

Could God die again?

Death of God theology was a 1960s phenomenon that casts light on the narrowness of the current debate



Nathan Schneider

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It is a familiar scene. A religious revival has just swept through the United States, spurred in part by fear of a non-Christian foe abroad. Among its dissidents there arise a handful of outspoken men – say, three or four of them – proclaiming as loudly as they can a caustic version of atheism, one directed especially at the US's brand of public religion. They inspire a volley of responses from the pious and enough public enthusiasm to make their books bestsellers, all the while forcing us to ask once again what the place of religion is and should be in the modern world.

This could be the early part of the present decade, at the height of the Bush years, and the men, the so-called new atheists: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. But it could also be the middle of the 1960s, and the men, of all things, *theologians*.

"Death of God" theology was a movement that reached its peak in April 1966, when Time magazine published what became one of its biggest-selling issues. The cover simply asked, in large red letters over a black background, Is God Dead? The cover story, written by John T Elson, explained the ideas of a crop of young theologians who were raising Cain in American seminaries by proclaiming, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "God is dead!"

Because of Elson's death on 7 September, death of God theology has been back in the news. And the timing may be just right; perhaps it can help us dig our way out from the tiresome trenches of the new atheist controversy.

According to two of the movement's chief exponents, Thomas J J Altizer and William Hamilton, it represented "an attempt to set an atheist point of view within the spectrum of Christian possibilities." They took it as a given that the onset of modernity had undermined the traditional idea of God. Altizer sought to reframe theology by affirming both God's absence and a world redeemable through faith in human creativity. The death of God, he argued, should be embraced as the fulfillment of Christ's incarnation and death, the final self-emptying of God into us and the world. The uproar caused by these assertions nearly cost him a job at Emory University. Hamilton lost his

different approaches. Paul van Buren, for instance, argued that the language of "God" is no longer adequate and needs to be discarded in exchange for a renewed focus on the ethics of the historical Jesus.

Two others, Harvey Cox and Gabriel Vahanian, began from the belief among sociologists at the time that an inevitable process of secularisation was at work, leaving religion on the margins of the social structure. Cox embraced the prospect of a "secular city," one infused with a renewed Christianity, freed from the dogmatic and institutional trappings of churchiness. Vahanian, in his 1961 book The Death of God, decried the bland religious revival that the likes of Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale had carried out in the 1950s as "domesticated" and its God, as actress Jane Russell then put it, "a livin' doll." He sought a new kind of faith that would tolerate no such impostors.

Implicitly or explicitly, these radicals took their bearings from the memory of the second world war. All cited the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for "religionless Christianity" in his letters from a Nazi prison. They often shared the podium with Richard Rubenstein, a rabbi who declared God unthinkable after the Holocaust.

Unlike some of the prominent atheists of today, these thinkers knew intimately the theology they were attacking. Life after God, they believed, could not move forward without understanding the debt it owed to the religious culture that had gone before. Consequently the movement went far beyond the simplistic, scientific concept of God common to both contemporary atheists and many of their critics: a cartoonish hypothesis, some kind of all-powerful alien. Altizer spoke of the God of direct experience; van Buren, the God conjured in language; and Cox, the God that arises in the life of societies. These are incisive approaches that, lately, have too often been forgotten in exchange for the caricature.

Ultimately, the death of God movement fizzled after only a few years in the limelight. It turned out to be a last gasp of the liberal Protestant theology that was quickly losing ground in American culture and politics to a more literalistic evangelical tide. The rise of such conservative religion at home and abroad forced sociologists to recant the strongest versions of the secularisation thesis. Just last year, Christianity Today had its own cover with a black background and red letters. It said, God Is Not Dead Yet.

The movement's prophets, looking back, don't agree on its legacy. Harvey Cox, who once declared the death of God "an epochal crisis" and "not just a passing fad," has recently called it precisely that, a "fad." By 1975, William Hamilton still thought of it as "the decisive theological event of our time". Nowadays, with both godly and ungodly reactionaries as assertive as ever, this doesn't seem to be so. But maybe it should have been.

