

## DOES THEOLOGY STILL HAVE A FUTURE?

Does theology still have a future? This question is not strange in our confused age. We have come to a point in history at which two self-styled "Christian atheists," Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, can write:

"The idea of God and the word God itself are in need of radical reformulation. Perhaps totally new words are needed; perhaps a decent silence about God should be observed but ultimately, a new treatment of the idea and the word can be expected, however unexpected and surprising it may turn out to be."<sup>1</sup> The death of God controversy has caused quite a stir. It has introduced new directions. The church which always wanted a theology of order has come to be involved in a theology of revolution. But why should we be surprised about that? In our time nothing seems nailed down once and for all. Everything appears to be in a state of flux. Theologians speak today not only about the death of God, but also about the hidden God, the absent God, the God before, and after Auschwitz. There is a search for a new concept of God."<sup>2</sup>

There is a new theology emerging, a theology which will be "as radically different from the theology of the past as the butterfly, rupturing its cocoon, is radically different from the caterpillar which months before wove itself into a silken prison."<sup>3</sup>

What will this theology be like? This is rather difficult to say. There is no specific direction as modern theologians are "time-bound" and change as rapidly as our times. It is a theology on its way.<sup>4</sup> However, it does not seem to know where it may lead to.<sup>5</sup> One thing we know; it does not lead us to the God of Scriptures. The fashionable talk is that all our traditional concepts (or descriptions) of God must be scrapped. But you cannot scrap these concepts of course, as Blamires has pointed out in his book *A Defence of Dogmatism*.<sup>6</sup> The new directions in theology lead us to the abyss of uncertainty. What are some of the new thoughts about God?

### **New Thoughts about God**

The late Dr. Paul Tillich (besides Bonhoeffer and Bultmann) has done much to develop new trends in modern theology. Tillich has been one of the most important forerunners of an "atheistic" theology. It is not by accident that William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer dedicated their essays *Radical Theology and the Death of God* to Tillich.

Tillich depersonalized God although he felt the need of a personal God as a symbol. As a matter of fact, this concept of God is "absolutely fundamental," but this does not mean that God is transcendent. God is the ground of being. Tillich made it possible for modern man to be "a Christian" without a God who is above

and beyond us, who intervenes, and whose hand is in the course of history. Tillich described his idea of God in these words: "*Against Pascal* I say:

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God of the philosophers is the same God. He is a person and the negation of himself as a person."<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Dorothee Sölle, well known in the World Council of Churches circles, believes that the death of God is the greatest happening in our modern times. Actually, God did not die but we no longer need Him. Man-come-of-age no longer needs Him, and the terrible suffering in this age negates a personal God. God died in Jesus Christ and this death of God is the main Christian thesis. It is most remarkable that Mrs. Sidle spends so much time writing about a God who is dead and that she seems to know so much about Him.<sup>8</sup>

What is meant by the death of God? This can mean that the traditional concept of God is no longer valid and therefore must be dismissed. God died in our generation according to Altizer. (This is what Hegel said already in the eighteenth century.) God is dead now but we are waiting for the living God. This is what Dr. Sölle seems to say.

Can we still speak about theology at this juncture? We should for practical purposes. However, I find it difficult as we see a tremendous shift from theology to anthropology. Modern trends in theology place so much emphasis on man. This is very noticeable in the dialogues held within the World Council of Churches circles. In Geneva they tend to stress anthropology and consequently sociology over against theology. This specific direction was very much in evidence at Uppsala, 1868.<sup>9</sup> Since Uppsala there has been an increasing interest in "secular ecumenicity" which looks to the unity of all mankind and wants to reach this goal not through confessional forms but through humanistic deeds. The church's concern thus becomes the reconciliation of man with his fellowman.

### **Factors Contributing to New Trends**

What are the factors contributing to these new trends? In an article like this one can only touch on some of the issues involved.

I. When theologians leave the objective revelation called the Scriptures, the way to relativistic thinking becomes wide open. We are told today that the Scriptures are "time-bound" and that we must accept this as a way out of our modern dilemmas.<sup>10</sup> This is treading on dangerous ground and makes the Word of God dependent upon subjective thought.

If Scripture is "time-bound," then other sources must be listened to in order to come to an understanding of God's Word for today. It is being suggested that we listen to Marx, Freud, sociologists such as Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills, and to non-Christian religions as well. In all these various forms of non-Christian humanism and in non-Christian religion, we are supposed to be able to discover pointers to the Truth as revealed in the Triune God.<sup>11</sup> When the Word of God is

no longer the basis for theological reflection, then there is room for every wind of change and one throws open the doors to every new cultural phenomenon which pops up. Then man stands above the Word instead of being subjected to the Word.

2. The ongoing process of secularization has modern theologians in its grip. The creature has turned against his Creator. The child has rebelled against his Father. He has declared himself to be of age and independent of God. The world and this side of eternity hold the interest of the theologian. Secular man is disinterested in questions related to life after death, heaven or hell, or a new heaven and earth to come. God is bound to the world and the kingdom of God has to come through the restructuring of society.

The theology of the future will be asking us to live without God altogether. The theologians will have secularized God, and they themselves will have become sociologists. I must agree with the rather alarming statement of Dr. Vernon C. Grounds: "If it (the theology of the future) pursues the logic of secularization to the very end, it will arrive at the atheistic nadir where Karl Marx, Frederick Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre are awaiting radical Christians with open arms."<sup>12</sup>

### **A Future for Theology?**

The theology of the future has no future. The pursuit of it leads to the death of Protestant theology but not to the death of God.<sup>13</sup> God is alive and manages quite well without the help of the modern theologians.

Has theology a future? It has if it remains moored to the Rock, the infallible Word. The discipline called theology should never become molded by the Spirit of the Age or gain its insight from contemporary culture. There is a basic unchangeableness in theology. The Holy Spirit who is at work today was at work also in the days of the Reformation and even before that dramatic period in the history of the church. We seem to forget this because of our lack of appreciation of history. Even in our own circles we have those who pay little attention to the continuity of the church in history.

The gospel has always been opposed to the Spirit of the Age.<sup>14</sup> The gospel is **for** man, but not **of** man. The church is **for** the world, but not **of** the world.<sup>15</sup> The modern theologian seems to forget today's problems lie with modern man, who is intensely sinful and corrupt by nature, and not with the transcendent God of the Scriptures. Modern theologians want to change God instead of man. They preach "Restructure the Gospel!" rather than "Regenerate the sinner!"

Theology has a future only when it (does not compromise the basic authority of Scripture. Without the authority of Scripture there is no sound foundation for theology. What we think of Scripture determines the future of theology. One scholar comments: "The doctrine of Scripture is fundamental to all others. The source of

knowledge governs the results. Even the doctrine of Christ and salvation depends on it 17

In conclusion, I believe that Dr. Harold Brown's view of what a theologian ought to do merits serious consideration. He says:

"Theology is just as much a victim of the prejudice that change means improvement as is the social order, and this prejudice is even more dangerous in theology than in politics. If there ever was an authoritative revelation, then change from it means degeneration, not improvement. The theologian's aim should be to conserve the precious heritage of an authoritative, reliable divine revelation, and to apply it meaningfully to his own people and age." 18

### Bibliography

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4. J.M.. Van Veen, *De Geloofwaardigheid van het Evangelie en van de Kerk in Deze Tijd*, pp. 17 f.
5. Cf. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest To God*.
6. Harry Blamires, *A Defence of Dogmatism*, p. 5
7. Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, p. 85.
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12. Vernon Grounds, p. 166.
13. Carl F. H. Henry, *Frontiers in Modern Theology*, p. 153.
14. Gal. 1:11; 1 Cor. 1:23.
15. 11. Berkhof, *De Ongeloofwaardigheid van het Evangelie in Deze Tijd*, pp. 5f.
16. Carl F. H. Henry, p. 151.

17. Ibid., p. 138.

18. Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of a Troubled Protestant*, pp. 191 f.

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