

RESPONSE

RELIGION IN THE SECULAR WORLD: NOTES ON MARTIN BUBER AND RADICAL THEOLOGY

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The meaning and challenge of secular life are explored by Mr. Reimer in his discussion of the death of God theology. In focusing on Martin Buber's recognition of the eclipse of God, Mr. Reimer comes to embrace Buber's solution—that of hallowing the everyday. The religious community, he concludes, should be an oasis in the secular world where significant and meaningful relationships can occur.

Theology has always attempted to systematically express in a contemporary idiom the religious vision of its age, and with the passing of ages and regeneration of vision, theology has sought to find correspondingly new formulations. Until our times theology comfortably articulated its vision in terms of a supernatural deity, but today we find theology expressing itself in a strikingly new way, in terms of the dramatic dictum of "God is Dead!" The radical theologians who are attempting this reformulation declare that all traditional talk of God is inconsistent with our modern experiences, and that if theology is to be at all relevant, it must adapt itself to the radically secular nature of our society. For the true religious experience today is not of God's presence, but of his absence or death, and it is this "atheistic" experience which theology must now articulate. The radical theologians, then, must be seen as considering with great seriousness the atheistic position as a natural, and therefore legitimate, stance for a religious man to adopt in our secular society. As contemporary men of religion we must try to understand why this seemingly irreligious position is now to be "religiously" considered, whether it can

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be legitimately adopted, and if so, with what consequences for the future religious community.

Behind the new theological reformulation is the radical theologians' view of our age as having been thoroughly secularized, so that we find ourselves to be practical atheists, living our lives without seriously considering the transcendent realm in our everyday experiences. "Secularization," which can best be defined as "the deliverance of man from religious and metaphysical control over his reason and language," must be seen as a cultural revolution contemporaneous with the emergence of the modern era, for as modern man's knowledge of the world and mastery over nature increased, so his independence from God increased. Today we must realize that not only has the environment in which man lives been reshaped by science, but also man's very nature—the basic way in which he perceives the world—has in turn been radically altered by his living in the newly-created environment. We must consider the effects upon modern man of living in the man-made, mechanized environment of the modern city, and realize that because our conceptual framework has come to be shaped by science and technology, we have learned to view and understand the world through scientific formulas and newspaper headlines. In this sense, modern man is culturally incapable of perceiving the world in supernatural categories, for they no longer fit his culturally-determined conceptual framework. As very conscious participants in the modern world, the radical theologians feel compelled to admit that they, too, can no longer experience God in their lives, and they force us, as honest men of religion, to truthfully examine our own experiences to see if there is place for the traditional God. The option before us is either to cling to age-old supernatural symbols without asking whether they still reflect our modern experiences, or to be honest enough to come to terms "religiously" with our secular experiences and attempt to formulate our religious vision in light of their true nature. The radical theologians may be wrong in declaring that secularization necessarily entails the "death of God": (generalizations about a cultural revolution, even if accurate, may not be able to account for the true experiences of each individual;) but until each of us truthfully faces up to the effects of the modern world on his religious experiences, we will not be able to determine which is the most honest and fruitful course to pursue.

Although the radical theologians admit to experiencing God only in his absence, they differ from the secular atheists in their identifying themselves as members of a religious community and in their understanding that the nature of our times forces them to radically re-interpret the posi-

tion of faith and community. By taking this religious position, they are saying that belief in God as traditionally conceived is not the essence of faith, but a particular articulation of faith, in terms which are presently irrelevant. First, the traditional view of God the Creator is integrally tied to a metaphysical world-view which has been discarded in modern times, and second, cognitive belief may itself be an inadequate expression of a living faith, so that today it is too limiting, therefore self-defeating, to base all of religion on the belief in a metaphysical ghost of the West. The radical theologians look forward to a freer expression of man's personal religious experiences, and to an extending of the realm of faith beyond the traditional house of worship to the active life of reforming the secular city.

From his position in the midst of the secular city, the radical theologian looks back at those who still remain within the walls of the religious institutions and asks whether their "worship" is not really an escape from the unattractive realities of our times. If the people within the institutions are only using God as a secure crutch and religion as a cult of reassurance, they are truly guilty of idolatry. The clinging to secure, but outworn, symbols is not an act of faith, but the worst lack of faith, and every man of religion must ask himself if his expression of faith makes a positive contribution to our world or whether it is an escape from that world. The radical theologians find religious institutions, as they are now constituted, very unsatisfying, for the institutions remain cut off from the main flow of the secular world by trying to preserve in themselves the last pockets of holiness in a profane society. These theologians wish to end traditional religion's dichotomy of the religious and profane realms, believing that now, when the secular has truly encompassed almost all aspects of living, all attempts at realizing a holy existence must be through secular living. In fact, the radical theologians hope that an entirely new mode of religious expression will eventually arise out of the religious activities in the secular world and will reflect the new nature of the religious experience as shaped by this new environment. So that while radical theologian admits to feeling the void created by the loss of the traditional God, he refuses to either mourn that loss or replace it with images, but will actively work within the secular city and wait without idols for whatever new religious expression will be born. He accepts secularization, not as a challenge to faith, but as the new ground for its operations: he is loosening his grip on the past so that he may better embrace the coming of the future.

Thus far we have spoken of the radical theologians as if they formed

a monolithic group. This certainly is not the case. All the radical theologians do accept the secular city as the proper new setting for the religious scene and do recognize the profound effects of the process of secularization on modern man, and yet since the theologians perceive the situation from different perspectives (e.g., as a social activist, linguistic philosopher, or mystical thinker), it is not surprising that their individual responses to the problem differ in certain respects. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate each reaction, but we should note that within the radical camp there is a split between a more and a less radical group. The less radical group believes that although secularization has created very serious problems for religious faith, if the religious language is reformulated to reflect our secular experiences, then faith in God may be possible. But the more radical group accepts the dictum that God is dead in a more literal sense and believes that no institutional reform or linguistic reformulation can ever revive faith in the traditional God, and all that can be hoped for is a future epiphany of faith in wholly different terms. We perhaps have emphasized the more radical view since it is the more challenging, but now, in hoping to draw together our observations and work toward a conclusion, we will return to an earlier, less radical, but perhaps more helpful formulation of the problem: Martin Buber's "Eclipse of God."

We turn to Buber not only because he perceived the basic difficulty of faith in our time at an earlier date and with greater calm and wisdom than the radical theologians, but also because he was better able to pinpoint the aspect of religious life which has been crucially disrupted by the secular spirit of our times, giving us a concrete starting-point from which to proceed in our search for a possible new religious expression in the secular world. Buber believes that the true nature of religion is such that it could never legitimately be limited to one area of life, but that the religious way of life ought to be realized in all our daily activities. Buber's explication of the *I-Thou* relationship is an attempt to show that this very basic way of relating to the everyday world is also the basis of the religious life, and that the highest religious moment, the meeting with the Eternal *Thou* is not a unique mystical moment, qualitatively removed from the everyday, but an extension of an entire relational orientation in our quotidian existence. The very problem of faith in our times is that our scientific perspective on the world does not allow us to relate to the world through the *I-Thou* mode, and once this very basic way of relating to the world has been disrupted, then its religious extension, the meeting with the Eternal *Thou* is in turn prevented. Buber does

not dichotomize between believers and non-believers, but rather says that cognitive belief is irrelevant to the problem of faith, and that the essential factor of faith—the way we relate to the world which had been open alike to believer and non-believer—has now been closed by the technological tempo of our times. Buber names this phenomenon "the eclipse of God" and describes it very aptly:

In our age the *I-It* relation, gigantically
swollen, has usurped, practically unaccosted, the
mastery and rule. The *I* of this relation . . . that
has become omnipotent can naturally acknowledge neither
God nor any genuine absolute . . . It steps
between and shuts off from us the light of heaven

Buber recognized that science, by setting modern man in the relational orientation of the *I-It*, has altered his very nature, the basic way in which he perceives the world. Now, our own inflated, technologically-oriented egos have stepped between us and the Eternal *Thou*, blocking any possible religious meeting. Buber reports that as he once experienced the Eternal *Thou* in his own life, now he experiences the scientific ego blocking off God from mortal vision. Perhaps we can cite no more cogent evidence than the actual experience of so religiously-sensitive a man as Buber to support our contention that the experience of God has truly become problematic because of the spirit of our times!

Yet, Buber does not believe that the "eclipse" need be a permanent phenomenon, hoping that a new stream whose source may be hidden today may yet rise to refresh our souls in the near future. But one of the obstacles in the path of religious revivification is the symbols which we ostensibly use to point to God, but which in actuality are part of the wall of *It* blocking our view of God. A true meeting or religious experience (a term Buber himself does not use, but which we have been using in this paper to signify something very analogous to Buber's meeting) yields no symbols or images of God, for the *I-Thou* relation yields no objective glimpse (or image) of the *Thou*. Symbols grow out of man's own soul when he is no longer relating to God as a *Thou*, and although at times they may be helpful as pointers to God, all too often symbols desire to be more than they really are and swell themselves up to obstruct our way to God. Such over-extended symbols are often mistaken by men for the religious reality itself, and therefore only serve to hide the actual absence of God's presence in man's life. As the radical theologians called our reli-

gious beliefs into question, so Buber forces us to examine the nature of our religious symbols. If they no longer point to God, that is, if they no longer reflect our true experiences, then they only obstruct our way to new religious experiences, and therefore must be discarded. Buber notes that often the "atheist" or critical philosopher (and radical theologian?), revolted by the emptiness of religious symbols, rejects both the symbols and reality to which they are supposed to point, and Buber goes on to suggest that the same spirit that moved the "atheist" ought also to move the religious man to reject these same empty symbols, so that he may once again "set forth across the God-deprived reality to a new meeting." If we hope that a new religious journey may begin in the "God-deprived reality" of the secular city, we will first have to deal truthfully with our existing, vestigial religious symbols.

If we wish to accept the testimony of Buber and the radical theologians that we are not directly capable of experiencing the traditional God in our times, but yet wish to speak meaningfully of the continuation of religion, then we must consider the possible function of the religious community in the time of the Death of God. At least in Judaism, and probably in most other religions also, we cannot meaningfully speak of the religion of an individual as totally separated from the community, for although an individual can certainly express his faith in his unique way, the nature of religion is such that it needs to be shared in a community. For religion to provide the individual with a way of life, it must be structured in the form of a group, for by association with groups individuals are provided with norms around which to fashion their lives. But if we realize that the worship now provided by conventional religious institutions fails to evoke from us any true religious response *because* the institutions are so cut off from our everyday experience, and that at the same time the very trend of modern, secular living runs against the grain of any religious experience, we can begin to grasp the tremendous difficulties involved in trying to establish the type of community which will not only be continuous with our everyday experience, but which will also be able to evoke a live religious response. Obviously without careful planning and considerable creativity, the project is doomed to failure as either irrelevant or a-religious. How to run against the trend of our secular society and yet participate in it, is our problem.

Significantly enough, it is to this very problem which Buber addresses himself in speaking of "hallowing the everyday" or realizing the religious through the secular. If the source of our religious problems has been created by the relational framework which our secular society has estab-

lished for us, then the main function of today's religious community may well be to provide the kind of setting, not often found elsewhere in our society, in which a more "religious" relational framework, along the lines of Buber's *I-Thou* relation, could flourish. The content of the religious services should still be drawn from the religious tradition (which itself is very rich in human insight), but it will be the setting and gathering-together which will be most crucial. We envision not set institutional services, but more informal and personal meetings of people who will come together to establish human links among themselves and gather strength and inspiration from an honest confrontation with a tradition, so that they may once again go out to the secular world with renewed dedication. In serving this function, the community is no longer cut off from the secular world, but is an oasis within that world where one stops for rest and refreshment. Here, people bring their contemporary problems to the wisdom of the tradition and learn to draw from that tradition together with other people in a truly participatory community. The details of the functioning of each community will depend on its own needs and sources of creativity, but as long as the communities will be trying to tap the religious qualities to be found in secular living, they will be moving toward the realization of the new religious expressions which must now arise out of our secular way of life.

The intention of this paper has not been to open a debate on the existence of God; rather, it has been to suggest that for many religious people who are also consciously-active participants in the secular world, the experiencing of the traditional God has become increasingly more difficult because of its incongruity with the stream of their everyday experience. These religious people believe that in the future, religion in the secular city should not revolve around the belief in a supernatural deity, but should find a wider and freer reformulation which will more truly reflect the new secular experiences of modern man; they wish to establish a religious community in the midst of the secular city which would articulate this reformulation. This community, which by its nature must be experimental, is not intended to replace presently established religious communities, but to offer a new religious option for the secular man. The community hopes to engage in dialogue with all other men, but especially with men of the same religious tradition, in order to insure that it does not lose touch with the richness of the tradition, while the older community does not lose touch with the realities of the present.