

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## **Beyond the Death of God Theology**

Renato C. Ocampo, S.J.

*Philippine Studies* vol. 19, no. 3 (1971): 526–544

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## Surveys

### *Beyond the Death of God Theology?*

RENATO C. OCAMPO, S.J.

#### Introduction

**E**VER since God's obituary notice was published for public consumption in *Time* magazine's April 8, 1966 issue, and the rise of the death-of-God theology to a peak of notoriety in the years that followed, the true state of the Death of God movement has been a real question mark in the minds of many interested parties who have been keeping a curious eye on the movement to see if, as in the parable of the farmer who went out to sow seed (Luke 8:4-15), it is as short-lived as the seed that fell among thorns, or as lingering and influential as those which fell on good soil to flourish and thrive and become a factor in the evolution of contemporary and future society.

The obscurity of the state of the movement's health is evidenced in the "Is it or isn't it?" uncertainty of people who contribute to theological discussions. As recent as December 26, 1969, *Time* magazine once again posed a question on its cover, namely, "Is God coming back to life?" Well, is He or isn't He dead? Is the death of God movement dead or is it alive and well?

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to answer the last question—first by probing at its roots and studying the

direction its growth has taken; secondly by examining the reaction of orthodox Christianity to it—as evidenced in some theological writings of recent vintage; and lastly studying the trend which may be in the process of being set by Harvey Cox's *The Feast of Fools* (1969) and Langdon Gilkey's *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (1969).

The question is not whether people today are still thinking about God. Undoubtedly this is a provocative question, but it is something that requires immense resources beyond the scope of this paper. One can safely agree however that modern man sees himself more and more as the climax of his universe, and to quote from Paul H. Furley's review of Andrew Greeley's *Religion in the Year 2000*:

The spirit of the contemporary world is hostile to traditional religion and particularly to the sense of the sacred, and both religion and the sacred are declining in influence both in society as a whole and in the lives of individual members....

The religious world-view is being replaced by the scientific and the process is proceeding at an accelerating rate.<sup>1</sup>

From this quotation, it seems that the Death of God movement is indeed alive and well. Certainly the Man-movement is undeniably vigorous and continues to flourish from day to day, without any sign of abatement. But is decide really necessary to accomplish this maturation?

Moreover the shift from the cosmological to the anthropological view of the universe is well established and much in evidence in theological writings. As the cosmos is de-divinized, it is at the same time being "hominized"—and this "homini-zation", under the impulse of modern atheism as John A.T. Robinson indicates in the *New Reformation*, implies for secular man that God is intellectually superfluous, emotionally dispensable and morally intolerable.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf Paul H. Furley's review of Andrew Greeley's *Religion in the Year 2000 Commonweal*. Vo. XLI (November 2, 1969), 284-5.

<sup>2</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965. p. 107.

Thus Ernst Bloch, the secular atheist, in his book, *Man on His Own* refers to this age as "an age in which man will shed the trappings of religion while maintaining his essentially religious ability to hope, to seek for the 'not yet' on his own because this is the essence of life."<sup>3</sup> The tone is remarkably non-anti-theistic, merely non-theistic, as if God has never ever been a factor in man's life. Whether this is really the post-Christian era of Vahanian continues to demand verification.

More and more secular man is becoming anxious about the word "God" because it is linked so closely to a Church ghetto-world. For many the word "God" is coming to mean the "Greatest Overwhelming Doubt." Is the motto of today's world "In man we trust"? Must theology therefore be dissolved into humanism? To all simple intents, this seems to be what the Death of God movement has reduced theology to—call it Christian atheism or any other name.

#### The Roots of American Radical Theology

Most probably John A.T. Robinson would not admit that Thomas J.J. Altizer, William Hamilton and Paul Van Buren, the foremost proponents of the Death of God movement in the United States, are his progeny, although some people would regard Robinson as at least directionally influential in the gestation of American Radical Theology. Radical theology has really come a long way, since *Honest to God* (1963). As early as 1967, Ved Mehta in his book *Over God Gesproken*, referred to Bishop Robinson as "behind the times," so far and so quickly had the Death of God movement advanced.<sup>4</sup>

In an interview published in the *Chicago Sunday Sun Times* on April 3, 1966, Robinson was asked about his opinion of the God-is-Dead school, and his reaction was:

I find it difficult to know just what to make of it. I mean, I'm quite certain that one's got to listen to what they're saying. . . . I think for him [Paul Van Buren], it's much more a question of whether the

<sup>3</sup> See the *New York Times* Book Review Section, March 15, 1970. 12-14.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *God the Future of Man*. N.D. Smith (trans.). New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968. p. 93.

word God may not be dead, and whether in fact one can operate with this thing at all, and I think this is a very real question. And certainly from talking to Bill Hamilton, I would have thought that his position is not the same as Altizer's. I suspect that this is a bit of a bubble which will fairly soon be pricked. And while they're raising important questions, and these will be on-going questions, to be taken account of, I doubt whether the position represented say, by Altizer in that interview with you, is one that can possibly really last, because I think it's so vulnerable in all kinds of points.

Today one may ask whether this "bit of a bubble" has indeed been pricked—and by whom?

#### A. Secularity

Certainly if we are to understand this God-is-Dead School of thought, there has to be some understanding of the cultural milieu which nourished this theological stance. In their defense of this position, it seems clear that one of the chief causes for radical theologians which gave birth to this movement is the fact that modern man no longer experiences God in his life.

Hence Langdon Gilkey takes the premise of this theology to be

the unreality of God for our age; his absence from our current experience; the irrelevance and meaninglessness of all talk about him; the emptiness and actual harmfulness of any so-called relation to him; the impossibility of understanding our experience of evil if we try to believe in him.<sup>5</sup>

This experience is due to a number of causes: 1. the loss of transcendence and the rise of immanence which in one form or another seems to go as far back as Schleiermacher (1779) and his inward approach to religion; Paul Tillich seems to have been influenced in this aspect of his theological thinking by Schleiermacher. Most would agree that Dietrich Bonhoeffer contributed to the loss of transcendence, so also John A.T. Robinson — and down to Hamilton-Altizer and Van Buren;

---

<sup>5</sup> Langdon Gilkey, "Is god Dead?" *The Voice: Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary* (January 1965) cited in Bernard Murchland (ed.) *The Meaning of the Death of God*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967. p. x.

2. the rise of secular humanism (the Enlightenment, Existentialism, Democratic theories); 3. the failure of Christendom to cope with social problems (sic Karl Marx, and more recently Roger Garaudy); 4. the development of psychology and psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud) 5. recent biblical scholarship (Bultmann); 6. the problem of evil and the existential feeling of *Angst* (Sartre, Camus).

In the light of these causes, one can understand why modern man no longer looks to God for the fulfillment of his needs. With the rise of science and technology, he has outgrown a God who has been presented to him as a *Deus ex machina*, a problem-solver, a sky-god, and a religious hypothesis—unverifiable in empirical inquiry.

Consequently radical theology unhesitatingly accepts the secular world. They have become allies. Here is a religion of humanity venerating humanity, in place of a transcendent God who is regarded as depriving, degrading and enslaving man. Hence Feuerbach could declare that every religious assertion is really a statement about man and not about God. He once announced that his purpose was to change "the friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, worshippers into workers, candidates for the other world into students of this world, Christians who on their own confession are half-animal and half-angel, into men—whole men."<sup>6</sup> Ultimately this is secularism in its most exclusivistic concept—not to be confused with secularization which is really an off-shoot of the Christian world-view, and which expresses the autonomy of secondary causes within their order, a contributing factor to the growth of modern science.<sup>7</sup>

To the traditionalist, this secularization may seem to spell the banishment of God, but it is the banishment rather of an

---

<sup>6</sup> John Charles Cooper, *The Roots of Radical Theology*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967. pp. 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Peter Hebblewaite, "The New Humanism." *The Way*. Vol. 10 (January 1970). 36.

"outside God" who maintains control over history and denies man a share in the making of that history.

Although radical theology and secular humanism share a certain kinship and a common ground—their mutual concern for human values, like concern for freedom, concern for others, man's dream of a new world, his longing for life, free from despair, there is more to the death of God theology than secular humanism.<sup>8</sup> Death of God theology has a rather elaborate Christology, but one which Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the great influences in the death of God movement, who stated that "to be a Christian is to be a man," would find terribly deficient.

Radical theology holds that God died that man in Christ might live. Sartre once said that Christ's passion was the suffering of a divine being losing himself in order to become human.<sup>9</sup> Christ is the "man for others"—an affirmation so familiar to the followers of Bonhoeffer and John Robinson. Thus the Christian is called to imitate Christ as he emptied himself on the cross.

Hence Hamilton explains that they are trying to see "if it is possible to live and think as a Christian without God" and they see this experiment "as both a practical-political and theoretical-theological task."<sup>10</sup> He also states that the time of the death of God is also the time of obedience to Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

But this is not really the same Christ, as Langdon Gilkey shows in his critique of Radical Theology which will be briefly presented in a later part of this paper. The Christ of Radical Theology is one divested of his divinity. So what else is new? It seems no more than a special concern for the building of a better world more worthy of man. But why Christ?

---

<sup>8</sup> Colin Williams, *Faith in a Secular Age*. New York: Harper Chapel Books, 1966. p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> Murchland, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> William Hamilton, "A Note on Radical Theology," in *Concilium*, Vol. 29 *Opportunities for Belief and Behavior*. New York: Paulist Press, 1967. p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Murchland, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

Why not Gandhi or Buddha or Martin Luther King? But more on this later.

### Christian Reaction

Whatever else may be said of the death of God movement, it was one which helped trigger off a modern-day "Renaissance." Never was so much attention given to man and his world by the major Christian Confessions.

Thomas E. Clarke notes that Vatican Council II will go down in history as the Council in which the Church inaugurated the age of Christian Secularity.<sup>12</sup> Albeit a moderate one. For Vatican II, especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, retained on the one hand the Church's age-old negativistic manner of speaking about the worldliness of the world but on the other hand it also manifested a far more positive attitude toward the world than had ever been seen in all of Church history—thanks to the growing influence of Teilhardian theology.<sup>13</sup>

Christians, shaken up and reacting to the death of God movement, began adopting the posture of "starting from the other end." So great was the impact of both the death of God movement and secularization, that they forced Christians to broaden the scope of their social orientation. Never before had love and brotherhood, community and fellowship, immersion and involvement in worldly activities received such emphasis. Even Cardinal Cushing's Pastoral Letter, aptly titled "The Servant Church," given in December 1966 was outstanding in its theme of service and in its secularizationist flavor.<sup>14</sup> Far and wide, there was a notable shift in emphasis in theology from the cosmological to the anthropological.

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., "The World is Already Christic." *America*, Vol. 112 (May 29, 1965), 800.

<sup>13</sup> Robert L. Richard, S.J., *Secularization Theology*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967. p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.



With the world becoming more and more transparent to science and subject to man, the Ptolemaic image of the world quickly lost favor and with it the image of the transcendent God. Current theology now pictures the genuine Christian as at home in the world and henceforth never again feeling guilty about involving himself in its activities.<sup>15</sup> Thus one often encounters in these writings an attempt to redefine man and the world and this being whom most would still wish to refer to as God.

But as in most reactions, the danger is one of over-reaction, especially when confronted with the denial of the very basis of all theological reflection. Thus at the denial of transcendence, the attempt at adjustment tended to an extreme form of immanence and immersion in the world. One is expected to encounter God only in the world which is now regarded as the *locus* and *contextus* of God's revelation. Consequently the *incognitos* of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats are those of humanity and secularity.<sup>16</sup> Thus Colin Williams in *Faith in a Secular Age* states:

. . . 'the transcendent' life is no longer mythical-metaphysical. It takes shape within the very heart of our secular conflicts. 'The 'earthly' life we put off is a narrow shrivelled worldly life. . . .'<sup>17</sup>

In Catholic writing, the trend of reflection ranges from (1) God's irrevocable acceptance of the world of man, taking it "lovingly into his intertrinitarian sphere of life"—through Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word and His Spirit,<sup>18</sup> to (2) an affirmation that "in Christ, *Amen* could be said to the secular, which could now be experienced as worship, because, since Jesus, 'all the fullness of God' has appeared on earth (Col. 1:19)."<sup>19</sup> to (3) an explicit reference to the world as already Christic, anonymously Christian but still really Christian—by

---

<sup>15</sup> Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World*. William Glen-Doepel (trans.). New York: Herder and Herder, 1969. p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Metz, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>19</sup> Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

means of the Incarnation, by the cross and resurrection.<sup>20</sup> In all this "aggiornamento" there seems to appear not so much an interest in polemical confrontation but rather a dialogic stance, trying in a sense to meet the problem posed by radical theology halfway.

And this "halfway" is Christ, the God-Man. Since radical theology wishes to continue to be identified as Christian, its only hold to the name is Christ. In its move to join radical secularity, it opted for Christ the man, the merely historical Jesus.

The importance of Christ as the common ground for the dialogue on the God-question between radical and Catholic and Protestant theologians cannot be over-emphasized. Since the common thrust is anthropocentric, secular, "the now and the not yet," a renewed concentration on Christology seems logical and expected, looking upon Jesus Christ not only as "the one from above" who enters human history and gives it a new direction but also as "the one from below" envisaging him as summing up and concretizing all of human aspirations.<sup>21</sup>

In non-Catholic Christian theology, John A.T. Robinson is, in some sense, one step ahead of his contemporaries. He has in his exploration into the God-question utilized an incarnational and eschatological form of panentheism as his approach to reconciling transcendence and immanence in man's secular existence.<sup>22</sup> He avows in his *Exploration Into God* (1967) that he is not espousing pantheism. God indeed forbid! (In this regard, he seems to have found explicit support from Edward Echlin who, in his article "The God-question and the Now Generation," is of the opinion that today's believer is really a panentheist.<sup>23</sup>) For Robinson, the charter of his understanding of Christian panentheism is scripture-based

---

<sup>20</sup> Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 802.

<sup>21</sup> Hebblewaite, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> See John A.T. Robinson, *Exploration Into God*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967. esp. pp. 157-61.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Edward Echlin, S.J., "God-Talk and the Now-Generation," *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (December 1968).

—"God as all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). There is no doubt that he was greatly influenced in his approach by Teilhard de Chardin whom he cites in *Exploration Into God* more often than he does Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>24</sup> oreover Robinson considers that "the death of God" is undoubtedly an unhappy slogan—certainly if taken as in any sense referring to a meta-physical event.<sup>25</sup>

#### Some Recent Critiques A.] Harvey Cox in *The Feast of Fools*

In further assessing the state of the death of God movement today, one ought to consider the critique of radical theology which Harvey Cox presents, together with the theological position regarding the God-question which he adopts in his latest book, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (1969).

In reviewing the contribution of the death of God movement, Harvey Cox notes how its advent and presence has brought about a significant renewal of faith and culture. Besides the frightening challenge it offered to theology, the death of God movement, according to Cox, enormously refreshed it. Thus Cox feels that even those who opposed it during its height [is this not an affirmation on the part of Harvey Cox that it is all over with radical theology?] now admit that the death of God movement was a "welcome elixir."<sup>26</sup>

In its over-emphasis on 1. Christ in the here and now, 2. immanence and 3. present actuality, Cox feels that radical theology has succeeded in extricating modern man, now culturally incapacitated for God, from the "prison of the past" only to lead him to the "dungeon of today." By demythologizing the present of its past, and by its canonization of the present, Cox points out that the death of God movement has seriously misjudged man's cultural mood which is a "a sometimes nearly frantic dissatisfaction with the now and a search for

<sup>24</sup> Robinson. *Exploration Into God*. pp. 160-61.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969. p. 122.

what is new, untried, novel." This—despite the presence of the NOW generation.<sup>27</sup>

Hence in such a radically incarnational posture, with its insistence that faith exist fully in the actuality of history, radical theology is just one small step to claiming that a transcendent God is no longer real. And this is its mistake. By elevating present experience to "divine" status, radical theology has forgotten that "man's distinctive creativity springs from his capacity to reach out for the 'not yet'." This is true also of faith. It cannot exist fully "within" any given situation but ever points beyond the constricting aspects of situations.<sup>28</sup>

Impressed by the new theology of hope, especially that pursued by Johannes Metz, Cox sees the future of the God-question within such a theological frame, and regards this in terms of *celebration* which has the capacity of linking man both to the past and to the future. It is in celebration that man expresses his hope for the future, that he is able to affirm "dimensions of time he might ordinarily fear, ignore or deny."<sup>29</sup> In a sense, to allow celebration (and laughter and festivity and hope) to disappear is to allow man to cease being a man.<sup>30</sup>

Thus in an analysis of contemporary man in his socio-cultural context, Cox notes that man's obsession with doing, producing and managing has deprived him of contact with vast reaches of reality. Why cannot man stop *becoming* and simply *be*? Celebration restores this crucial loss to man. It reminds him that, even as he is fully within history, there is something else which envelops that history.<sup>31</sup>

To sum this all up, Cox states that

Perhaps when we have learned again to celebrate, we will look back on the experience of God's death as merely the religious symptom of a cultural sickness—our worship of work and production, and our

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

insensitivity to the mystery from which human history arises and toward which it inevitably flows....

Only a rebirth of festivity can move us beyond the religious crisis we call the death of God.<sup>32</sup>

**B. Langdon Gilkey** (*Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language -1969-*) on the Death of God Theology

Langdon Gilkey's analysis of the death of God theology is even more persuasive than Harvey Cox's. It does seem very devastating to the hopes of longevity for the death of God movement which its followers may at present entertain. Gilkey's thoroughly perceptive line of reasoning shakes the very center of radical theology.

Gilkey nevertheless rejoices at the optimism that belongs to radical theology—as it looks upon the world as “a place of joy, of creative discovery, of developing reform and of expanding values.”<sup>33</sup> He further gives cognizance to the generally accepted opinion that the American brand of the death of God movement is more radical than the one in England or the Continent.<sup>34</sup> If one can glory in this! Its radicalism lies on six basic affirmations, according to Gilkey:

1. the unreality of God for our age; his absence from man's current experience;
2. the principle of the coming of age of man;
3. in Christianity there is no longer any “religious mode of knowing”;
4. the centrality of the historical Jesus as man's sole Lord; (Van Buren)
5. the tendency to dispense with all mythological, suprahistorical, divine, eschatological, or otherwise non-visible and merely “theological” entities because these are meaningless in a secular age;
6. its action-centered view of human existence.<sup>35</sup>

In taking issue with this challenge to the validity of God-language as expressed in the American death of God school,

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43 & 47.

<sup>33</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind The Renewal of God-Language*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969. p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.

Gilkey attempts to show that radical theology cannot with any consistency maintain the category of the Lordship of Jesus without God-language. And if Jesus is not Lord in the proper sense of the term, then it has no alternative but to desist from presenting itself as Christian.<sup>36</sup> Gilkey asks:

Can a merely historical Jesus be our Lord in the twentieth-century naturalistic world, where only the shifting results of historical inquiry relates us to him, and where there is nothing in our relation to him that transcends the eroding relativism of cultural epochs?<sup>37</sup>

Gilkey pushes the question further by asking why secular man who is supposed to have come of age and therefore a competent problem-solver should need extra-secular help from a man from the first century in determining something as crucial as his style of life. If radical theology strongly asserts man's secular autonomy vis a vis God, a fortiori, if it is to remain consistent, it has to assert autonomy vis a vis a merely historical Jesus. If secular man is really autonomous, he should not need Jesus in any essential manner to be able to speak of him as Lord. This is to assign to him a central role which, it appears, no other man does or can perform. Either radical theology admits it is humanism pure and simple, and therefore gives up its claim that it is an expression of normative Christianity, or else faces the issue that for Jesus to be truly Lord, God-language is necessary, and that therefore God is not dead.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, from a psychological standpoint, a merely historical Jesus is reduced to a veritable super-ego with the binding force of law, and is as crushing to the autonomy and health of man as in a transcendent deity. The reason is that in summoning man to become like him, he then leaves man, as in his merely historical status he must, to achieve this call on his own. Certainly both secular psychologists and secular political scientists would agree that a man as Lord is more destructive than God as Lord.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-60.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

In summary Gilkey makes a strong affirmation that

... the possibility of authentic existence within this theology (as well as the category of Lordship) presupposes the power of Jesus to act on us as other men do not, to act on us **now** and to set us free from ourselves as he was free himself. Only thus can he be Lord, only thus can the salvation here proffered be possible, and only thus can this theology make a legitimate claim to be called Christian.<sup>40</sup>

In this light radical theology is thus reduced to a statement of personal history, of the state of personal faith, whether Altizer's, Van Buren's, Hamilton's, or any other Christian's. It is rather a religious attitude, something on the "ontic" level, whose coherence is historical rather than theological or ontological.<sup>41</sup> The radical theologians can say that God is dead for them, but it is not the same as saying that God is dead for our age or that there is no God at all.

Even as Harvey Cox proposes celebration based on a theology of hope as the way of moving beyond the death of God movement, so Langdon Gilkey explores the question of the renewal of God-language as a way of confronting the radical theologians within their own milieu—within the secular, in man's concrete experience of being in the world of nature and society. Gilkey proceeds to show that the picture of human existence today—as religionless, come of age, and self-sufficient in a godless world is hardly faithful to man's actual experience.<sup>42</sup>

In chapters three and four (Part II) of *Naming the Whirlwind*, Gilkey argues, and argues well, that man can perceive the dimension of *ultimacy* in his experience of what Gilkey refers to as man's "ontological structure — namely his contingency, relativity, temporality on one hand, and his freedom and autonomy on the other." This ultimacy appears (1) as the source, ground and origin of man as he is; (2) in his awareness of his limitations; and (3) also at the same time as the source and basis of his values. Moreover there is ever present in man's

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-77.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

experience of this ultimacy and his language about it (4) an element of mystery.<sup>43</sup>

According to Gilkey, although contemporary man's culture has been desacralized, ultimacy cannot vanish from modern experience, but is present as it always has been in human life.

... not so much the seen as the basis of seeing, not what is known as an object so much as the basis of knowing, not an object of value but the ground of valuing, not the thing before us, but the source of things; not the particular meanings that generate our life in the world but the ultimate context within which these meanings necessarily subsist.<sup>44</sup>

A depth analysis (one possible designation of the process Gilkey follows in his "ontic" search) of numerous human experiences are presented to illustrate his thesis—from the event of birth to the various well-known contingencies of life, experienced either meaningfully or meaninglessly, to death.

The question of ultimacy is really reducible to a question of man's own being, so that as Paul Tillich is quoted as stating, in this region, man does not have a question, he is the question.<sup>45</sup> Without this sense of ultimacy, man encounters a Void, without answers, bereft of a sense of value and meaning, generating anxiety in his life. On the other hand, whatever commitment, sense of direction and security man may possess in life derive from contact with this Ultimacy.<sup>46</sup>

However Gilkey admits that in a secular milieu, man may not immediately encounter anything so definite as the God of Christian faith in these depths of his experiences. But what will be found is some "category of the ultimate, the transcendence of the creaturely, negative [the void of human despair] and positive, and inextricably mixed with the finite as its ground, necessity and limit."<sup>47</sup> This awareness is finally brought to a conscious and definitive form by the experience of illumination

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 313-14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.



and renewal in the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. Thus it is in this Christian life situation that the strange religious symbols of the transcendence and immanence of God, of eschatology begin to make sense.<sup>48</sup> This is very strikingly stated by Gilkey in the concluding paragraphs of *Naming the Whirlwind*:

... We can understand the symbol of the *immanence* of God as the source of our being and meaning in terms of the common, universal, and secular experiences of the reality, wonder and joy of life, of the coherences that experience offers to our inquiries, and of the universally apprehended meaningfulness of life's tasks. Correspondingly, we can understand the symbol of the *transcendence* of God through our continual experience of the elusiveness of that security and meaning, in the experience of the radical relativity of our truth, and in our sense of alienation from forgiveness and from the power of love—of all of which our secular friends, as well as we, are so very much aware. Above all, we can know the divine hiddenness in the Void of insecurity, despair, doubt, guilt, and death, which every human faces—even Jesus himself in his cry from the cross. The transcendence of God is initially experienced in the Void, which is the first terrible face of the divine that, at least in a secular culture, man knows. But then in the joy and acceptance of our contingent being, of our relative life, and of our death, and in the achievement of relative meaning and truth, of love and of community despite our fragmentariness, the renewed immanent presence of God is also known, and we begin to be aware of who that ultimate reality is—and the promise of an end in which God will be all in all takes on concrete, experienced meaning. The beginning of faith then appears in the awareness of the sacred in the profane, of joy and wonder in the midst of insecurity, of meaning and truth in the midst of the meaningless, and of life in the face of death, and it culminates with our understanding and affirmation of their ultimate unity in God.<sup>49</sup>

And yet, according to Gilkey, this is really only the beginning. It is finally in the law and love shown in Jesus Christ that this Mystery begins to become known to man who can then begin to speak of God, "haltingly, but with some sense of meaning and certainty."<sup>50</sup>

In the light of this universal human experience, so well expressed in Gilkey's concluding remarks to his important work, *Naming the Whirlwind*, it is understandable that the modern

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 468-69.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470.

atheist theologian may experience a certain *angst* in his rejection of the Ultimate. Even as the believer may fear that Freud may have been right in saying that God is simply a projection of his own wishes and desires, and nevertheless makes a "leap", so the radical theologian too in a sense has made a leap; he has set aside a whole tradition. This anxiety and uneasiness seem manifest in the hesitant conclusions of William Hamilton:

He knows that his rebellion and unbelief is both deeper and uglier than his bland worldly mask suggests, and he knows also (a bit less assuredly?) that his devout mask is too vapid. To be a man of two masks is, he knows, to be less than honest. Thus he has had to come out into the open about his faithlessness, even though he may suspect a hope that beneath it is a passion and a genuine waiting for something that may, one day, get transformed into a kind of faith even better than the one he has willed to lose.<sup>51</sup>

and also in that of Thomas J.J. Altizer:

The contemporary Christian who bets that God is dead, must do so with a full realization that he may well be embracing a life-destroying nihilism . . . 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.<sup>52</sup>

But perhaps they may find in Gilkey's attempt at renewing the God-language a way to move beyond this Void which they presently encounter in their secular experiences.

### Conclusion

In this admittedly non-comprehensive "survey" of the present state of the God-question as seen in the principal "beliefs" of the death of God school and in the responses made by some contemporary Christian theologians, one can only note the persistent tensions and polarizations in man's attempts at a relevant God-language. For the radical theologians, the tension, especially between transcendence and immanence, found reso-

---

<sup>51</sup> William Hamilton & Thomas J.J. Altizer (editors) *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966. pp. 90-91.

<sup>52</sup> Murchland, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

lution in the form of violently exclusive alternatives. Abetted by the contemporary atheistic milieu, the fundamental option was made in favor of man, and God had to go.

Harvey Cox has pointed out in his *Feast of Fools* and Langdon Gilkey has likewise noted in his *Naming the Whirlwind*, the psychological loss man is taking in his "*homo faber*" society. He is losing that sense of himself as *homo admirans*. They propose a recouping of this quality through celebration (Cox) and a consciousness and awareness of the presence of Ultimacy in man's secular experience (Gilkey). Peter Berger with his signals of transcendence seems to be moving in this direction in his *A Rumor of Angels*, and likewise Sam Keen in his *Apology for Wonder* and Robert E. Neale in his *In Praise of Play*. Andrew Greeley notes in his assessment of the trend indicated in the content of recent religious publications that this may be the emphasis of religious experience for the seventies. From present indications, there seems to be a resurgence of the transcendent in current theological literature.<sup>53</sup>

The over-all picture seems to indicate that Christian atheism or radical theology is dead, or is in the throes of death. As a bubble (sic John Robinson), I believe it has been pricked and the air has been let out. Langdon Gilkey's critique of the death of God theology may well spell its final deflation. However modern unbelief as a human experience, as a personal attitude, continues to live on in many people, and secularity continues ever more vigorously.

It is my opinion that the major contribution of Langdon Gilkey's *Naming the Whirlwind*, somewhat similar in intent to John A.T. Robinson's *Exploration Into God* is his attempt to cope with secularity and its influence on the question of God, and the consequent question of the viability of the Christian faith as it finds expression and meaning in a seemingly ever more non-theistic milieu—precisely by "locating" the Ultimate in secular life. It can only be hoped that the future may

---

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *New York Times* Book Review Section, March 15, 1970. 7 & 9; 30 & 39.

usher in movements and literature urging the recovery of Christian man's lost inwardness, a form of mysticism expressed in humor, wonder, celebration, and the further renewal of an image of a transcendent-immanent God to whose reality man can relate not as a Void, nor as an enemy, but as a friend — not in a state of polarity, but of some kind of "symmetric and sympathetic tension". Perhaps there is here a real coincidence of opposites.