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The Life And Death Of The Death Of God

by Nathan Schneider

NOVEMBER 5, 2009

TAGS: GOD, RELIGION, ATHEISM, 1960S

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It was a recipe for the easiest headline ever: "Death of God Guy Dies." John T. Elson, who passed away on Sept. 7, was a journalist best known for penning the story behind *Time* magazine's wildly controversial cover in April 1966, which asked, in bold red letters over a black backdrop, "Is God Dead?" The issue became one of the best selling in the magazine's history and sent American religion spiraling into an identity crisis.



Maybe now, goes the obvious punch line, Elson can tell us the answer.

His article represented the zenith of what may be the last theological craze in history, the mortal gasp of a time when academic theology still qualified as headline-worthy. It announced the "death of God" movement, a group of rambunctious young professors who made it their business to turn Nietzsche's proclamation of the deity's demise from frightful blasphemy into the basis of a new kind of faith. They had media savvy that today's theologians have long forgotten, save for the megachurch superstars; one of them, William Hamilton, even had his own TV show on CBS. He considered all the hype and brash rhetoric part of the movement's necessary "journalistic phase," which would shake the foundations of the culture, clearing the way for their subtler ideas to transform it.

By the end of the 1960s, the revolution started to look more like a fad. The flower-power counterculture went in other directions. Reacting against all that the death of God

represented, conservative religion rose in the following decades and overshadowed it. Still, those years allowed for what was certainly recent memory's most audacious attempt to contemplate the peculiar prospect of the Almighty's end. The New Atheists of today, like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, have replicated something like the movement's scandal, but they offer nowhere near its captivating mixture of morbidity and hopefulness.

"It was as though the country itself was possessed by a theological fever," recalls Emory University professor Thomas J. J. Altizer, the most shocking of the "death of God" theologians, "one in which the most religious nations in the industrial world had suddenly discovered its own atheism." Like a good heretic, he traces his insight to a haunting vision of Satan himself, which he then came to interpret through the dialectical goggles of Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche. By way of them, he concluded that modernity's turn away from a supernatural God represents a culmination of Christ's incarnation and death on the cross. Just as that death led to a resurrection, the death of God opens the way for a renewal of faith, one based in the fuller affirmation of temporal life and creativity. "In matters theological as well as personal," wrote Altizer's colleague Mark C. Taylor, "he simply cannot imagine a death that is not a resurrection."

Altizer took pains to insist that, Satanic inspiration notwithstanding, his ideas lie within the bounds of orthodoxy. His landmark book bore a puzzling title: *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. "The intention throughout this voyage," he explained, "is to seek a truly radical and yet nevertheless fully Christian theology." He was serious about calling his message "gospel" -- he meant it as good news.

Harvard Divinity School's Harvey Cox, though he fell short of declaring God dead, also sought to affirm the

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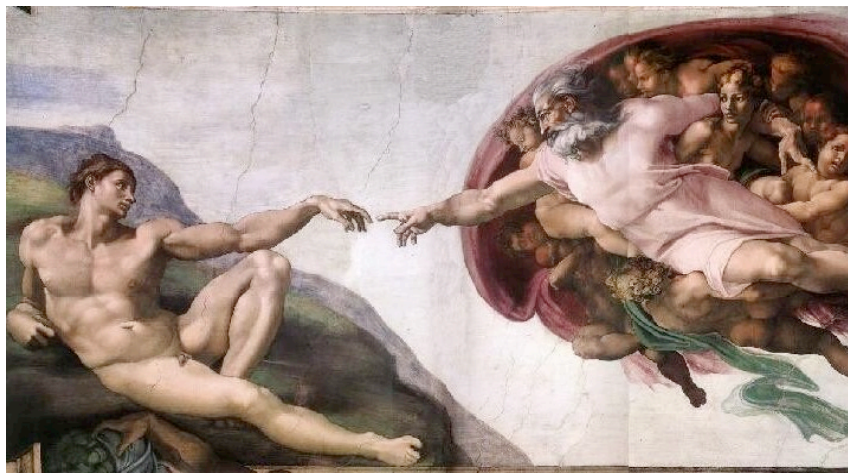


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arrival of "the secular city" and its ever-more worldly world. "Secularization rolls on," he wrote, "and if we are to understand and communicate with our present age we must learn to love it in its unremitting secularity." Rather than simply accepting God's passing, Cox called for a renaissance of festivity and fantasy to bring the divine back to life. In the process, he suggested, we may have to think of new names for God that won't sound so stale to our ears.

Others associated with the movement didn't embrace the new secular order so enthusiastically. Gabriel Vahanian's 1961 book *The Death of God* is eerily ambivalent about the "euthanasia" that the modern world seems to have carried out. Like Altizer and Cox, he sees the shift as a direct outgrowth of Christian tradition, which from Jesus's birth to Luther's Reformation has turned ever more from the transcendent to the immediate. But he mercilessly attacked the so-called revivals exacted on the 1950s by the likes of Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale, which preached the Jesus of corporate culture and materialism. For Vahanian, "God dies as soon as he becomes a cultural accessory of a human ideal." It's not the kind of death that puts one in the mood for Cox's festivals or Altizer's resurrection. For each thinker, the death of God meant something different.

Still, their apparent cohesion made them a force to contend with in the popular press. It was a testament to the strength of the movement that for several years its flurry of critics warranted regular coverage in the *New York Times*. One reporter, in a 1965 story on the uproar among Emory's trustees against Altizer, belittled him as "a boyish-looking man with black wavy hair." Another, in early 1966, suggested the movement amounted to "old-fashioned cracker-barrel atheism in poly-syllabic terms." The articles typically marched out venerable clergymen to decry what the young radicals were stirring up.



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The most memorable critique, though, came in the form of the ultimate obituary. It appeared in the Methodist magazine *motive* as well as in the *Times*. Poet Anthony Towne, under the headline "God Is Dead in Georgia," related the particulars of God's death on Nov. 9, 1965, due to a case of "diminishing influence." Altizer he names as the deity's chief surgeon; dignitaries the world over and the man on the street alike comment on this unfortunate event. "It is difficult to imagine how we shall proceed without Him," admits the pope. And, says a housewife in Elmira, New York, "At least he's out of his misery."

By 1968, Towne had enlarged the satire into a book, *Excerpts from the Diaries of the Late God*. We learn straight from the divine pen about everything from creation ("what a week it has been!") to popular preachers ("Billy Graham has halitosis of the soul") to final reflections on life ("I'm glad I did it, but I don't think I'll do it again"). The Diaries are at once wise and ridiculous, casting the notion of a God who could die as no better than a joke. Towne's "Prefatory Caveats" remind us of "God's passionate antipathy, while he was alive, toward all forms of death."

In his later memoir of life with Towne, his partner, the circus-loving lawyer-theologian William Stringfellow, writes that they found the death of God hubbub "trivial, pretentious, and literally profane." It was, sometimes purposely, all of those things. But it was also, as John Elson wrote in *Time*, "a summons to reflect on the meaning of existence," one unusually willing to take death as the starting point for life.

It is a summons that continues to ring in the ears of even the most fervent believers. Last year, the leading evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, had its own cover with big red letters over a black background. "God Is Not Dead Yet," it said. The leading article proclaimed that a renaissance of Christianity is underway in academia. But why "Yet"? What are we waiting for?

Nathan Schneider edits the online literary magazine, Killing the Buddha.

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