

speaks of the death of God--and actually means what he speaks--he is speaking of the death of God himself. He is saying that because God has disappeared from history he is no longer present for faith. But he is truly absent, he is not simply hidden from view, and therefore he is truly dead.

William Hamilton, in attempting to define this concept, makes a distinction between the "soft radicals" and the "hard radicals" within the movement toward the secularization of religion and theology:

Soft radicals tend to have difficulty not with the message but with the medium through which the message should be passed. They worry about adequate institutional embodiment, the problem of communication, hermeneutics, secularism and modern man. They have the gospel, but they don't like the old words. They have God, but sometimes for strategic reasons they may decide not to talk about him.

The hard radicals are really not interested in problems of communication. It is not that the old forms are outmoded or that modern man must be served but that the message itself is problematic. The hard radicals, however varied may be their language, share first of all a common loss. It is not a loss of the idols, or of the God of theism. It is a real loss of real transcendence. It is a loss of God. . . . The common experience of loss. . . is, by some of us, referred to as the death of God. "Death of God" raises a host of question and problems that we are just beginning to sort out and investigate. For example: just what kind of statement is this phrase "death of God"? For Hegel it was little more than a symbolic way of stating the inner meaning of the crucifixion. For Nietzsche it was an actual event in the space and time of 19th century Europe that only a few perceived. For Sartre today it seems to mean merely that the European intellectual cannot, unfortunately, believe in God any more. Does "death of God" refer to an event? If so, when did it happen? Out there, as part of some historical or ontological reality; or within, in that part of the self that does the believing? Or perhaps in our language? Questions like this are being asked, and taken seriously. I am inclined to avoid the idea of "event" altogether and to speak of "death of God" more as a metaphor describing something that is happening to a particular group of modern Western Christians today. But I believe that "death of God" as a metaphor is to be preferred to and distinguished from similar phrases in theological discourse such as "absence of God," "disappearance," "eclipse" or "the hidden God." A real loss, something irretrievable, is portrayed by the metaphor of death, while the other terms still live quite comfortably within the classical tradition of the dialectic between the presence and absence of God. . . . It is just this dialectic, . . . that has collapsed, and therefore the phrase "death of God," with its special history over the past 100 years, says exactly what we feel needs to be said.

Paul van Buren, by way of sharp contrast, confesses that he simply cannot understand Altizer's writings, and expresses astonishment at Hamilton's apparently premature announcement that there will soon be an organization of death-of-God theologians, complete with its own journal, etc. Van Buren's view of the "God is dead" concept is not that God has suffered death as a historical event, or that he has been edged out of the world through a loss of transcendence. Rather, in accordance with his emphasis on linguistic analysis, he has concluded that the word "God" no longer conveys any meaning, and therefore it is questionable whether the alleged reality to which the word refers is meaningful. God is like (to use Julian Huxley's words) "the last fading smile of a Cosmic Cheshire Cat." The Cosmic Cat is gone, the smile fades, the vacuum alone remains. And yet, says van Buren, we must try to think and speak theologically.