

GETTING IT IN SHAPE

WILLIAM C. TREMMEL

In 1965, Harvey Cox published a book which announced the demise of religion. It had died, so Cox proclaimed in the turning of the world into a *Secular City*, "The age of the secular city, the epoch whose ethos is quickly spreading into every corner of the globe, is an age of 'no religion at all'."¹

A year later, Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton published a book which announced the demise of God. Altizer and Hamilton had looked inward and discovered that the world was suffering from an absence of the experience of God, or at least they were. They proclaimed, somewhat inconsistently, that although "... God had died in our time in our history, in our experience," he really died when he willingly poured himself into the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and died with Jesus on the cross. Other Death of God men, of Jewish tradition, apparently concluded that God had died at Auschwitz. In his book *After Auschwitz*, Richard Rubenstein raised the question: How can a Jew believe in God? He concluded that after Auschwitz, he for one Jew, could not; that he was living at the time of the death of God.

If I believe in God as the omnipotent author of the historical drama [the death camps] and Israel as His Chosen people, I had to accept [the] conclusion that it was God's will that Hitler committed six million Jews to slaughter. I could not possibly believe in such a God nor could I believe in Israel as the chosen people after Auschwitz.²

Cox's death of religion was politely received by the American intelligentsia, and widely read by it, but not widely read by everyone else. But the proclamation of God's death struck the fancy of certain news journals and for awhile it got wide publicity, and for awhile much popular attention. Now, however, some years later, neither the *Secular City* nor the books of the Death of God men command much attention. And we are, perhaps, in a position to make some sober observations about that flurry of religious excitement.

First, it is somewhat surprising that a Death of God announcement in 1966 got viewed as "news," when the same kind of announcement had been made much more logically and philosophically on a number

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¹Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) p. 3.

²Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), p. 46.

of occasions much earlier. One can go back as far as the third century b.c. when Carneades, the Head of the Second Platonic Academy, examined the evidence and concluded not that God had died, but that God could not possibly ever have existed. In the 18th century A.D., David Hume, a brilliant Scottish philosopher, made the same argument even more systematically than had Carneades. And after Hume there were Schopenhauer and Feuerbach and Nietzsche and Freud—all presenting brilliant dissertations proving that God and religion had surely passed out of the picture for anyone bright enough to read their books on the subject. The notice and/or notoriety “enjoyed” by the recent announcements seems to have been more an accident of modern instant communications than a “news scoop.”

The second observation to make is that apparently when the announcements were made in 1965 and 1966, as in earlier times, nobody listened. Robert Ellwood in his little book on the Jesus People asserts that what happened was that everybody played a game called “Fool the Prophets.”

“Fool the Prophets” has been played on a sweeping scale in American popular and political culture in the sixties and seventies. Never have predictions and projections been more plentiful and precise. Never have the people who make popular culture taken more apparent delight in confounding the prognostications by finding something else to do.³

Lots of people heard what the “prophets” were saying clearly enough: Religion is gone, replaced by technology, megalopolis, and secularism. God is gone; dead gone, and man must learn to live not in the experience of the absence of God, but in the absence of the experience of God. *But nobody listened.* Religion did not end, and God seems to have come back quite alive from Argentina or wherever else he was in 1965 to 1966. Evidence to this effect can be seen in recently taken polls which indicate that although church and synagogue attendance has declined over the past few years, a large portion (about 40%) of the American population still gets out to church or synagogue once each week. Also, apparently God is alive and well in American hearts and minds. According to the polls, from 94% to 99% of the adult population affirms a belief in God, while only between 1% and 3% have no such belief, and the remainder are undecided. In Europe the belief is a little less wide-spread and the disbelief more wide-spread, but even in Europe God gets large endorsement; even from Frenchmen, who

³Robert S. Ellwood, *One Way*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 1.

are the most skeptical of all, but still array themselves 66% for God, 14% undecided, and 20% atheists.

The Contemporizing of Religious Expressions. Another observation to make about the current shape of things is that Harvey Cox, Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, and other "radical theology" people, did not mean exactly what they said, or mean it exactly as they said it. When Cox said, in effect, Religion is dead, he really must have meant: Religion is dead. Long live religion! And the others must have meant, similarly: God is dead. Long live God! What they were doing was proposing that certain kinds of religious expressions and feelings were gone, and that it was time to re-do religion for the world of today. And in such proposing they were not doing anything especially new or even radical. Redefining religion is probably as old as the second generation of the first religion of mankind. Once started the next generation surely had to redefine it to make it fit some modified contemporary situation.

Any time there is sufficient reason, the case of religion is restated. Sometimes a person coming at the right time is sufficient reason; e.g., Moses, Gautama, Jesus, Mohammed. Sometimes a major cultural change is sufficient reason. When Paul and the other Apostles left Palestine and moved their religion into a different cultural setting, the faith got restated. It was made to talk sense not to Jews only, but also to Ephesians and Colossians and Athenians and Romans. And when it got sophisticated enough to make appeal to educated people, it got reinterpreted by St. Augustine in Platonic modes of thought. When in the 13th century Aristotelian philosophy became the science of the day, it was restated by St. Thomas in the rational forms of Aristotle's logic. When modern states began to arise in Europe, the Christian Church decentralized and nationalized and talked a theology congenial to the newly emerging mercantile and industrial economies.

When modern science introduced heliocentric and evolutionary theories, Christian theology at first fought it and then joined it. If anyone believes that anywhere today the religion of Jesus is followed, or the religion of Paul, or Augustine, or even Martin Luther, he is sadly uninformed. Religion does not die; but its forms change. Sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes dramatically, sometimes drastically, religion takes on new shapes as it presents its old message in a new way.

The Disillusionment. It is impossible to tell how the forms of religion (or techniques as we have called them) will change in the next ten, fifty, hundred years, but they will change. What does not change is

the fact of religion in the lives of people. Human finitude does not change. The joy of religious experience does not change. But the answers and expressions given and experienced constantly change, and are currently changing rapidly. The surface reason for these religious changes is that the world (through communication systems, air travel, atomic bombs, international economic intricacies) is changing rapidly, but a deeper reason for religious changes lies in growing disillusionment which reaches back fifty years in Western history. People have been increasingly disillusioned by science, by modern theology, and by society. Modern science offered a cure to all physical ills, modern theology offered a palliative for spiritual joy, and modern society offered freedom, prosperity and security. But the pay-offs did not pay off adequately.

First, science and modern technology. Science and the by-product of science, technology came on strong with heady expectations: to know the truth, to find the answers, to control the outcome. And science has functioned magnificently. It has solved tremendous problems. But it has also created tremendous problems all the way from identity crises to ecological murder; and it has nowhere solved man.

Modern theology also failed. For the modern world there arose, first, a theology which intended to translate the ancient religious message into modern language, which intended to accommodate Christianity to a modern world. It did so with considerable enthusiasm and optimism. With science to solve man's physical problems, the church could develop a decent "social gospel," and work to establish the kingdom of brotherhood, the kingdom of God on earth. And with evolution on everybody's side it would surely come about if not tomorrow, then a little later. But that was not the way things worked out. The world went sour. It did not get better. It seemingly got worse. The Great Depression was solved not by a social gospel but by World War II, which was also not solved by either the Cold War in Europe, or by hot wars in Korea and Vietnam.

Theologians began to question their liberal interpretations, and some of them turned back to a more orthodox posture. Man was a fallen creature. In no way could he ever create the kingdom of God on earth. *Christ and Culture* stood against each other. God was not working with man. God was far off; completely far off, completely other. From over optimism about the powers of man to effect world change, modern theology became increasingly pessimistic. And God got farther and farther away from man's experiences in this world; and the world got farther and farther away from the "experience of God," until one day it was discovered by some searchers that no matter where

they turned, God was not to be found. It was not as if they just could not, for the moment, make contact with God, but as if they had no experience of God at all. And some of them finally concluded: He is dead. We are living in the time of the death of God.

A third disillusionment came in the social structure—in thousands of ways in the social structure, but, perhaps, one illustration is paradigm. In the 1940's, the most sophisticated people on earth, the most educated, the most scientific, the most philosophical, the most cultured, turned upon the world with something called a "Blitz Krieg," and something called "The Holocaust." Unbelievable! How could such a thing happen? There are thousands of explanations and excuses as to how it could happen, but they do not help the disillusionment. And even after the Nazi violence, the social disillusionment did not end. It broke out again in little wars which kill people just as dead as big wars; in bad laws everywhere that "good parliaments" would not change; in hungry people whose petty, tyrannical governments, with the connivance of tyrannical big governments, bought fighter planes and bombers and machine guns instead of bread; in churches and synagogues which dismissed or otherwise chastised their clergymen for sympathizing with the civil disobedience of black men and the rebellions of long-haired kids; and so on and on.

Some Recent Reshaping. In the midst of all of this modern disillusionment, several new forms of religious expression began to take shape. One new shape was called The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. A new Exodus was conceived in the hearts and minds and songs of a bonded people. Led by Martin Luther King, a man inspired by his Christian faith and schooled in the techniques of Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian holy man, the black people of the South moved to the front of the bus. This walk forward did more than set in motion a civil rights revolution in American society. It set alive, before a restive younger generation, the example of a people who were separate from "the establishment." It created an awareness of special identity, and a heightening of the consciousness of selfhood, in all kinds of people, and it established a new passion, euphemistically called "doing your own thing."

These ideas and modes of behavior seized a whole generation of young white Americans. They felt a spiritual kindred with the black cause, and with what it directly and subtly meant to the spirits of men. Not that most of the "white children" joined the civil disobedience of the black cause, but in the fact that most of them felt a separation and an alienation in their own private, home, school, church, social struc-

tures, even as the blacks felt it in the wider national structure. They began to turn off and drop out. And they got a name: "hippies."

At least two other factors helped to shape the Hippie Movement. One was the "instant solution" afforded by the use of psychedelic music, wild decorations, special talk and language, and by the taking of hallucinogenic drugs. The other factor molding the shape of the movement was the war in Vietnam. In the senseless and "immoral" involvement of America in a Southeast Asian war, a generation of young people found ample grounds for despising their elders.

Many of the hippies at first became politically active, trying to turn off the war, trying to "save the nation." But a shocked adult world, overreacting to marijuana, bare feet, and long hair, crushed their "flowers." A generation-gap conclusion was reached by the "children:" the world is hopeless, it isn't worth saving. And many of them began to build a world of their own in places like San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury and New York's Greenwich Village, Los Angeles' Sunset Strip, and Atlanta's Peach Street, where they had "happenings" and "trips" and rock music, posters, poetry, and drugs. And the young people who did not "split" to the special centers of the "street people," or later to hippie communes, still joined their comrades in spirit, and often in hair, dress, and drug tripping.

The moment was "anti-establishment," and the organized religions of the American scene were establishments marked for special avoidance. The hippie people generally absented themselves from the religious denominations of their parents. At the same time, the mysteriousness of religion, and its capacity for aesthetic exploitation and its potential for aiding in self identification, offered special attractions to them. In many instances this ambivalence was overcome by rejecting religion in Western shapes and endorsing it in Eastern shapes. In a rather faddish fashion the hippie people "got into" Zen, and Transcendental Meditation, and Hare Krishna, and other exotic imports.

For a while these Asian imports were the "in thing," in spite of the fact that they were seldom genuinely Asian or of much religious profundity. Of them Carl Raschke remarked:

. . . these religions frequently have all the "spiritual depth of the promotional gimmicks which make them easy and attractive . . . [and] . . . all the primordial authenticity . . . of the little porcelain Bodhisattvas I once saw in a local discount store and on which was stamped unobtrusively "made in Los Angeles."⁴

⁴For a more extensive analysis of these Asian imports see Carl Raschke, "The Asian Invasion of American Religions," *Philosophy and Theology* 1973, (Tallahassee, Florida: American Academy of Religion, 1973), and Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (New York: Pocket Book, 1972).

What these Asian type expressions of religion represented was not a sweeping away of Western expressions in favor of Eastern expressions, but signs of the disillusionment which had infected the contemporary culture.

After a few years of "Eastern Religion," another religious grouping and movement of young people took shape. The pendulum swung back from East to West, and American teenagers began to "get high" not on gurus, but on Jesus: The Jesus Movement. It should not have surprised anyone that in a hippie-type culture, some people would eventually begin to get as excited about a Sunday-school Jesus as others had gotten about Asian gurus. Jesus was so available, so "freaky," so charismatic, one might have expected that he would get his hippie scene also. The Jesus Children came on almost like a new Children's Crusade, replete with naivete, scrubbed faces, bible versus, and cheerleader enthusiasm. A close observer of American religion, Will Herberg, made an informed guess that that part of The Jesus Movement usually called the Jesus Kids or the Jesus Freaks, which was a loosely organized, almost spontaneous expression of fundamentalistic, Sunday-school Christianity, would dissolve into establishment, denominational religions. Getting a little older, the Jesus Kids, Herberg predicted, would get married, get jobs, join churches, and remember (even witness to) the good old days when people had "real religion"; namely, themselves, jumping for glee for Jesus at age sixteen. That part of the movement, called The Children of God, which was a well-organized system of Christian communes, Herberg speculated, would simply become another conservative Protestant denomination.

Principles of Shaping. Everywhere new styles of religion are being tried, both independent of established denominations and inside established denominations. The future of any style cannot be predicted. But an historical perspective may give us some insight into the dual forces which seem to govern all religions as they move through history. Religion expresses itself in two ways: as rational, culture-related thought and activity; and as emotional, inner-directed experience. The rational pole emphasizes the ideas, vocabulary, and the established scientific and philosophical world view in which it operates. It is properly, historically worldly. The other pole of the same religion sees the religious experience, and all of the mythological lore of that religion, as basically unique, and not to be corrupted by any foreign "modern language." At any given time both of these antagonistic poles are alive and straining at each other. Religion has its extremely rational moments. It also has its extremely emotional moments. Its long-run success comes when some degree of balance is maintained between the

two. An unbalance usually occurs when the culture shifts. Our culture has shifted. There is an unbalance between rationalism, often called liberalism, and emotionalism, often called evangelicalism. And they are struggling. Today, liberalism, on the one hand, and evangelicalism, on the other, are standing against each other as an internal split in both Catholicism and Protestantism. How the tension will be resolved no one can possibly predict.

A deeper penetration of the religious situation, however, informs us that it is the style, the shape, which changes, not the need for, nor the fact of religion in the lives of men. Religion *as such* remains constant today and tomorrow, as it was yesterday.

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