

7. Quoted in Ralph E. James, *The Concrete God* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), p. 120.

the theory that everything is God and God is everything; God, in short, is merely the name applied to the totality of existence; hence, since God is everything, God is actually Nobody. But the theologians who today are reshaping faith in order to render it fit for tomorrow contend heatedly that their view is not pantheism. It is pantheism. Let Bishop John A. T. Robinson explain this elusive term:

If one had to find a label to replace that of traditional "theism," I would fall back on one that has a respectable pedigree but has never quite succeeded in establishing itself in orthodox Christian circles—namely, "pantheism." This is defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* as "the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in him, but (as against pantheism) that his Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe." It is the view that God is in everything and everything is in God.<sup>8</sup>

Robinson's explanation, itself somewhat cloudy, is the quintessence of simplicity when compared with that of Charles Hartshorne:

Pantheism: (Gr. pan, all; en, in; theos, god). The view that all things are within the being of God, who yet is not merely the whole of actual things. If God were merely the system of actual things, then should a different system be possible, it would be possible that God should not exist, or should not be himself. Hence either God must be a purely contingent being, and anything might happen to him, including his destruction, or all things, just as they are, are necessary. On either construction God and other things are upon the same metaphysical level, whether of pure contingency or of pure necessity. Pantheism holds, on the contrary, that the self-identity of God is independent of the particular things which exist and the particular totality they form, and that consequently God may exist necessarily, although all other beings exist contingently. God exists, to be sure, in a different state for every difference in the existing whole, for he is that whole, but it is a different state of the same being, or of the whole as having a flexible selfhood, the individual essence of which is unaffected by the accidents of existence. This makes the inclusive whole analogous to a human personality, which contains many things not essential to its self-identity. A man is the sum of things which fall within his experience, but he is more than that sum, and many an item could have been missing (or have been replaced by another) without making his self-identity impossible. Pantheism claims to reconcile the legitimate motives of ordinary pantheism (God is simply the de facto—or the eternal—whole of things) and the contrary extreme (things other than God are in no way parts of his being). Pantheism admits that there is in God something independent of particulars, but holds that this something is merely the "essence" of God whose entire nature includes also accidents, each of which is the integration of all the accidental being in a given state of the

8. Quoted in Lonnie D. Kliever and John H. Hayes, *Radical Christianity* (Anderson, S.C.: Droke House, Publishers, 1968), p. 151.

universe. Panentheism sees in God not just another example of whole or totality, unity in multiplicity, but the supreme and most excellent example, as He is the most excellent example of "goodness," "knowledge," and other conceptions.<sup>9</sup>

One struggles with this none-too-illuminating elucidation and remains unimpressed. For God's "entire nature includes also accidents, each of which is the integration of all the accidental being in a given state of the universe." God, then, includes all that exists, yet He is not everything. Pardon the furrowed brow! At any rate, this view is certainly not the traditional doctrine, Biblically derived, which maintains with Archbishop William Temple that, though the whole cosmos should cease to be, God *is!*

Hartshorne's distinction without a difference does not succeed in nullifying the charge of pantheism brought against the emerging theology of the future. It cannot nullify that charge; for in this new theology transcendence is dissolved into thoroughgoing immanence. And transcendence is the doctrine that God existed in and of Himself, eternally and perfectly, before He created anything; it is the belief that God would exist independently in undiminished perfection if all created reality were to vanish. Thoroughgoing immanence, on the contrary, is the doctrine that God exists only in and with and through "created" reality; in a word, He exists interdependently. Destroy other reality and God would also disappear like the color of a frozen ice-ring slowly melting as it floats in a punch-bowl. Altizer has stated this view succinctly:

If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century, it is a passage through the death of God, the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.<sup>10</sup>

Bypassing the mystifying tangles of Altizer's own peculiar theology, we feel impelled to ask why he and other *avant garde* Protestants insist on an unbiblical immanence which is indistinguishable from pantheism? Why, we wonder, their fierce opposition to an independent, self-subsistent, transcendent Deity? Paul Tillich is unequivocal in accounting for the attack on "the God of theological theism" or Christian orthodoxy.

God as a subject makes me into an object which is nothing more than an object. He deprives me of my subjectivity because he is all-powerful and all-knowing. I revolt and try to make him into an object, but the revolt fails and becomes desperate. God appears as the invincible tyrant. . . . This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control. This is the deepest root of atheism. It is an atheism which is justified as the reaction against the theological theism and its disturbing implications. It is also the

9. Quoted in James, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86, n. 3.

10. Quoted in Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 143.



deepest root of the Existentialist despair and the widespread anxiety of meaninglessness in our period.<sup>11</sup>

As he reads this passage, one thinks of the human revolt against God depicted in Psalm Two, the creature's proud refusal to acknowledge and obey its Creator.

Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us (vs. 1-3).

One thinks of that Psalm when he comes across Altizer's assertion:

Once God has ceased to exist in human experience as the omnipotent and numinous Lord, there perishes with him every moral imperative addressed to man from a beyond, and humanity ceases to be imprisoned by an obedience to an external will or authority.<sup>12</sup> So perhaps man's sinful desire to be his own authority is the deepest root of the revolt against theism.

Certain "disturbing implications" of traditional theism, Paul Tillich tells us, are eliminated by postulating a God Who is radically (totally?) immanent. But certain other implications, even far more disturbing, inescapably arise.

For one thing, panentheism leaves no place for prayer as personal communion with God, the living God Who is able and willing to respond. R. S. Lee rightly insists that prayer in any traditional sense presupposes the traditional God:

It would be pointless to pray unless we had some belief in the reality of God and of His effective action in the world, some belief that our prayers could and would be answered. It is of course possible to say prayers without any formulated belief in God. But this is only a form of mental discipline and can scarcely be called prayer. Prayer is meaningless unless it is addressed to someone capable of hearing and of responding. It is an effort to enter into effective relationship with that being. The nature of the relationship we seek will depend upon what prompts us, that is, our particular need, and upon the ideas we hold about the God to whom we pray.<sup>13</sup>

In light of this, no wonder prayer is a problem for the theology of the future. Listen to Bishop Robinson as he strives to transform the man-with-God dialogue of prayer into a man-with-man encounter that reduces prayer from a vertical relationship to a purely horizontal happening. Attempting to delineate the "mode" or "mood" of contemporary praying, he says:

11. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

12. Quoted in Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

13. Quoted in Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

God is to be met in, with, and under, not apart from, response to the world and the neighbor. Its point of entry into God, the *ens realissimum*, is whatever is most real for the person concerned, however irreligious. Its form of the divine is more often than not the Son of Man incognito, whose presence is to be known obliquely, parabolically, brokenly—but always presently. Its style is that of a *secular mysticism*, with each of these words equally stressed. There is—in Christ, no gulf, no difference even, between ordinary life and prayer. And, needless to say, any special holy language or devotional diction is out. The “thees” and the “thous” have gone without trace. . . . The strength of this contemporary prayer-style is that it is inescapably personal. It knows God as given in response to the whole of life as *Thou*. Its weakness is that it is often artificially personalistic—envisaging God as a separate *Thou*. Is “O Lord” the last remnant of the poetic diction of a bygone age—or is it unavoidable? And if the latter, can we use rather than stumble at the “myth”?<sup>14</sup>

Notice how prayer is flattened out. There is “no difference between ordinary life and prayer.” “Picketing and praying have become so assimilated that it is difficult to draw a line between them,” Robinson remarks.<sup>15</sup> Notice, too, that Robinson criticizes some of the trailblazers on the frontiers of Christendom because in their published prayers there is still a sense of talking to a Person Who is Other than one’s neighbor. Clearly, then, without the personal God of traditional theology, prayer is nothing more than a term for being sensitive to one’s neighbor and meeting his needs. Robinson Crusoe alone on his island could not really pray. For one prays to God only as he is busy serving man. Which sounds defensibly Biblical until one reflects on it. Love for one’s neighbor? Certainly! Serving God by serving one’s neighbor? Certainly! Seeing Jesus Christ in humanity’s lost and least? Certainly! But what if God is forgotten? What if there is no concern for the great and first commandment? What if one accepts the exegesis set forth by Paul Van Buren, professor at Temple University?

It might be objected that this interpretation ignores the double command of love with which Jesus summarized the Law. Did he not say that love for God was the first commandment and that love for the neighbor was second? . . . The command to love God first and the command to love the neighbor, when taken together, can only mean that we are to love the neighbor on the model of Jesus and in his freedom. He has set the believer free for the service of the good Samaritan, who came to the man lying by the roadside simply because he was a man in need, and who offered help where it was needed. In hearing this parable, the Christian recognizes that he himself is the man left by the roadside who has been rescued. He recognizes that the key to the parable is the man who first told it, and in the freedom for which he has been set free, he is able

14. John A. T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 139, 140.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

to hear the concluding, "Go and do thou likewise," as words of command which point him on his way, the way of love leading toward the neighbor.<sup>16</sup>

So love for one's neighbor is sufficient. Why not? God is present in one's neighbor because God is one's neighbor. Only a razor-sharp logician can distinguish between them; and in practice the theoretical distinction evaporates. Panentheism becomes pantheism.

For another thing, panentheism eliminates the hope of personal immortality. It argues that, while our experiences are conserved eternally in the mind of God, we as conscious personalities are done for once we die. Schubert Ogden, following Whitehead, argues subtly that we are not swallowed up by oblivion because God retains us in His memory forever. But Ogden goes on to confess his own inability to accept "conventional forms of immortality."

Although I recognize it is commonly supposed that Christian faith turns on the validity of some such theory, I must state in all candor and as clearly as possible that I hold this supposition to be mistaken. In the New Testament, once its mythological forms of expression are penetrated to their underlying motif, I see little to justify the supposition, and much that should make us profoundly skeptical toward it. I do not mean by this that it is any part of the New Testament's faith to deny that we somehow survive death and continue our subjective existence. Nor do I myself have any interest in making such a denial. I regard the question of subjective immortality—or, at least, of our subjective survival of death—as an open question; and I hope I could be convinced by relevant evidence and warrants that it should be answered affirmatively, even though I do not now find sufficient reason so to answer it. But what I must refuse to accept, precisely as a Christian theologian, is that belief in our continued subjective existence after death is in some way a necessary article of Christian belief. The only beliefs that are necessary are those that have their basis and warrants in Christian faith itself. And I am quite clear in my own mind that belief in subjective immortality is not to be numbered among such necessary beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

For a third thing, evangelism goes by the board except as it is transmogrified into social welfare and political action. Of course! Ponder Robinson's insistence: "God is to be met in, with, and under, not apart from, response to the world and the neighbor."<sup>18</sup> Well, why not? Religion traditionally has to do with God; but from the pantheistic perspective God is inseparable from man, deity incorporates humanity. Consequently, rat-free apartments, disarmament treaties, integrated neighborhoods, improved sewage, equal educational opportunities, a guaranteed annual income, reduced crime, free medical services—such things are not by-

16. Quoted in Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

17. Ogden, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-230.

18. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

products of the Gospel; they are the Gospel, the only Gospel that matters. Hartshorne, who does not pose as a theologian, reveals explicitly the outworking of this modified pantheism:

In a certain great city veterans and Negroes are in especially desperate need of housing. The cry goes up from property owners, "yes, housing for veterans, perhaps housing for Negroes, but not in our neighborhood." Some of these persons are doubtless Church people, and probably more of them believe there is a God. But how many have thought to themselves, that it is not just veterans or Negroes that are seeking houses. It is, as many Hindus would put it, God Himself that is seeking a home. A Christian should say this as well as a Hindu. "Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these. . . ." Once more, Christians have symbols which they even yet do not know the meaning of. That other fellow (of whatever social class) whose sonship to God we may abstractly admit, is not just a product of divine power, or just an object of divine well-wishing, but a very fragment of the life of God which is made all-inclusive through sympathy.<sup>19</sup>

So Ralph James sums up this position in a succinct sentence: "To do unto others is to do unto God."<sup>20</sup>

One wishes that somehow these theologians who pride themselves on being progressively anti-traditional could be helped to realize the truth of E. L. Mascall's warning:

In view of the widespread tendency even among theologians today to be satisfied with a doctrine of God as in one way or another conditioned by or dependent on his creation, it is important to stress the absolute necessity of the conception of the entire independence of God. . . . Unless we are prepared to accept the God of classical theism, we may as well be content to do without a God at all.<sup>21</sup>

### III

Whatever else may characterize the theology of the future, one of its structural principles will evidently be *an unbiblical relativism*. Rather simply stated, relativism is the name applied to an inescapable consequence of being human: a finite creature, born and dying at one point in history, sees things of necessity from his own unique viewpoint, a viewpoint which is limited and segmental. Every person alive finds himself the child of a particular culture, subject to a given set of circumstances and influences by which he is conditioned and controlled. Hence it is no more possible for 20th century American Lyndon Johnson to perceive things as did 16th century German Martin Luther than it is possible for him to feel with Luther's heart. In short, what a person is able to perceive and understand depends on where he happens to be situated. The

19. Quoted in James, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

20. James, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

21. Quoted in Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

significance of this elemental fact, Harvey Cox asserts, has finally dawned upon a world emancipated from religious bondage.

The awareness that his own point of view is relative and conditioned has become for secular man an inescapable component of that point of view. His consciousness has been relativized. He knows that not only his language, his customs, and his clothing style, but also his science, his values, and his very way of perceiving reality are conditioned by his personal biography and the history of his group. In our time the Copernican revolution has reached out to incorporate everything into its sweep. All things are relative. Everything "depends on how you look at it."<sup>22</sup>

Truth, accordingly, is not always the same for everybody everywhere. In Nietzsche's famous aphorism, "There are many eyes; therefore, there are many truths; therefore, there is no truth." A person's perspective determines his concept of what is good and bad, right and wrong, rational or illogical, believable or incredible. For example, very few Biblicists in the 20th century are willing to burn witches; in the 16th century, however, intelligent and compassionate Christians helped incinerate thousands of innocent victims. Hence we never possess the undiluted truth, and truth for us is no more fixed and final than it is pure and permanent. Truth, instead, is a relative thing changing with the flux of time.

Lonnie Kliever and John H. Hayes, the authors of a helpful summary, *Radical Christianity: The New Theologies in Perspective*, have this to say concerning the rise and impact of relativism:

The discovery of spatial and temporal relativity has made a profound impact on modern life and thought. For centuries, men have believed in universal truths, values and institutions. Differences between cultures and changes within cultures were scarcely noticed because of their geographical isolation and gradual amelioration. But the development of modern means of travel, communication and education brought such parochialism to an end. Men have become aware of the diversity and the changes in human life through the past two centuries of historical research, comparative study and philosophical criticism of human life in all of its expressions. Such intellectual activity laid bare the diversity of social institutions, life styles and belief systems found in different times and places. More recently, men have realized not only that politics, ethics and religion are relative but scientific propositions, logical rules and perhaps sensory perceptions as well. Both the social and natural sciences have acknowledged that scientific laws are not absolute. Philosophy has shown that we think and even perceive with conditioned categories. In short, a sobering realization that there are no universal institutions, values, beliefs, truths or experiences has dawned in the twentieth century. . . . All theories of relativism center in the claim that men are limited *to* and *by* their own viewpoints. Every view-

22. Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

point is marked by distinctive spatio-temporal, physiopsychic and socio-historical features. These distinctive features are, in turn, reflected in all truth claims, faith affirmations, value judgments and social institutions growing out of that point of view. Therefore, absolute accuracy, exact agreement and universal applicability are impossible because no two perspectives are identical.<sup>23</sup>

Or as Ralph James poetically describes man's situation today: "Groping in the darknes of modern relativism, he is now forced to feel his way through the stars with shaken confidence."<sup>24</sup>

Thus relativism, the notion of time-conditioned and changing truth, is cheerfully accepted as legal tender in the academic and scientific marketplaces; absolutism, the notion of fixed and final truth, is regarded as being as worthless as Confederate money. Everywhere relativism has been victoriously driving out absolutism, even in the province of religion. Peter Berger, professor of sociology in the Graduate Faculty of the New School of Social Research, thinks that especially in the field of religion the old notion of absolute truth has been undermined, with history and philosophy functioning as saboteurs.

Put simply, historical scholarship led to a perspective in which even the most sacrosanct elements of religious tradition came to be seen as *human products*. Psychology deepened this challenge, because it suggested that the production could be not only seen but explained. Rightly or wrongly, psychology after Freud suggested that religion was a gigantic projection of human needs and desires—a suggestion all the more sinister because of the unedifying character of these needs and desires, and finally sinister because of the allegedly unconscious mechanisms of the projection process. Thus history and psychology together plunged theology into a veritable vortex of relativizations. The resulting crisis in credibility has engulfed the theological enterprise *in toto*, not merely this or that detail of interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

But in Berger's opinion his own discipline of sociology has administered a sort of *coup de grace* to absolutism in religion.

The challenge of sociology can be seen as a further intensification of the crisis. The historical nature and product-character, and thus the relativity rather than absolutism, of the religious traditions becomes even more transparent as the social dynamics of their historical production is understood. And the notion of projection becomes much more plausible in its sociological rather than its psychological form, because the former is simpler and more readily verifiable in ordinary, "conscious" experience. Sociology, it may be said, raises the vertigo of relativity to its most furious pitch, posing a challenge to theological thought with unprecedented sharpness.<sup>26</sup>

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

24. James, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

25. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 39.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

The effect of sociology on any and all religion is so destructive, Berger argues, because in terms of this science,

The mystery of faith now becomes scientifically graspable, practically repeatable, and generally applicable. The magic disappears as the mechanisms of plausibility generation and pausibility maintenance become transparent. The community of faith is now understandable as a *constructed entity*—it has been constructed in a specific human history, by human beings. Conversely, it can be dismantled or reconstructed by the use of the same mechanisms. . . . In other words, the theologian's world has become *one world among many*—a generalization of the problem of relativity that goes considerably beyond the dimensions of the problem as previously posed by historical scholarship. To put it simply: History posits the problem of relativity as *a fact*, the sociology of knowledge as *a necessity of our condition*.<sup>27</sup>

Because of its absolutistic claims, Biblical faith in particular has been a casualty of this triple assault. Relativism, Kliever and Hayes point out,

raises radical problems for traditional Christianity. It strikes at the roots of fideistic and exclusivistic claims to God's truth and grace. The idea of timeless truths, unchanging values and permanent institutions appears hollow in a world increasingly committed to relativism. Worse yet, claiming *sole* access to the divine nature, will and favor echoes presumption in a world increasingly comfortable with relativism. The day of proclaiming any point of view final much less exclusive is rapidly fading away.<sup>28</sup>

Hence because faith in fixed and final truth has been rendered unthinkable, yes, literally unthinkable for any person whose perspective is that of a 20th century relativist, religion must now be provisional, open-ended, amorphous, tolerant, and undogmatic—not quite as firm as a dish of half-congealed jello, about as chartless as the course of a darting hummingbird. Which takes us back to John Dillenberger:

Theology too is inextricably immersed in the problem of changing orientations and cultural shifts. That all genuine theological statements contain truth is not thereby denied; but the radical contingency of all theological work is affirmed. Both the statement that cultural shifts cannot be explained, and that all theology is relative to the situation, can be interpreted as matters for despair or for hope. Such approaches are psychologically difficult to accept for those who must be sure, and a source of laziness for those who must be assured of certain results. It is a source of hope for those for whom the situational aspects of truth provide multitudinous facets by which truth may be known. There is a major gap between the statement that all truth is relative and that the truth is relatively known.<sup>29</sup>

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

28. Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

29. Dillenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Yet since "the truth is relatively known," the truth which we have at any time is necessarily relative, relatively true and relatively false. So we must operate with the truth that all truth is relatively true; for, to quote Dillenberger again, "Our situation is one of the complete fluidity of concepts, the intense increase of knowledge in all domains, and the burgeoning of new fields of endeavor."<sup>30</sup> Alas, "our situation is one of the complete fluidity of concepts." Therefore, to quote Dillenberger once more, "It is uncomfortable but nevertheless true that we are having to accept fluidity as the lot of our existence."<sup>31</sup> This, then is the truth: the truth which we tentatively apprehend is at best relatively true—except for the one absolute truth that all other truth is of necessity relatively true!

What a gulf yawns between this concept of theology and the theology of traditional hymnody!

O Word of God incarnate,  
 O Wisdom from on high,  
 O Truth unchanged, unchanging,  
 O Light of our dark sky,  
 We praise Thee for the radiance  
 That from Thy hallowed page  
 A lantern to our footsteps  
 Shines on from age to age.

#### IV

Whatever else may characterize the theology of the future, one of its structural principles will evidently be *an unbiblical secularism*. Definition is again called for. So let us turn to Dr. Harvey Cox whose book *The Secular City* proved a theological bomb-shell when it was published in 1965. He seeks to clarify this term by setting it over against a related term, secularization, which, he confesses has a "troublesome vagueness."

It refers to a wide variety of ideas depending on the context in which it appears. In my own book I have tried to stay close to its etymological source, (i.e. "saeculum," "this present world age") and define it as the movement of man's primary interest and attention *from* other worlds beyond or above this one and *to* this world. This includes the loosing of this world from its dependency on mythical, metaphysical or religious dualism of any sort. It means, therefore, taking this earthly realm, with all its health and hope, with all its sickness and sin, in utter seriousness.<sup>32</sup>

This may not impress us as especially baneful. After all, Biblicism surely takes the world "in utter seriousness." Indeed, as Archbishop Temple remarked, Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions. It never downgrades nature as such; it refuses to denounce anything

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

32. Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 64.



whatever merely because it is physical. Quite the reverse! "The Christian faith," Eric C. Rust urges us to bear in mind,

is world-affirming. At its center there are the doctrines of Creation and Incarnation. When God created the world he declared it to be good and made it the scene for the actualization of his purpose of love. In the Incarnation, God took a human life up into his own and so identified himself personally with man's psychosomatic nature that his redemptive love is effective at all levels of our world. Paul sees the whole creation groaning and waiting for the final unveiling of God's purpose, and our Lord healed men's bodies concomitantly with forgiving them their sins. The Old Testament men manifest a healthy realism toward nature and history, finding in them the media of divine disclosure and the arena for the actualization of the divine purpose. The New Testament writers do not preach escape from this world but the living of eternal life in their own *Dasein*. The life of the Kingdom is already a present reality to be wrought into the texture of human history here and now. It is true that the eschatological note is never absent, but even that has cosmic dimensions. There is the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Personal survival is rarely envisaged apart from such a setting, and the symbolic framework of the latter means that survival is pictured in terms of resurrection rather than immortality.<sup>33</sup>

But secularization, as Cox understands it, does not mean merely that we take this world and this life "in utter seriousness." It means, rather, that we no longer recognize man's dependence on "religious dualism of any sort"—which is a polysyllabic way of declaring our complete independence from God. Moreover, secularization means that man's interest and attention are fixed primarily on this world and life. In fact, Cox elsewhere makes it clear that the interest and attention of secularized man are fixed *exclusively* on this world and life. For example, in his article, "Why Christianity Must Be Secularized," he states in italics, "*Secularization means that the world of human history now provides the horizon within which man understands his life.*"<sup>34</sup> Human interest and attention, therefore, are more and more confined entirely within the horizon of history. If anything lies beyond this horizon—a resurrection, a heaven, an eternity—it is of no concern to secularized man. He focuses wholly on the here and now, even if he admits theoretically that there may be some kind of God conceived as Being itself or as the dimension of depth in existence or as ultimate concern.

In their speculation about secularization and secularism, Cox and his fellow-pioneers on the theological frontier have been decisively influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian whom the Nazis hanged. Admirably heroic and tantalizingly thought-provoking, Bonhoeffer advanced some ambiguous ideas which radical Christianity has

33. Eric C. Rust, *Evolutionary Philosophies and Contemporary Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 204.

34. Quoted in Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

seized upon and inflated. He felt that the world has "come of age" philosophically and technologically. Man in the 20th century, now totally secularized, can dispense with religion. Deity has become a superfluity for a mature humanity.

There is no longer any need for God as a working hypothesis, whether in morals, politics or science. Nor is there any need for such a God in religion or philosophy. In the name of intellectual honesty these working hypotheses should be dropped or dispensed with as far as possible.<sup>35</sup>

But if God is superfluous, religion of course is equally superfluous—any dependence on supernatural help, any concern for a life beyond this world.

We are proceeding toward a time of no religion at all: men as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so when they say "religious" they evidently mean something quite different. Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rests upon the "religious premise" of man. What we call Christianity has always been a pattern—perhaps a true pattern—of religion. But if one day it becomes apparent that this *a priori* "premise" simply does not exist, but was an historical and temporary form of human self-expression, i.e., if we reach the stage of being radically without religion—and I think this is more or less the case already...—what does that mean for "Christianity"?<sup>36</sup>

Bonhoeffer himself never answered the question raised in this letter, but it seems indisputable that a religionless Christianity—whatever that may be—inculcates no concern for the salvation of one's own soul and thus for a heaven to come. This much, at least, Bonhoeffer flatly avers.

Is it not true to say that individualistic concern for personal salvation has almost completely left us all? Are we not really under the impression that there are more important things than bothering about such a matter? (Perhaps not more important than the matter itself, but more than bothering about it.) I know it sounds pretty monstrous to say that. But is it not, at bottom, even biblical? Is there any concern in the Old Testament about saving one's soul at all? Is not righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth the focus of everything, and is not Romans 3:14ff., too, the culmination of the view that in God alone is righteousness, and not in an individualistic doctrine of salvation? It is not with the next world that we are concerned, but with this world.<sup>37</sup>

It would appear, consequently, that secularization is a half-way house on the road to secularism: indifference to God, a disinterest in any

35. Quoted in Daniel J. Leary, *Voices of Convergence* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1969), p. 155.

36. Quoted in Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

37. Quoted in Leary, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-149.

future life, results in an abandonment of these beliefs. Agnosticism in theory becomes atheism in practice. Kenneth Cauthen perceives penetratingly the tremendous issues which are here at stake, issues which are inexpressibly crucial and important:

Secularization is that process in our civilization by which "human existence comes to be determined by the dimension of time and history" (Gogarten). What this means is that modern man becomes secular to the extent that he ceases to have interest in anything that does not enter into the determination of his life as a creature and creator of history in this world here and now. This means, obviously, a decreasing concern with otherworldly sanctions, goals, and problems. Metaphysical systems and theological doctrines cease to matter in direct proportion to the degree to which they do not come to bear in some more or less direct way upon man's life in the profane order. Religion, insofar that it points man toward ultimate concerns, tends to be pushed to the periphery so that attention can be concentrated on matters of more immediate concern. A secular age, then, is one whose basic interest is with the concrete practical issues of life, without any obvious or strongly felt need to refer to any supernatural, otherworldly, or ultimate realities. Secularism may be regarded as a final extreme, and can be defined as a way of living in which all appeals to anything beyond the horizon of human history are completely rejected. The result is a belief system in which man alone is regarded as the maker and measure of his existence. In short, secularism is the affirmation of the radical autonomy of man. The theological problem that must be faced, then, is whether or not the logical, unavoidable outcome of secularization is secularism.<sup>38</sup>

Can secularized man resist his downgrade development into secular man? The answer, one must conclude, is a definite no. Secularization, as we have been seeing, leads not only to a disregard for traditional Christianity; it leads as well to an irreligion which is indistinguishable from disbelief in any personal God or future life. Recall the process philosophy which underlies the theology now taking shape. Recall its skepticism with respect to the survival of individual consciousness after death. Harts-horne, typically, bids man forget the improbability of the then and there, devoting himself exclusively to the here and now.

A popular idea of immortality is that after death the artist will paint new pictures in some finer medium; by the same principle, the statesman will have some finer mode of group leadership opened to him, and so on. I wonder. The chance to paint pictures or lead groups seems to be here and now, and there will not, I suspect, be another—for us. Our chance to do right and not wrong, to love God and in God all creatures, is here and now. Not only will there be "no marrying and giving in marriage" in the heavenly mansions, there will, I imagine, be no personal actions of yours and mine other than those we enact before we die.<sup>39</sup>

38. Kenneth Cauthen, *Science, Secularization and God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 32.

39. James, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

As Ralph James frankly admits, "Hartshorne is asking us to live without eternity altogether!"<sup>40</sup>

In addition, one suspects, the theology of the future will be asking us to live without God altogether. If it pursues the logic of secularization to the very end, it will arrive at the atheistic nadir where Karl Marx and Frederick Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre are awaiting radical Christians with open arms. Does this sound excessively alarmist? Then listen to a passage from the book, *The Sacred and The Profane*, by one of the world's foremost authorities on comparative religion, Mircea Eliade, now on the faculty at the University of Chicago. It is a passage that should be read and re-read by Biblicists:

Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.<sup>41</sup>

Eliade's concluding sentence is as revealing as it is terrible: man "will not be truly free until he has killed the last god." And that sentence really calls for no exegesis. Contemporary atheism is arguing that humanity will achieve maturity and autonomy only when it abandons totally any dependence upon and faith in God. Hence if the logic of secularization is pursued to the end, that end will be the very bitter end which Kliever and Hayes envision as at least a possibility:

No room remains for God in the modern world, not even for a God who wills or permits the relativizing and secularizing process. While these momentous consequences may not have been foreseen by any of life's modernizers, relativism and secularism leave men completely alone in the universe.<sup>42</sup>

Man an orphan in the space-time continuum, this world the only world there is, a world which vanishes when human consciousness ceases to function—that is the mess of poisoned pottage which a secularized theology offers to us.

## V

Whatever else may characterize the theology of the future, one of its structural principles will evidently be *an unbiblical autosoterism*. Certainly! Autosoterism or self-salvation is the inevitable outcome of a faith that has no faith in either supernatural truth or grace, a faith that has no faith in the supernatural God of Biblicism, a faith that has no

40. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

41. Quoted in Cauthen, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

42. Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

faith in the God Who redeems through a supernatural Christ and so brings the forgiven sinner into a supernatural destiny. To be sure, the theology of the future proclaims a message of redemption, but its redemption is a social and political redemption which unaided man brings to pass in the here and now. What could be more patent? Since there is no God—at any rate no purposeful, active, intervening God—everything which is done to improve and uplift life must be done by man himself. There is no Big Daddy, no cosmic Father, no invisible Ally to step into history and lend a helping hand. There are no supernatural resources; responsibility rests entirely on human soldiers.

Some front-line theologians take an interesting approach to this matter of responsibility. Bow God off the stage; reduce him from the role of playwright and producer to the status of a spectator. What then? A Roman Catholic progressive like Ed Marciniak in his book, *Tomorrow's Christian*, professes belief in some kind of God, but he nevertheless contends that in our secularized age, whatever happens in history must be effected wholly by humanity while deity rests on the side-lines. The Christian, Marciniak says, has now recovered

his identity as the man of "the eighth day." The book of Genesis tells him that in seven days (including a day of rest and celebration) God created the world, turning it over—for the eighth day—to men for fulfillment. The world now lies in the hands of men, created in God's image and likeness as His representatives. As the book of Sirach reminds us: "He himself made man in the beginning, and then left him free to make his own decisions" (Si 15:14). And the Psalmist, speaking to God, notes that man is now in charge: "... you have crowned him with glory and splendour, made him lord over the work of your hands, set all things under his feet..." (Ps. 8:5-6).

As man's time on earth, the eighth day inaugurates a new era, the beginning of man's joy and sorrow—and God's promise. It is the era of man's responsibility for building a world which men can ultimately return to God with pride in a job well done.<sup>43</sup>

A rather similar approach is taken by another Roman Catholic, Leslie Dewart, a philosopher who intrigues Protestant iconoclasts. He too believes that God exists in some form or other, but that God has turned history over to man, lock, stock and barrel. Man, therefore, really going it alone without God, is entirely responsible for his own success or failure.

There is no divine manipulation of the puppet-strings of history, whether surreptitious or otherwise, whether cooperative or absolute. There is no pre-destination, no divinely imposed natural *ananke*, no divine command to history to unfold *kata phusis*, no *moirai*; there is not even so much as a divine policy statement prescribing the general principles by which history will happen. In a word, there

43. Ed Marciniak, *Tomorrow's Christian* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1969), pp. 165-166.

is no "divine plan." For God's "omnipotence" not only means that all history is possible, it also means that all history is free.

All history is free and possible, in the first place, against God, given man's real freedom. His real self-creative possibilities and his true ability to create in due time any possible world mean he can actually create a history without, or against, God. The creation of such a history is what Christianity calls *sin*, and its outcome *hell*, (and evidently it is we, not God, who create it and establish its gates at the very center of the earth). This means that history can actually fail. A *real* and *eternal* (more precisely, definite, irreversible) hell is a real possibility, even if it is not a punishment willed by the Greek *dike* of God. For there is no divine decree that assures the inevitability (any more than there is one to forbid the actuality) of unending progress or the ultimate success of man.<sup>44</sup>

Apparently Dewart's version of the Bible does not include the eighth chapter of Romans with its soul-assuring guarantee: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." But if we leave out of the picture Paul's God, the Biblical God, the purposeful, active, intervening God of traditional theology, man must then go it alone in time and space, and history may turn out to be an unredeemed fiasco.

Trail-blazing Bonhoeffer had the courage to face this same possibility of failure. The corollary of human autonomy, he affirmed, is autosoterism. In his prophetic sketch of our world come of age, as William Hamilton paraphrases it, there is

a rejection of religion as salvation either by transmitting the individual to some protected religious realm, or even as protection from something that, without religion, a man might fall into, like despair or self-righteousness. Put more clearly, Bonhoeffer states that in the world come of age, we can no longer be religious, if religion is defined as that system that treats God or the gods as need-fulfillers or problem-solvers.

There are thus no places in the self or the world, Protestants who listen to Bonhoeffer go on to say, where problems emerge that only God can solve. There are problems and needs, to be sure, but the world itself is the source of the solutions, not God. God must not be asked to do what the world is fully capable of doing: offer forgiveness, overcome loneliness, provide a way out of despair, break pride, assuage the fear of death. These are worldly problems for those who live in this world, and the world itself can provide the structures to meet them.<sup>45</sup>

Since God is dead as a problem-solver or a need-fulfiller, "a present help in time of trouble," why beat around the bush? Why not use the blunt language of Bishop Robinson?

44. Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief: Theism in a World Come of Age* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 196.

45. Quoted in Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Most of us today are practical atheists. The 'god-hypothesis' is an irrelevant for running an economy or coping with the population explosion as it was for Laplace's system. As a factor you must take into account in the practical business of living, God is 'out'—and no amount of religious manipulation can force him back in. He is peripheral, redundant, incredible—and therefore *as God* displaced: in Julian Huxley's words, 'not a ruler, but the last fading smile of a cosmic Cheshire Cat'.<sup>46</sup>

And for a practical atheist, the only saviour he can count on is himself.

Something else follows from secularization with its disdain for and disinterest in any possible world beyond this one. Admit that personal immortality, except in sophisticated double-talk, is a myth, as are the joys of heaven and the pains of hell. Then attention and energy must be concentrated on turning earth from a hell of unfulfilled frustration into a satisfying heaven where without God and without hope of a hereafter, man and his neighbor will live together in peace and joy and creativity and justice and brotherhood. Heaven must be established on earth in the form of a redeemed and redemptive community which will take the place of eternal fellowship with God. Consider William Hamilton's eulogy of this utopian society which eliminates the necessity of any supernatural salvation.

If by God you mean the means by which forgiveness is mediated, or consolation in time of sorrow or despair, or judge of my arrogance and my idolatry—then we say that these functions, as central for us as they ever were in classical Christianity, must be taken over by the human community. We must learn to forgive each other with the radical unconditioned grace men used to ascribe to God. . . . We must learn to comfort each other, and we must learn to judge, check and rebuke one another in the communities within which we are wounded and in which we are healed. If these things cannot now be done by the human communities in the world, then these communities must be altered until they can perform these tasks in this new context. In this sense the death of God leads to politics, to social change, and even to the foolishness of utopias.<sup>47</sup>

Thus humanity will become its own saviour by creating a secularized community which can function redemptively. But that acute economist, David Bazelon, warns about the possible slip between the cup of present society and the lip of redemptive communitarianism.

We are going to have to become more useful to each other as human beings: we may manage without God, but not much longer without each other. Without a sense of community, society is absurd and detestable—and all members of it will detest it, somewhere in themselves, even if they do not kill because of it. Without community, we will have increasingly convulsive returns to decivilized

46. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

animalism. . . . The sense of community is our expectation of the willingness of others. This is an act of faith at all times; and sometimes it rises beyond. . . . to the proposition that all we modern existentialists have suspected and feared—that the alternative to religion is heroism.<sup>48</sup>

It would appear, then, that the frontier theologians are asking Biblicists to surrender their faith in the redemptive God Who creates community and put their faith in a redemptive community which can perhaps be created without God. But to believe in the collective auto-soterism of humanity, achieved by some godless collectivity, requires more than heroism. It requires logical hari-kari as well.

## VI

After this all-too-superficial survey of those present tendencies which may be amplified and amalgamated in tomorrow's theology, one feels entitled to conclude that the faith of the future will be *an unbiblical romanticism*. It looks as though today's theologians are spinning out a gossamer tissue of speculation, a pseudo-Gospel without support in history, reason, or experience. Abandoning what they call the old mythology of traditional Christianity, they are concocting a new mythology. F. C. Happold in his book, *Religious Faith and Twentieth Century Man*, bears witness to this:

The religious thought-forms of twentieth-century man will represent a new fusion of religious and scientific "myths," mystically (in the sense we are using the term) interpreted, accompanied, particularly among the more sensitive types, by a growth in spirituality, and by a deeper sanctification of secular life, as the sacred and the profane are more and more seen as one.<sup>49</sup>

We can quarrel with Happold's optimism concerning spirituality and sanctification while approving his allusion to the religious and scientific myths which undergird the pseudo-Gospel of frontier theology. And, really, why embrace this mythological concoction once traditional Christianity has been demythologized and in practice discarded? What does the new faith have to offer? Nothing or worse than that. Think of William Hamilton's confession:

My Protestant has no God, has no faith in God, and affirms both the death of God and the death of all the forms of theism. Even so, he is not primarily a man of negation, for if there is a movement away from God and religion, there is the more important movement into, for, toward the world, worldly life, and the neighbor as the bearer of the worldly Jesus.<sup>50</sup>

Think likewise of Harvey Cox's *confessio fidei*, if one can call his confused agnosticism a faith:

48. Quoted in Leary, *op. cit.*, pp. 56, 58.

49. Quoted in Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

50. Kliever and Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 231.



I can only concede that the road ahead does seem treacherous and sometimes almost impassible. I refuse, for the moment, to settle for some brand of simple "religious atheism." That seems too easy somehow. But at the same time I find the available "theistic" options equally unattractive. I have no answer. I can only indicate how I am grappling with this conundrum and where I now hope some new hint of an opening can be found. I am now pursuing the hints, perhaps misleading, of two vagabonds on the periphery of theology, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Ernst Bloch.<sup>51</sup>

Think, finally, of Altizer's confession that the path he is pursuing may take him over the brink of both hope and sanity:

The contemporary Christian who bets that God is dead must do so with a full realization that he may very well be embracing a life-destroying nihilism; or, worse yet, he may simply be submitting to the darker currents of our history, passively allowing himself to be the victim of an all too human horror. No honest contemporary seeker can ever lose sight of the very real possibility that the willing of the death of God is the way to madness, dehumanization, and even to the most totalitarian form of society yet realized in history. Who can doubt that a real passage through the death of God must issue in either an abolition of man or in the birth of a new and transfigured humanity?<sup>52</sup>

These confessions ought to induce some searching second-thoughts as to the value and validity of radical Christianity. They ought to encourage an open-minded re-examination of traditional theology. It may well be that what looks hopelessly outmoded is still the one religious option which can satisfy not only the heart but also the mind of man today and tomorrow.

In one Peanuts sequence Lucy is frightened because it has been raining and raining. She wonders if there may not be a repetition of Noah's flood. But Charlie Brown tells her about God's promise and the meaning of the rainbow. Much relieved, Lucy says, "You've taken a load off my mind." To which Charlie replies, "Good theology has a way of doing that." It does indeed. Good theology, Biblical theology, the theology of traditional evangelicalism, has a way of taking off our minds the load of defeatism, fatalism, and pessimism which weighs down these radical theologians. And the theology which is good for today will also be good for tomorrow.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

52. *Ibid.*