

At present, it may seem perhaps premature to designate this radical viewpoint in Protestant liberal theology as a "movement." Nevertheless, the position held by that admittedly small number of theologians who loudly herald the demise of God appears to represent a general mood, a theological climate, which had been growing during the last decade, and only now is becoming articulate. Langdon Gilkey, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, although not a proponent of the "God is dead" view, nevertheless gives witness to the general climate in contemporary theology. Gilkey says:

No more than five years ago (1960) the "younger theologians" seemed to have a comfortable basis for their task, fashioned by the great theologians of the '20s, '30s and '40s. To the question "How are you making up your mind?" the young theologian would probably have replied, "I have already done so" -- and it would have been in a neo-orthodox, a Bultmannian or a Whiteheadian direction. Or if he were more honest than most he would have said, "My mind has already been made up for me" -- by Barth, by Niebuhr, by Tillich or by Hartshorne . . . We knew from our teachers what theology was, what its principles and starting point were, how to go about it, and above all we were confident about its universal value and truth . . . The most significant recent theological development has been the steady dissolution of all these certainties, the washing away of the firm ground on which our generation believed we were safely standing.

Various questions immediately crowd in upon us. What is meant by the assertion, "God is dead"? What are the presuppositions, the basic tenets, the implications of this concept? Further, what factors, remote and proximate, have contributed to the bringing about the contemporary theological dissolution, the disintegration of systems, the dissolving of all certainties, the crumbling of the foundations? These questions insistently clamor for reply. Consequently, we now take them up, in order better to understand the nature and the backgrounds of, The Contemporary Theological Dissolution.

## I. THE "DEATH OF GOD" CONCEPT IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL DISSOLUTION

The assertion, "God is dead," issuing from the pens of the atheists Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, or Martin Heidegger, would perhaps not have been quite as surprising as its proclamation by men who teach in the fields of Bible, Theology, Religion and Ethics. Yet the three leading "prophets" of the "God is dead" movement include Thomas J. J. Altizer, Associate Professor of Bible and Religion at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia; Paul van Buren, Associate Professor of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and William Hamilton, Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York. This phenomenon should, I think, make us pause at least long enough to ask, "When these men affirm that God is dead, do they really mean it? And if so, what is it that they really mean?"

Thomas Altizer acknowledges that the concept is difficult to precisely define. Nevertheless he does make an attempt:

What can it mean to say that God is dead? First, we must acknowledge that we are not simply saying that modern man is incapable of believing in God, or that modern culture is an idolatrous flight from the presence of God, or even that we exist in a time in which God has chosen to be silent. Nor is it possible to say that these words must mean that the Word of God transcends all human expressions of faith or that the true God is above the God of metaphysics and religion. A Theological statement that proclaims the death of God must mean that God is not present in the Word of faith. Insofar as the theologian