Religion *Post Mortem Dei*

A Review Article

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The Death of God. By GABRIEL VAHANIAN. New York: George Braziller (Toronto: S. J. Reginald Saunders), 1961. Pp. xxxiii, 253. $5.95.
Religion and the Rise of Scepticism. By FRANKLIN L. BAUMER. New York: Harcourt, Brace (Toronto: Longmans, Green), 1960. Pp. 308. $6.95.
Religion and the Modern Mind. By W. T. STACE. Philadelphia–New York: J. B. Lippincott (Toronto: Longmans, Green), 1960. Pp. 320. $2.10.
The New Essence of Christianity. By WILLIAM HAMILTON. New York: Association Press (Toronto: G. R. Welch Co.), 1961. Pp. 159. $3.00.

ONLY THE PERSON who has not been reading widely in the fields of religious and secular literature in the post-War years will find anything startling in the title of this review article. References abound to our time as a cultural period which can be spoken of not only as post-Christian but also as *post mortem Dei.* For the point is not simply that the Christian religion no longer in any vital sense forms and informs the general culture of our day. It is religion as such, in any traditional sense of the term, with its belief in some kind of transcendent divine being who is related meaningfully and purposively to the world of nature and to human history, which has lost credence today in the countries of the West. All four of the books under review here state this as a fact, attempt to show its causes and consequences, and in one way or another raise the question of the future prospects of religion in Western culture.

Of course, the death of God does not necessarily have as its consequence the demise of religion. Indeed the time of the death of God can be a time of religious revival, such as that of the 1950's on the North American continent, according to Dr. Vahanian. The fact that churches are well attended, that religious books can head the best-seller list, that the language of religion permeates the culture, is not in itself a sign that God has not died or that religion has survived. It may simply be the case that, with God's death, religion is transformed into religiosity in which all sorts of substitutes for God give some kind of meaning and encouragement to lives that have not the strength of mind and heart to admit God's death.

The first part of Vahanian's book is entitled "The Religious Agony of Christianity," the second part "The Cultural Agony of Christianity." In the former he attempts, with abundant reference to religious and secular

literature, to show the transformation that has taken place in our day of Christian faith into religiosity. The chief characteristic of religiosity as compared with traditional Christian believing is the immanental rather than transcendental "object" of religious experience and belief. Religiosity is marked by the following traits: a faith in faith which substitutes for faith in God; a desire for "togetherness" instead of genuine "community"; an amorphous mixture of Christianity, secularism, and secularity; a narcissistic, hedonistic, man-centred religion, marked by a faith so inflated that it has lost all its value. It was not true religion which experienced a revival in the 1950's but rather the upsurge of this sentimental, man-centred cult of reassurance and success which bears incontrovertible witness to the fact that God is dead. The religious agony of Christianity in which God dies ends, not in the death of religion, but in the birth of a god "who reflects the image of man all too faithfully."

Dr. Vahanian begins his analysis of the "Cultural Agony of Christianity" by noting that "theologically speaking, every age is post-Christian." He means by this statement that there is no period in human history that does not stand under the judgment of God. (This is the Kierkegaardian insight that no man can speak of himself as *being* a Christian but only as *becoming* Christian applied to man's cultural history as a whole.) But the uniqueness of our age is that it is *culturally* post-Christian. This means not only that Christianity has ceased to have any significant relevance for modern man but also that "the fundamentals of our culture—those things that govern our self-understanding—make us impervious to the conception of Christianity, so that our culture makes it impossible for us to become Christian." As already noted, the world-view of Christianity is transcendental; the world-view of our culture is radically immanental. Since the context of our self-understanding is the reality of the world in all its immediacy and immanence, it is easier for us to understand ourselves without God, than with him. The world-view of our time makes God irrelevant. His existence is no longer called into question intellectually, as it was in an earlier anti-Christian period. Even the *question* about God's existence has ceased to be relevant in our time. God has ceased in any real sense to inform life and therefore must be presumed to be dead.

Those who want their expositions of such serious themes neat and tidy will not be satisfied with this book. There is a lack of precision in the use of terms which gets in the way of understanding. Paul Ramsey in a helpful introduction underlines as one of the main points of the book that it is Christianity itself which is responsible for the loss of God today. But one finishes the book with no very clear impression of the way in which this has been so. Moreover, one is never quite sure what is meant by "Christianity" in the author's use of the term. At times it is used as a synonym for biblical faith, or biblical religion, or ecclesiastical history, or modern Christian thought, and at times it is difficult to infer just which of these meanings is intended. In its impressionistic way, *The Death of God* does lead to

insight into the spiritual condition of ourselves and our contemporaries and into the implications of that condition for anyone concerned about the Christian faith. It raises very sharply, but does not answer, the question: What essentially is the relation between Christianity as faith and Christianity as religion? And the subsequent question: What is the relation between the Christian faith and the cultural enterprise of man? The chapter "Christianity, Secularity and Secularism" seems to point in the direction of an answer to such questions when the author suggests, without developing the thesis, that "secularity is a Christian obligation" and shows that "secularism" is the fate that befalls Christianity itself when it degenerates into religiosity. Even a Christian of sound faith can today make some sense out of speech about God's death when it implies an experience of God's absence and especially when it indicates the passing of a religious world-view. But it is difficult to know what a Christian is to make of the author's contention that post-Christian culture is such as to make it *impossible* for modern man to become a Christian through faith in a transcendent God. For it would indeed be a sure indication, not merely of God's death through absence, but that he never lived except through poetic fiction, if he, the living God, self-revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, could not bring it to pass that men are sustained or recreated in faith even in the midst of a culture that gives every indication that he is dead.

Whereas Dr. Vahanian has given us a suggestive account of the popular religion that has survived the death of God in Western culture, Dr. Baumer in his book, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism*, presents a carefully structured, historical account of the rise and development of the sceptical tradition and its effect upon the religious beliefs of the educated man. With respect to the latter, he too is led to speak of the religious situation of today as a time of the death of God, "The Death of God" being the title of his third chapter.

Dr. Baumer discovers four main types of scepticism, each marking a principal phase in its development. There is the Enlightenment type of the eighteenth century, with its anti-dogmatic, anti-clerical, anti-Christian, but not necessarily anti-religious, attitudes and ideas. This period was preceded and prepared for by the attack in the seventeenth century on the teleological view of nature under the providential ordering of God from the side of the mechanistic views of nature and the empirical views of knowledge that had their origin in the new science of the day. Accompanying this intellectual attack on traditional Christian views of nature in its relation to God were the sceptical attitudes that resulted from increased travel, which brought the educated person into contact with cultures whose religious or secular foundations differed from those of the West; from the proliferation of Protestant sects, each with its own claim to authoritative and absolute knowledge, the general effect of which was the relativizing of all such claims; and from the revival of interest in antiquity, which also tended towards the relativization of Western man's attitude towards his own particu-

lar cultural tradition. Eighteenth-century scepticism developed into the peculiar type of the nineteenth century, which found its most pointed expression in Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God and Feuerbach's less funereal but equally serious contention that theology is virtually anthropology. What Nietzsche and Feuerbach shared in common was the assertion that man is the *fons et origo* of the notion of God and that for his own freedom and development he must consciously set himself the task of becoming the God he confesses. Such views as these gave rise to a new set of gods, replacing the God of traditional Christian believing, whose names were variously Humanity, Society, Science, History, and Culture. The scepticism of this age seemed to be accompanied by a sense of expansive freedom, as men cast off what was felt to be the yoke of Christian tradition and gave themselves to the nurture of their man-made gods. But today, in the middle of the twentieth century, this optimistic scepticism of the nineteenth century has yielded to an anxious scepticism of which the literature of our day speaks. For Dr. Baumer it is best characterized by Arthur Koestler's novel, *The Age of Longing*. The main characters of this book show no sense of freedom in their failure to believe. They have lost all confidence in man-made gods. Scepticism has become a burden to them. They have an acute sense of longing for the birth of a new god who, like the old, would possess the quality of transcendence but who would not make the demands against intelligence that Christian believing makes. In this day of the death of God, marked by a scepticism combined with longing, three alternatives confront the intellectual: nihilism, the revival of the God of Christian origin, or the painful waiting for the birth of a new god that will satisfy both man's longing and the requirement of intellectual honesty. In the concluding section of the book, Dr. Baumer asks whether the latter hope and possibility will give rise to a "Layman's Religion" which will creatively combine scepticism and religious aspiration. Such a religion will be marked by a multivariety of forms of religious expression, a renouncing of all vanity of dogmatism, and a recognition that all religious language is symbolical and mythical, not literal, in function and meaning. These marks, if taken seriously, will make impossible a revival of the Christian faith with its archaistic thought-forms and language and the gross presumption of its claim to finality of revelation in Jesus Christ.

While reading this book the reviewer was made aware of the large degree to which his own Christian thinking had developed in more or less conscious dialogue with the sceptical tradition of doubt of which Dr. Baumer speaks. Therefore, he could not but regret the implicit contention of the author, explicitly attributed to others, that anyone holding to Christian beliefs and attitudes must fall short of thoroughgoing intellectual honesty. For an ordained theologian, the offence is compounded by the suggestion that only a "Layman's Religion" could satisfy the demands of religious longing and rigorous thought. Surely Christian apologetic belongs in any comprehensive history of religion in relation to the sceptical tradition, especially when such

a history concludes with a discussion of religious possibilities in the face of sceptical doubt. No attempt to give contemporary Christian answers to questions of doubt is made in this book. One can therefore be excused for continuing to believe that there is more promise for man's longing in a renewal of Christian believing than there is in the vague outline (with which the book ends) of a religion that satisfies longing only to the extent that it is bereft of intellectual content. Baumer seems to be groping for the solution to the demands of the age already arrived at by some, not least by W. T. Stace in the book next to be reviewed. This solution is mysticism. But the god of the mystic is a very old god indeed.

In Dr. Stace's book, *Religion and the Modern Mind*, one finds what a modern intellectual who well knows the sceptical tradition still thinks it possible to affirm about religious belief and experience. As suggested above, he is not one of the vanguard of the Lay Founders of a new religion about whom Dr. Baumer speaks, for there is nothing new about the religion of which he speaks. Even in this modern scientific age the essence of all valid religious belief and experience remains inviolate from any strictly logical, rational point of view. It is true that the history of modern thought, as reflected in the art, literature, or philosophy of the modern period, has been the history of the conflict between two radically opposed views of the world, the religious and the scientific. But it is Dr. Stace's conviction, the grounds for which he is intent to show in this book, that the conflict between the two world-views has been rooted in logical fallacy. Its origins lie in psychological impressions, not in rational thought.

The authors of the two previous books drew heavily on the literature of the modern period as source and illustration of the points they wished to make. Perhaps because he is a philosopher, it is Dr. Stace's view that "[an age's] philosophy is perhaps a better key for unlocking the secrets of its *Weltanschauung* than either its art or literature." He therefore traces the rise and development of the scientific world-view, and the sceptical tradition to which it gave birth, in the history of modern philosophy. But first he gives an account of the "medieval world-picture," pointing in it to the three affirmations basic to any religious view of the world: (*a*) the divine government of the world; (*b*) the teleological or purposive nature of the world; (*c*) the world as a moral order. The author then shows how in the development of the scientific world-view into a thoroughgoing naturalism it was thought necessary to call into question these basic religious affirmations. But this (he argues) is a false conclusion originating in a logical muddle. In the third and final section of the book, entitled "Present Problems," the author seeks to show what a modern man concerned about intellectual integrity may in all honesty affirm about religious truth and reality. He must assert, as Dr. Baumer has insisted, that the language of religion is metaphorical and mythical, that the religious Object is a mystical reality which is neither objective nor subjective but transcends the split between the object and the subject, and therefore that continual openness to the possibilities of mystical experience is the religious way of life. It may be

affirmed, Dr. Stace believes, that there are two worlds, or two dimensions of the one world, each of which looks to the other like an illusion. "That God is an illusion is the standpoint of naturalism. That the world is an illusion is the standpoint of the eternal." Kant saw clearly the truth about these two orders of the one world, that naturalism is the sole truth about the natural order, and religion the sole truth about the eternal order. Kant's only mistake was his failure to recognize that man can have a direct experience of the eternal order in the mystical vision.

As a contribution to the intellectual history of modern man's dialogue with doubt the Christian scholar will find Dr. Stace's book interesting. But because of the author's insistence on subsuming Christian understanding under the general category of religion, without any attempt to show how biblical or catholic Christian tradition fits the application, his book is not instructive for the Christian who wishes to carry on *his* dialogue with doubt. The latter may indeed accept all that Dr. Stace wishes to affirm about the mystical as well as naturalistic dimensions of human experience, without believing that in either he has encountered the living God self-disclosed for him in Jesus Christ. It is again interesting to note that Dr. Stace makes no mention of the significance of modern *theological* revivals in both Protestant and Roman Catholic quarters for any account of "Religion and the Modern Mind" today, though he does note that Neo-Thomism as a religious philosophy is failing to make any serious impact on the modern sceptical mind. Moreover, considered from within the limits of the author's own presuppositions, it is difficult to see how the understanding of religion with which he ends satisfies the requirements necessary for a valid religious world-view which the author himself sets down earlier in the book. Rather than asserting the divine government of the world, the purposive nature of the world, and the world as an objective moral order, does not the mystical approach to religion inevitably deprive the world of any ultimate purpose and meaning, as the author himself states when he says that, looked at from the viewpoint of the eternal, the natural world appears as an illusion? And surely the man in whom the naturalistic and mystical orders of the world meet must be a terribly split personality when each of these orders is necessarily experienced as an illusion from the standpoint of the other. It is precisely to the healing of this split that the Christian understanding of salvation could address itself. For both the reality of God and the reality of the world are affirmed in the gospel of the Word made flesh, in a reconciling act which makes it possible for man to love God and world together as they meet in Jesus Christ.

With William Hamilton's book, *The New Essence of Christianity*, we return again to the theme of what it is possible for a man to believe in the time of the death of God. Dr. Hamilton is concerned to say what he believes it possible for a Christian to assert with a sense of reality and honesty in this time of sceptical doubt. He is concerned equally with the question of the way in which the Christian ought to go about stating his convictions. The style of life of the Christian is as important as the content of his

Christian believing. The author implies that his contemporary "theological betters" have been guilty of attempting to say too much in the way of Christian affirmation and that they have certainly said it with a kind of aggressive assurance that is lacking to him. Should not the Christian, like the admirable secular man, Camus, seek to clarify for himself and his contemporaries the little that he really knows, rather than give the impression, by mighty systems and many tomes, that he knows so very much? Is not the theological fragment more appropriate to our day than the system—a softer rather than a more strident tone to represent the broken-vision character of our Christian understanding? The author, then, is concerned with that limited, essential core of Christian understanding to which he believes the present-day Christian may assent with conviction. It is a *new* essence of Christianity in that it results from the Christian scholar's acceptance of responsibility for an attempt to say in and for his particular age—in its language and thought-forms—what can be said meaningfully of Christian truth and reality. As Dr. Hamilton unfolds his theme of Christian belief in the time of the death of God, his acknowledged dependence on the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer becomes increasingly clear. Indeed the book as a whole strikes one as the attempt of a contemporary Christian to respond to various sharp challenges to Christian thought and life found in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison.*

The author makes it abundantly clear that it is not only the unbelieving secular man who has experience of the death of God today. Paradoxically enough the Christian too may have experience of that death. One of the difficulties that a reader of these books which use the language of the "death of God" will experience is that of knowing precisely what meaning the phrase is intended to convey. Dr. Hamilton interprets the fact and experience variously. At one time it means "the death in us of any power to affirm any of the traditional images of God." Traditional Christian language has lost its power to convict and convince. No doubt his meaning is somewhat similar when he further says: "It is the God described by the best and most sophisticated theologians of our time, who seems to many to have withdrawn from his world." Then again, as in Vahanian's book, the "death of God" is a synonym for the experience of "God's absence." Hamilton seems to sound again the note of longing struck by Baumer when he says that some Christians in the midst of their experience of God's absence find it possible to pray for his return. For them faith becomes hope. "To be a Christian today is to stand, somehow, as a man without God but with hope." *Apart* from Jesus the Christian experiences God as a wounding presence from which he would be free. This wounding presence is experienced also as an absence, so that God seems to be present to us only in ways we do not want him and absent in the ways we do want him. The attempt to say what God can mean to us today *with* Jesus leads us to seek to find in the language with which the New Testament sought to express his meaning the answers to our contemporary questions. Without indicating in any precise way how the answers discovered fit the questions asked, Dr. Hamilton finds the key to

unlock the answers to his own questions, and apparently to "all the problems of belief in the time of the death of God," in themes which speak of our Lord in terms of lowliness, humiliation, suffering, and death, rather than in themes which speak of sovereignty, power, and authority in any ordinary sense of the terms. He frankly admits that he can find little meaning in the biblical witness to the exaltation and reigning-in-glory of the risen Christ, though this language may represent something of final, eschatalogical significance and meaning. It is the Lord who is Lord only in his suffering and death who is the One in whom the absent God meets us and in whom the dead God lives. In him too we find the answer to the question about the Christian style of life, though the author does not show how the characteristics of this style derive from life in Christ. (On the contrary, he even states that some secular men have described and lived by a similar style without confession of Christ's lordship.) Some of its characteristics are: a wholesome sense of reserve in one's relations to others who are friends; a combination of tolerance and anger towards the enemy; the renunciation of every wish and hope to be more than tolerated by others; the recovery of an unashamed commitment to goodness; the learning to live in the dialectical tension between rebellion and resignation in our relation to nature, man, and God.

In a footnote on p. 12 Dr. Hamilton says: "My essay as a whole is deeply indebted to Bonhoeffer and may be taken as a theological response to the coming to age of the world as he has analyzed it." Certainly the book is an answer to Bonhoeffer's challenge to every Christian to come out from behind the shelter of the Church's believing and say what it is that he really and truly believes. In his search for the "essence" of Christianity the author does not attempt, as a hasty first reading of the book might suggest, any reductionist trimming of the biblical witness. Like Bonhoeffer, he would have us take the whole biblical witness seriously, always remaining open to the possibility that any part of it might speak meaningfully to us some day. But only that which does so speak at any time should form part of a Christian's profession. The reviewer is not so certain that the author has followed, or rightly interpreted, Bonhoeffer in answer to other crucial questions. Dr. Hamilton's emphasis on experience would seem to call into question Bonhoeffer's distinction between religion and faith; what he has to say about the Church would seem to contradict Bonhoeffer's view of the Church as Christ-existing-as-community; and we are not sure that the meanings the author gives to the phrase "the death of God" are precisely those of Bonhoeffer when the latter speaks of the God who died because men outgrew him in distinction from the God who is absent from the world because he died on the Cross. Above all, one could have wished that some mention had been made, because of its importance to the subject of the book, of Bonhoeffer's distinction in the *Letters* between what a man believes through self-persuasion and what he believes as gift of God. For even in a time of God's "absence" it is God himself who must speak his present Word.