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*Philippine Studies* vol. 15, no. 2 (1967): 259–287

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

# God and His Death: An Analysis of the Radical Theology of William Hamilton

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ROGER D. HAIGHT, S.J.

**P**ROTESTANT theology is today witnessing a new movement, the death-of-God or radical theology, the three main prophets of which are Thomas Altizer, Paul van Buren and William Hamilton. In fact, the whole United States witnessed it when for a while the communications media picked it up. The question is, then, is this movement significant even though it represents such a tiny fraction of Christian theology? Is it an incipient mode of thought which is destined in the future to grow? Or is it symptomatic of still yet another but closely related problem?

The exposition of Hamilton's position here undertaken is not motivated by any conviction that, theologically speaking, this movement at present has a great deal to offer in itself. Rather it is an attempt to see it as it is—an option of these particular men. If it has any significance at all it lies simply in the fact of its occurrence. That is, the death-of-God theology could be a mere symptom of something which is crucial for today—the problem of belief, the problem of God. With this in mind the following pages present Hamilton's position genetically. It is thus an attempt to show how this man lost his belief in God.

## THE BACKGROUND

It is not too difficult to determine at least the broad lines of the tradition out of which Hamilton's position today grew. He studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York after World War II and was content with the Neo-orthodoxy on which he was raised until the early 50's. This would include a thorough grounding in Barth, Tillich and Niebuhr. Hamilton has made it fairly clear where he stands in relation to these men.

Hamilton characterizes neo-orthodox theology as a protest against Liberalism's confidence that God could be possessed. Its response was its return to the dialectic of the presence and absence of God and its strong emphasis on the otherness of God. Barth contributed the "infinite qualitative difference" between God and man and the strong rejection of any possibility of man's power to reach God through natural theology. For Hamilton, however, it is precisely this dialectic that has collapsed so that the absence of God is being asserted undialectically over the presence of God.<sup>1</sup> "It is a very short step, but a critical one, to move from the otherness of God to the absence of God."<sup>2</sup> In this way Barth contributed to Hamilton's development at least by supplying him with a point of departure.

Two elements of the thinking of Paul Tillich may also have contributed to Hamilton's position, one positively and the other negatively. The positive contribution would be Tillich's criticism of God-language. Tillich emphasized that God cannot be treated as a being or a thing, however supreme; he himself spoke of God above God, the "ground of being" and "object of our ultimate concern" towards which man's language points but does not reach, thus, as it were, removing God one step further. The second element of Tillich's theology, against which Hamilton reacted, is the movement toward God which

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<sup>1</sup> William Hamilton, "The New Optimism — from Prufrock to Ringo," *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), p. 157. Originally published in *Theology Today* (January, 1966) and cited hereafter as N.O.

<sup>2</sup> William Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York: Association Press, 1961), p. 55. Cited hereafter as simply *New Essence*.

is as it were vertical, out of this world. God is the solution to to the brokenness of man and his world and appears as the answer to these problems from outside the world or in the depths of being. Hamilton's optimism concerning the possibilities of man makes him reject Tillich's "ground of being" as problem-solver for man's "non-being." Moreover, he characterizes existentialist theology as adolescent since it appeals to the individual in the critical periods of his coming of age, and thus has no appeal for a man who has overcome and gone beyond these problems—man come of age. "To mark the end of solitariness as a theological posture, of obsessive senses of sin, of crying out to God, absent or present, is to mark the end, in Protestant circles at least, of the existentialist mood."<sup>3</sup>

Hamilton links Reinhold Niebuhr's theology with the cultural situation around the second World War. He considers it a theological framework designed to shape the attitude of the Christian so as to enable him to cope with the despair and tragedy of the 30's and 40's. Labeling it a pessimistic theology, Hamilton asserts that the style of the 50's was remarkably the same: "Inner submission, prudent realism, accepting with maturity the tragic structures...."<sup>4</sup> This is summed up in the prayer which Niebuhr coined and which since has been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous: "God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, courage to change things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." "I suspect," Hamilton concludes, "that one of the reasons neo-orthodoxy now doesn't work is that this pessimism doesn't persuade any more."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today," *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 45. Originally published in *The Christian Scholar*, Vol XLVIII (Spring, 1965), and cited hereafter as D.G.T.T.

<sup>4</sup> N.O., p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Langdon Gilkey makes the following remarks about the movement as a whole: "From Barth this movement has accepted the radical separation of the divine and the secular, of God and ordinary experience, and so of theological language and philosophy; and it approves his further separation of Christianity and religion, and the consequent centering of all theological and religious concerns solely on Jesus Christ. From Tillich it has accepted the campaign against theism, and against personalist and mythological language about God..."

More direct influences leading to the breakdown of the God concept of Barth and Tillich come from Dostoevsky and Bonhoeffer. Hamilton has described his starting point as having two parts, one negative and the other positive. The negative part is his feeling that the God-man relation presented in biblical theology and neo-orthodox tradition has deteriorated. The all-powerful and transcendent God who would never let us go has let us go—the idea is ineffectual today. The positive thrust is his way of looking at Protestantism and the Reformation, that is, as representing a movement away from the sacred, away from the cloister and the Church and into the world. It could be sustained that Dostoevsky was responsible for the former point and Bonhoeffer the latter. Hamilton calls his study of Dostoevsky “the decisive influence in my transition from the neo-orthodox to the radical mode of theological thinking,” and adds, “If I had to allocate the blame for this move, I would doubtless point to Ivan Karamazov and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.”<sup>6</sup>

From his study of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Hamilton concludes that the novel expresses Dostoevsky's own soul and its struggle with God, thus making the religious problem in the book “not the actual emptiness of man's life but the possible emptiness of the heavens that really terrified Dostoevsky.”<sup>7</sup> His analysis focuses especially on Ivan and the problem of suffering. “Dostoevsky, through Ivan, faced a problem that modern Christian thought has tended to avoid: the suf-

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the older neo-orthodox leaders had unwittingly ‘pushed God out of ordinary existence’ to its edge (Bultmann), to its depths (Tillich), or to the special place where secular existence had been entered and transformed by revelation (Barth). In the thought of each, secular existence as it is ordinarily lived and understood was seen to be devoid of the divine and so in turn the divine could only be found in these special ‘unsecular’ places, dimensions or depths.” “Is God Dead?”, *The Voice*, Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary, Vol. 57, No. 1 (January, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> William Hamilton, “Banished from the Land of Unity,” *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 57. Originally published in *Journal of Religion* (October, 1959).

fering of children. So he (Ivan and Dostoevsky too?) accepts God and refuses to believe in him or his world."<sup>8</sup>

What does Hamilton absorb from Dostoevsky? Ivan, he says, really presents two images of God. "One is the God who explains suffering by positing an overall unity to things; the other is the Tormentor who compels Ivan to refuse to trust in the first. The first image is dead for Ivan (and for us). The second, Ivan's—and perhaps Dostoevsky's—true God, is not dead for us for it is very similar to the God of modern theology."<sup>9</sup> Dostoevsky (and Hamilton through him) is struggling unsuccessfully to reconcile two things, God and his world. The two are simply incompatible: and thus Dostoevsky believes in both, God and his world, but suffers in the tension of their very incompatibility. And even though he rejects God under the image of harmony and unity, still God returns, indeed as Tormentor, because of the conflict he causes. "Ivan's picture of himself we immediately recognize as self portrait; the God that is dead for him is dead for us; and his Karamazov-God of tension and terror is often the only one we are able to find."<sup>10</sup>

"No one," affirms Hamilton of Dostoevsky in 1959, "can better teach us what our despair is like."<sup>11</sup> He sums up the struggle between belief and unbelief, the struggle for one who still believes and accepts God in spite of the evidence of his world. In 1966 Hamilton reasserts how the problem of suffering has always been difficult to reconcile with the goodness of God. "It has always been hard, I am saying, and now it is impossible; for the terrible burden of suffering our time has witnessed can be ascribed to God only by turning him into a monster."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64. In this connection, one might also add Camus as an influence on Hamilton's thought. In *The New Essence of Christianity* the theme of suffering from *The Plague* is dealt with at some length by Hamilton.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73, note 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> William Hamilton, "The Death of God," *Playboy* (August, 1966), p. 138. Cited hereafter as D.G.

But probably the strongest influence on Hamilton, as well as the other death-of-God theologians, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Hamilton relates that his first encounter with Bonhoeffer's thought in the early 50's marked the first step in this direction. In a later short essay dedicated to Bonhoeffer Hamilton isolated three themes from his thought, three ideas that had the most influence in the formation of his own theological position.

The first of these is that now, in the mid-20th century, the world and man have come of age. This implies a full affirmative attitude towards the process of secularization. It means further that man must learn to live as if God were not there, independently of him, with full pride and confidence in himself. This means that there are no ultimate questions—death, guilt, meaning—to which man himself cannot furnish the answers. Existentialist apologetics have lost their validity. "There are problems and needs, to be sure, but the world itself is the source of the solutions, not God. God must not be asked to do what the world is fully capable of doing: offer forgiveness, overcome loneliness, provide a way out of despair, break pride, assuage the fear of death."<sup>13</sup> Since there is always a dimension of life over which man is powerless, there was said to be a natural longing for God. But this idea of an innate religious a-priori must be rejected. If there is a God he must not be found by renouncing the world that can do without him: he is not *needed*.

Bonhoeffer's idea of the world come of age cannot be stressed too much as an influence on Hamilton. In several places he has referred to his realization that God could not be considered as man's problem solver as the deciding experience in his conversion.<sup>14</sup> Looking back from 1966, Hamilton

<sup>13</sup> William Hamilton, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 116. Originally published in *Nation* (April 19, 1965). Cited hereafter as D.B.

<sup>14</sup> In his essay *The New Essence of Christianity* Hamilton has this to say: "My essay as a whole is deeply indebted to Bonhoeffer, and may be taken as a theological response to the coming of age of the world as he has analyzed it." (p. 12, note 2). Cf. also William Hamilton, "The Shape of a Radical Theology," *The Christian Century*, Vol. LXXXII (October 6, 1965), pp. 1219-1222. Cited hereafter as *Shape*.

describes the causes of his experience of the death of God as emotional events in which a number of facts converged into a single experience of being-without-God as contrasted to a system of thought that might exclude God as a conclusion. The events that he cites summarize this theme from Bonhoeffer: the disappearance of the idea of God as a problem solver, the breakdown of the primitive or naive notion of a God that fills the gaps of our experience, of a God who explains that which man cannot explain or control.

The second idea of Bonhoeffer which had an impact on Hamilton was that of a religionless Christianity. Although it is not altogether certain what Bonhoeffer meant by this, Hamilton uses it as a springboard for his own development. Religion is not necessary, he says, because man does not need God. This is not a rejection of a false Christianity, it is a rejection, simply, of religion. "There are those, Bonhoeffer says, who can make it today without God and without despair and guilt. And their success is just as real as the fulfillment of those who live happily and have a God."<sup>15</sup> The third idea that Hamilton cites from Bonhoeffer is a cryptic quote which may as well as any summarize Hamilton's position at present: "'Man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world.'"<sup>16</sup>

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The link between Neo-orthodoxy and radical theology is described by Gilkey thus: "With Bonhoeffer, however, the theological significance of these special divine dimensions and places disappears with the basic repudiation of dependence on God... And God remains only as He before whom we stand in accepting life and living in the world, the Beyond who is not found 'Beyond' or in the depths' but precisely in the midst of life...."

For he accepted the radical Barthian 'separations' or distinctions: first of dependence on and knowledge of God from all secular experience, and secondly of Christianity from all religion. Believing, however, in a very un-Barthian fashion that somehow the 'world had come of age' and 'needed God no longer,' he chose culture rather than supernatural revelation for his starting point, and felt that any dependence upon God for help in our problems was a false misuse of God and an escape from our task." *Op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> D.B., p. 118.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



A final influence on Hamilton, and by no means the least important, is American culture and what he calls its optimism. The whole death-of-God movement, Hamilton feels, is typically American and drawing from the cultural situation of twentieth century United States. "Is there something basically antitraditional about the American, even the American man of faith?"<sup>17</sup> In any case, Hamilton asserts that this movement might represent something quite foreign to European experience. Over against the Niebuhrian pessimism, he defines what he calls this new optimism of American society: "a willingness to count on the future and a belief in its real improvement."<sup>18</sup> "I think that the new optimism is both a cause and a consequence of the basic theological experience which we today call the death of God."<sup>19</sup> He refers to man's increased sense of the possibilities for human action, human happiness, and human decency in this life, in a way that has never existed before. "We do not have an equipoise between having and not-having; this was the equipoise of the neo-orthodox theology, the world of Dostoevsky's struggle, of existentialism and Prufrock and the rest. We are the not-havers, whose undialectical *Yes* to the world is balanced by a *no* to God."<sup>20</sup> This "Yes" means acceptance of the world with its rapid change, new technologies and automation and mass media. The time of alienation and the wasteland is over and a decisive halt should be called to so called "modern" and pervasive hostility towards technology, speed and automation.<sup>21</sup> The new optimism

faces despair not with the conviction that out of it God can bring hope, but with the conviction that the human conditions that created it can be overcome; whether those conditions be poverty, discrimination, or mental illness. It faces death not with the hope for immortality, but with the human confidence that man may befriend death and live with it as a possibility always alongside.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *New Essence*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> N.O., p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Shape*, p. 1221.

<sup>22</sup> N.O., p. 169.

## FIRST FORMULATION

Hamilton's first attempt to synthesize the foregoing themes into a theological position occurred in 1961 with the publication of the book *The New Essence of Christianity*. The presupposition of this essay is that today's age, more than any other, is an age of doubt. The Christian is infected by this as much, as any other and as a result the Christian theologian is "reduced to fragments, partial vision, broken speech, not because of the unbelieving world 'out there,' but precisely because that unbelieving world has come to rest within ourselves."<sup>23</sup> Because of the present coexistence of belief with unbelief, and because today there are no complete answers, Christian theology must be fragmentary. This means the Christian theologian does not affirm the whole of the Gospel, or of Christian tradition, but is satisfied with whatever can be accepted honestly and sincerely. The Christian must do the best he can with what little can be salvaged from Christian tradition—perhaps a Christological affirmation and some ethical consequences. It is from this explicitly relative and subjective point of view that Hamilton begins to delimit the remnants of Christian theology.<sup>24</sup>

*The Death of God*

Hamilton's analysis of today's unbelief begins with an acceptance of the Barthian-Tillichian notion of God; the God whom we cannot know, but who has made himself known to us; the God who cannot be spoken of or treated as an object, but whom we can address in praise and reverence. As correct as this notion is, like every theological formulation, it becomes inadequate with time. This was yesterday's idea of God; today "We have come to find it far easier to say 'we cannot know'

<sup>23</sup> *New Essence*, p. 28. It "may well be that we can search for only a provisional order, a makeshift position, a place to stand for a moment before moving on into darkness." *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "No, we must accept our subjectivity and partial vision, and save ourselves from the errors of the earlier essence-of-Christianity tradition simply by not claiming permanent validity to what we see. All our theology, even our essences of Christianity, must be done afresh in every generation." *Ibid.*, p. 19.

than to say 'he can make himself known.' His holiness and separation are beginning to look like an indifference."<sup>25</sup> The key area, Hamilton feels, where this idea of God fails, or simply evades the issue of experience, is in relation to the problem of suffering and evil. "The insurmountable barrier to Christianity does seem to me to be the problem of evil."<sup>26</sup> Participation in suffering, the real experience of it, often destroys the possibility of faith. This is the one problem to which theology has no answer. Interestingly, the data of human suffering, of darkness and meaninglessness, of despair, which are the roads to faith for a Kierkegaard, are precisely where, for Hamilton, the voice of God is not heard, and where today's man cannot speak the word of faith. Thus it is this phenomenon that is leading man into a time of death of God.<sup>27</sup>

By the death of God Hamilton is not referring at this time to a belief in the non-existence of God. Rather he is "talking about a growing sense, in both non-Christians and Christians, that God has withdrawn, that he is absent, even that he is somehow dead."<sup>28</sup> One must note Hamilton's language here. The "somehow" clearly indicates that he is speaking metaphorically. Moreover, he explicitly states that he is referring to a "growing sense," that is, in the collective consciousness of that group usually labeled "modern man." What Hamilton means by the death of God in 1961 is clearly a growing loss or weakening of faith. "This is the point. The experience of many men in our time has suggested that the traditional sovereign and omnipotent God is a difficult God to perceive or to meet."<sup>29</sup>

If this were Hamilton's only meaning, however, there would be no problem with his use of the phrase the "death of God." But he continues:

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> A statement of Camus quoted by Hamilton on p. 35 and again on p. 44, note 7, *ibid.* Here William brings to bear the weight of his conclusions from Dostoevsky but in terms of Camus.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-5. "The suffering of a child could not be reconciled to anything we know about God. It forced us to the wall, without an answer." p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

We seem to be those who are trying to believe in a time of the death of God. Just what do we mean when we say this? We mean that the Augustinian-Reformed portrait of God itself is a picture of a God we find more and more elusive less and less for us or with us. And so we wonder if God himself is not absent. When we speak of the death of God, we speak not only of the death of ideas or the falsely objectivized Being in the sky; we speak, as well, of the death in us of any power to affirm any of the traditional images of God. We mean that the world is not God and that it does not point to God. Since the supports men have always depended on to help them affirm God seem to be gone, little wonder that many take the step and wonder whether God himself has gone.<sup>30</sup>

The problem this passage raises is that certain phrases, given the concept of God Hamilton has accepted, seem illogical; such as, God being referred to as absent or gone. Yet he insists that he is not speaking only of the death of a false God, of idols, or of God wrongly conceived so that a true notion of God might appear. What he is saying is that the true notion of God, today's correct and accepted notion of God, has also become an idol. Man's consciousness today says first: the God who is "correctly" conceived is dead, *that* notion of God cannot be affirmed, *that* God does not exist. Secondly, it implies that if God is to be affirmed at all, he must be conceived differently. Divinity must be different; in a sense the death of God for Hamilton at this period is not simply a loss of faith in the existence of the correctly conceived God of Christianity. Rather it is this *plus* the *feeling* that *some* God *must* exist, but must be conceived differently if this is to be affirmed. What he describes then is truly a case of belief and unbelief existing simultaneously and without synthesis in human consciousness.

To bring out this dual nature of his experience, one of distress for the Christian, Hamilton asks how one can adjust to this situation. How does the Christian move from the realization and acknowledgment of the simple and rueful fact that God (as traditionally conceived) has disappeared, that the word 'God' simply has no meaning, towards a sense of some kind of reappearance and presence of God? He rejects the dialectical idea that every doubt implies faith. He rejects as well

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9. "...the God of the Augustinian-Reformed tradition, is not only remote, he is irrelevant; he not only is far from us, he has departed from us." p. 55.

the dialectical movement of Kierkegaard and a formulation of it by Tillich whereby the very emptiness of man is his being filled by God; when God seems farthest from consciousness, then he is most with us and we are not alone. Both of these ideas, Hamilton feels, confuse the issue by some sort of verbal trick or dialectical manipulation of the real experience of loss. The utter difference and non-reducibility of the experience of having and not having must be retained.

Yet Hamilton saw at this time in the religious situation of the Christian something which complemented the simple absence of God. This is the fact that God's absence has left a void within Christian man; God's separation from the world and from men is not absolute (yet), for God somehow speaks to us in his very disappearance through the real experience of being without him. As a proof of this, Hamilton cites the apparent calmness with which the Christian faces the absence of God from the world. God has not yet decisively withdrawn; he is still present in man's desire and yearning for him, in our wish for his return, in the realization that we cannot do without him. Thus, despite the burden which this absence of God is for the Christian, he can still wait for God's return; he can still hope. Despite God's disappearance, even in the very moments when his absence is most keenly felt, the Christian finds it possible to pray for his return. "...To be a Christian today is to stand, somehow, as a man without God but with hope . . . Faith is, for many of us, we might say, purely eschatological. It is a kind of trust that one day he will no longer be absent from us. Faith is a cry to the absent God; faith is hope."<sup>31</sup>

### *A New Concept of Divinity*

Hamilton is not satisfied with a mere waiting in the situation of a God somehow present only in his absence. Such a

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4. But Hamilton adds, as if he knew the direction of his future thought, "Perhaps our calmness will disappear when we face the possibility that God will even more decisively withdraw—that he will withdraw from our selves as he has already withdrawn from the world, that not only has the world become sheer world but that self will become sheer self." *Ibid.*, p. 66.

partial solution as waiting for the same God who has disappeared or who is dead cannot provide a final deliverance from this situation. That "deliverance will somehow be connected with another image of God . . . that emerges when we try to take our next step and say something about Jesus the Lord."<sup>32</sup>

Hamilton resorts to Christology and the New Testament to establish this new concept of divinity. His movement, however, is not from divinity to Jesus as divine, but rather from his interpretation of how the New Testament understands Jesus to the meaning of divinity itself. Hamilton argues that the basic understanding of Jesus in the New Testament is that he is the humiliated and suffering Lord. This is what "to be God" meant to the early Christians. "Jesus is Lord by being a servant; to be Lord and to be servant are the same."<sup>33</sup> Jesus is thus not divine in the sense of that kind of God who is the transcendent ruler of the universe, apart from man. No, the divinity of Jesus transforms that whole conception of God: divinity simply does not mean anything save the Lordship of Christ which is suffering, humiliation and service.

If there is divinity apart from Jesus, it is a form of divinity that Jesus as suffering Lord corrects, destroys, transforms. In Jesus the Lord we see for the first time what Christian 'divinity' must be taken to be: it is God withdrawing from all claims to power and authority and sovereignty, and consenting to become himself the victim and subject of all that the world can do.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86. Hamilton is dependent on Bonhoeffer for this idea. However, far from just taking over the idea, he tries to substantiate it from Scripture. To the objection that this is a partial view of Jesus' Lordship Hamilton simply agrees.

Yet at this point, Hamilton seems to accept the Resurrection. "I believe that the resurrection of Jesus can be affirmed as an ordinary event; the empty tomb tradition, at least, seems to me to contain historical material of a high degree of probability. The historical texture to this event is not equivalent to its meaning for faith, but there can be no meaning for faith, I am sure, without this historical texture." P. 116, note 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

*Christian Life and the Lordship of Jesus*

Hamilton sees Jesus' Lordship as the answer to three basic religious questions. The first question is: how can we know God if he is so utterly beyond our observation? Jesus answers this because he defines what divinity is and embodies it. The second is the existential question of salvation: how can man who is enslaved to himself be freed and saved from himself? Jesus answers this because he is God's forgiveness; a forgiveness that is "a bending down to us of God defined by Jesus' work and words."<sup>35</sup> To the third, the ethical question: how can we know and do God's will? the response in Jesus is: "the world is God's; Jesus is Lord of the world; this lordship is received by the Christian as he stands and works in the world; the form of his action is the form of Jesus' Lordship."<sup>36</sup> The answer in brief is thus discipleship.

Christian life in a time of the absence of God is a life of discipleship, a life under the Lordship of Jesus. Since Jesus' Lordship over the world was really identification with the world, a surrender to it and a being for it, like Jesus the Christian should be for the world in dedication and service. Further, Jesus' Lordship had the twofold aspect of "now" and "in the future." Jesus was Lord and Jesus would be Lord. While his present Lordship is one of suffering, service and hiddenness, his eschatological Lordship will be one of victory. It is the former Lordship that Christians must take as their standard; they must live in the present, in the now, and must expect the emptiness and loneliness of being in the world. But the Christian can have a certain peace since victory is promised in the future, a peace, however, rooted in hope and not in actuality. Basically, the Christian attitude that Hamilton espouses here is pessimism without despair. Hope (not faith) in another life, a sort of orientation to another life in hope, is healthy because it enables the Christian to accept this world and this life as meaningless. In hope and under the Lordship of Jesus the Christian is enabled to live in an unintelligible now.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-115. Along with this, Hamilton rejects "religion" in the sense of any organization with an ecclesiastical-sacramental view

Hamilton goes on to describe the qualities of the life-style of the Christian today, the various characteristics which define what it is to be a saint in the world, a secular saint. From one point of view the style of life he describes is not Christian at all; but it is an attitude which the Christian can adopt with integrity both because of his being-without-God and because the qualities he presents flow to some degree from the idea of Jesus the lowly one, humiliated and totally at the disposal of others. Of the several qualities that Hamilton recommends for the Christian secular saint the principal one is an attitude of acceptance and resignation. By resignation he means freedom through acceptance in the face of the inalterable. This attitude is best seen as opposed to the existentialist life-style which is characterized by rebellion, activism, the experience of being trapped, with the resultant visible and dramatic break with conformist culture. Over against this, Hamilton recommends passivity and acceptance of life in the world which simply is the way it is. This would be our attitude toward death for example. If the secular saint is to be a man fully in the world he must suffer it calmly, and not seek to escape it.

Interestingly, Hamilton makes the following remarks about prayer: "All we know is that somehow our style of life must make room, in our world of noise and movement, for the silence, the waiting, the withdrawal of the life of prayer."<sup>38</sup> "One can perhaps become a Christian without prayer, but surely one cannot stay Christian without it."<sup>39</sup> Yet, as to the nature of this prayer, what it is in this context, Hamilton is at a loss. "Perhaps the secular saint today . . . can know only the experience of being torn apart in the midst of his failure to pray."<sup>40</sup>

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of Jesus' present Lordship. He quotes Bonhoeffer: "There are not two realities but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifest in Christ in the reality of the world." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, quoted by Hamilton, *ibid.*, p. 105. Of course, Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ and his relation to the world and the Church is far more traditional than this isolated text would indicate.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.



## TOWARD A MORE RADICAL POSITION

*The New Essence of Christianity* is most interesting in that it represents Hamilton's attempt to formulate and systematize what is basically a state of transition and confusion. Yet Hamilton has said essentially all that he has to say in the *New Essence*. In the next five years, while remaining within the same framework, he has, however, pushed his earlier affirmations further in the sense that he has become more radical. The following will trace chronologically that development within the two main themes of the *New Essence* which are: a) the death of God, and b) the Christian's response.

In 1963 Hamilton wrote the article "Thursday's Child" which, although it is "not wholly autobiographical," is strongly that. Describing the Christian theologian, he says. "He really doesn't believe in God, or that there is a God, or that God exists . . . At the center of his thoughts and meditations is a void, a disappearance, an absence."<sup>41</sup> This is the fact; Hamilton the theologian does not believe that there is a God; and yet the subjective response to this experience of the absence of God can only be expressed as a tension of opposites. For on the one hand Hamilton says the theologian, without faith and without hope, wills this faithlessness over and above merely accepting it. And on the other hand, however candid he is about his faithlessness, the theologian "may suspect and 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>42</sup>

The stance of Hamilton here can be summed up as waiting, praying, loving, with Jesus as the model, in the absence of God. He retains the ethical dimension wherein Jesus dominates the Christian, but Jesus here is not the person he was in the *New Essence*. He is more an abstract ideal, a symbol for a commitment to humanity as the ultimate value.

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<sup>41</sup> William Hamilton, "Thursday's Child," *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 88. Originally published in *Theology Today* (January, 1964).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

...Jesus Christ is best understood as neither the object nor the ground of faith, neither as person, event or community, but simply as a place to be, a standpoint. That place is, of course, alongside the neighbor, being for him. This may be the meaning of Jesus' true humanity and it may even be the meaning of his divinity, and thus of divinity itself.<sup>43</sup>

In another fuller statement of his position in 1963 Hamilton describes the death of God less in personal terms, more in social terms, but still in experiential terms. He explicitly calls the phrase a metaphor,<sup>44</sup> and only an event in a special odd sense. It is an event only insofar as it is a group experience of the absence of God which is a peculiar phenomenon of our age. The world today is such that God is not present to men and only in this sense is it an event, a public event.<sup>45</sup> And in this sense too, "God is dead" is a statement about the nature of the world today.<sup>46</sup> God is dead means that men positively experience the absence of God.

Although Hamilton positively experiences and asserts the non-existence of God, he distinguishes himself from the atheist at this point on two counts. First, he is a man of faith, not in God, but in man over against God. This faith means a being for man; faith means love of neighbor. "for if there is a movement away from God and religion, there is the more important movement into, for, toward the world, worldly life, and the neighbor as the bearer of the worldly Jesus."<sup>47</sup> Together with

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>44</sup> D.G.T.T., p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> "We have insisted all along that 'death of God' must be taken as symbolic rhetoric for something else. There really is a sense of not-having, of not-believing, of having lost, not just the idols or the gods of religion, but God himself. And this is an experience that is not peculiar to a neurotic few, nor is it private or inward. Death of God is a public event in our history." *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>46</sup> It is really that we do not know, do not adore, do not possess, do not believe in God. It is not just that a capacity has dried up within us; we do not take all this as merely a statement about our frail psyches, we take it as a statement about the nature of the world and we try to convince others. God is dead. We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God." *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

this faith in the world there is again the absolute denial of any need of God for man. God and religion are simply not necessary for man in any sense. "To assert that we are men moving from the cloister to world, church to world, to say that we are secular men, is to say that we do not ask God to do for us what the world is qualified to do."<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, the idea of waiting further distinguishes Hamilton from the atheist. "There is an element of expectation, even hope, that removes my position from classical atheisms and that even removes it from a large amount of anguish and gloom."<sup>49</sup> He waits for a God who might return in a role different from "problem-solver"—a God who is not the object of our needs, but a God to be delighted in; not needed, but enjoyed. "Our waiting for God, our godlessness, is partly a search for language and a style by which we might be able to stand before him once again, delighting in his presence."<sup>50</sup>

One might ask how this theme of waiting can be maintained alongside the strong assertions of disbelief. As a matter of fact by 1965 the waiting theme seems to have been dropped. "The death of God radical theologians . . . are men without God who do not anticipate his return,"<sup>51</sup> he says. And again, in another place:

But I believe that "death of God" as a metaphor is to be preferred to and distinguished from similar phrases in theological discourse such as "absence of God," "disappearance," "eclipse" or "the hidden God." A real loss, something irretrievable, is portrayed by the metaphor of death. . . . The one who is lost is found; the hidden one makes himself known. It is just this dialectic, the radicals say, that has collapsed, and therefore the phrase "death of God," with its special history over the past 100 years, says exactly what we feel needs to be said.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40. "It is not true to say that there are certain areas, problems, dimensions of life today that can only be faced, solved, illuminated, dealt with, by a religious perspective." *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> William Hamilton, "American Theology, Radicalism and the Death of God." *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. 6. Originally published in *Christianity and Crisis* (December 13, 1965). Cited hereafter as A.T.R.D.G.

<sup>52</sup> *Shape*, pp. 1220-1.

Moreover, prayer, affirmed possible, indeed necessary for the Christian in the *New Essence*, is impossible now. "I do not see how preaching, worship, prayer, ordination, the sacraments can be taken seriously by the radical theologian."<sup>53</sup>

At this time too, Hamilton insists that despite the fact that he is willing to do without God, and despite his critics' assertions to the contrary, he is still a Christian, in the mainstream of Protestant tradition, because he accepts Jesus of Nazareth. "The Christian is defined, therefore, as the man bound to Jesus, obedient to him and obedient as he was obedient."<sup>54</sup> To the questions, Why Jesus? and Obedience to whom? Hamilton admittedly has no answers; Jesus is simply his choice, his free choice.<sup>55</sup>

In an article in *Playboy* magazine in 1966 Hamilton begins to cloud the meaning of the phrase "the death of God." For the first time he uses impersonal language indicating that the death of God means that God once was (out there, so to speak), and now has ceased to be. Referring to the phrase, Hamilton writes:

It might mean that there once was a God to whom adoration, praise and trust were appropriate, possible and even necessary, but that there is now no such God. This is the position of the death-of-God or radical theology. It is an atheist position, but with a difference. If there was a God, and if there now isn't, it should be possible to indicate why this change took place, when it took place and who was responsible for it.<sup>56</sup>

Yet throughout the article this event is not a cosmic event, but a human event.<sup>57</sup> It happened not to God, but to man. It happened to the world in the sense that it has happened in the experience of man. "Thus 'When did it happen?' gets a three-part answer. In one sense with Jesus and the cross. In another sense in Europe and America of the last century. In

<sup>53</sup> A.T.R.D.G., p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Shape*, p. 1221.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> D.G., p. 84. Cf. also *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, p. x.

<sup>57</sup> "...I am... committed to the death of God as a theological and human event." *Ibid.*, p. 79.

a final sense, today, just now."<sup>58</sup> Hamilton simply interprets the death of Jesus, who was divine, as a revelation to man that there is no need of any god or religion. The saying "he who abides in love, abides in God" he implies, has a secular or humanistic meaning, that is, love is a substitute for God. To describe the death of God in the nineteenth century. Hamilton refers to literary themes of the period which celebrate nature and man as its apotheosis and mark the collapse of God into the world. And in our own day, Hamilton feels that men who look around will also be led "to see and grasp this event," "to understand and accept it."<sup>59</sup> Thus the event of the death of God, although foretold symbolically in Christ's death, has its locus thereafter in man's consciousness. God is dead still means the public event of God being dead *for men*.<sup>60</sup> "We are talking about a real loss, a real doing without, and—whatever we do expect of the future—we do not expect the return of the Christian God, open or disguised."<sup>61</sup>

Here too, for the first time, over and above the replacement of God by the community which will forgive, judge, console and arbitrate, and by Jesus who serves as the focus for obedience and the object of trust, loyalty and love, Hamilton inquires into the possibility of things sacred without God. He suggests two areas where man can totally give himself to something or someone and thereby raise an area of existence to the level of the "sacred:" sexuality and death. Regarding sexuality he

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> "It is because something has happened to us, and because we suspect that it may have happened to others, that we are talking about the death of God." *Ibid.*, p. 84. Hamilton, especially in his description of the three stages of the death of God, comes close here to the language of Altizer who also recognizes these stages. But, whereas we interpret Hamilton as speaking of a gradual loss of faith in God (or a gradual becoming aware of the absence of God), Altizer's view is more subtle. He too analyses the consciousness of western civilization, but seems to conclude from this to a God or Transcendence which has negated itself to immanence, thus becoming non-God. But there is no sign of this ongoing dialectic in Hamilton. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 137-8 where Hamilton gives another description of the death of God in purely subjective or experiential terms.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

asks whether such an expression of total love cannot consecrate. Referring to Lincoln's speech over the battlefield of Gettysburg Hamilton concludes: "Suffering and dying men . . . have the power to make holy or sacred what was ordinary and profane."<sup>62</sup>

Hamilton has moved quite some distance from his synthesis of 1961. There God was still present in the void left by his absence, enough to be the object of hope. He was still someone to be waited for and prayed to by the Christian. Today God is definitely lost to faith; there is no prayer or waiting. And while God is still dead for man in Hamilton's writings up to the present, there is some indication that he is moving towards Altizer's position where God, the God who was, is no longer or is in a different form. But as far as Hamilton's own faith is concerned, it seems, he has said about all he can.<sup>63</sup>

#### HAMILTON AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD

What has been exposed thus far is a genetic portrait of a Christian who has lost his belief in God. The value of the fairly clear progress over a fifteen year period that Hamilton provides lies in the supposition that he is, as a matter of fact, a "modern man," and although hardly the typical Christian, to some degree he might represent more than himself in the difficulties he presents. Secondly, Hamilton (along with the other death-of-God theologians) raises "the basic theological

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Ogletree, in *The Death of God Controversy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), points to five questions that Hamilton has laid out for further investigation; "(1) further development of a 'radical' christology, perhaps along the lines of traditional discussions of the 'imitation of Christ;' (2) fresh consideration of the nature of man, with fuller attention to his possibilities for doing something about his world; (3) a second look at the relation of radical theology to the life and ministry of the church; (4) an examination of the place of nineteenth-century thought both in the development of contemporary culture and as an aid to the clarification of radical theological thinking; (5) exploration of the possible contribution of the radical theology to interfaith dialogue, especially with Judaism and Buddhism (the latter, of course, itself being an 'atheistic' religion)." pp. 38-9.

question of our time," namely, the problem of faith, the problem of the very existence of God.<sup>64</sup>

One thing that immediately strikes the reader of Hamilton is his candidness. All his writings have what Thomas Ogletree has called "a strikingly personal or confessional quality about them."<sup>65</sup> His essay "Thursday's Child" provides the clearest example of this quality. This, of course, makes his position very hard to criticize. Because it is based on personal experience, his thesis cannot be subjected to tradition or the common experience of the Christian community which usually serve as the norms for criticism. Added to this is the fact that he is speaking in fragments. While these may be adequate to express his personal experience of faith or the lack of it, still, how is the reader or critic, one outside his experience, to read meaning where there is no coherent structure? Vis à vis traditional Christianity the things that Hamilton says raise far more questions than they do answers.

The following pages, therefore, will be an outline of how an analysis of Hamilton's thought might proceed. His position can be broken down to three main affirmations and to these it can be shown that even granting his suppositions (which are by no means established), his fundamental option is not the only possible one.<sup>66</sup>

The three affirmations summarizing Hamilton's position are the following: 1. God is dead; he does not exist for our age nor will he in the future; he is totally absent from our

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<sup>64</sup> "Is there anything beyond the immediate that we can talk about, and how is it possible for us to talk about this sort of thing at all? ... *this* is the central theological question of the church as well as for the doubting world, and so it is high time it became focus for creative theological debate." Langdon B. Gilkey, "God is *not* Dead," *The Voice*, Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary, Vol. 57, No. 1 (January, 1965).

<sup>65</sup> Ogletree, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> One could also analyze Hamilton through his theological sources, for if he has borrowed from Barth, Tillich and especially Bonhoeffer, he has borrowed to his own advantage, often reinterpreting them. Moreover, for each of these theologians there are positive elements which synthesize their position into a coherent theism. Hamilton has often simply ignored these positive elements.

experience, and unnecessary. 2. The world, as it is, and as it can be made to be by man, is to be accepted. God is not needed by us because the functions of God can be performed adequately by man for man. 3. Jesus the man, or the model of Jesus, is to be accepted as the norm and guide for Christian life, an atheistic Christian life.

### *The Problem of God*

The central issue in Hamilton, obviously, is the God question, the question of belief. A look at some of the motives for his assertion of the death of God will show that his position rests on a simple option.

*The experience of the absence of God.* One might question whether there is a difference between the absence of the experience of God and an experience of the absence of God. Perhaps there could be such a distinction when a believer who once lived in the presence of God now no longer does. Obviously, the five ways of St. Thomas are of little value in response to Hamilton. It may be seriously doubted whether anyone can demonstrate the existence of God, given modern presuppositions<sup>67</sup> But it must also be realized that Hamilton shares this experience with many a believer. The Christian God is a hidden God, not because he wants to be, but because he *is* hidden and mysterious, by nature. Both belief and unbelief, therefore, are elicited in darkness—and if the believer finds presence in this absence it is not because of an empirical seeing; it is because of faith.<sup>68</sup> Both belief and unbelief

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<sup>67</sup> Not that reason *per se* is incapable of reaching God; rather, because of man's situation today, his pragmatic and empirical predispositions render such an approach less effective.

<sup>68</sup> We make a distinction here, following Michael Novak, between belief and faith. "Our insistent question is whether there is a way to the living God through the use of human intelligence, through reflection upon one's own experience and identity. To make this distinction clear we have chosen to use the word 'belief' for our concern, and have regularly reserved the word 'faith' for that religious faith which comes by grace, is salvific, and beyond man's resources." *Belief and Unbelief* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 44.



are "faiths" in the sense of acts of existential direction of self towards ultimate reality.<sup>69</sup>

Thus both for the believer and the unbeliever alike, God is not known in the sense of empirical experience; God is not "seen." Michael Novak, in describing a movement toward belief, says, "Thus, we name him whom we do not directly experience by means of something which we do experience, viz., our restless drive to understand."<sup>70</sup> When one looks for God, he is silent and absent. There is no *object* called God. But there is peace in one's intelligence when it has "reached its limit," and when this intelligence experiences peace in prayer, it is an experimental fact that is indisputable.<sup>71</sup>

*The God who is dead.* The fact that Novak does not define God throughout his book, or rather, defines him only intentionally and indeterminately in the limitless thrust of the pure desire to know, is significant. For one might ask, is the God of Dostoevsky, Camus and Hamilton the God of Christianity? Or is it not better that this "tormentor" God is dead? Can any God who is over against man and not wholly for man be the same Father of Jesus? As for God the problem-solver, Hamilton has much to say to a belief that pictures God as the ready solution to all of man's problems, thereby exonerating man of the responsibility he has to exercise his creativity. And where man has been creative, he has solved many of his problems in the course of time, and by so doing has shown that God was not where, earlier, man thought he was—in the storm, and in the earthquake. But it seems the more man can tell us what God is not, the closer we come to what God is. Thus man's knowledge of "where" God is grows with history. But Hamilton's development did not proceed this way. He affirmed the neo-orthodox concept of God as the correct one, accepted the tormentor God of Dostoevsky as well, and declared dead the God who never was.

<sup>69</sup> Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), pp. 58-60. Cf. also p. 122. Novak, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-7, 191-2, speaks of the similarities between belief and unbelief.

<sup>70</sup> Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

If Hamilton had allowed his concept of God to grow as it seemed he would in the *New Essence*, perhaps he would have contributed much to theology for our time. As it is, however, he poses a problem for theology. For if it is true that "Man could not believingly assent to any proposition if he did not in some way understand it,"<sup>72</sup> and if "contemporary experience must be accepted as *given* and as an *integral whole*,"<sup>73</sup> and if the development of the meaning of what God is not has not kept up with modern experience,<sup>74</sup> then examination of the meaning of "God" is a task for today's theology. As for Hamilton, it is the task he did not undertake.

*The problem of evil.* It is not proposed here to offer Hamilton a solution to the problem of evil. Rather, continuing the line of reasoning above, since God must be the real God, he must be the God of the real world. Thus, evil must be a factor in determining for ourselves what the relation of God is to the world-that-includes-evil. What Hamilton has done is this: he has accepted an a-priori notion of God and what divine goodness should be and confronted it with the fact of evil. But God is simply not good as man is good. And, to rebel against *his* world is to assume that the world is as he wills it—an assumption of a position about God which is rather naive. "To cease believing in God because evils have happened is to have refused to move on to the true God, after having exposed a counterfeit."<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, to deny the existence of God because of the existence of evil is not only not to solve the problem of evil, it is also a rejection of any hope of a solution. The believer lives with evil and fights against it as much as the secular humanist. Man's non-tolerance of evil altogether corresponds with God's non-willing of evil and need not be an assumption of a God-position. But the believer also realizes that if God is more than man, there must be mystery, and in the mystery of God

<sup>72</sup> Josef Pieper, *Belief and Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), p. 11, quoting St. Thomas (II, II, 8, 8, ad 2).

<sup>73</sup> Dewart, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>75</sup> Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

there is real hope. It is certainly questionable whether there is any hope of salvation if man is left to his own doings.

### *The Function of the World*

Hamilton's optimism in accepting the world seems to rest on the gratuitous hypothesis that man *can* be to man what God is to man. This involves, first, a recognition of the exigencies of man for acceptance, for forgiveness, for salvation, etc., and secondly, the *belief* (for it is nothing but a belief) that the community can provide man his salvation, hope and forgiveness. In this respect Hamilton's development resembles more a shift of belief than loss of it. One is reminded of Marx's formula: "The critique of religion leads logically to the doctrine that man is the supreme being for man."<sup>76</sup> This observation is not meant to deny the possibilities of man or the power of secularity. Rather it is to question whether man can even have hope of accomplishing the goals Hamilton puts to him by himself alone. By whose power and creativity does man have any power and creativity at all?

As was said, the evidence is against the world as a substitute for God. But more, it is precisely when man refuses God in preference to the world that God seems to inject himself back on the scene. Gilkey feels that four a priori categories set off the attitude or assumption with which modern man faces reality: contingency, temporality, relativity, and freedom or autonomy.<sup>77</sup> But if such a man is really committed to the world, to partial meaning, relative values, and temporal creativity, then within each of the areas mentioned the question of ultimacy, the region of God-language, must make itself felt. Perhaps this happens on the level of existential feeling at first, but given real commitment, these questions of the lasting quality of value, work and life necessarily intrude on the consciousness of the committed man. "When we ask, then, not 'What do I see before me?' but 'Why am

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Ignace Lepp, *Atheism in Our Time* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> Langdon Gilkey, in an unpublished lecture, "The Secular Spirit and the Shape of Modern Theology," delivered at Woodstock College, Woodstock, Maryland, in October, 1966.

I?" "What should I become and be?" "What is the meaning of my life?" "How can I be whole again?" and "What is the meaning of my death?"—then we are exploring or encountering that region of experience where language about the ultimate, and so the language game that concerns God, becomes useful and intelligible."<sup>78</sup> The anti-theist, then, on the level of existential experience cannot ignore the God question: the possibility of God in terms of ultimacy arises out of the very contingency, finitude, temporality and relativity of the very world which one asserts over against God.

It should be noted, however, that although finitude itself generates the questions of ultimacy, finitude does not of itself present answers. And it is the answer of God that Hamilton precisely denies. But on the other hand, as Ogletree, following Gilkey's line of reasoning, points out, he is not being logical in this denial. It is in his commitment to the world that Hamilton, as it were, shows the necessity of God for any view of the world that is optimistic. For Hamilton would have man hope for a redemptive process within history, in the very hands of man, so to speak, without there being any apparent evidence for this. But if there is such a force, then there must also be God, for this is precisely what God is, and where God is—in the world, in history, present to the human community as it moves in turn towards Him.<sup>79</sup>

### *The Lordship of Jesus*

Hamilton's third affirmation is that of the Lordship of Jesus. It has already been pointed out that he has no logical grounds for this; it is a free choice. To the question, "Why Jesus?" Hamilton has no answer. It might also be asked whether a personal relationship, here and now actual, between Jesus and the Christian community and the individual Chris-

<sup>78</sup> Gilkey, "God is *not* Dead," *op. cit.* We speak here of anti-theism and not a-theism. The former takes a position over against God, the latter does not even admit the possibility of thought about God. The former is characterized by militancy, with the latter the question is never raised.

<sup>79</sup> Ogletree, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-6.

tian in this community is not essential to Christianity, making Jesus actually the Lord of History here, now and always.

But Hamilton's choice of Jesus is not only a-logical, it is inconsistent. His picture of Jesus in the *New Essence* is explicitly partial and fragmentary; and there can be little doubt that the Jesus of Hamilton's system has little in common with the complete picture of Jesus in the New Testament. Hamilton has reduced Jesus to a vague love-your-neighbor type of figure, an ideal which as a matter of fact hardly resembles the Jesus that the primitive faith presents us with in the Gospels. Personification of a number of traits of a man's character, together with a number of symbolic events from his life taken in isolation, do not make the whole man. The point is that the Jesus to whom Hamilton owes his allegiance is simply not Jesus, and if this is true, Hamilton's humanism, although labeled Christian, is not so at all.

Gilkey sees the further inconsistency in accepting both the Lordship of Jesus and the Lordship of the secular word or of man in it. That is, he sees an either/or in Christianity and mere secular humanism. He could be referring to Christ as present Lord, or to the Jesus who spoke quite clearly against the "world" of man's self-sufficiency.<sup>80</sup> Again, Ogletree develops this point and shows why a commitment to Jesus leads one logically back to the ground for a recognition of God. "Unconditional loyalty simply cannot be given to a particular historical figure unless something unconditional is disclosed in that figure. Yet when we begin to use such language, we are already moving in the direction of formulating a doctrine of God in order to attest the reality disclosed in and through the person of Jesus."<sup>81</sup>

To conclude this analysis, then, at least this can be said: every step of Hamilton's journey from belief to unbelief involved a decision, a free choice that did not have to be made.<sup>82</sup> The data that Hamilton presents can as easily be

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<sup>80</sup> Gilkey, "God is *not* Dead," *op. cit.*

<sup>81</sup> Ogletree, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>82</sup> Recall the distinction between belief and faith.

integrated into a coherent belief. The death of God for Hamilton is truly a fact because he wills it and not because of the evidence.