

The Theocentric Error

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"It can be of no importance to me of what religion my physician . . . is."—Montaigne

IN attempting to understand what religion is all about one can go at the matter theocentrically; that is, in terms of what God is doing or has done for man. Or one can go at it anthropocentrically; that is, in terms of what man is doing for himself when he is engaged in those activities which are commonly called religion.

In another essay, I argue for the anthropocentric approach. But first it is necessary to indicate why the theocentric approach, which is by far the most popular way of defining religion especially in Western traditions, is held to be inadequate. To get at this rejection let me begin by setting an example typical of Western theocentricities. This one tells us what God has done for man: he has created the world and man; he has used the holy history of Israel to make his will known to man (or to demonstrate man's helplessness); and he has used the death and resurrection of his Son to exemplify perfect living (and/or to effect the purgation of sin). This is what religion is because this is what God has done and is doing for man. And this is a "good" (i.e., widely accepted) theological definition of religion. But it is also rather obviously parochial; and, not so obviously, it is at the present time in considerable intellectual and functional disarray. Theocentricity of this theistic variety is simply (1) too provincial and partial to stand as the essential principle in a universal definition of religion; and (2) it is too abstract and irrelevant to grab and hold in the modern world.

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The God-Word

Before examining more closely these two accusations it will be necessary to describe the God-word being used here. What is the nature of this God who has done something for man? This particular God-word is the one used in those philosophies of religion usually called theism. The term theism is sometimes used simply to refer to a belief in God or Gods. But more technically, and as it is being used here, it refers to that form of theological discourse in which the concept **person** is used as the organizing principle. This view is anthropomorphic not in the naive sense of believing that God looks like man or acts like man, but in the more sophisticated notion that God is at least what man is; namely, possessing self-consciousness, intelligence and will. God is, in fact, the perfect case of person, which means, among other things, that although God is infinitely more than what man is, he is not categorically different from man in the possession of consciousness, thoughts, and desires. As we shall see in a later essay, the word God is sometimes ascribed not to a divine person, but to a basic generative principle (e.g., creative act, complexification, Brahman, Tao), but in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, if we are to be faithful to the way the word has been used traditionally and is used with few exceptions today, God means: that supreme being who knows himself and us, and who is concerned to rescue and support us in those issues of our lives which are critical and non-manipulable. This is the God-word particularized as person. And it is the God we are considering in the two criticisms of theocentricity mentioned above.

Criticisms of Theocentricity

Now, let us consider those criticisms further. First, the accusation that a theocentric definition of religion is too provincial. Even if a common particularization of the God-word as it is used

in the great theistic religions of the West (i.e., the religions of Near Eastern origin — Judaism, Christianity, Islam) could be agreed upon, and thus some kind of common theocentric definition be made possible, it would still be grossly inadequate because it would still exclude most of the world's religions past and present which simply do not submit to the idea of self-conscious, intelligent, willful God as being the causative principle of the world and/or the ultimate source of human salvation.

On the other hand, and parenthetically, no improvement seems to occur when one attempts to define religion according to some non-personal divine surrogate such as Atman-Brahman or perhaps Sartori. To do so leaves the theistic religions out of consideration. Whether we go the way of the personal God or the impersonal divine principle, we are forced always to read some legitimate religious system out of the picture. Most of the religious systems of Hinduism, for example, although they do in certain forms affirm the existence of Gods — even the great trinity of Brahma, Krishna, Shiva—do not find in the final analysis, identify primal reality, or the source of "created" beings, as a supremely self-conscious, supremely concerned being. From a theistic point of view (namely, that God, the basic reality is the supreme case of person), Hinduism may be called atheistic — as may Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, much of Mahayana Buddhism and all of Taoism. In short, all of the great religions of the East — not to mention practically all primitive and ancient religions — have no God in a theistic Western sense. To define religion in terms of the personal God of theism simply reads out of religion most of the religions of the world.

Second, the idea of God, simply as a metaphysical concept, is under serious attack by the criticisms of contemporary positivistic and analytic philosophers. Much modern Anglo-American philo-

sophical thought argues that to say that God exists (the supreme person, omniscient, omnipotent, etc., God of the Near Eastern traditions) is nonsense; which is to say that this God is not subject to any sensible mode of verification, and as such is without sensible meaning. Even Paul Tillich, who is no defender of Wittgenstein philosophy, attacks the notion of "God exists". Tillich's position holds that the proposition asserting the existence of God may not be meaningless or non-sensical, but it is certainly a kind of blasphemy. It makes God just another thing among things, another being among beings; and just a being, even when the supremely perfect being, is an icon, an idol, an idolatry.

Now, a definition of religion centered in the idea of a personalistic God can be adjusted to Tillich's objections. In fact he does so. And such a definition of religion can in practical fact withstand the barbs of contemporary analytical philosophers. The few people who read Tillich can take comfort in his assertion that he stands firmly within the right theological circle. And although the charge of logical meaninglessness made by Wittgenstein philosophers may disconcert some theologians (the few who read such philosophy), it will not distress the multitude of "true believers" who not only do not read Wittgenstein or his interpreters, but would not understand such "nonsense" attacks if they did. It is not **logical** nonsense (no sense) that makes God-talk meaningless to people, but psychological nonsense. The idea of God simply makes no sense. Or put in more popular language, which better describes the true situation, it simply does not "grab". Such words as love and peace and money and cancer and communism and sex and freedom grab. But God does not. God is a word that everybody uses occasionally. God presumably designates a "being" that everybody believes in. But how many of us are ever assaulted by the word? overwhelmed by it? driven to our knees

by it? or even mildly exhilarated by it? Sometimes something called love grabs us and immediately we are assailed by clutchings—psychological, visceral, even spiritual. But how often anymore in the ordinary course of events does that something the word God presumably defines ever grab us with the awesomeness, the wonder, the terror, and the ecstasy which presumably that word alone commands?

Is God Dead?

Aware that the viability has gone out of the God-word, some new theologians have started saying that God is dead, or at least in eclipse. We are living at a time when God seems to be notably absent. We are living in godless times, or (as William Hamilton has put it) in times when we are involved not with the absence of the experience of God, but with "the experience of the absence of God."¹ It is not just that we are not experiencing God for the time being, but fully expect to later. No. We are experiencing what it is like not when God is tardy, but when God is not. The term God simply does not refer to anything that has any kind of evocative reality. A word that once evoked passion and loyalty and power and life is now a kind of museum piece. The word is still here, but it is empty.

Cox, Vahanian, Buber, Sartre and others, including Nietzsche, try to inform us as to what it is in the rising modern culture which caused God to disappear: (1) the world has gone secular and no longer acknowledges a profane here and a sacred there; or (2) modern culture simply has no intellectual accommodations for a God or religion conceived and articulated in pre-scientific languages; or (3) the overwhelming facts of man's existence can no longer be swept under the altar rug. This life is, indeed, as Sartre-Camus inform us: a nauseous, meaningless, Sisyphean jour-

ney from nowhere to nothing; and God, as any honest man must admit, is simply the postulate of those who have not the guts to live by what they know to be the case; namely, that life is mean, brutish, ugly, short and there is no God in it, except the play-like God we create in our gutless faiths.

For What Reasons?

I shall not deny that the culture (in a heightened sensitivity and a growing secularity) has become disenchanted with, or just unresponsive to the theistic God, but I doubt that the reasons suggested by Nietzsche, Vahanian, et al. really join the facts of the divine demise. Among other things we can see that other periods of exaggerated secularity (say the "gay nineties" or the "roaring twenties") did not put God to death. People may have avoided God. They may have, happily even, experienced an absence of God in their lives, but they generally "felt" that God was still there. They did not experience Hamilton's "experience of the absence of God". They did not experience what it is like to turn (or return) to the experience of the presence of God and find nothing there to experience.

Also, we can not take too seriously that God has died to modern man because we have discovered the anxiety and meaninglessness of human existence. Man did not just discover the brutishness of life — the existential, human condition — and the theodicean problems involved therein. He discovered in his pre-historic cave, if not in Eden itself, that human life is not all it should be, nor God or Gods as responsive and helpful as one might desire. But God did not die or disappear from human concern and attention because the world God made was full of brutish problems which God did not always or even often solve for man. In fact, God's relevance seems to have been precisely correlated to (1) man's inability to cope with critical problems, and (2) the tardiness or "refusal" of God to intervene

¹ *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Altizer and Hamilton, p. 38

with his metatechnological superiority and manipulate those critical problems of man — which man could not manipulate because his technology was at the moment inadequate. Here we have a clue to the demise of God in recent times. The God of theism, as traditionally particularized, is relevant where man is incompetent; and now man is not so incompetent. We shall return to this idea later.

But first we should make another observation: the pre-scientific language of religion does not lie at the center of the current **oblivion of God**.² The awareness that religious language is pre-scientific and that scientific beliefs and religious statements contradict each other, is not a recent discovery. Modern religion has long since met Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin, and Freud and made adequate accommodations. To meet the conflict with astronomy (the Copernicus/Galileo challenge) theism simply extended the "glory of God" from a relatively parochial universe to a fantastically gigantic one. The conflict with biology simply caused theism to see God more gloriously in billions of years of evolution from mud to man, instead of the less glorious third, fifth and sixth day fiat of Genesis chapter one. The encounter with Freud and psychiatry has simply made theism more responsive to its Jewish origins, especially to the Jewish concept of man as a whole being with body and spirit united; and consequently more suspicious of Greek accretions, especially Plato's separable soul imprisoned someplace inside this alien body.

These encounters between modern

science and traditional Christianity were clear-cut theoretical differences. The church had, from ancient times accepted a simply earth-centered astronomy. Such an arrangement was scriptural, sensible and theological. The Bible clearly described a three storied universe — up, down, and here. Common sense also argued for this. One could look up and see the sun — see it by day rise in the east, arch through the skies, and go down in the west; and by night one could see the moon and stars do much the same thing. Also, this arrangement made theological sense. God had created an earth primarily that man would have a place for habitation. Why would he not put it at the center of things? Of the created, finite creatures man was the highest form. What other arrangement would make sense except that in which the superior creature was placed in a place at the center of the up-down-here world? When Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo proposed a radically different arrangement, the authorities in religion denied such error and moved to stamp it out. A war was declared with each side clearly defined. When the Copernican position prevailed, not by winning the battles, but by outlasting the opposition, religion simply joined the persistent data, moved to the other side, and began to use it "to the greater glory of God".

The point being made is that in the major confrontations between Christianity and modern astronomy an issue was clearly drawn. Men on both sides knew what they were quarrelling about. Geocentricity was opposed by heliocentricity — biblical myths by scientific observations. When the battles finally ended biblical astronomy had capitulated to telescopic astronomy, and religion had simply moved into the world of macroscopic science. Both theology and the pertinent Bible passages were reinterpreted. Similarly clear cut issues were drawn over the question of evolution, and modern psychology. Darwin's work

² It seems to me that the condition of today is not that God has gone into an eclipse, as Martin Buber suggests, or has died — which is a dramatically impressive way of saying that God is somehow out of our vivid awareness, but otherwise is rather ridiculous, for the kind of God that Jews, Christians, Muslims mean simply does not die—as the Death of God theologians suggest. What has happened is that God is forgotten. As such, God is in the condition of oblivion.

clearly declared things about the origin of life and man which contradicted the posture of Biblical theology. Modern psychology proposed things about the inner life of man which (less clearly than in astronomy and biology, but clearly enough) ran counter to ancient, especially Greek-Christian, notions about the nature of the human soul.

In all these cases we have theoretical science arguing with theoretical religion — religious doctrines and dogmas opposed by scientific doctrines and dogmas. But the question of God in very modern times (even in this generation) is a different matter. Here we have not a conflict of stated ideas, but an oblivion through technological efficiency. Put most bluntly: without science ever theoretically challenging God's existence, or anybody else seriously denying it, God has been forgotten because God is unnecessary (not in theory but in fact. Laplace might say to Napoleon that to him God was simply an unnecessary **hypothesis**, but modern man (western man: Anglo/European/American man) has made no such intellectual declaration. He has simply stopped **using** God, because he does not need to use God; he can do it better by himself.

The Fix-It God

For whatever gradiose theories men have created calling God such things as the Unmoved Mover, the Uncaused Cause, the Ground of Being, the Primal Entertainer of Eternal Objects, and for whatever ecstasy man has experienced in worship and mysticism, and for whatever values he has derived by believing in the reality of God; the God of the Near Eastern traditions and the theistic Gods of the Indian and Far Eastern traditions are, by men in general, looked upon as powerful, intelligent, self-conscious beings who will at appropriate times and circumstances enter the life of man and do for man what he cannot do for himself. God is a "fixer." Except for a few intellectuals and a few spiritual poets, the theistic God is an intelligent being who is cap-

able of fixing things that need fixing which man at the moment cannot fix for himself. Said differently, the God prayed to for protection in battle, for good crops, for regained health for escape from the annihilation of death, for national guidance and prosperity; the God prayed to, to fix things (which is the God prayed to by the vast majority of people who ever lived) is a Fix-It God. He is the Great Plumber In The Sky who can sometimes be persuaded or even coerced to come down and fix the pipes.

If such a notion seems crude, and not the whole story, it is nevertheless the fact of the case for most people from Paleolithic man's cave drawings and burial practices to the Buddhist pantheon and to the public prayers of Billy Graham, Pope Paul and the local preacher last Sunday. Prayers to the Plumber do go on, by some people meaningfully, significantly, grippingly, but by most people just ritually. We always prayed that way or heard those prayers, so we reverently bow our heads when somebody says, "Let us pray," and we reverently wait for the prayer to get said. But even a cursory examination of the real situation indicates that this ritual formality has somehow lost its existential passion. Prayer today, in this scientific-secular culture, doesn't seem to talk very meaningfully to God or to anyone else. Intellectually (as a habit) almost everyone gives assent. No one disbelieves that there is a God to pray to, but the passion is missing. Who of us ever falls with passion to his knees? Who of us ever feels overwhelmed with the sense of the divine God listening? Indeed, what does anybody ever ask for? If my child becomes seriously ill I get passionately involved — to get a physician and adequate medical assistance. I want a "plumber," a "fixer," and I go after one: an available one, a dependable one. I want technology; and if I do remember to pray it is a fillip. I do not inquire about the physician's religion.

God Before Penicillin

Not long ago, before the miracle drugs and other recent medical miracles, the doctor had only a pill and a prayer. The pill was not much good. So everybody, including the doctor, prayed. Today we can do better; and it seems a fact that men do not ask God to do for them what they can do for themselves. In such things God is forgotten, or is only casually remembered. God disappears—to all passionate significance—into oblivion. What this means, in practical fact, is that the word God is not spoken regularly, daily, passionately, as a household word, as it was only a few years ago. I can remember my Grandmother, who was not an especially religious woman, was nevertheless quite religiously aware of Diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, measles, small pox, poliomyelitis, pneumonia, influenza, tuberculosis, to say nothing of lockjaw and numerous other not always diagnosed or even named maladies. She thanked God quite regularly that her six children and numerous grandchildren were all alive and "God willing" would be alive next week. And she had reason for such prayerful thankfulness because in 1900, when she was having her babies, and for many years after that, infant deaths accounted for 1/5 of all deaths. Out of every 1000 babies born in the decades around 1900, 150 died before their first birthday. And if they made it past year one there were still diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, etc. to go. In 1900 of every dozen funerals only four were for people who had lived 50 years or more. That is, 2/3 of all people died before they were 50 years old. But fifty years later of every dozen funerals, with rare exceptions, none of them would be for persons under 50 years of age. God was a lively part of any household: God willing, God willing, God willing. But that is simply not the way things are today.

In an outstanding address made before the American Medical Association

and published in *The Annals of Internal Medicine*,³ Dr. Frank G. Dickenson, Ph.D., said:

I have already mentioned that the median age at death in 1900 was 30 years, while in 1950 it was 66. Think of the difference—the difference between dying at 30 and dying at 66. It is the difference between being cheated of life and having the best of it. At age 30 the "dying man" was just getting established . . . To his family, his death was more than a personal loss: it was the loss of their means of livelihood . . .

Our "dying man" of 1950 leaves behind grown children already established in their own work and with families of their own. The widow probably has some income assured and, in an emergency, her grown children can help her. In spite of her grief, she must surely give thanks for all the years she and her husband had together, thanks that he lived to fulfill the goals of his youth, to see his home established, his children married and most of his grandchildren beyond infancy. Only the retired years have been denied him. Even this man's funeral sermon has been altered by the length of time he lived. The sermon is no longer filled with commands for acceptance of God's Will. Reminders of years of peace and accomplishment flow through it, assuaging the grief of relatives and friends as it never could at the death of a young man. Because so many more die old today, the bitterness of death for the survivors has been lessened.

God and Metatechnology

Dr. William Bernhardt in a study entitled *The Analysis of Religion* has ably demonstrated that there is a concomitant relationship between technology and what he calls metatechnology. By metatechnology Bernhardt means any attempt as a part of religion to introduce supernatural or extranatural force into natural processes. Bernhardt after examining the religious practices of the contemporary primitive civilization of the Trobriand Islands, the religious rituals of the Age of Augustus in ancient Rome, and modern Christian Protestants (especially Methodists), points out

³ Vol. 35, No. 4, October, 1951, pp. 889-897

That in the area of food getting and human health the use of metatechnological devices are elaborate and extensive where agricultural and medical skills are pre-scientific, and are minimal where such technologies are advanced. As a further observation he points out that metatechnology has dropped from Protestant religious practices (rituals) as scientific agriculture and medicine have become adequate in dealing with crop failure/starvation threats and many erstwhile diseases.

In short: what Dr. Behnhardt is saying about religion in general, I am here also indicating about God in particular. Religions becomes increasingly unimportant (superficial) in those areas where man begins to gain technological control. And God to the degree that he is looked to as the metatechnological agent, loses significance in the same way. Where man has control over life and events, religion is missing or superficial and God is little recognized and soon forgotten.

Summary

To summarize: any attempt to define religion theocentrically (i.e., as a function of God's action for man) is inadequate. It fails because there are many religious systems which do not have a purposeful, self-conscious being as the basic explanatory principle. Further, it fails because it is in certain philosophical disarray. It is found by many modern thinkers to be logically meaningless, and by others to read itself out of existence by claiming extreme transcendence or by presenting itself in imprecise symbolic and paradoxical assertions. Finally, the idea of a God who does things for man has become attenuated to the point of near oblivion by the loss of God's erstwhile metatechnological importance.

In a subsequent essay the attempt is made respectfully to restore the God-word to religion as a basic interpretive principle. There we can see what the God-word does for man. But before that can be done it is necessary to examine religion anthropocentrically — as something that man does for himself.

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