

The Death of God

(Written for the University of California, Extension Division, Prof. Hobbs)

In writing on this subject, one is taking the liberty to include references and materials introduced by Prof. Hobbs, and in so doing, looking at each item from several points of view, including (a) the author, insofar as one understands him; (b) the author in view of contemporary philosophies introduced in class discussions; (c) the implications or criticisms within the matrix proposed.

Having had considerable philosophical backgrounds, one tends to look negatively on the writers who seem to ignore Russell's "Confusion of Types," or much of Modern Logistics. One also accepts these Logistics and certain trends which reject the dualistic "right" and "wrong" of other days.

(a)

Vahanian assumes the efficiency of Dialectics. He also naively assumes the ego as Descartes did in pronouncing **Cogito**, and such assumptions may cause confusion. He has been influenced by Nietzsche somewhat as Nietzsche was influenced by Schopenhauer, but in mentioning these three there is a tendency to become more and more egocentric and less and less Schopenhauer but in mentioning these three there is a tendency to become more and more egocentric and less and less cosmocentric.

When Vahanian mentions the word "God," one is never sure whether he is speaking of a scriptural character, an ecclesiastic idol, the "absolute" of philosophy, the real or purported universal creator, or what. One does not know whether he identifies these terms but it is certain that his arguments which might well dethrone one of them are assumed to dethrone all of them. Thus Vahanian ignores the "Confusion of Types" and resorts to what is called **multordinality** by semanticists.

His negative arguments would be well taken if he were a Pragmatist rather than a Dialectician. And in his efforts to dethrone "God," he bypasses men like James and Hocking and all the great English poets from Blake to Mansfield inclusive.

His attitude toward "history" is like that of the Neo-Hegelians.

There is no doubt he has some pressing arguments against the assumed "God" of theologians. To me he seems to have dethroned Earth, which is most welcome. Whether "God" ever lived, recently died, or is Eternal remains a moot question.

(b)

Hamilton has been much influenced by Vahanian but also by contemporaries and is aware of “church” movements and at least recognizes contemporaries. While retaining Dialectics, he wishes Pragmatics.

Hamilton’s “history” is not an empty dialectical abstraction. It includes persons, institutions, events and other essential data. He agrees with Vahanian that **science** is **against** those with whom he differs. Neither of them belong to any stream of **science** and may be in full conflict against “Society for the Scientific Study of Religion” which includes many laboratory scientists in its membership.

Hamilton would be in conflict both with theological groups and the late Prof. Von Grünebaum who could carry on polemics uninfluenced by dialectical assumptions.

The problem remains with a question if God ever lived, and if he (or He) died, when. And one is never sure when the word “church” is used whether it applies to a **particular** institution, to the **generality** of institutions or to a **consent** in Hamilton’s mind. Thus **dialectics**: thus the conflict with Russell’s “Theory of Types” or “Confusion of Types.” Thus the lack of clarity to this person.

(c)

Altizer has a much clearer view of an integral outlook. He accepts the full historicity of Jesus Christ but not the implication of the establishment of complex or simple historical institutions which purport to have their foundation in: “The Church’s firm foundation is Jesus Christ, our Lord.” Altizer accepts the Jesus Christ, but not the church. He sees the person, the teachings and the ideals as real.

Altizer has a proposal which would make Jesus Christ a central figure of a “Christianity” as Gautama Siddharta has been made a central figure of a “Buddhism.” As this is a logically sound presentation, and one way to explaining phenomena, history, men and institutions, it cannot be brushed aside. (This follows Cassius Keyser’s *Doctrine of Doctrines*.)

While Altizer may be criticized for overlooking poets and artists, it may well be that there will be a “Christianity” in the future based on his endeavors.

(d)

Van Buren writes as if God may be dead but traditions are alive. He covers the same subjects and often uses the same style as his predecessors—quite legitimate. He seems trying to prove: “Prove All Things, hold fast to that which is good.” He differs from the other writers too, in being more in a theological than in a philosophical tradition.

He takes traditional terms, sifts and often discards or re-evaluates them. In this his book loses a

sense of originality, a criticism which cannot be applied to the other writers.

Van Buren definitely recognizes the Bible as literature and seems to have made a profound (he thinks) study of it. He assumes the validity or even the perfection of certain versions of translations, and this often takes one beyond both logic and philosophy.

Van Buren has introduced the theme of compelling traditional institutions to pass the tests of modern Logistics. This theme is so well taken it might be used more by both adherents and critics. But there is still the “orthodox” tendency to accept certain versions of the text without due consideration to the original Greek or Aramaic.

In doing this he follows the pattern of too many theologians of selecting certain part-passage. St. Paul still remains to be studied by those who will accept the existence of a physical, a psychic and a pneumatic body. Pauline psychology has yet to be applied to the modern world. If van Buren had applied his own theses to himself he might be leading the way to a properly renovated study of a valid Christianity.

Van Buren might have learned more from modern semantics by understanding what they call “abstraction.” This failure—and he is far from the only one to be considered—has meant that the passing generations have not, or have not hardened to take too verbally the sayings (**logia**) of Jesus, in the orthodox test or otherwise.

He presents a valid theme that for all purposes “God” may be dead but this cannot be applied to Jesus Christ, a definite historical character. And it is unfortunate he has not given more consideration to the problem of original sources, including language. If he had he might have gone a long way in supporting the thesis that he offers.

The problem of determining what may be “God-words” and what may not has remained unsolved because of lack of consideration to the two companionate faiths, Judaism and Islam. Jewish exegesis makes much of **Vayomer** (“And He said”) as a semantic basis for what should be taken as valid and what is not valid. And in Arabic there are two terms **Qur’anmullah** and **Umm khatib** which propose an original universal background and basis for considering what is genuine **revelation**, and what is not.

In practice Jewish apologists do not accept their own traditions and Muslims ignore theirs. This equalizes matters, and there is no genuine rational for not making deeper studies which certainly will not diminish faith; may even strengthen it.

It is certain that in this sense, there being no more **Vayomer** (Jewish stand) and no more **Quranmullah** or **Umm khatib** (Islamic stand) that proper researches in accordance with the effort of the “Society for the Scientific Study of Religion” may not come up with proper answers. But this means the displacement of individual authors and any dialectical basis, for a sound, modern, scientific approach, which is certainly being done today.

Altizer, by removing “God” from the scene has offered a Christianity akin to Mahayana Buddhism and this is certainly **one** valid answer.

The efforts of all our individualistic writers, whether dialectician or not, removes the discussion from both the church (i.e. collectivity) consideration, and from science, that is, a general social consideration. Both the “church” in this sense and “science” afford a universal rather than an individualistic approach to the solution of problems, and for research.

Both also give scope to the consideration of the experiences of all mankind, whether an author has heard of other writers or not. I personally believe that the experiences of Paul were and are valid and will become more and more prevalent among the young people—“Hippies” or not—who are demanding experiences rather than premises.

This subject will be considered from other points of view at later seminars of the University Extension. We cannot throw out Van Buren’s suggestion for a more deliberate and careful examination of the texts. But we must consider all people’s contributions whether we shall continue from a collective—church and/or scientific approach or otherwise.