OF SPACE, TIME AND GOD'S TRANSCENDENCE

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1. THE PROBLEM OF TRANSCENDENCE IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

During recent years, the issue of God's transcendence has again emerged as a central problem for theological discussion. It can be argued that the contemporary period of theological thought began with a consideration of the transcendence of God. In his *Epistle to the Romans* (1921), Karl Barth leveled a devastating criticism of the *Kulturprotestantismus* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by reasserting the radical transcendence of God. Barth's polemic against an emphasis on God's immanence must, of course, be understood against the nineteenth century background of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's identification of God with Absolute Spirit, or with the totality of the world historical process. According to both Barth and Kierkegaard, the inevitable conclusion of any theological position that does not acknowledge God's transcendence is the Feuerbachian identification of God with the human race, in which "God and the world become confused with one another."[1] In an effort to overcome such a confusion, Barth consistently understood God as "Wholly Other." Summarizing both his debt to Kierkegaard and the central point of the position he sought to develop, Barth wrote in the preface to the second edition of *Romans*, "... if I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the "infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity..."[2]

During the nineteen sixties, however, a crucial theological shift began to take place. The change in theological climate is indicated by the popular slogan, "The Death of God." Although clear anticipations of the death of God movement are present in Nietzsche and his existentialist followers such as Sartre and Camus, what is significant about the development of thought during the sixties is that *theologians themselves* became increasingly disaffected with the understanding of God as Wholly Other. Even within the theological circle, the significance of such a God for the historical process, and for the individual's life in the world was no longer evident. A group of theologians went so far as to argue that such a radically transcendent God is both unintelligible and inconsequential. Agreeing with Nietzsche, they declared that the Wholly Other God had died.

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[1]Karl Barth, *The Epistle To the Romans*, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 52.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 10.

It is important to recognize that while Barth drew on Kierkegaard's attack of Hegel in developing his criticism of *Kulturprotestantismus,* death of God theologians depend heavily on Hegel's differences from Kierkegaard in formulating a critique of Neo-Orthodoxy.[3] In direct opposition to Barth's emphasis on God's transcendence, Thomas Altizer writes:

> If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century, it is a passage through the death of God, the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.[4]

While for Barth, God's immanence would seem to have disappeared in transcendence, for Altizer, God's transcendence would seem to have vanished in immanence. Neither position adequately maintains the dialectical tension between divine immanence and transcendence.

Simultaneous with the development of the death of God "theology," another theological trend was taking shape both in America and in Germany. In America, there developed what has come to be called process theology, while in Germany, a theology of hope was being formulated. Although the inspiration for these groups of theologians was different, the Americans drawing on Whitehead and the Germans on Bloch, significant parallels unite them. The most important similarity between process theology and the theology of hope is an emphasis on history as a developing process in which God is intimately involved. From this theological perspective, categories of temporality become especially important for understanding both the cosmos and the divine life.

What often passes unnoticed is that the stress on categories of time and of history, as exemplified by process theologians and theologians of hope, has very important implications for the problem of the transcendence of God. A fundamental metaphor shift is involved in these theological discussions. Temporal categories and images are replacing spatial ones as the basic building blocks of theological reflection. This metaphor shift requires the reworking of the problem of the transcendence of God. Furthermore, the move from spatial to temporal metaphors makes it perfectly clear that the problem of God's transcendence is not simply a difficult theological puzzle, but has profound ethical consequences.

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[3]This is especially evident in the work of Altizer See: Thomas J J Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism (Philadelphia· The Westminster Press, 1966)

[4]*Ibid.,* p. 22.

II. Spatiality and Transcendence

For most of the history of theology, spatial categories have been central for interpreting the transcendence of God. This fact is plainly evident in the definition of transcendence. "Transcendence" derives from *"trans"* meaning "beyond", and *"scendere"* meaning "to climb." Hence the noun "transcendence" is defined as: "The action or fact of transcending, surmounting, or raising above. . ." And the root verb, "to transcend," is defined as:

> To pass over or go beyond (a physical obstacle or limit); to climb or get over the top of (a wall, mountain, etc.); to let pass or extend beyond or above (a non-physical limit); to go beyond the limits of (something immaterial). . . ; To be above and independent of, especially said of the Deity in relation to the universe.[5]

When God is said to be transcendent, the intention is to emphasize that God is *beyond* or *above* the world. Although sophisticated thinkers usually do not take such language about God literally (though it is not clear that the same can be said of popular piety), the metaphor which dominates most thinking about God's transcendence remains spatial. Such spatial imagery is deeply ingrained in our thinking about deity.[6] From church architecture to ecclesiastical rituals, spatial images inform religious symbolism. One need only consider the awesome effect of a Gothic cathedral to be aware of the importance of the sense of God being beyond or above the world. Though on a much less grand scale, the common use of church spires, and the elevation of different parts of the church interior (e.g. the pulpit and the altar) are also results of spatial imagery. The arrangement of spatial relations within the house of worship mirrors the hierarchical cosmos. An obvious instance of spatial imagery in ecclesiastical ritual is burial practice. Although by no means universal, it is common to place the dead person beneath the ground. The hope is, however, that the deceased will be *raised* from the dead. A detailed phenomenological investigation would be necessary to disclose the many dimensions of the religious imagination which are governed by spatial images These comments should, however, suffice for our purposes.

It must also be recognized that the human sense that is correlative with space is sight. It is, therefore, quite understandable that when one's mind is ruled by spatial metaphors, the goal is to "see" God. The

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[5]Both of these definitions are from: *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary.*

[6]Paul W. Pruyser has made some interesting suggestions about the importance of different views of space for the religious imagination. See: *A Dynamic Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 23-30.

one who knows God might be called a "seer." Of course, the metaphor of sight for one's relation to God can take various forms such as beholding, contemplating, or having a vision.

As the definition of transcendence indicates, an implication of envisioning God as spatially transcendent is the understanding of man as inhabiting a lower sphere. Images of barriers and of limits[7] are used to indicate man's finitude, or enclosure within the world and separation from God. During the early years of its development, Christianity often borrowed the spatial symbols of Gnosticism to express a sense of man's limitation. Such language still informs much of the Christian tradition.

In light of these considerations, it is evident that Bultmann's classical characterization of the biblical world-view is an apt summary of a general perspective shared by many in the history of Christian reflection.

> The whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological; i.e., the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth, and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events; the conception of miracles, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits.[8]

But Bultmann and many others contend that it is virtually impossible for modern man to speak intelligently about a God beyond the world. Might it be that the most basic metaphors which traditionally have been employed to imagine divinity are so unintelligible that talk about God no longer makes any sense? There appear to be at least two alternatives to speaking about God as above or beyond the world that seem to overcome many of the problems encountered by traditional theological language about God's transcendence. First, one could stop referring to God as beyond the world and could regard God as fully *within* the world. Second, one could shift from images of height (e.g. above and beyond) to images of depth (e.g. ground and foundation). It is important to note that while the changes implicit in these two

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[7]For example: "Consequently, they have in their midst the sign-post which points them to God, to the KRISIS of human existence, to the new world which is set at the *barrier* of this world." Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 65. Italics added.

[8]Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 15. In this context, it is interesting to note the spatial imagery which underlies the term "supernatural."

options are quite wide-ranging, the fundamental metaphor for envisioning God remains *spatial.* Although God is no longer spoken of as *above* the world, he is regarded as either *within* or *beneath* the world. Let us consider each of these alternatives.

A. FROM ABOVE TO WITHIN

Thomas Altizer's work represents the effort to overcome the problems posed by language about God's radical transcendence by developing a theological position which stresses God's presence *within* the world process. Altizer constantly criticizes the persistent emphasis which Christian theologians have placed on God's transcendence.

> Throughout its history Christian theology has been thwarted from reaching its intrinsic goal by its bondage to a transcendent, a sovereign, and an impassive God. Once having absorbed a Greek metaphysical idea of God . . . , Christian theology found its ground in the God who alone is God, the awesome Creator and the distant Lord.[9]

As this quotation indicates, Altizer, and those theologians of a similar disposition, contend that the notion of God as qualitatively different from the world is, in fact, foreign to Christianity, and grows out of the influence of Greek speculation on early Christian thought. As opposed to the Unmoved Mover of Greek metaphysics, Altizer proposes to return to what is unique in Christianity: the incarnation. From Altizer's point of view, the Christian claim that Jesus is God is a denial of a distant and transcendent God, and is the affirmation of the *complete* incarnation of God *within* the world. Altizer develops an extreme kenotic Christology in which God becomes *"fully incarnate"*[10] by completely emptying himself into the world process. In view of such a kenotic Christology, the belief in God's incarnation in Jesus entails the consequence that "God himself has ceased to exist in his original mode as transcendent or disincarnate Spirit: God *is* Jesus."[11] In brief, the incarnation is the "death" or the "self-annihilation of God."[12]

> But his [God's] death is a self-negation or self-annihilation: consequently, by freely willing the dissolution of His transcendent "Selfhood", the Godhead reverses the life and movement of the

[9]Altizer, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
[10]*Ibid.*, p. 44.
[11]*Ibid.*, p. 69.
[12]*Ibid.*, chapter IV.

> transcendent realm, transforming transcendence into immanence, thereby abolishing the ground of every alien other.[13]

It must be emphasized that Altizer does not think that the incarnation was a once-and-for-all event that was fully accomplished in the person of Jesus. Rather, the incarnation of the spirit in the flesh is a gradual process through which God and the world are increasingly identified.

> If we are to preserve the uniqueness of the Christian Word, we cannot understand the Incarnation as a final and once-and-for-all event of the past. On the contrary, the Incarnation must be conceived as an active and forward-moving process, a process that even now is making all things new.[14]

From these comments, it becomes apparent that Altizer attempts to resolve the problem posed by God's transcendence by arguing that God is not above or beyond the world, but is completely present in the world. As the reader might have suspected, however, Altizer falls prey to the danger recognized by Barth and Kierkegaard: he ends by identifying God with "Universal Humanity." Developing what he sees to be the implications of Hegel's Christology, Altizer argues:

> Dialectically, everything depends upon recognizing the meaning of God's total identification with Jesus and of understanding that it is God who becomes Jesus and not Jesus who becomes God. The forward movement of the Incarnate Word is from God to Jesus, and the Word continues its kenotic movement and direction by moving from the historical Jesus to the universal body of humanity, thereby undergoing an epiphany in every human hand and face.[15]

Altizer's extreme kenotic Christology does not allow him to make any distinction between God and the human race. He would have to agree with Feuerbach's conclusion: to say that God becomes Man is actually to say that Man becomes God, i.e., to assert the divinity of man. Altizer does, in fact, contend that

> As the God who *is* Jesus becomes ever more deeply incarnate in the body of humanity, he loses every semblance of his former visage, until he appears wherever there is energy and life.[16]

But if God is completely identified with the human race, then it seems highly misleading to continue to employ God language. In speaking

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

of God, one is *in fact* speaking of the human race in its ideality. Again, Feuerbach's position is the only logical conclusion: "Theology becomes anthropology."[17]

In the course of analyzing the issue of transcendence in current theological discussion, Gordon Kaufman writes: ,

> ... the problem is whether there is *any significant reality at all* 'above' or 'beyond' or 'below' the world we know in our experience or whether life is to be understood simply in this-worldly, that is, secular terms.[18]

It is clear that for Altizer, there is not "any significant reality above or beyond ... the world we know in our experience." He understands life completely in "this-worldly" terms. Such a position, however, does not seem to be a very satisfactory solution to the problem of the transcendence of God. The traditional notion of God as above or beyond the world is reworked in order to present God as being totally within the world. But Altizer finally completely identifies God and the human race. Therefore, he attempts to solve the problem of God's transcendence by denying the reality of God.

B. FROM ABOVE TO BELOW

In opposition to a position such as Altizer's in which God-talk becomes meaningless, it might be argued that one can continue to speak of God in a significant way by shifting from images of height to images of depth. This course is pursued by Paul Tillich. The following passage is one of the clearest indications of the importance of images of depth for Tillich's vision of God.

> The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of being is *God.* That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in

[17]See: *The Essence of Christianity,* trans. by George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).

[18]"Transcendence Without Mythology," *God The Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972, p. 43.

> complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God.[19]

For Tillich, God can be conceived neither as completely within the world, nor as radically separated from the world. He believes that much of the confusion of what he takes to be traditional theism arises from the incorrect identification of God with *a* being. Once God is understood in this way, spatial imagery is simple-mindedly employed to remove such a being from the world and to place him beyond or above the worldly sphere. As the foregoing quotation indicates, and as is worked out in great detail in his *Systematic Theology,* Tillich thinks that the first step in overcoming many of the problems of traditional views of God is to stop understanding God as a being, and to start imaging God as being-itself.

> The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others.... Many of the confusions in the doctrine of God and many apologetic weaknesses could be avoided if God were understood first of all as being-itself or as the ground of being.[20]

Once this clarification has been made, the spatial imagery of above or beyond would no longer seem appropriate for representing God's transcendence. When God is understood as being-itelf, metaphors of depth or of ground become more appropriate. Accordingly, Tillich proceeds to speak of God as the depth of being or the ground of being. Of course, Tillich does not intend that such language should be taken literally. Drawing heavily on Spinoza, mediated through Schelling, Tillich uses the language of God as the ground or the depth of being to indicate that God is the *power* of being. To say that God is being-itself is to say that God is that by virtue of which everything else is, or that God is the power of being.

> The power of being is another way of expressing the same thing in a circumscribing phrase. Ever since the time of Plato it has been known – although it often has been disregarded especially by the nominalists and their modern followers – that the concept of being as being, or being-itself, points to the power inherent in everything, the power of resisting nonbeing. Therefore, instead of saying that God is first of all being-itself, it is possible to say

[19]"The Depth of Existence," *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 57. J.A.T. Robinson's *Honest To God* uses such texts in developing the significance of the depth metaphor for our thought about God.

[20]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 235.

that he is the power of being in everything, the infinite power of being.[21]

At this point, the intellectual sources of Tillich's thought exercise a significant influence on his way of conceiving God. We have indicated that Tillich draws heavily on Spinoza and Schelling. While Spinoza consistently thought of God as the power of being, the language which he most often used to express this idea was that of substance, mode, and accident. Given the intellectual history of substance metaphysics, it is quite natural to think in spatial terms when employing substance language. As Locke was later to make clear, substance is that which *underlies* and supports accidents, while accidents inhere in substance. If we translate these terms into Tillich's language, we can see that being-itself is that which underlies and supports beings, and beings inhere in, or grow out of, being-itself. The metaphors of depth and of ground are built into the very fabric of the metaphysics upon which Tillich consistently draws.

By reconceiving God as being-itself rather than as a being, and by shifting from metaphors of height (above, beyond) to metaphors of depth (ground, foundation), Tillich thinks that he is able to give a more intelligible interpretation of God's transcendence.

> God is being-itself, not a being. On this basis a first step can be taken toward the solution of the problem which usually is discussed as the immanence and the transcendence of God. As the power of being, God transcends every being and also the totality of beings – the world. Being-itself is beyond finitude and infinity; otherwise it would be conditioned by something other than itself, and the real power of being would lie beyond both it and that which conditioned it. Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite. There is no absolute break, and infinite 'jump.' On the other hand, everything finite participates in being-itself and in its infinity. Otherwise it would not have the power of being.[22]

Tillich seeks a middle ground between the radical transcendence and the complete immanence of God. He argues that God transcends the world as its ground or its creative source.

It should be apparent that in seeking to come to terms with the problem of God's transcendence ,Tillich continues to use spatial metaphors. It is to his credit that this use of images is quite conscious.

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[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 235-6.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 237.

> The spatial symbol points to a qualitative relation: God is immanent in the world as its permanent creative ground and is transcendent to the world through freedom.[23]

The innovation of Tillich's work does not involve a shift away from metaphors of space, but entails the replacement of metaphors of height with those of depth. It should be noted that Tillich's continued use of spatial metaphors has important consequences that are not at first apparent. It can be argued that Tillich's language about God in terms of being or of being-itself is a function of his commitment to spatial imagery. As a matter of fact, we can generalize and say that the category of being is a *spatial* category. Throughout the history of Christian reflection, it has been unclear whether the spatial category of being leads to an adequate view of reality. As opposed to the somewhat static concept of being, which arises from spatial imagery, might it not be more accurate to envision God, the world, and the self in terms of the temporal category of becoming? Indeed, one way to understand the conflict between Greek and Hebraic-Christian thought is as the confrontation between spatial metaphors (Substance, Being, etc.) and temporal metaphors (Action, Becoming, etc.). In contemporary theological discussions, there are thinkers who are trying to develop their theological positions by using predominately temporal metaphors. We have indicated at the outset that the two most clearly defined groups of writers who fall under this general characterization are process theologians and theologians of hope. In order to examine the importance of the shift from spatial to temporal metaphors for the problem of transcendence, we will concentrate on a representative theologian of hope, Johannes Metz.[24]

III. Temporality and Transcendence

Metz, as other thinkers with whom we have been concerned in this paper, takes as a fundamental fact of the current intellectual situation the loss of belief in any "world beyond."

> The "World-Beyond" . . . and the "Heaven above us" have not only become hidden, but seem to have disappeared . . . . No longer is the world recognized as the numinous vestibule of heaven. No longer do we directly discover in and on the world the footsteps of God, the *vestigia Dei,* but rather we see only the footsteps of men, the *vestigia hominis,* and *his* actions of changing the world. We appartently encounter in and on the world only

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 263.
[24] Other noteworthy representatives are Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Cox.

ourselves and our own possibilities. The shining glow of the "world above" and the "world beyond" has dimmed.[25]

But unlike so many of his fellow theologians, this attitude on the part of modern man does not lead Metz to despair, for he discerns another current tendency which he understands to be religiously significant.

> What moves the man of today is not the commitment for the 'world above' but the commitment to build a *new world* (or, if you will, to build 'a great society.')[26]

According to Metz, a particularly characteristic aspect of contemporary consciousness is the constant orientation toward the future. There is always an emphasis on the new, and on bringing the new into being. The world is not regarded as a closed cosmos, governed by unchanging laws, but is viewed as the arena of change and of creative becoming.

Metz argues that this orientation to the future is congruent with the important biblical themes of God's promises and the correlative issue of eschatology. He goes so far as to assert that this aspect of modern awareness is actually based on these two biblical themes.

> The orientation of the modern era to the future, and the understanding of the world as history, which results from this orientation, is based upon the biblical belief in the promises of God. This biblical faith demands that theology be eschatology.[27]

From this point of view, eschatology must play a central role in developing a theological position. God must be understood as that reality which calls man forth from his present situation into new, unknown spheres of experience. Desired perfection does not lie behind us in a forsaken Eden, but is before us in a *"promised land."* Man, believing in the promises of God, must strive to realize God's kingdom.

Metz's argument has important implications for the problem of the transcendence of God. He contends that

> We must bring together that which has been so long disastrously separated: namely Transcendence (God) and Future, because this orientation toward the future is demanded by the biblical faith and message itself. Only then can faith enter into a fruitful conflict and discussion with our modern era's passion for the future.[28]

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[25]Metz, "The Church and the World," *The Word in History*, ed. T. Patrick Burke (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p. 73.
[26]*Ibid.*, p. 73.
[27]*Ibid.*, pp. 74-5.
[28]*Ibid.*, p. 75.

Here is an important shift in the metaphor through which one envisions the transcendence of God. Time rather than space supplies the guiding image for theological construction. This metaphor shift means that God's transcendence is now understood in terms of futurity.

> . . .God revealed himself to Moses more as the power of the future than as a being dwelling beyond all history and experience. God is not 'above us' but 'before us'. His transcendence reveals itself as our 'absolute future.' This future is grounded in itself, and is self-possessed. It is a future that is not erected out of the potentialities of human freedom and human actions.[29]

God transcends the world as the future transcends the past and the present. This does not mean that God is unrelated to the present world. Quite the contrary, God, the "power of the future," historicizes the world.

> . . . this future calls forth our poteitialities to unfold themselves in history. Only such a future — one that is more than just the projections of our abilities — can call us to realize the truly *new* possibilities, to become that which has *never* existed.[30]

As the "power of the future," God beseeches man to *become.*

Implicit in Metz's equation of God's transcendence with an "absolute future" is an interesting phenomenological insight regarding faith. To say that God's transcenence is the absolute future, or that God is the power of the future, is to say that when one believes in God, he does not regard the future as determined by the past, but understands the future to entail genuinely *new* possibilities. For the believer, God is held to be the ground of infinite (i.e., unlimited) possibility. In short, to believe in God is to believe in an open future which is not irrevocably determined by the past, and which therefore allows significant human becoming to continue. This means that the belief in God is not a resignation of the individual's freedom, but is the ground of the possibility of the self's freedom. If one did not believe in a radically open future, his entire life would be the outworking of what had previously been determined. As Kierkegaard long ago recognized, belief in God is the hope for an open future, and hence is the basis of the possibility of man's free becoming.

> Inasmuch as for God all things are possible, it may be said that this is what God is, viz. the one for whom all things are possible. . . So to pray is to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing. But for possibility or for necessity alone to supply the conditions for the breathing of prayer is no more possible than

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

it is for a man to breathe oxygen alone or nitrogen alone. For in order to pray, there must be a God, there must be a self plus possibility, or a self and possibility in the pregnant sense; for God *is* that all things are possible, and that all things are possible *is* God; and only the man whose being has been so shaken that he became spirit by understanding that all things are possible, only he has had dealings with God.[31]

It should be pointed out that when God's transcendence is imagined in temporal metaphors, the human sensibility through which one is related to God is no longer sight. As Paul says in Romans 8:24, "to see is no longer to hope." The transcendence of God, interpreted as futurity, is correlated with the human sense of hearing. It is the Word, the Word of promise, that calls man from his present situation into an open future. Man must hear the Word, and must respond to it by trust in God and hope for things as yet "unseen."

If all of the consequences of Metz's reformulation of God's transcendence in terms of futurity are to be grasped, it is necessary to consider the ethical implications of his argument. However, in order to appreciate the import of the shift from spatial to temporal metaphors for an individual's life in the world, it will be helpful to consider in more general terms the ethical significance of God's transcendence.

IV. Ethical Significance of God's Transcendence

Is the problem with which we have been concerned throughout this essay simply of metaphysical or of theological interest? Have we actually been trying to solve an intellectual puzzle which, by its very nature, must remain unsolved? At first glance, it might appear that these questions should be answered affirmatively. However, a closer reading of the matter suggests that a negative response is more appropriate. The problem of God's transcendence has very important ethical implications, and therefore bears directly on the self's life in the world.

For many persons, the conviction of God's transcendence has led to a negative relationship to the present world. If God is the ultimate reality with which one has to do, and if this God is radically removed from the world of time and space, then it would seem logical for one's devotion to God to issue in the self's abstraction from the temporal process. The believer turns his eyes toward heaven, and away from earth. Probably the most extreme form of this general theological position is the Gnosticism that dominated so many minds during the years when Christianity was first taking root. For Gnostics, the world was

[31]Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday and Co,. 1954), pp. 62-3.

positively evil, and opposed to the goodness of heaven. Employing spatial images, the Gnostics held that man's task was to disengage himself from the world below, in order to allow the divine spark within him to return to its eternal home, heaven, which lay beyond the outer-most spheres of the cosmos. Gnosticism has repeatedly invaded the Christian framework. Not only in the form of early Christian heresies, but in much more subtle ways, Gnosticism reasserts itself in ostensibly Christian thinkers. Yet it is precisely in opposition to Gnosticism that theologians first formulated the unique contentions of Christianity. As opposed to the world-denying implications of the Gnostic view of God's radical transcendence of and opposition to the world, the belief in the incarnation of God in Christ indicates the conviction that God is both concerned with and involved in the world. The individual should not flee from the world, for the world is the proper arena for one's activity. Furthermore, God is not unconcerned with the course of the world, but takes worldly activity with the utmost seriousness. The theological problem is, therefore, to construe the transcendence of God in such a way that the self's activity in the world is not undercut, but is underwritten.

In a very suggestive article, "The Secular Utility of God-Talk," Gordon Kaufman argues that the fundamental function of the belief in the transcendence of God is to prevent idolatry.

> The sharp distinction between God and the idols, which is the fundamental note in the idea of God and of considerable secular significance, depends on conceiving him as radically independent of or other than the world and everything in it, so that he can be seen in sharp contrast with everything finite. If God were simply one feature of the world, or were an extension of the world, or were dependent on the world in some fundamental way, the contrast would be lessened and the whole point of the difference between God and the idols would be weakened.[32]

Kaufman's point is that belief in the transcendence of God functions to prevent a person from pledging absolute loyalty to any provisional, finite reality. This interpretation of the function of transcendence does not need to lead to a Gnostic world-renouncing position. It can, in fact, lead to a position of Christian militancy. From a theological perspective, the doctrine of God's transcendence is a principle of criticism, both intellectual and social. Every idea and every particular social structure must be regarded as provisional and must be profoundly questioned. This does not mean that one renounces the total-

[32]Kaufman, "The Secular Utility of God Talk," *God The Problem, op. cit.*, pp. 268-9.

ity of the world. It does mean that one refuses to regard as ultimate any particular set of ideas or any form of social organization. For the theologian, the doctrine of God's transcendence is the principle of negativity or of criticism to which he subjects every set of ideas and all forms of conduct.

The revolutionary implications of the doctrine of God's transcendence are especially evident when the transcendence of God is understood through the temporal metaphor of futurity. It is no accident that the shift from spatial to temporal metaphors for envisioning God's transcendence has been taking place among theologians who have been inspired by the Marxist, Ernst Bloch. At every point, theologians of hope are eager to indicate the ethical implications of belief in a transcendent (i.e., future) God. Returning to our consideration of Metz, we see quite clearly the ethical implications of his doctrine of transcendence when he argues that

> The relationship between the Christian faith and the world should be characterized from a theological viewpoint as a creative and militant eschatology.[33]

God cannot be identified with any existing reality, but always lies before the self as the "absolute future," beckoning one from his present situation (this world) to a world in which human existence is more authentically realized (the next world). The Christian is called to transform the world in which he finds himself. One renounces this world not for a trans-temporal heaven, but for a more humane earth. Metz makes this point clearly:

> However, everything hinges upon a correct understanding of what is properly meant by the renunciation of the world.... Not a flight out of the world, but a flight with the world 'forward' is the fundamental dynamism of Christian hope in its renunciation of the world.... The Christian renunciation of the world takes on the servant's form of a crucified hope for the world. A faith which is guided by such a hope is primarily not a doctrine, but an initiative for the passionate innovating and changing of the world toward the Kingdom of God.[34]

The reformation of society is not an occasional occurrence, for history itself is a continual process of negating current structures in light of imagined possibilities yet to be realized. A passage from one of Metz's fellow theologians of hope draws together the issues relating to the ethical significance of God's transcendence.

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[33]Metz, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
[34]*Ibid.*, pp. 80, 81.

> The God spoken of here is no intra-worldly or extra-worldly God, but the 'God of hope' (Romans 15.13), a God with 'future as his essential nature' (as E. Bloch puts it), as made known in Exodus and in Israelite prophecy, the God whom we therefore cannot really have in us or over us but always only before us, who encounters us in his promises for the future, and whom we therefore cannot 'have' either but can only await in active hope...
> Hope's statements of promise, however, must stand in contradiction to the reality which can at present be experienced. They do not result from experiences, but are the condition for the possibility of new experiences. They do not seek to illuminate the reality which exists, but the reality which is coming to be. They do not seek to make a mental picture of existing reality, but to lead existing reality towards the promised and hoped-for transformation. They do not seek to bear the train of reality, but to carry the torch before it. In so doing, they give reality a historic character.[85]

V. Conclusion

From the consideration of the authors examined in this paper, the importance of the problem of God's transcendence for contemporary theological debates should be apparent. We have seen that the way in which God's transcendence is understood largely depends upon the metaphors with which the theologian works. In recent theological discussions, the image of God as above or beyond the world has become increasingly unsatisfactory. In an effort to avoid the problems encountered by speaking of God as radically above or transcendent to the world, some thinkers, such as Altizer, have tried to understand God as fully within the world, while others, such as Tillich, have tried to understand God as the ground of being. Both of these options, however, remain within spatial imagery. An alternative way of interpreting God's transcendence is to shift from spatial to temporal metaphors, and to view God's transcendence in terms of futurity. This course is taken by theologians of hope. Especially in the analysis of the theology of hope, we have seen that transcendence is not an esoteric theological or philosophical problem, but has significant ethical implications which bear on the individual's life in the world. God's transcendence is the theologian's critical principle by the means of which revolutionary activity becomes a constant obligation. As such, the belief in the transcendence of God is the source of both the continuation of the theological enterprise and of the constant effort to bring God's Kingdom to earth.

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[85]Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 16, 18.