

D0098

Drawing on Gilkey, Ch. 1.

immediate
More

Antecedents to Revisionist Theology are found in the theological ferment of the last fifteen years where the question of the reality of God and of the possibility of meaningful language about him was raised within the theological community. The questions went as follows: "Is faith in God a real possibility for a modern secular man; is it possible to speak meaningfully -- to ourselves and to others -- of God and what he has done for man, is there a Word and a Presence in scripture, in sacrament, and in the preaching and moral aims of the Church that is not merely human, relative, and fallible? Does our religion, and so its institutions, its ministries, its worship, its obligations & its behavior, relate us to a reality beyond ourselves, or is it only a useful (or useless) activity played out by man in an unresponsive cosmos? Is the God we seek to worship, preach and serve, in church and out of it, in the old forms or in new ways, real or illusory, alive or dead?" (5)

These were the central issues in the O^ol ferment of the late '60's and early '70's. These issues developed suddenly and radically, for between roughly 1920 and 1960 in Protestantism and 1950 and 1965 in Roman Catholicism there had been what many younger theologians considered an immensely creative period of theological construction, known, in each case, as neo-orthodoxy. Whether the neo-orthodox theologians drew primarily on biblical and traditional sources or more extensively on general cultural sources, they all shared common assumptions about theology:

(1) Theology as an enterprise has substance and integrity, stemming as it does from a unique and certain source in divine revelation

(2) the reflective language of theology is universally meaningful, since it helps also to interpret cultural experience.

Since 1965, these certainties about the established validity & meaningfulness of O^ol lg have disintegrated.

Theologians used to apply a given system of theological thought to new areas or to improve its edges by more careful wording. Now the theologian began to wonder whether he could do theology at all in the contemporary world. On what basis, in particular, could he now speak about God? Some theologians, the radical or death of God theologians, decided that all theological language is impossible. Others sought new bases for it. In either case, theological reflection concerned itself not with building systems but with the foundations of all theological language.

What precisely was it about this shaking of the foundations that distinguished it from the calling into question of religious beliefs in previous decades and centuries? Three things:

1) This upheaval took place within and not outside the Church. Gilkey, p. 9: "The Church itself, the religious community itself, through the experience and the reflective thought of its official representatives and functionaries, is not so much expounding 'faith' to a doubting world as it is itself exploring the depths of its own uncertainty, and itself searching for possible foundations for its language, its worship, and its works." "The doubts which the world has long known about the articles of belief are now recognized by the Church to be her own doubts, and the world's problems with her theological language are the theologian's problems." Previously, the Church understood itself as the faithful hearer, if not the firm possessor, of a divine Word, and thus radically distinguished from the world of unbelief. The presence of uncertainty within the Church, of doubt, of scepticism, and of ^{a sense of} the meaninglessness of religious language.

2) It was the most fundamental of all our Judeo-Christian religious affirmations that was under scrutiny, the reality of God. Is there a divine dimension

transcendent to the finite, contingent, transient world of creatures? This is the most fundamental of all theological questions. Does any religious faith, any theological discourse, have any validity at all?

Notice what this implies. To debate this question in theology means that no theological assumptions can usefully be made in the debate, no theological authorities invoked -- for such an assumption would presuppose the reality of the divine. "If the question of God is raised, theology must begin from the beginning, it must deal with its own most basic foundations. And however much one may be guided by one's great teachers, that means starting as best one can on one's own and at the level of concrete experience. This is an upheaval that has thrown us all quite back to the beginnings of all religious reflection."

literally

The question of God will take different forms in different ages. In a rationalistic age, it arises as a proof for God's existence. In an historically-minded age, it becomes the question of the meaning of life & of history. Today it has become the question of the possibility or intelligibility of religious or theological language. This was not the question of whether theological language should have its basis in a metaphysical system or in the Bible, but whether there was any God to talk about. Theology has been driven to the task of justifying religious discourse as a whole, a task that can be accomplished only by seeking to locate within concrete experience some element, aspect, or being which calls for religious symbolization, for which religious or theological language is necessary, & in relation to which it communicates and so has 'meaning.'

Another way of phrasing the same development is in terms of the distinction between validity and meaning with

respect to God-talk. When one is concerned with validity, one asks whether statements about God are true and in what ways we might have certainty of that. One presupposes the reality of the referent of such language, and so the possibility of some form of intelligible discourse about him.

But when one is concerned with meaning, one asks about cash value, relevance or effectiveness to experiences. To say, "I do not even know what you mean by the word 'God'" is very different from "I understand what you mean by belief in God, but I do not think it is true." In the 12th qu. I am doubting even that Old or new systems are at all intelligible as potential modes of understanding the world. Does the word "God" have any use in ordinary, contemporary discourse? Does it fit anywhere into experience? Or is there a total disrelation between it and life? If not, it is meaningless, not in the sense of self-contradiction but in that of its total disrelation to experienced actuality.

As to the qu. of the reality of God arisen today w/c the context of the qu. of meaningfulness to our modern experience of religious discourse. The theologian must be involved with the prior delimitation of the meaningfulness in a secular age of religious discourse as such. Does it express our experience? This is a question of the relation of concepts to experience. The theologian must concern himself today with the examination of ordinary experience, so as to find there those dimensions or regions to wh. the language of religious symbols has reference, meaning, possibility.

3) The "death of God" theologians or radical theology brought to clear expression all the difficulties faced by contemporary Christian faith and theology. Their thought has the following seven characteristics:

- a) their central denial of the reality of God presents

~~In What Way Am I a Revisionist Theologian?~~

~~A. D. N. S. J.~~

- all
an essential challenge to religious & O^d discourse;
- b) this denial represents a new movement of O^d thought, repudiating totally the O^d part;
 - c) it is an explicit rejection of the dominant neo-orthodox establishment in O that preceded it, signaling its demise as a ruling mode of O^d discourse;
 - d) represents w/i the Church community, the mood & viewpoint of our secular age, and leads us to affirm that no useful distinction can be made between a O^d starting point relevant for the Church and one relevant for the world.
 - e) explicitly built on foundations wh. reject any peculiarly religious means of knowing reality & regard as undiscoverable any category of the transcendent, the sacred, the holy, that wh. is more than the finite realities experienced in our ordinary secular contact w. nature & w. others in community. Christian belief, practice, and theology have a totally naturalistic base;
 - f) creates an entirely new situation for O^d method, making old starting points irrelevant;
 - g) expresses in powerful form the conviction that Christianity is primarily mission & service in the world and for the neighbor, & therefore that its own existence is secular. To be a Christian is not to be religious, worshipful, theological, not to "believe" with all one's heart, but to love, serve, & so change the world.

The death-of-God O itself was short-lived, as such, but its protests alone have made it possible for us to tackle the real O^d issues of our time. They set the sole frameworks for relevant O^d discussion today.