

THE SUICIDE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN THE SIXTIES AND A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR ITS RESURRECTION*

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I. A DISQUIETING PARABOLIC INTRODUCTION

Paul Tillich's Chicago University Law School lectures have just been published posthumously under the title, *My Search for Absolutes*.¹ This work is significant not only because of the lectures themselves, which represent Tillich's last major thoughts, but also because of the striking illustrations prepared for the volume by Tillich's close friend Saul Steinberg. One of Steinberg's drawings well depicts the theme of the present essay. It pictures two men on a teeter-totter poised at the edge of a cliff. The man on the end of the board which extends over the abyss is firing a fatal shot at his companion who stands on the safe end of the board. The result of this action is, of course, the destruction not only of the one who receives the bullet but also of the one who fires it, since when the shot finds its mark and the murdered man falls, the teeter-totter will throw the killer into the chasm. In killing his supposed enemy, the aggressive gunman has in reality killed himself, for he was dependent on him for his own life.

This, in my judgment, is the sad state of contemporary theology: in firing what is thought to be a fatal shot at Christian orthodoxy, the modern theologian has only succeeded in killing himself, for he has eliminated the sole *raison d'être* for his own existence. He has, in effect, committed suicide. To understand this suicidal phenomenon, we must first take a close look at its context, both secular and religious.

The Secular Dilemma

Theologians of secularity such as death-of-Goders William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer, urban theologians such as Harvey Cox and Gibson Winter, and theological pundits such as James McCord of Princeton, inform us that secular society has finally overcome its neurotic guilt feelings and is on the verge of a new era of optimism, megalopolitan accomplishment, and social progress — an era which may well rise to a new name for God and a new conception of the working of the Spirit.²

Sad to say, however, a closer look at the evidence belies any such interpretation. Antonini's film *Blow-Up* has been heralded as a clear proof that the "op" generation has confidently thrown off the troubling

* Dr. Montgomery of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School made this invitational presentation at the McMaster University Teach-In, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, November 17-19, 1967, in dialogue with the Rev. Gregory Baum, O.S.A., Dr. William G. Pollard, and Resigned Bishop James A. Pike.

1. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

restrictions of Christian morality and is now delightfully reinstating Eden by a permissive sexual code and an autonomous, self-created situation ethic. But sensitive observers of *Blow-Up* will have noted the real theme of the film: the brooding, unsatisfied quest for reality in which the photographer-hero engages — a quest which is left unsatisfied by his sexual adventures and which finally collapses in his solipsistic inability to distinguish between the real world and the world of self-created photographic artistry.³

Three recent French films have made this point with even more telling effect. Alain Jessua's *Jeu de Massacre*, which received the best scenario award at Cannes this year, presents an op cartoonist who loses his wife to the absurd and immature life-model of his cartoon character, the "killer of Neuchâtel"; as in *Blow-Up*, the blending of fiction and reality in modern life is relentlessly destroying the values and personalities of the modern man who gives himself up to the spirit of the times. In *Le Grand Dadais*, a twenty-year old, taken as the symbol of contemporary youth, listens seriously to the cacophony of slogans modern life offers for achieving happiness: secular success and hedonistic love; in religiously putting these values into practice, he makes a shamble of his life. Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*, which produced an uproar at Cannes and offended both Marxists and anti-Communists, tells of the endeavor of five French students to inject meaning into their lives through Mao's "red book": instead of facing the selfcenteredness which stalks them at every point, they sublimate their real motivations by absorption in the totally secularized gospel of revolutionary Communism. They think that they are following Mao's axiom: "Il faut confronter les idées vagues avec des images claires"; but in actuality they fall into the worst kind of intellectual, moral, and personal chaos.

One of the best descriptions of the current secular dilemma is provided by Greenwich Village cartoonist Jules Feiffer's fable, "George's Moon."⁴ George the lone inhabitant of the moon, represents contemporary man in his fruitless search to discover meaning in life. His grandiose intellectual attempts (à la 19th century idealism) to construct a universal philosophy border on the absurd ("If I *am* here and I can see space then space must, in all logic, be able to see *me* . . ."); his endeavor to lose himself in activist programs leave him totally unsatisfied, for they introduce no real meaning into his existence ("What good was it to collect rocks, to count craters, to fill the craters you've counted with the rocks you've collected, to empty the craters and collect the rocks

2. See Montgomery, "The Relevance of Scripture for Current Theology," *Christianity Today*, November 10, 1967.

3. Cf. the excellent critical review of the film in the French newsmagazine *L'Express*, 8-14 mai, 1967.

4. This fable is included in Feiffer's *Passionella and Other Stories* (New York: New American Library Signet Books, 1964).

all over again?"); and his existential effort to establish universal significance by total concentration on his own existence results in the loss of his personal starting-point ("Since *he* was the only thing around, George decided to believe in himself Then he awoke one morning and found that he had forgotten his name").

The current preoccupation with psychedelic drugs is an extension of this existential quest. Having lost confidence in the reality and significance of the external world, many today seek to uncover, through drugs, a hidden reality within themselves. The kind of "reality" encountered has been put in serious doubt by psychedelic experts such as French specialist Roger Heim, who found that a cat who has received LSD recoils in fear from a mouse;⁵ but the very use of psychedelic techniques, regardless of their results, shows how dissatisfied modern man is with his secular existence and how far he will go to inject meaning into his world.

Philosopher J. Glenn Gray, in his article, "Salvation on the Campus: Why Existentialism Is Capturing the Students,"⁶ has perceptively argued that today's focus on existential subjectivity paradoxically arises from the desperate search for "some authority, both private and public, that will make possible authentic individuality." However, concludes Gray, who has done depth studies in German existentialism: "I doubt that Existentialist philosophy can ultimately satisfy the search for authority." At best it merely offers to those "not yet able or ready to act" an "escape from the morass of conformity, *la dolce vita*, boredom, and . . . meaningless competitiveness."

Traditionally, Christian theology has seen its prime task at this very point: it has sought to lead men to the only "authority" that can create "authentic individuality" — the God who revealed Himself in the living Word, Jesus Christ, through the written Word, Holy Scripture. What about today's theology? How effectively is it carrying out this task?

The Religious Dilemma

On October 31, the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation reminded Christendom of Martin Luther, who typifies the great theologians of former days. Luther made many mistakes, but equivocation and uncertainty were not among them. His stand at Worms ("I am bound by the Scriptures adduced, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God; I am neither able nor willing to recant"); his opposition to all relativizing of the truth of Holy Scripture ("I make it my invariable rule," he wrote to Erasmus, "steadfastly to adhere to the sacred text in all that it teaches, and to assert that teaching. . . . Uncertainty

5. See Montgomery, "The Gospel According to LSD," *Christianity Today*, July 8, 1966.

6. *Harper's*, May, 1965.

is the most miserable thing in the world"); his great hymnody ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God") — every aspect of his career displayed his unalterable conviction that God has spoken clearly, revealing His will to man and demanding a response of trust and faith in this clear revelation.⁷ A similar description could apply, with little substantive change, to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Wesley, Newman, or to any other great theologian of the Christian past.

If the pre-20th century theologian could be sculpted as Luther is at Worms and at Wittenberg — standing forthrightly and preaching from God's Holy Word — the contemporary theologian might be represented as Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase": all motion and no substance. That this is by no means an exaggeration can be seen in studies made of the image of learned representatives of the faith in today's novels and films. Worden's unpublished Boston University doctoral dissertation⁸ on the American film situation from 1951 to 1960 and Horton Davies study of contemporary fiction⁹ display the theological representative in an exceedingly poor light. Typical is Peter DeVries' hilarious but tragic portrayal of liberal clergyman "Holy" Mackerel, whose confusion of belief is so appalling that his idea of church architecture is to create a pulpit with "four legs of four delicately differing fruitwoods, to symbolize the four Gospels, and their failure to harmonize."¹⁰

This is perhaps the contemporary emancipated cleric at his worst; but the extent of present theological decline is as readily shown by the common attribution of Luther-like qualities to any modern theologian who takes a stand of any kind — even if (or particularly if?) it involves his stalwart refusal to make any positive presentation of Christian doctrine at all. Luther shook the world because he courageously endeavored to reassert the biblical Gospel; today's "Luthers" are theologians who steadfastly maintain their inability to believe or proclaim historic Christian truth any longer. So parched is the desert of contemporary theology that any act of faith — even if it is a commitment to unfaith — becomes a mirage suggesting Luther himself.

How has this sad state of affairs come about? Why is contemporary theology seemingly incapable of offering any firm word to modern secular man? How is it that the secular dilemma of uncertainty is matched by an equal if not greater religious uncertainty? Perhaps the

7. Cf. Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1967), Vol. 1, especially chap. ii.

8. James William Worden, "The Portrayal of the Protestant Minister in American Motion Pictures, 1951-1960, and Its Implications for the Church Today" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University Graduate School, 1962).

9. Horton Davies, *A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels* (New York: Oxford Press, 1959).

10. Peter DeVries, *The Mackerel Plaza* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), chap. i.

best way to understand the self-destruction of contemporary theology is by way of a modern parable. I call it "The Parable of the Engineers."

Once a corps of engineers was assigned to continue the building of a magnificent cathedral which had already been under construction many centuries and which had benefitted from the devoted labor of great engineers of many generations. Some of the new engineers, however, began to question the architectural soundness of the plans. They said that the plans had numerous errors and contradictions in them. When asked for clarification by some of their fellows, they pointed out that architectural styles were changing and that the plans erroneously presented older stylistic characteristics and contradicted current styles. In reply, a few engineers noted that this did not make the plans erroneous or contradictory in themselves, and that it was the architect's business to draw the plans and the engineers' to follow them. The majority did not agree, but they did not want to cast direct aspersions on the architect or abandon the construction. So they had recourse to a number of stratagems.

1. First, they argued that though the plans were erroneous and contradictory this was not the architect's fault and should be attributed to his draughtsmen. (Intransigent engineers claimed that the architect was always responsible for his draughtsmen, but this argument was brushed aside.) Endeavors were thus made to ignore the "draughtsmen's errors" while accepting the architect's "true ideas" as conveyed by the draughtsmen's plans. But since the only knowledge of the architect's ideas came by way of the draughtsmen's plans, this endeavor miserably failed and led to more radical suggestions. (It is perhaps worth pointing out that while these discussions went on, relatively little building was done.)

2. Then the engineers argued that the purpose of the plans had been misunderstood. They were not intended to be followed as such, but contact with them would increase the engineer's inner sensitivity to true building methods. But one engineer's inner sensitivity did not produce the same results as another's, considerable confusion set in, and a tower collapsed.

3. A particularly brilliant engineer now suggested that everything in the plans was symbolic of the architect himself. However, it was soon discovered that if everything was symbolic and nothing literal, no engineer could determine the real meaning of any particular element in the plans. More disputes set in, and another section of the building crumbled.

4. Now the people for whom the cathedral was being built were becoming more and more agitated and many would not enter the half completed edifice at all because of the danger of stones, loose mortar, and buckling floors. Some were even crying for a new staff of engineers. This made the engineers terribly nervous and excitable, and finally some of them, to placate the mob, began to claim that there was no architect at all, that the people for whom the cathedral was being built were more important than anything else, and that everyone was in as good a position as the inaccurate draughtsmen to draw up plans. Oddly enough, this seemed to infuriate the people even more, for the latter apparently considered it self-evident that the plans, the great engineers of the past who had faithfully followed them, and the earlier work on the cathedral (the work done before the present confusion) all presupposed an architect. They began to become violent and even claimed that the engineers were destroying their cathedral and making a mockery out of the engineering profession.

5. At this point a very vocal engineer tried to convince the people that such efforts as he and others were making were really acts of tremendous heroism and that even though the plans of the architect were impossibly naive and had been hopelessly muddled by past draughtsmen and engineers, he himself could lead them through the maze by direct communication with dead engineers of the past thereby proving the deathless value of engineering science. But instead of being considered a repristination of heroic, reforming engineers of early times, this engineer was regarded as an epitomal fool by virtually all of his colleagues and the great mass of the people. Only the media of communication featured him, for they quickly discovered that people followed his exploits with horror and fascination even as they did the latest scandals of famous entertainers.

Thus did the great cathedral eventually crumble and fall, killing not only the people who had loved it but also the engineers responsible for its loss. Pathetically, there were a few engineers who, right up to the moment of final destruction, still pleaded that the only hope lay in following rigorously the original plans, that the engineers must bring their stylistic ideas into conformity with the architect's, and that deviations from their notions of style did not constitute genuine errors or contradictions in the plans. But their voices were scarcely heard amid the din of engineering teams working at cross-purposes to to each other, and the deafening roar of falling masonry.

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the

winds blew, and beat upon that cathedral; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

II. ANATOMY OF A SUICIDE

Let us now consider each of the sad stages in the destruction of the cathedral of theology. By observing the unfortunate decisions of the theological engineers assigned to the work, we will be able to understand how the current religious dilemma has arisen. And only when the religious crisis has been diagnosed can a meaningful remedy be offered.

The Gun Is Loaded in the 18th Century, Placed against the Head in the 19th Century, First Fired in the 20th

During the 18th century, when it became painfully evident that the church was identifying with certain privileged classes and neglecting others, and revolutionary opposition was directed against unjust privilege, the church fell under the revolutionary axe. Instead of seeing that the church had violated her own principles (which firmly maintained the equality of all men before God) and should be corrected on the basis of these very principles, the intelligentsia endeavored to establish a counter-religion, naturalistic Deism.¹¹ Philosophical objectors to historic Christianity arose, who argued that "firm and unalterable experience" eliminates the miraculous claims of Christian revelation (David Hume), and "the accidental truths of history [such as are provided by the historical revelation of Christ] can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason" (Lessing). Attention was thus shifted to the natural laws of the external world as proofs of God's existence, and to the moral nature of man as evidence of God's moral perfection; and biblical revelation was considered superfluous if not positively misleading. Deists such as Thomas Paine (*The Age of Reason*) went to great lengths to demonstrate alleged errors and contradictions in the scriptural text.

In the 19th century¹² man's confidence in his abilities, ethical and otherwise, expanded by leaps and bounds. Reinforced by what he believed to be the scientifically-established world-view of evolution, he built metaphysical and idealistic systems to replace Christian revelation, and pragmatically endeavored to achieve a perfect society through technology, big business, and colonial expansion. Many theologians—not appreciating that the arguments of Hume, Lessing, and Paine had

11. See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Knopf, 1966).

12. See B. M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

been well met even in the 18th century,¹³ and not listening to 19th century littérateurs such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Burckhardt who reminded Western man of his finitude and presumptive selfishness—jumped on the evolutionary, perfectionistic bandwagon. They endeavored to re-do the biblical revelation in the image of the 19th century Zeitgeist, and where it did not fit, they *made* it fit—by dismembering the Old Testament texts through (non-textually based) documentary criticism so as to demonstrate the “evolution of Jewish religion,” and by throwing out the miraculous in Jesus’ ministry so as to turn him into an ethical example, a kind of ideal boy scout helping little old ladies across the Sea of Galilee.

Building on this base, early 20th century theological Modernism, both Protestant and Catholic, created a totally new religion of human perfectability and social improvement, to which they attached the terminology of traditional Christianity.¹⁴ These theological engineers justified themselves by pointing out that “architectural styles were changing and that the plans [God’s revelation in the Christ of the Bible] erroneously presented older stylistic characteristics and contradicted current styles. In reply, “a few engineers noted that this did not make the plans erroneous or contradictory in themselves, and that it was the architect’s business to draw the plans and the engineers’ to follow them.” But the vast majority of theologians were too inebriated from gulping down the heady wine of early 20th century cultural self-confidence to listen to these warnings. They preferred to take their cue from such aphorisms as that of autosuggestionist Emile Coué: “Every day in every way we are becoming better and better.” Thus was the first suicidal round fired against Christian theology by its own theological proponents.

Inadequate First Aid Treatment by Dr. Barth

The First World War accomplished what orthodox theologians had not been able to do: it destroyed the evolutionary, progressivistic confidence of 19th century man and of his early 20th century Modernistic counterpart. Into the theological vacuum left by the collapse of Modernism stepped Karl Barth,¹⁵ who reasserted the ancient Christian verities: man is a sinner desperately needing the Divine grace offered by Christ’s death on the Cross and proclaimed in Holy Scripture. But Barth was equally convinced that the 19th century negative criticisms

13. For example, Richard Whately, in his superlative tour de force, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte*, showed that the same arguments Hume used to eliminate the miraculous from the life of Christ would equally well eliminate the unique from the career of Napoleon — thus destroying all meaningful historical analysis.

14. See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

15. See Montgomery, “Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology of History,” *The Cresset*, November, 1963.

of the miraculous plan of salvation and of Scripture itself could not be rejected. His solution was a "dialectic" of Yes and No: Yes, the transcendent Gospel is valid, but No, it cannot be justified evidentially through investigation of the Resurrection of Christ or through an errorless biblical revelation. The Biblical writers, asserted Barth in his *Church Dogmatics*, "have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word."¹⁶

This attempt to have one's theological cake and eat it too was tremendously influential as long as dismal post-World War I conditions prevailed; but as soon as secular life began to recover after the War and the subsequent Depression, the inherent instabilities of Barth's dialectic caused it to lose ground. Critics soon observed¹⁷ that what Barth gave with one hand he removed with the other: since, in the words of our Parable [1],¹⁸ "the only knowledge of the architect's [God's] ideas came by way of the draughtsman's plans [the biblical writer's productions]," Barth's concession that the Bible was an erroneous book and that Christ's miraculous work was untestable removed all ground for accepting its Gospel message. Dr. Barth's first aid gave the suicidal patient a temporary lease on life, but his medical technique was too self-contradictory to bring about the needed recovery.

The Bultmannian and Post-Bultmannian Discharge of More Ammunition

Rudolf Bultmann recognized full well the instabilities in Barth's theology, and insisted that if the miraculous claims of the Bible could not be evidentially sustained (as the 19th century had asserted and Barth had conceded), then the only answer was to "demythologize" the Bible. One must, said he, eliminate the mythical, miraculous thought-forms with which the scriptural writers and the early church clothed the basic Christian message. What was the fundamental Gospel? For Bultmann, caught up in Heideggerian existentialism, it was "authentic self-understanding," which can (and must) be proclaimed to modern man without offensive miraculous trappings.

Barth had endeavored to discount the negative efforts of 18th and 19th century biblical and historical criticism of the Christian faith by a dialectic affirmation of the transcendent Gospel; however, his concessions to biblical criticism put a serious question mark over all biblical teaching about the transcendent God and the Gospel. Bultmann, while rejecting Barth's inconsistency, fell into a parallel difficulty: if the Bible

16. *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 529-30.

17. Cf. Brand Blanchard, "Irrationalism in Theology: Critical Reflections on Karl Barth," in John Hick (ed.), *Faith and the Philosophers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964).

18. Bracketed figures from 1 to 5 designate numbered sections of "The Parable of the Engineers" given above.

is a mythologically corrupted work, what makes its conception of existential self-authentication valid? Why not extend demythologizing to the Christian interpretation of *Existenz*?

Moreover, if Barth's flight to a transcendent Gospel put him in a realm of unverifiability, even more so did Bultmann's descent into existential subjectivity. In theory it seemed superficially plausible that the scriptural plans for the cathedral of theology "were not intended to be followed as such, but contact with them would increase the engineer's inner sensitivity to true building methods." But in practice, "one engineer's inner sensitivity did not produce the same results as another's, considerable confusion set in, and a tower collapsed" [2]. Just as secular existentialism was unable to "satisfy the search for authority," so Bultmann's religious existentialism, founded on the Kierkegaardian axiom that "truth is subjectivity," necessarily produced relativistic chaos on the theological scene.

This has been painfully illustrated by the diverse theological views of Bultmann's disciples, the so-called "Post-Bultmannians," in their "new quest of the historical Jesus." From Fuchs' hypostatizing of language ("the Word interprets us") to Ott's rejection of all objective history ("there are no such things as objectively verifiable facts"), one sees the inevitable theological outcome of existential commitments. The Jesus of Christian proclamation almost totally disappears in the blending of revelation with the contemporary interpreter of revelation.¹⁹ Theology degenerates to autobiography.

Tillich Fires Another Round

If the first suicidal shot against theology in the 20th century was discharged by the Modernists (using ammunition prepared by critics of the faith in the 18th and 19th centuries), and if Bultmann and the Post-Bultmannians fired rounds two and three (after Barth's first aid proved ineffective), then the fourth discharge at the victim was set off by Paul Tillich.²⁰

Tillich properly saw that existential theology confused revelational answers to the human predicament with the predicament itself, and he sought to avoid this grave difficulty by giving theology an absolutely firm base in ontology—in "Being Itself." Only Being Itself (or the "Ground of all being") is worthy of ultimate concern, he maintained, and all genuine religious statements are symbolic of ultimate Being. No biblical assertions and no historical realities (including Jesus Himself) can be regarded as absolute; at best they "participate" in Being Itself, while always pointing beyond themselves to ultimacy.

19. See the essays (including one by the present writer) in Carl F. H. Henry (ed.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1966).

20. See Montgomery, "Tillich's Philosophy of History," *The Gordon Review*, Summer, 1967.

But Tillich's appeal to ontology achieved little more than Barth's appeal to transcendence or Bultmann's appeal to existential experience. As analytical philosopher Paul Edwards has shown, "Tillich's theology is indeed safe from anti-theological arguments, . . . but only at the expense of being compatible with anything whatever."²¹ Tillich's concept of Being Itself is technically meaningless because it is completely formal; no religious statements about it can be taken literally, and the degree to which Christian "symbols" (even the Christ) "participate" in it remains indeterminate. As our Parable says [3]: "It was soon discovered that if everything was symbolic and nothing literal, no engineer could determine the real meaning of any particular element in the plans."

Tillich, like other major theologians of the 20th century, uncritically accepted Lessing's claim that eternal truth cannot be identified with historical revelation, and likewise bought the negative biblical criticism of the 19th century. Thus he eliminated the possibility of his making concrete and verifiable statements about God or about His relation to the world. As George Tavadar well noted: "Tillich has simply not been radical enough in criticizing liberal theology. He has not seen that the historians who doubt the value of the [biblical] records have failed to establish their point. Here, Paul Tillich remains a child of his generation, a victim of the historicism of the last century."²²

The Last Two Chambers Emptied by the Secular and Death-of-God Theologians of the Sixties

Two barrels of the six-shooter were left unfired when Tillich ceased his labors, and as the theological victim, already mortally wounded, reeled back and forth on Steinberg's teeter-totter, the "secular" and "God-is-dead" theologians of our decade took careful aim and finished him off. They have yet to realize that as a result they themselves are now in what Christian poet Charles Williams referred to as "the spectral grave and the endless falling."²³

No one should have been surprised at the secular and theothanalogical turn of contemporary theology: the way had been fully prepared.²⁴ Death-of-God theologian Paul Van Buren, who had taken his doctorate under Barth, woke up one morning to the realization that if God were indeed the transcendent "Holy Other" that Barth said He was—unverifiable in revelational history and subject only to the acknowledgement of unsupported faith—then God was in fact dead; God-lan-

21. Paul Edwards, "Professor Tillich's Confusions," *Mind*, April, 1965.

22. George H. Tavadar, *Paul Tillich and the Christian Message* (New York: Scribner, 1962), chap. v.

23. Charles Williams, *Taliessin Through Logres* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 31-32.

24. I have charted this development in detail in my book, *The 'Is God Dead? Controversy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1966).

guage no longer had any meaningful referent. Thomas J. J. Altizer followed out Tillich's basic "Protestant principle"—that the ultimacy of all religious assertions must be negated in order to prevent non-ultimate concerns from triumphing—and applied the principle rigorously to Being Itself, thus negating the very idea of God.²⁵

And why have the "secular theologians" such as Robinson, Vidler,²⁶ and Pike reprinted the old liberal humanism that finds God where man's social action takes place? Simply because the intermediate stages of 20th century theology—Barthian Neo-Orthodoxy, Bultmannian and Post-Bultmannian existentialism, and Tillichian ontology—having accepted the critical approach to revelation maintained by the old Modernism, were unable to offer any stable alternatives to humanistic liberalism. Once the reliability of God's revelation in the historical Christ of Scripture is put in question, as it was in 18th and 19th century thought, secular theology is the only consistent possibility: in rejecting God's revelation, man puts himself in God's place; now, all that is required is to work out the implications of man's centrality. Naturally, God will take a back seat or be redefined in terms of man's interests; naturally, human social action will become all-important; naturally (as in the theology of death-of-God advocate William Hamilton), Jesus will be transmuted into a humanistic "place to be" and "revelation" will now be found in sexual satisfaction and the amelioration of the ills of society.²⁷

Ironically, however, the secular focusing of theology has not in any sense accomplished what its proponents envisaged. Instead of church life reviving through concentration on the humanistic, indifference or out-and-out antagonism has been manifested. Church interest in England is still approaching the vanishing point in spite of the efforts of Cambridge radicals and the Bishop of Woolwich to outdo each other in a "more heretical than thou" contest; in the United States, theological seminary enrollments in non-evangelical institutions have continued their steady one-half percent decline each year.²⁸ Young people seeking careers and older people seeking meaningful community associations have recognized what ought to have been obvious to the theologians: if Christian faith reduces to humanistic values, then why bother with church membership or church careers? The peace corps, social work, psychiatry, and the Rotary offer more meaningful opportunities for secular association and service—and they are not debilitated by a conceptual vocabu-

25. Cf. *The Altizer-Montgomery Dialogue: A Chapter in the God is Dead Controversy* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967).

26. See Montgomery, "Vidler at Strasbourg," *Christianity Today*, May 26, 1967.

27. See Montgomery, "'Death of God' Becomes More Deadly," *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1966.

28. This has not been equally true of orthodox, confessional seminaries. The Trinity Evangelical Divinity School has grown from 31 students five years ago to 330 in 1967; the 130 new students this year were selected from more than 400 qualified applicants.

lary which even their own leaders do not take seriously. As for committed church members, they look at the secular theologian as little more than a betrayer; in the words of our Parable [4]: "They [the people who desired to worship in the cathedral] began to become violent and even claimed that the engineers were destroying their cathedral and making a mockery out of the engineering profession." The failure of the radical theologians' efforts to make the church "relevant" through secularism suggest that there might actually be some merit in that old teaching, "He who would save his life shall lose it."

One of the most tragic examples in the current revival of liberal theology is that of Bishop James Pike [5], whose theological devolution has taken him farther and farther left since he entered Protestantism at the point of an unstable Barthian theology. At the time the Bishop's work, *What Is This Treasure*, was published in 1966, he had already come to display utter arbitrariness in accepting and rejecting biblical materials in accord with his personal religious preferences; in a series of critical articles on his theology published that same year I cited a number of examples and drew conclusions from them:

If we can trust no revelation of God fully, then *we ourselves become the only remaining standard of judgment*. This is precisely the case with the Bishop of California, and the arbitrariness of his entire theology is the consequence. He picks and chooses Scripture according to his interests. Thus, as we have seen, he accepts the first clause of John 14:6 while rejecting the second, and uses the apocryphal book of Judith to argue for a loose sexual morality, while rejecting the absoluteness of the Ten Commandments found in canonical Scripture. In "How My Mind Has Changed," he insists on wine for Communion on the ground that "Jesus never drank grape juice," yet in *What Is This Treasure* he approvingly cites the non-Christian philosopher Porphyry (third century), who said of Jesus' healing of the Gadarene demoniac, "probably fictitious, but if genuine then morally discreditable" (p. 69). In *A Time for Christian Candor* he rejects Hebrews 12:5, 6 as "in direct contradiction to our Lord's teaching" (p. 136).

The more one reads the bishop, the more the conviction grows that in dispensing with all "earthen vessels," he has inevitably ended up with the earthen vessel of his own judgment. . . . Pike's adventurous theological career has made him the sole arbiter of the divine, whose increasing vagueness as the "Ground of all being" opens the floodgates to semantic confusion, to creedal double-think, and to moral anarchy.²⁹

29. Montgomery, "Bishop Pike and his Treasure Hunt," *The Sunday School Times*, May 7, 1966 (the first installment of the article appeared in the April 30, 1966, issue).

This year, with the appearance of *If This Be Heresy* and the reports of the Ford-Pike seances, the evident deterioration has proceeded even farther. In sublime disregard of the basic Christian affirmations concerning sin, hell, judgment, redemption, and resurrection, the Bishop endeavors to provide "empirical" evidence for human survival after death by way of psychic phenomena and psi-research. As in the 18th century, when alongside a Voltaire stood a Cagliostro, rationalism has shown its other face, superstition. By "superstition" we do not mean ESP investigations as such, for this is a legitimate field of inquiry; nor do we criticize the Bishop's laudable appreciation of empirical method. What is sad is the extent to which he, like the 18th and 19th century critics of the Bible, consistently confuses empirical investigation with unrecognized metaphysical and religious commitments.

The data collected by parapsychological experts over the years has been exceedingly impressive; only prejudicial blindness can ignore research compilations such as those by Sidgwick, Gurney, Myers, and Tyrrell, or the work carried on by Professor Rhine.³⁰ But one cannot stress too emphatically that *the specialists in this area have not been able to establish human survival or any other religious doctrine on the basis of their data*. Thus, after setting out the best evidence the ESP field offers, Gardner Murphy—by all odds one of the foremost American students in this field—gives this chilling personal testimony: "Trained as a psychologist, and now in my sixties, I do not actually anticipate finding myself in existence after physical death."³¹ And in concluding a detailed examination of the entire parapsychological field, Castellan quotes another French expert, Robert Amadou, and perceptively comments on his judgment:

"Il y a un immense décalage, entre la connaissance exacte que nous possédons de ces phénomènes et les suppositions qu'impliquent hypothèses . . . Nous ignorons trop les circonstances qui entourent l'apparition des faits psi pour pouvoir édifier une théorie satisfaisante de ces phénomènes, immédiatement vérifiable par l'expérience." Cette remarque se dégage d'elle-même au terme, de notre étude. Les véritables métapsychistes n'ont pu poser aucune conclusion scientifique: toute conclusion est manifestement empreinte de métaphysique.³²

30. E. M. Sidgwick, E. Gurney, et al., *Phantasms of the Living* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Book, 1962); F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1961); G. N. M. Tyrrell, *Science and Psychical Phenomena Apparitions*; (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1961); J. B. Rhine, *The Reach of the Mind* (New York: William Sloane, 1947).

31. Gardner Murphy, *Challenge of Psychical Research* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 273.

32. Y. Castellan, *La Métapsychique* (2e ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 119. Cf. the same author's related work, *Le Spiritisme* (2e ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959).

This is the point: Pike's own metaphysics—and, in light of the close connection between psi phenomena and the unconscious, doubtless his personal drive toward wish-fulfilment as well—creates the "survival" interpretation he places on psychic data. Why not other contexts of interpretation? In the Christian world-view, there are other spiritual powers to be reckoned with besides God and the members of the Church Triumphant.³³ Wrote B. Vaughan in his Foreword to a classic work by a noted British psychical investigator: "There is a great deal to say against Spiritism, but not much that I know of for it. But I shall be reminded that it has disproved the doctrine for materialism and proved the immortality of man. Not so; it may have only proved the immortality of demons."³⁴ A sobering point, and one reinforced by the most important German theological work published on the subject in this century: Kurt Koch's *Seelsorge und Okkultismus*, where the author scientifically tabulates the "frequency-ratio" of consequences connected with spiritualist activity on the part of practitioners (mediums, etc.) and followers; these include psychoses, horrible death-bed scenes, suicides, apoplexy, warping and distortion of character, compulsions and fear-delusions, indifference or positive hostility to Scripture and prayer, and obduracy (*Verkrampfung*) against Christ and God.³⁵

"Test the spirits" cautions the Christian revelation, but for Bishop Pike and the radical theology of the Sixties, testing of theological judgments has become impossible. If the current issue of *Newsweek*³⁶ is right that "Anything Goes" in our "Permissive Society" today, then theology has become relevant beyond the wildest dreams of its current proponents: now "anything goes" religiously as well. And this of course applies also to the practical ecumenical blueprints on the horizon, such as the Blake-Pike proposal. In a prevailing atmosphere of doctrinal vagary, with no clear standards of theological truth or error and with the inability to condemn heresy because few know what orthodoxy is,³⁷

33. Cf. E. L. Mascall (ed.), *The Angels of Light and the Powers of Darkness* (London: Faith Press, 1954), and J. H. Jung-Stilling's old but still valuable *Theory of Pneumatology*, trans. Samuel Jackson (London: Longman, 1834).

34. In: Elliot O'Donnell, *The Menace of Spiritualism* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1920). Cf. the occult and demonic experiences of fin-desiecle litterateur J.-K. Huysmans, who said after his conversion to Christianity: "With his hooked paw, the Devil drew me toward God" (see Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), chaps. v-vii).

35. Kurt E. Koch, *Seelsorge und Okkultismus*, Geleitwort von Adolph Koberle (5. Aufl.; Berghausen b. Karlsruhe: Evangelisationsverlag, 1959), pp. 162-66. Cf. the similar conclusions arrived at in *Vrais et faux prodiges* (Paris: Fayard) by Dr. Jean Lhermitte, the distinguished neurologist and member of the French Academic Nationale de Medecine.

36. November 13, 1967.

37. This is the real tragedy of the inept heresy-trial discussions concerning Pike in the Episcopal Church. As for Stringfellow and Towne's argument in *The Bishop Pike Affair* (New York: Harper, 1967) that opposition to the Bishop stems from ultra-right-wing forces inimical to the American spirit, one can only second a recent commentator who has called this charge "galloping paranoia."

church unions based on piety, sentiment, love of organization, or the simple urge for togetherness become not only live possibilities but appalling actualities. And the result is a steady devaluation of the coinage of the Gospel.

III. MODEST PROPOSAL FOR A RESURRECTED THEOLOGY

By strict analogy with Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*, it might be thought that we would recommend that the church eat its theologians. This suggestion does not need to be entertained, since, as we have seen in the foregoing discussion, contemporary theologians have eaten each other and nearly gobbled theology down as well. Conditions have become so bad that a radical rethinking of the whole theological enterprise has become mandatory.

The lines along which theological recovery can be made have been outlined in our Parable. While the cathedral was tottering on the brink of collapse, "there were a few engineers who, right up to the moment of final destruction, still pleaded that the only hope lay in following rigorously the original plans, that the engineers must bring their stylistic ideas into conformity with the architect's, and that deviations from their notions of style did not constitute genuine errors or contradictions in the plans." Contemporary theologians have destroyed themselves by their unnecessary and unwarranted destruction of biblical revelation, on which all sound theology is based. The only hope for a resurrected theology lies in a recovery of confidence in the historical Christ and in the Scriptures He stamped with approval as God's Word.

The Divine Christ of History

Neither rejection of the historicity of a Divine Christ, nor the fear of negative consequences if the question of His Divinity is subjected to historical investigation, can in any sense be justified—though such attitudes have characterized all mainline Protestant theological positions in the 20th century. Contemporary theology has uncritically followed the 18th century dicta that history is too uncertain to ground faith (Lessing's ditch) and that universal experience rules out the miraculous (Hume). But no one is obligated to accept Hume's circular argument (the very existence of evidential claims for Christ's miracles shows that no alleged "universality of experience" can eliminate miracle claims *a priori*),³⁸ nor can anyone legitimately depreciate history as the ground for religious faith (since history is but past experience, and our every decision, religious or non-religious, involves the weighing of experiential evidence and the commitment of faith to the implications of empirical data).³⁹ Moreover, contemporary theology is in no way required to carve

38. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), especially chap. xiii.

39. See Anthony Hanson (ed.), *Vindications: Essays on the Historical Basis of Christianity* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1966).

up the biblical records by 19th century documentary methods that are in fact rooted in discredited evolutionary presuppositions and subjectivistic analytical techniques; in actuality, these methods have been tried and found wanting in other fields (Greco-Roman and ancient Near Eastern studies, for example).⁴⁰ Concerning the destructive use of form-criticism on the New Testament documents, C. S. Lewis argued with tremendous cogency just before his death that a lifetime of work on comparative literary questions had showed him the utter fallacy of the method: "The 'assured results of modern scholarship,' as to the way in which an old book was written, are 'assured,' we may conclude, only because the men who know the facts are dead and can't blow the gaff."⁴¹

The historical value of the New Testament records about Christ is, when considered from the objective standpoint of textual scholarship, nothing less than stellar. Writes Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, formerly director and principal librarian of the British Museum: "The interval . . . between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the *authenticity* and the *general integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."⁴²

And in these attested historical documents the Divine claims of Jesus Christ and the Resurrection by which he validated those claims are set forth in the most lucid and persuasive terms. J. V. Langmead Casserley perceptively noted in his 1951 Maurice Lectures at King's College, London, that the evidence for the Resurrection is "like a knife pointed at the throat of the irreligious man."⁴³ Attempts like Schonfield's to explain it away invariably demand more faith than the Resurrection

40. See Edwin Yamauchi, *Composition and Corroboration in Classical and Biblical Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1966); U. Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1961).

41. C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," in his *Christian Reflections* ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 161. See also the excellent recent work by Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels: New Approaches and Outlooks* (New York: Harper, 1965).

42. Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper, 1940), pp. 288-89 (Kenyon's italics). For numerous other evidential considerations along the same line, see Montgomery, "History & Christianity," *His* (Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship), December, 1964-March, 1965 (also available as a *His* Reprint).

43. J. V. Langmead Casserley, *The Retreat from Christianity in the Modern World* (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. 82.

itself, for they fly squarely in the face of the primary-source material.⁴⁴ The saving events of the Christian Gospel are as factually sound today as they ever were, in spite of theological opinions to the contrary. Well ought we to ponder Ignatius of Antioch's words, written on his way to martyrdom under the Emperor Trajan (*ca.* A.D. 107): Christ "suffered all these things for our sakes, that we might attain salvation, and He truly suffered even as also He truly raised Himself up, not, as some faithless persons say, that his Passion was a matter of mere semblance, whereas it is they who are mere semblance. Things will assuredly turn out for them in accordance with their opinions; they will find themselves disembodied and phantasmal."⁴⁵

The Holy Scriptures

The historical validation of a Divine Christ leads to the establishment of the Scriptures as Divine revelation. When one examines, purely on historical grounds, the attitude of Jesus toward the Old Testament, one finds that He regarded it as no less than God's revealed Word. His attitude is one of total trust: He quotes authoritatively from the most obscure corners of the Old Testament; He makes no attempt to distinguish "religious" or "moral" truth from veracity in historical or "secular" matters; and never does He subject the Old Testament to criticism. Far from rebuking the devil himself for quoting Scripture, Jesus out-quotes him, employing the significant assertion that man lives "by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."⁴⁶

As even radical biblical critics such as Bultmann, H. J. Cadbury, and F. C. Grant have admitted, Jesus considered the Old Testament to be fully revelatory and totally reliable. But if Jesus was in fact God Incarnate as He claimed and as His Resurrection evidences, then His evaluation of Scripture is no mere human, fallible judgment, but the exact truth. And the same veracity attaches to His promise to His Apostles that His Spirit would give them "total recall" concerning His teachings,⁴⁷ thereby guaranteeing that the New Testament documents, subsequently to be written by them and by their close associates (under Apostolic guidance), would have revelatory value also.⁴⁸

44. Of *The Passover Plot*, Samuel Sandmel of Hebrew Union College wrote in *Saturday Review*, December 3, 1966: "Schonfield's imaginative reconstruction is devoid of a scintilla of proof, and rests on dubious inferences from passages in the Gospels whose historical reliability he himself has antecedently rejected on page after page. In my view, the book should be dismissed as the mere curiosity it is." Worthy of careful examination is the detailed scholarly review of *The Passover Plot* in *The Gordon Review*, Summer, 1967 (by Edwin M. Yamauchi).

45. *To the Smyrnaeans*, ii.

46. Mt. 4:4, quoting Deut. 8:3.

47. John 14:26-27; 16:12-15; cf. Acts 1:2-26; I Cor. 14:37; II Pet. 3-15. See also Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1963), pp. 138-39, 171-72.

48. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents* (5th ed.; London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1960).

Thus can the authority of the Christian Scriptures be established on a solidly empirical, historical footing. Problems of course still remain, such as the reconciliation of biblical and scientific data concerning the origin of man and the world, alleged contradictions in Scripture or between Scripture and extra-biblical data, and moral difficulties in the scriptural narratives. But these problems now become questions of interpretation, not of authority, for Christ Himself has settled the authority issue once and for all. His testimony to the de facto revelatory character of the whole of Scripture outweighs any and every counter-argument from particular difficulties; it now becomes the task of the faithful biblical interpreter, as he confronts problem passages, to seek effective solutions consistent with the high view of the Bible's authority held by the Incarnate Lord Himself.⁴⁹

Resurrection and Life

The keystone of a resurrected theology is, then, an unqualified acceptance of the resurrected Christ. His historical resurrection was the focal point of early Christian witness (and the early Christians were close enough to the events to know what had and what had not happened). Only when modern theology ceases its equivocation on the issue of the reality of the Resurrection will it find its way to a Divine Christ and to a fully authoritative Scripture. John Updike, in "Seven Stanzas at Easter," speaks directly to contemporary theology in this regard:⁵⁰

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body.
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

49. Many useful works have been written dealing with the problem passages of the Bible. Among the best in English are two books by New Testament Greek lexicographer William F. Arndt: *Bible Difficulties* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1951), and *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1955). Cf. also B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948); and Montgomery, "Inductive Inerrancy," *Christianity Today*, March, 3, 1967.

50. John Updike, *Verse* (New York: Fawcett World Library Great Books, 1965), pp. 164-65. This poem was written for a religious arts festival sponsored by the Clifton Lutheran Church, of Marblehead, Mass.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
 the same valved heart
 that — pierced — died, withered, paused, and then
 regathered out of enduring Might
 new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
 analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
 making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
 faded credulity of earlier ages:
 let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
 not stone in a story,
 But the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
 grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
 the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
 make it a real angel,
 weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
 opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
 spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
 for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
 lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
 embarrassed by the miracle,
 and crushed by remonstrance.

Bishop Pike is right to seek empirical grounding for faith; he is wrong in looking to ambiguous psi-experiences for that experiential base, when he could find it where Christians from earliest days to modern times have met it: in the Resurrection of Christ. Paul stated the issue precisely: "If Christ was not raised, your faith is vain and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If our hope in Christ is limited to this life, we are of all men most miserable. But Christ *has* been raised from the dead — the first-fruits of those that slept."⁵¹ The evidence that man today can live forever is available where it has been for twenty centuries: at the empty tomb. "I am the Resurrection and the Life," said Christ. "He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"⁵²

51. I. Cor. 15:17-20.

52. John 11:25-26.

IV. A PARABLE OF HOPE BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This presentation began with two disquieting parables: George's Moon, reflecting the contemporary secular dilemma, and the Parable of the Engineers, mapping the decline and fall of 20th century theological solutions to the secular predicament. Sad to say, uncertainty and loss of meaning in the secular realm proved to be more than matched by vagueness and indefiniteness in theology. "Physician," the secularist could well say to today's theologian, "heal thyself!"

We have been at pains to show that healing is in fact available in contact with the Cross, the Empty Tomb, and the Holy Scriptures. There a solid foundation exists for theology, personal faith, and spiritual renewal. In stark contrast to the parables with which this essay began, listen now to a parable told in the 7th century by an adviser of King Edwin of Northumbria to show the King the wisdom of accepting the Christian faith:

O King, this present life of men on earth, in comparison with the time that is unknown to us, seems to me as if you were sitting at a banquet with your ealdormen and thanes in the winter time with the fire burning and the hall warmed, and outside the storms of winter rain or snow were raging; and there should come a sparrow swiftly flying through the hall, coming in by one door and flying out through another. During the time it is inside it is not touched by the storm of winter; but, that little moment of quiet having passed, it soon returns from winter back to winter again, and is lost to sight. So this mortal life seems like a short interval; what may have gone before or what may come after it, we do now know. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any greater certainty, it seems fitting that it should be followed.⁵³

The new teaching did indeed bring "greater certainty"; and, in contrast to the uncertainties of contemporary speculation, religious and secular, it continues to bring that certainty to every man who, in his swift flight through the hall of this world, gives himself to the Christ who gave His life for the sins of us all. Unremittingly He seeks us, offering a certainty and a peace available nowhere else. In Auden's words — and we close with them:⁵⁴

From no necessity (He) Condescended to exist and to
suffer death And, scorned on a scaffold, ensconced in His life
The human household. In our anguish we struggle To elude
Him, to lie to Him, yet His love observes His appalling
promise; His predilection As we wander and weep is with us
to the end.

53. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ii. 13.

54. W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 137.