



*Bishop Pike speaks and Moderator Sutherland (center) and Dr. Altizer (right) listen*

# The Pike-Altizer Dialogue

*This year's Conference on Religion was the focal point of considerable sound and fury. Both antipathy and acceptance were directed at the 1967 program, which was a dialogue between two controversial theologians, Bishop James Pike and Dr. Thomas Altizer. On these next pages the conference moderator, Dr. Stephen Sutherland, gives his assessment and interpretation, campus ministers write their views, and selections from the statements of the principals themselves appear*

## AN APPRAISAL

*By Dr. Stephen M. Sutherland*

This year's Conference on Religion brought together in a dialogue the Right Rev. Bishop James A. Pike and Dr. Thomas J. J. Altizer. The amount of interest evidenced by the citizens of Oklahoma, the faculty of the University, and the student body would seem to indicate that if only by superficial criteria the activity must be viewed as unique in a series of Conferences on Religion. Approximately 1,300 persons attended each of the two convocations held in the Student Union Ballroom. Another indicator of the widespread interest concerning this dialogue was brought to the attention of those gathered at the conference by Dr. Cross. Dr. Cross indicated that in terms of the amount of mail received at the President's office that this event would rank third in the amount of attention attracted by it across the state. He indicated that the two events which exceeded this year's conference as "attention getters" were the integration of the student body and the search and ultimate selection of a new football coach.

The dialogue between Bishop Pike and Dr. Altizer truly fits into the context of what a dialogue should be as defined

by OU Prof. Gustav Mueller in *Origin and Dimensions of Philosophy*: "The dialogue takes place between equal partners who present essentially different standpoints, each willing to listen to the other and to respect his freedom to express himself. The living exchange of ideas between them is their concrete unity which is more than each of the views contributing to it." The use of such a vehicle as a dialogue is certainly one which has gained considerable acceptance in theological circles today. William Hordern, writing in *New Directions in Theology Today*, offers a possible explanation for the relative prominence of this kind of encounter: "What lies behind this widespread concern with dialogue? One obvious answer is that theology has become more humble. There was a time when theology did not deign to converse with the secular arts and sciences. Instead theology moved imperiously in their midst as the 'queen of the sciences.' A queen does not hold dialogues with her subjects; at best she grants an audience . . . Theology, as queen, assumed that she held a vantage point above the other sciences so that she knew the real meaning



*Capacity crowds filled the Union Ballroom for both the afternoon and evening sessions*

of each of the sciences better than they could know it themselves. But a theology that is prepared to enter into dialogue with these disciplines is thereby admitting the equality of its partners in the dialogue.”

Dr. Altizer in an initial 30-minute presentation to the audience addressed himself to his radical position in the field of theology, i.e., the death of God. In establishing his position, Dr. Altizer said, “I wish to speak about one primary phrase, the phrase of course being ‘the death of God’ . . . It is when modern men, those of us who exist and live as men in our world, in our time in history . . . obviously we can and do use and speak the word God, but what I would say is that it is impossible today for any man in our world to speak the word God, to say the word God, and to say anything which could in any real sense shared by a Christian who lived in the presence and reality of God. Upon our lips the word God becomes blasphemous, unspeakable, unsayable, because we are living in a situation, we are living in a world which to speak in any real sense the word God is to speak the language of darkness and emptiness, of alienation.” This mode of presentation adopted by Dr. Altizer for the convocation certainly made his thoughts far more intelligible than has been the case in some of his writings, which have been criticized for the highly complex and mystical aspects of expression. One needs only to go to the *Gospel of Christian Atheism* to see the contrast. Here Dr. Altizer says, “For the Christian believes that God most fully reveals himself in Jesus Christ; and the kenotic acts of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion are by no means to be understood as fragmentary epiphanies of the power and glory of an eternal and unchanging Godhead, but rather as historical acts or events whereby the Godhead finally ceases to exist and to be real in its past and primordial manifestations.” Or in a statement such as this: “Yet Jesus Christ is the consummation of the historical acts and movements of God: the forward-moving process and kenotic energy of God have ever evolved through sacrificial acts of self-negation, as

God has acted to estrange himself from his own original Totality thereby making possible an actual movement to a new and wholly other Totality for the End.”

In adopting the former style of expression, Dr. Altizer has made his thoughts more relevant to those who would attempt to attain an appreciation of his “radical theology.” His new theological language forms now appear to be more in keeping with some of his contemporaries within the arena of Christian Atheism, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. A key word in his new exposition is “consciousness.” He says, “In other words, we have come out of a form of experience, a history which has known God in some sense as the wholly Other, as transcendent, sovereign Lord who exists in a lordly relationship with the world, which simply means in a certain sense that God and world in part oppose each other.” In stating his position in what might be thought of as an existential way rather than a mystical way, he asks us to think in these terms. “Whereas before it was God who is absolute and infinite, which in a certain sense is embodiment of total being and total power—eternity—which is the absolute or source of all value and before which everything else in a certain sense becomes subordinate, becomes a lesser being. Now, in a certain sense we are moving into a form of consciousness in which these old models, old valuations, or former modes of perception, experience, understanding, and sensibility are becoming reversed. Now we are coming to know a world which, in a certain sense, is All, a world which is autonomous, which in no sense whatsoever can be known as existing in relation to anything beyond.”

In his closing remarks, Dr. Altizer brought into focus his views on the death of God, Jesus Christ, and consciousness. He states, “In the old consciousness and experience, Christ was known as the Son of God, the Eternal Word, the cosmic Lord, wherein he was known in the image of the infinite and absolutely sovereign and all-righteous Lord or God or Creator. Christ was fundamentally known in the Christian consciousness, in Christian experience, in Christian prayer, in Christian worship, and in Christian life as the embodiment of or as the portal to, or the way to, the sovereign, absolutely powerful, infinite, and wholly other Lord.”

His analysis at this time would indicate that such a form of viewing that relationship is now passing away. The new direction which this form is taking can be expressed as follows: “Living in our form of consciousness, we know

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*The moderator for the Pike-Altizer dialogue, Dr. Sutherland is professor of geography and assistant dean of University College. He is also an avid student of theology and leads an extracurricular seminar, composed of honors students, which studies religious and theological concepts.*

Christ in some sense as the total embodiment of God in the world. We know Christ in some sense wholly, purely, and simply as the God who has become flesh, as the word who is present in the world and present in the world in such a way that He can truly be known only insofar as He is present and active in the world. . . . It is by knowing Christ in that form and by being liberated by Christ in that form and being immersed in that Christ who makes possible total life and energy in the world which is the fundamental ground of our real vision that God is dead."

In his opening remarks, Bishop Pike said, "I have a great deal more difficulty with Christ than I do with God. In fact, I can't use the word Christ at all. Jesus, yes. I can talk about that. Christos in our common tradition has to do with the Messianic aspects, the interruption of history from the outside—expected at that time and theoretically expected in our liturgies, though not really." This position of Bishop Pike is one of the three salient features of that which he says he can affirm. Central to Bishop Pike's minimal number of affirmations is his suggestion to us in *What Is This Treasure* that we cultivate "fewer beliefs, more belief."

Bishop Pike's three affirmations are: "(1) I affirm a life becoming more alive all the time, at least a Unus, (2) I affirm ongoing personal conscious life, and (3) I affirm the servant image of Jesus."

In presenting his first concept of Unus, Bishop Pike makes his affirmation in this way: "On the basis of the kind of hunch that there is a universe and the certain degree of order and predictability and a certain amount of repeatables I affirm by faith, not by proof, there is a One—that is a Unus—in the universe." He quickly states that this conclusion is not entailed in the data but that it is a plausible inference from it. To some degree it would seem that Bishop Pike's Unus can be equated with the more traditional concept of God. He says, "I would suggest that it is not implausible to suggest that the Unus has at least that which we would mean by the word personality. I am being quite careful here. He is *not* a person beside other persons. Paul Tillich has stressed that, and I would add that He is certainly not *three* persons beside other persons." Continuing on this point, Bishop Pike says, "I'm leaving open the question whether the Unus is the All which we all are continuous with as separate items of reality or whether he is other than." In talking about his own personal faith affirmation involving a Unus, Bishop Pike says, "God is the customary word. I don't use the word in my private prayers or in any extemporary prayers I use . . . I think the word has so many barnacles on it and means so many things to so many people—so many horrible things. God is often pictured in the Bible as worse than I am at my worst rather than better than I am at my best." Bishop Pike concludes on this particular topic with this thought: "I say not only is God not dead, he was never more alive. I go along with Father Johannes Metz. First in his reminder to us, not original with him, that Yahweh or in some Protestant hymns, Jehovah, means not as the King James version puts it *I am what I am*, but *I will be what I will be*. We're affirming a becoming, not just a flat ontological being." Here Bishop Pike's position seems to be quite influenced, as by the way is Dr. Altizer's, by some of the

more modern Roman Catholic thinkers—Metz, Leslie Dewart, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

In the question and answer period, Bishop Pike addressed himself to the second of his affirmations, a personal ongoing conscious life: "I do affirm an afterlife. I believe I now, by the nature of who I am, as a person, transcend space and time limitation that I seem to be contained within." This in no way is regarded by Bishop Pike as a supernatural view of life. Rather the opposite, he would affirm that this is most natural. His view on the subject might be stated in psychological terms. Bishop Pike says, "I do believe in a natural psychology of the ongoingness of the psyche. I am not even sure it is a theological affirmation; it is a psychological affirmation by nature but a faith affirmation on data."

Bishop Pike's third affirmation—the servant image of Jesus—gives us a substantive view for action. In contrasting the servant image of Jesus to an alternative view Bishop Pike states, "There is triumphful image I don't like and I don't like the aspects of the church built on it." In speaking of the opposite, the servant image, he says, "I myself can't affirm in Jesus a difference in kind from you or me. . . . There is not to me an *ontological* difference but rather an *existential* difference. There is a difference, I think, in the quantity or breadth of the openness to ultimate or divine but not a qualitative difference between Jesus and you."

Dr. Altizer responded with a position which reflects some of the difficulty encountered by theologians in the past in dealing with the historical Jesus and the divine Christ. He says, ". . . so that the name Jesus here doesn't refer fundamentally or primarily to the ancient Jesus of Nazareth, but rather to a way of life, which has existed in history following Jesus of Nazareth but has nevertheless been successfully embodied in later ages, perhaps in different ways. . . ."

Bishop Pike in his most recent book, utilizes the same theological concept which Dr. Altizer has used in a significantly different way: *kenosis*. He states, "The possibility of actualization of this potentiality in each of us is not a matter of law or theory; it can be and for many has been verified in experience. Many of us have found ourselves in confrontations in which at least 'for the duration' we have managed to empty ourselves, care nothing for the reputation, and act as servants—obedient to the overall Claim as it seems to apply in the context. And we have experienced in such a period the operation in us, and through us, of truth, accepting love and new life. The difference between these examples of *kenosis* and the day by day, week by week, and month by month life of Jesus is not a difference of degree."

Certainly the most central issues associated with this years' COR are old ones. There can be little doubt that men at all times in history, whether associated with civilizations later to be classified as attaining great heights or as men acting and interacting in relative isolation in what might be called primitive cultures, have been preoccupied with such questions as man-man relationships, and man-God relationships. This particular dialogue was the occasion for much controversy, some discussion, and moments of meaningful progress towards coping with the problems which beset us all.