THE RENEWAL OF GOD-LANGUAGE – A Review Article

W. CREIGHTON PEDEN

Langdon Gilkey, in *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language,*[1] has undertaken the task of developing a prolegomena for a "secular theology." In essence, what Gilkey attempts to do is to demonstrate that there is an area of secular in which the sacred or ultimate is known and then to indicate the validity of Christian God-language as being adequate for secular man in understanding this "sacred" area of his experiences. His prolegomena represents an interesting mixture, on the one hand, of the perspectives of Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich, Martin Heidegger, and the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and, on the other hand, the perspective of orthodox biblical and theological symbols. We shall attempt first to present a summary of the essential points of Gilkey's position, granting that we cannot do justice to the fulness of his argument. After having presented Gilkey's position, we will then offer some critical comments.

SUMMARY

Whether one agrees or not with the direction of his theological conclusions, one should find the first half of this work, entitled "The Challenge of God-Language", a brilliant contribution to understanding the essential characteristics of secular culture and the crisis in which contemporary theology finds itself. At the center of the crisis is the question of the reality of God and the possibility of meaningful language about God. Gilkey properly indicates that the question of God is a radical shaking of the fundamental task of theological discourse. "For, in essence, to debate the question of God in theology means that in that debate no theological assumptions can usefully be made, or any theological authorities invoked – since every such assumption or authority presupposes the reality of the divine." (p. 11)

For several thousand years, theologians have been in the sheltered position of engaging in their God-talk within the context of their cherished tradition. Modern man, who is just as much within the church as without, now apprehends reality in such a fashion that he can no longer engage in God-talk within the confines of these traditions. The problem lies in the difference of perspective between these traditions. Whereas the traditional perspective allowed man to view

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reality in terms of the sacred, modern man views reality in terms of a radically this-worldliness.

> We tend not to see our life and its meanings as stretching out toward an eternal order beyond this existence, or our fortunes as dependent upon a transcendant ruler of time and history. We view our life as here, and our destiny as beginning with birth and ending with the grave, as confined in space and time to this world in nature and among men. (p. 39)

On the basis of this cultural *Geist,* modern man sees little reason to establish the validity of there being a sacred, there being a God. Lest those within institutional religion begin to feel overly secure, Gilkey continues to point out that this cultural spirit dominates the Church just as well as the general cultural life of our time. Like Wall Street in 1929, the Great Crash has come for theology and institutional religion whether one has lifted his head out of the sand enough to realize it or not. Since the rise of modern science, institutional religion has been increasingly confronted with the question of the validity of God. But the times have changed as man's perspective has changed, and secular man is asking an even more devasting question of contemporary theology: "What difference does it make even if there is a God?" A secular theology must not only demonstrate the validity of there being a God, but it must also establish what meaning such a God would have for secular man with his this-worldly perspective.

It is to this latter task, of establishing what meaning a God would have for secular man, that Gilkey devotes his primary efforts. He undertakes this task within the context of exploring the contemporary possibilities for religious discourse. Gilkey assumes that, if one can discover the context of meaningful religious discourse, one will have discovered experiences in which man finds God or the sacred meaningful in his life.

Gilkey contends that there are four essential elements or characteristics which distinguish the modern *Geist.* The first element is *contingency.* By this he means that "the given is ultimately arbitrary, and consequently beyond the given lies nothing, no ground, no ultimate order, no explanation, no reason." (p. 40-41) Due to this element, modern man is limited in his perspective to what is real in terms of what can be supported by concrete, sensory data. In other words, intelligible statements are limited to that which can be supported by empirical data. All other statements are at best speculations which must be supported or rejected on the basis of concrete facts. Beyond the given of man's experiential reality there is merely a Void, and man does not plan his life around speculative theories related to the Void.

Based on this characteristic, secular man rejects all philosophical theologies which are dependent upon an ontological or metaphysical approach.

The second general characteristic of the secular spirit is that of *relativity,* or *relativism.* Relativism means that "nothing anywhere in experience, space, time, or any mode of being is, in that sense, absolute; all is relative to all else and so essentially conditioned by its relevant environment." (p. 48) The effects of relativity on traditional religion and on theology have been devastating. There is nothing absolute or ultimate which shapes everything and is at the same time unshaped by everything else. Traditional religion has sought to claim certain events to be revelations of a deity, but when all events are relative the supposedly ultimate events of revelations are lost in the relativity of historical events. There can be no sacred scriptures which are uncorrupted by the relativity of historical words and events. Not only are specialized traditions upset, but speculative talk about transcendence is nonsense when all experience is relative. All intelligible assertions about reality are limited to the finite sphere. All symbolic language which attempts to speak of the sacred or ultimate which makes itself manifest within the finite media, is *ipso facto* unintelligible to the modern man.

A third characteristic of the modern consciousness is that of *temporality* or *transcience.* For those of us who have taken A. N. Whitehead as one of the major philosphers of the 20th Century, we have learned from him that an essential nature of reality is that all is becoming, all is changing, all is moving out of the past into the future. Not only do all things develop within a process of becoming but all things are mortal. Nothing but becoming and mortality are real. The important twist of the modern view of transcience is its total character. There is nothing that does not exist in a state of becoming and finally ends in death or perishing. With this view of reality, it is no wonder that theologians have a difficult time getting across to modern man religious ideas clothed in the concepts of a self-sufficient, unchanging, unconditioned, and eternal being. "The result, as many representatives of what is called traditional theism have yet to learn, is that many of the traditional modes of understanding deity—especially that associated with an independent, unrelated, changeless *actus purus*—are quite irrelevant and meaningless to the modern intelligence." (p.54) Not only does a deity conceived in traditional terms seem weird, the conceptions of a divine eternity, everlasting life, eternal judgment, and eternal salvation are meaningless and unreal to the modern mind. The transtemporal structures of traditional religion are rejected as being nonsensical by modern man, thus, rendering equivocal or empty any

notion of a deity that is able to bring about either individual or historical salvation.

The fourth characteristic of the modern *Geist* is designated by the term *"autonomy."* By autonomy, we speak of the autonomy and freedom of man. Modern man contends that he is free and has the capacity to discover his own truth, to determine his own values. In this perspective modern man is rejecting traditional western philosophy and theology, which has contended that man must seek to regain a lost "essence" or "order"; he is seeking for the opportunity to create his own history out of his own freedom. Man does not find salvation through the loss of his sinful freedom and the regaining of an eternal freedom; rather, modern man finds salvation through the realization of his freedom.

> Obviously, this assertion of autonomous freedom and self-direction as the key to human self-fulfillment is subversive of many of the historic forms of religion, with their traditional authorities of various sorts stemming from the distant past, their requirements of faith, obedience, submission, and self-surrender, and their insistence that man is fulfilled when he patterns himself according to the divine image. Is not—so the modern spirit declares—revelation the denial of all personal autonomy in ethics; above all, is not God, if he be at all, the final challenge to my creativity as a man? (pp. 60-61)

In essence the modern spirit has been developing since the rise of modern science and has come full force in the development of humanistic naturalism. We exist in a world of continual flux, where forms themselves are fluid and only process is real. Man can no longer operate from the perspective of a fixed view of reality based on an unchanging creative force. The conception of a transcendent, self-sufficient Absolute deity is unintelligible to modern man, and Gilkey rightly points out that this is true inside institutional religion as well as outside. It is just absurd to continue talking about an ultimate structure of coherence, order and value or a dimension of mystery beyond the evident and the sensible. Having presented the philosophical perspective of the modern spirit, Gilkey offers a careful presentation and evaluation of how fundamentalism, liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, hermeneutical theology and the God-is-dead theology fare in this contemporary philosophical climate. He comes to the conclusion that all of these fail on a variety of different counts. Special note should be made of the excellent critique by Gilkey of "The Radical Theologies."

Having rejected all of the major Christian attempts at theology, Gilkey turns to secular experience to discover a foundation for the

meaningfulness and intelligibility of "religious language." What he is seeking is some form of philosophy of religion that will serve as a logical and existential base for Christian theology. He approaches this task by a combination of ordinary language philosophy and phenomenology. Gilkey explains his approach as investigating "the *meaning* of religious symbols by an examination of our actual existence in the world, achieving our goal by uncovering a hidden or forgotten dimension of ultimacy that, we believe, nevertheless appears significantly in our experiences of our contingency, relativity, temporality, and autonomy." (p.243) What Gilkey desires to do is to examine experience and discover a definite experience he can point to as clearly being a manifestation of the divine, sacred, ultimate, or trancendent. If he can establish clearly the experience which reveals this transcendent dimension, then religious language will be valid and the task will only be to make such language intelligible to secular man.

Gilkey approaches this phenomenological task by rejecting what he calls the secular understanding of secular experience. In his review of the secular view of reality, he has indicated that the cultural *Geist* of modern man rules out a transcendent dimension as being relevant. Gilkey contends that secular symbols are inadequate for an adequate dealing with the questions of life. He asserts that on the level of felt existence questions emerge for man with which secular symbols cannot fruitfully deal and which require religious symbols in order to discover adequate answers which are specifically religious in character.

Gilkey's first attack on the secular understanding is over the question of an ultimate. Basically he offers for argument a traditional existential view of life. Man in his day-to-day world encounters a more paradoxical existence than secular symbols imply. Man discovers that he is contingent, that he is searching for meanings and values, that he seeks both community and freedom, and finally that he is confronted with suffering and the shattering experience of radical temporality. Despair is the result of the reality which man confronts. Gilkey calls this condition the manifestation of an ultimate emptiness. He contends that only religious symbolization can be used to deal adequately with this experience of the absence of an ultimate dimension. For man to make sense of this ultimate emptiness he must use symbols which explain this experience in terms of "a dimension that transcends both his selfhood and his environment, and that makes him human." (p. 254) Gilkey assumes that an experience of ultimate emptiness logically indicated that there is in human experience a dimension or region of ultimacy or sacrality. Since secular man does not provide for this move from ultimate emptiness to there being an ultimate, the secular view of reality is at best inadequate.

Gilkey next attacks the secular mood concerning autonomy, contending that this perspective is related to the loss of all historical ultimates. Modern man lives without any divine ruler who sets man's law, leaving man without any absolute authority except himself. Gilkey contends that there are two errors compounded with this view of autonomy. "First of all, latent within the modern idea of autonomy is the notion that man, now freed from external authorities that formerly crushed, or at best educated, his rational creativity and often dominated his will, will exhibit such an objective mind and noble conscience that he can create a seamless society, a new history unruffled by conflict and tragedy." (p. 255) This is the traditional view of optimism, with a utopia at the end of the rainbow. "Secondly, the notion of autonomy has frequently led to the thought that man is now free of destiny or fate, of that aspect of his historical existence which he can seemingly neither determine nor control." (p. 256) In this error man not only concludes that he can control himself but also can control the stream of history in which he functions. In attacking what he considers to be the errors of the modern view of autonomy, Gilkey again does so from an existential perspective. Man lives in a state of guilt, anxiety and the threat of meaninglessness. He contends that these existential conditions are the effects of the demons of sin or of fate. Since man lives in sin, he concludes that the classical religious view is relevant in the secular age.

> Consequently, the ancient religious problems of confidence; repentance, reconciliation, and of hope are as much the deepest problems of a secular age, made up entirely of relative things and autonomous men, as they were in the life of primitive or ancient man, or in the holy world of the Church. And the classical religious and theological symbols of stain and sin, of faith and hope, of forgiveness and reconciliation, and of fate or providence are as relevant in our age as they ever were. (p. 258)

Gilkey is careful to point out that the starting point of man's existential plight does not offer an immediate basis for making valid theological assertions about God. It only affords theology a level of man's experience to which religious discourse can be applied and hopefully established as being meaningful discourse in relation to this level of experience. What Gilkey is doing is jumping from the existential game to the language game. The existential game provides the experiential level. The validity of God cannot be established based on the absence of God; therefore, Gilkey shifts to the language game and asserts that the validity of God is not his concern. He limits his concern to establishing whether religious language is meaningful to those within the

community who share man's existential plight within the perspective described by Gilkey. "The actual using, testing, or verifying of any given proposition within a language game is thus left to the special community which uses that form of discourse, which shares the experiences the language game expresses and which presumably validates it in its common life." (p. 263) Gilkey leaves to others the task of establishing whether valid religious discourse within a community is in fact related to a valid God. "Such an analysis of secular experience is thus no demonstration of the reality of the Christian God. It is, however, a defense of the meaningfulness of the language game of religious discourse." (p. 303)

Gilkey very richly develops his contention that there is an "Ultimacy in Secular Experience" which is the basis for religious discourse. As we have noted he argues from an existential perspective, contending that man lives in a state of anxiety, meaningless and ends in death. Man's condition is the awareness of an ultimate void, which Gilkey contends is a negative "hierophany" which demonstrates that the most important aspects of man's experiences point to Ultimacy in Secular Experience. Man cannot live meaningfully in this plightful state and seeks an ultimate acceptance by which he can live. At the same time neither man nor his fellowmen can provide this ultimate acceptance which will make life whole. When man comes to understand this ultimate need of acceptance and in the process becomes open to an unconditioned acceptance by this *ultimate*.

> We call this *ultimate* because the need for acceptance is unconditioned, if the self is to be at all; because this acceptance constitutes and recreates the self from beyond itself; and because the acceptance that is sought has in two senses an unconditioned character. First, it is unconditioned in its knowledge of what we really are—only an acceptance that knows us through and through and yet loves us is worth anything. . . .And secondly, it must be unconditioned in its acceptance of us: whatever you are or have done, you are loved. (p. 406)

It is Gilkey's contention that this unconditioned ultimate acceptance is made known as Jesus. "He communicates the forgiving love and the healing grace of God to us." (p. 408) When we take Jesus as our example and try to become like him, something happens in us and we experience this ultimate acceptance that gives our life meaning. In his attack against the death of God theology, Gilkey contends that meaningful religious language is not possible about Jesus without also talking about God, since God is the ultimate origin and destiny that is manifest in Jesus who is the Christ. Since Jesus cannot be understood

adequately except as a manifestation of God and since Jesus can serve to assist modern man in experiencing that ultimate acceptance which makes life whole, God language is not only possible but is essential. Through our experience of The Void we come to realize our ultimate need. Through the law and the love shown in Jesus Christ we begin again haltingly to speak of "God." The presence of God is real in secular life, and on the basis of this presence begins the possibility of man knowing the reality of God and the renewal of God-language. "Our Biblical symbols, the treasured vehicles of our community's life and faith, can be understood as meaningful and asserted as valid as forth-rightly in our secular existence as in any other age—but only if we retain, both in our thought and in our existence, a lively sense of their relatedness to our ordinary secular life." (p. 470)

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Gilkey points out that in a language game the question of validity or meaningfulness must be considered within the context of the community sharing the experiences which are symbolized. The question is whether the language adequately conveys the meaning experienced by the community. If Gilkey had limited his prolegomena to that community which understands itself to share a common experience of a negative hierophany of the ultimate, then we would rightly judge the validity of this language game within the context of the communities' experience. Since Gilkey claims this experience to be universal and since he claims his concern is with a secular theology, his efforts should be evaluated from the perspective of the secular *Geist*. It will be from this latter perspective that we will offer some brief remarks.

Gilkey points out correctly that modern man sees little reason to establish the validity of there being a sacred dimension to reality, so long as this dimension cannot be established on the basis of concrete, sensory data. From this perspective, it is impossible to establish the validity of the reality of God, so long as the God does not exist in a fashion that can be evaluated by modern man. Gilkey uses the term "valid" in this empirical fashion, and then uses the term "valid" in relation to religious language. In the latter use he does not mean conform to empirical data, but means that the term is used in a meaningful way in relation to shared experiences of a community. Although Gilkey does mention that one cannot argue that because religious language is valid God is also a valid reality. To those who are use to playing language games this distinction causes little trouble, but one suspects that the religious traditionalist slips into the emotional trap of assuming that if religious statements are valid it means that the reality of God is empirically established. One fears that Gilkey's argument tends to sup-

port this mistaken assumption, as he refuses to deal with the primary question of whether there is a God and moves to the secondary question of the experiences which man attributes to being manifestations of God. The shift to the secondary without establishing the validity of the primary might lead one to believe that the secondary can establish the validity of the primary. One cannot help but wonder whether Gilkey himself does not fall into the trap as he ends with the triumphant assertion – "Our Biblical symbols, the treasured vehicles of our community's life and faith, can be understood as meaningful and asserted as valid as forthrightly in our secular existence as in any other age–." One feels warm and proud with this triumphant assurance until one thinks that it is based on a God which the secular *Geist* does not accept as being established in a valid fashion. The "treasured vehicles" may remain meaningful to those within the community who do not share in the secular spirit of "contingency," but it is questionable how relevant these vehicles are in a secular theology which rejects their ontological and metaphysical foundations.

Secular man might well deal with this criticism of Gilkey's position from another perspective. Gilkey contends that all men share in the negative hierophany of the ultimate. He reasons indirectly that the absence of God leads man to a deeper experience of God. Although he sidesteps the issue of the reality of God, he really argues as if in some way the experience of the absence of God offers concrete support for asserting there to be a God. This is certainly an interesting way to reason, but it does not follow logically or prove that, because one experiences the absence of something – assuming one can experience the absence of something – the thing not present does in reality exist. It is questionable whether this line of reasoning would be considered adequate by the modern philosophical orientations.

Secular man might well disagree with Gilkey's explanation of man's existential plight. He claims that all men share in the experience of the reality of death and meaninglessness of life. A part of this experience might be a confrontation of an Unconditioned Void (whatever this is?) and the need for an ultimate to fulfill man in this life and to enable him to deal with death. Since all men share in this experience, they share in a religious experience. Gilkey contends this experience is religious because it points beyond its finite object to the dimension of sacrality. Secular man (Sartre for an example) might well tell Gilkey that I agree with you only in part. Sure, we all experience the reality of death and do not like it, for we are especially anxious about the possibility of pain. But we do not consider that The Void of death leads us to any need or belief in their being an ultimate which can overcome the reality of death. We accept death as death. In fact the

acceptance of the reality of death affords us a new freedom, for now we are free from having to pretend all of our lives that there is some unconditioned ultimate which can make things meaningful. On the basis of our freedom we now can deal with reality as it really is and can begin to find what limited meaning there is. Those of you who are always talking about an unconditioned that will make you whole do not have the courage or psychological security to face reality. What it really means to be a secular man is to be free from the illusion of an ultimate escape and free to accept the limited reality of being human. It is questionable whether secular man shares Gilkey's existential experience in the way Gilkey contends. If secular man does not share the experience in this fashion, then Gilkey's criteria of sharing the community experience would render the religious language of his secular theology meaningless to modern man. Since secular man, or at least many who claim to be secular man by Gilkey's standards, reject the validity of his universal negative hierophany, it might seem reasonable to assume that secular man has the experiences he claims to have and not to try to impose another interpretation upon his experience. Gilkey claims that all who do not recognize that they share in this universal experience are culturally impoverished. (cf. p. 295) From Gilkey's perspective they may seem impoverished, but it may be that we should allow secular man the right to interpret his own experiences.

Another critical problem from the perspective of secular man might be in Gilkey's attack upon the modern view of autonomy. When secular man recognizes his autonomy he is indicating that he must accept the responsibility for what truth he can know, what values he can establish. He is responsible for whatever he makes of himself, granted that he is greatly limited by his environment, etc. Gilkey attacks this view by setting up what might best be described as a "straw man." Gilkey contends that latent within the idea of autonomy is the notion that man can create a new history unruffled by conflict and tragedy. Secular man might well reply that if such a view is latent, it is so latent that only those who live in a state of dreamy innocence hold it. Modern man certainly holds up various humanitarian ideals as possible goals— i.e., equality for all men — but only those who do not function in our struggling society could contend that we live under the illusion of a new history unruffled by conflict and tragedy. The second error Gilkey attributes to his straw man concerning autonomy is the view of man being free from fate or destiny and, thus, feeling that he can control the stream of history in which he lives. Secular man certainly rejects the idea that there is some supernatural fate or destiny controlling reality; therefore, he understands that he must attempt to give some direction to the stream of history in which he lives.

Secular man, if he is responsible, must attempt to control the stream of history, granting the historical and environmental conditions in which he must function. To leave history up to fate or some unknown destiny is the height of irresponsibility in our complex world. The issue is not that man thinks he can absolutely control the stream of history. Rather, the issue is that man, if he will be responsible, must attempt to create the most constructive reality he can, given the historical and environmental limitations. An essential part of the secular *Geist* is man being responsible, since he no longer has the illusion of a supernatural destiny to which he can escape. If Gilkey's position is to be a meaningful secular theology for those who share the secular view of reality, it would seem reasonable for Gilkey to accept and build upon this view of autonomy instead of attacking it.

One further comment from a secular perspective would be concerning Gilkey's view of Jesus as an example for modern man and as a manifestation of the unconditioned ultimate acceptance. On the one hand, modern man who has given serious thought to Jesus finds that the historical record is so sketchy that at best we have so little information about who Jesus was and what he taught that Jesus cannot really serve as an intelligible example. On the other hand, our information about Jesus is so tied to a metaphysical system which is at best outmoded and is tied to a cultural system which is basically oriental that Jesus cannot really be considered a viable example for secular man who must function within our cybernetic culture. Modern man may find in Jesus an interesting and even noble figure who tried to call the Jews to some type of humane and non-legalistic style of life, but he cannot serve as a very realistic figure today for those who function within our secular *Geist*. It is further questionable whether Jesus can serve as a manifestation to secular man of the unconditioned ultimate acceptance, since such a perspective is tied to an ontological and metaphysical orientation which is totally rejected by our secular culture. Since the secular position rejects their being an ultimate, due to lack of any concrete evidence, Jesus cannot be taken very seriously by modern man as a manifestation of the sacred. Unless Jesus can be presented in a more relevant fashion, it is questionable whether Gilkey's secular theology leaves any room for Jesus as more than just an interesting hazy, historical figure.

In essence, our critical comments are centering on the issue whether Gilkey's secular theology is really based on a secular understanding of reality. Gilkey's position appears to require that one begin with a metaphysical position which would enable one to interpret reality in such a way that one experiences there being an ultimate which provides man with a salvatory acceptance, and thus be able to

understand Jesus as a manifestation of this ultimate acceptance. Since the secular *Geist* rejects this metaphysical orientation as an essential characteristic of being secular, it would appear that Gilkey's theology is in reality non-secular.

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