

# THE URBAN RENEWAL OF RELIGION

**Are the God is Dead theologians distracting community ethical forces from lifting a callous curtain that has lowered on America?**

By DAVID POLING, Associate Editor, *Christian Herald*

**O**N MARCH 22, 1966, 125 students of St. John's Seminary, Boston, stood in silent vigil outside the school library. They were protesting the school's restrictions on academic and personal freedom and appealing to Richard Cardinal Cushing for support in their struggle. A month later the seminary rector resigned, making possible a "new spirit of harmony and discipline." In New York City, on April 21, 300 students, led by seminarians from Union Theological Seminary, formed a double line outside the branch of First National City Bank, at Broadway and 111th Street. They were closing out their accounts, causing a minor "run," as a way of protesting the bank's involvement with the economy of South Africa and the racial policies of its government.

If the reader of the morning paper thinks that the religious community is generating activity on the streets and sidewalks, wait until he gets inside the seminary classroom. With the lectures of the God is Dead theologians, the sermons of Saul Alinsky on church involvement in poverty programs, the rumblings over the war in Vietnam, you have a light sampling of the ferment, and at times furor, that has rattled the stained glass from coast to coast.

With the publication of books like Thomas J. J. Altizer's *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Westminster Press, hardbound, \$3; paperback \$1.75) and William Hamilton's and Altizer's *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Bobbs-Merrill, hardbound, \$5; paperback, \$1.85) you have an inkling of what is, if not inspiring the world of religion, certainly disturbing it. While the cries of outrage and shock have continued to mount as church members discover that seminary professors and religion faculty members are proposing a God-denying, Christian "atheism," others have allowed that, well, better a live heresy than a dead orthodoxy.

For those who really want to enter the *melée*, the best book for a quick survey is by Hamilton and Altizer, *Radical The-*

*ology and The Death of God*. As they develop the historic argument from Nietzsche, the torments of Dostoevsky, the mournful cries of Albert Camus, and the rebellion of the radicals against Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, they show us the interior struggles of young men seeking a living faith without a living God. "There once was a God to whom adoration, praise and trust were appropriate, possible, and even necessary, but . . . now there is no such God. This is the position of the death of God or radical theology. It is an atheist position, but with a difference. If there was a God, and if there now isn't, it should be possible to indicate why this change took place, when it took place, and who was responsible for it."

Although stimulating, challenging, threatening and, at times, exasperating, the writers have yet to locate the grave plot and the headstone. This cemetery theology displays a gentle, mystical spirit in Altizer, who has studied widely in the Oriental religions and would have the Western Christian follow to the same well. It is one thing to drink and be refreshed at such sources—it is quite another to drown!

Bill Hamilton has to be one of the most exciting figures on any campus. He has won the admiration of thousands of students through his leadership, humor, and provocative thinking in campus Christian conferences and seminars. One can feel the bruises that Hamilton and Altizer are going to receive (and probably have already) for their "live heresy." It

must represent some sort of institutional strength and administrative courage for Emory University and Colgate Rochester Divinity School to shield those who say, as did Hamilton, "It must be clear that this theology has neither the power nor the ability to serve the Protestant Church in its present institutional forms. I do not see how preaching, worship, prayer, ordination, the sacraments can be taken seriously by radical theologians."

As you dig into this kind of statement, you realize that the radical theologian is not saying that God-is-alive-but-the-church-is-dead, or God-is-alive-but-He-is-not-very-operative in the decisions and the thought processes of His people.

To them, God is Dead. Nothing. Nihilism. Zero. The awful word has been said. The heavens are empty. The interior life is vacant. The "Ground of all Being" was Tillich's phrase and is gone with him. There is a peculiar kind of horror here, as Kenneth L. Wilson says, like the fleeting thought of suicide that touches every man's mind, so "We recoil from the suicide achieved because we recognize ground upon which we once stood, however briefly." But the radical theologian is not apologetic or clinical about this thought: he faces it head on with a James Dean sort of destiny. "For the Christian who bets that God is dead risks both moral chaos and his own damnation. . . . No honest contemporary seeker can ever lose sight of the very real possibility that the willing of the death of God is the way to madness, dehumanization, and even to the most totalitarian form of society yet realized in history. Who can doubt that a real passage through the death of God must issue in either the abolition of man or in the birth of a new and transfigured humanity?"

For both Hamilton and Altizer (quoted above), Jesus Christ remains the last anchor, the final rung, the remaining limb on the abyss of nothingness. God is dead but the qualifications begin.

In an interesting exchange of letters, published in the May *Christian Herald*, between Norman Vincent Peale and Thomas Altizer, Dr. Peale asked the



pastor's question: "How do you help the man or woman in sorrow or tragedy without using 'God talk and God thought forms'?" Professor Altizer answered:

When we say that God is dead, we are in fact intending to make a Christian affirmation that God has died in His transcendent form and reality and is now fully incarnate in every human hand and face. It is a way of saying that Christ lives more fully and more comprehensively now than He has ever lived before.

Dr. Altizer signed it, I believe in complete sincerity, "Yours in Christ."

Hamilton obviously finds some consolation and spiritual insurance by waiting for the return of God. "We pray for God to return, and we seem to be willing to descend into the darkness of unfaith and doubt that something may emerge on the other side."

One of the problems raised in the material of Hamilton and Altizer is their quotation and reliance on the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—carefully documented as "later" Bonhoeffer. Writings like *Letters and Papers from Prison* are quoted heavily by the radical theologians.

With the general rejection of Karl Barth and the observation that Paul Tillich made a good start but did not follow through, the radical theologians have a hungry look as they browse for confirmation material. This leaves Nietzsche, William Blake, and the "later" Bonhoeffer. I wonder if such a cavalier selection of source material is strong enough for sustained argument. I mean, to take "later" Bonhoeffer and reject "early" and "middle" Bonhoeffer: is it fair to a man or honest to his writings? For, after all, his perceptive comments on American culture, church life, and college adventures must come from "early" Bonhoeffer. "Middle" Bonhoeffer, if we accept the categories, would be his stirring public leadership of the Christian minority of Nazi Germany: his teaching, lectures, sermons, and even radio addresses. During this time his colleague, Karl Barth, criticized Bonhoeffer for his trips to England, and begged him to return to Berlin "to attend faithfully and bravely to the machine-gun which you have left behind there."

"Later" Bonhoeffer material is the collection of writings smuggled from prison by sympathetic guards, who, although they could not save the man, served the world by preservation of this vital material.

The publication of *Christ the Center* (Harper & Row, \$3) will do little to further the claims of the radical theologians. These lectures, recovered from class notes made by students of Bonhoeffer at the University of Berlin, are part of the same brilliance that followed

his career to the end. "Early" or "late," Bonhoeffer was a man of the hour, and this volume should be added to the bookshelf of the serious participant in today's religious skirmish.

It is either Providence or thanks to the speed of modern publishers or both that a stack of stimulating writings has come out during this debate to keep the perspective healthy for the religious community. A good part of the spirit of contemporary church life is wonderfully and wickedly ignited in *The Restless Church*, edited by William Kilbourn (Lippincott, \$3.50). Get it. It swings. It takes off from a response to Pierre Berton's best-selling *The Comfortable Pew* and turns into a street fight with a wild exchange by sixteen authors, scholars, and professional agitators. William Stringfellow, James Pike, Harvey Cox—and Peter Berger! Berger has to be the mad bomber of the bunch, sort of a religious Viet Cong rolling idea-grenades into theological teas. It takes a lot of courage to put so many divergent writers and thinkers together and, as Martin E. Marty says, without "ideological neatness." An example is Elizabeth Kilbourn's remark: "After all, I had read Tillich, [John A. T.] Robinson, and Bonhoeffer for myself and thrown them across the room in fury . . ." It reminds one of stock-car racing, which is fun until your own entry gets clipped.

Paul Tillich's lectures before his death on October 12, 1965, are now in print, in the volume *The Future of Religions* (Harper & Row, \$2.95). To the vast audience who mourned his passing the

appearance of these writings at this time is like the lifting of the clouds to reveal again the majesty of the highest mountains. They are always there. Occasionally the darkness covers them only to give way to light and life. These closing chapters, from the mind of one of the greatest theologians, reveal the brilliance and intensity of a man who lived on the "Frontier." Tillich is always out ahead, sweeping aside the underbrush, cutting new trails, scaling high walls.

IS there anyone who has fashioned such careful and comprehensive understanding of "The Emotional Reaction to Space Exploration" or the "Spiritual Consequences of Space Exploration"? Have we read anywhere the appreciation—and warning—of the "esoteric elite" that has come from the massive pursuit of outer-space projects? Tillich sees the space-age scientist, research academy, and experimental program as strengthening "anti-democratic elements, which are present in every democratic structure." Tillich, as a man on the Frontier, discussed the East-West tensions, the dangers of the new Philistine, and the inherent weakness of the God is Dead theologians. He is still speaking in that winsome, caring way; the believer and unbeliever find it natural to sit at his feet.

The honest to God, God Is Dead discussions have drawn new response in the field of Christian apologetics—some shrill, some thoughtful and sensible. One of the more deliberate studies is by the  
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## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

### PRIZEWINNERS

Anna M. Anderson of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, lists fifteen plays and novels that have won the Pulitzer Prize. Can you assign each to its author and decade? The judging takes place on page 52.

1. <i>Alison's House</i>	( ) James Gould Cozzens	1920s
2. <i>All the Way Home</i>	( ) Owen Davis	— — —
3. <i>Guard of Honor</i>	( ) Martin Flavin	
4. <i>Icebound</i>	( ) Ketti Frings	1930s
5. <i>In Abraham's Bosom</i>	( ) Susan Glaspell	— — —
6. <i>Journey in the Dark</i>	( ) Paul Green	
7. <i>Look Homeward, Angel</i>	( ) Josephine W. Johnson	1940s
8. <i>Now in November</i>	( ) Joseph Kramm	— — —
9. <i>Scarlet Sister Mary</i>	( ) Harper Lee	
10. <i>The Edge of Sadness</i>	( ) Tad Mosel	1950s
11. <i>There Shall Be No Night</i>	( ) Edwin O'Connor	— — —
12. <i>The Shrike</i>	( ) Julia M. Peterkin	
13. <i>The Store</i>	( ) Conrad Richter	1960s
14. <i>The Town</i>	( ) Robert E. Sherwood	— — —
15. <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	( ) T. S. Stribling	