

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL DISSOLUTION

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The Madman Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. "Why, did he get lost?" said one. "Did he lose his way like a child?" said another. "Or is he hiding?" "Is he afraid of us?" "Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?" Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

"Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him--you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. . . . Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed". . .

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. "I come too early," he said then; "my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering--it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars--and yet they have done it themselves."

These words from the pen of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) foreshadow what would appear to be the most crucial motif in theology today. As Dr. H. Van Riessen put it, in his monograph on Nietzsche: "Nietzsche . . . is a child of his time, and his time was the calm before the storm. He stands, in that calm, as the prophet of the coming century, our century."

This prophecy is now coming to pass. For without question, of the three most significant strands of theological development during the contemporary "Epoch of Dissolution" -- namely: (1) the shattering of the Bismarckian empire in Germany; (2) the attempted construction of a new "Christian Natural Theology"; and (3) the movement toward the complete secularization of religion and theology -- the most striking has been an outgrowth of the third: the emergence of the radical "God is Dead" movement.

In the now-famous Time article of October 22, 1965, which reported this movement, Thomas J. J. Altizer of Emory University in Atlanta is quoted as having stated: "We must recognize that the death of God is a historical event: God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence." And in a recent conference at Emory, Dr. Altizer said: "All America is called to freely accept and will the death of God."