



THE PRINCIPALS SPEAK

Dr. Altizer

I wish to speak about one primary phrase, the phrase of course being the death of God. I think first of all we should understand this phrase occurs in a particular context, in a particular situation. It is when those of us who exist and live in this moment of time, who find the name of God to be unspeakable insofar as we exist and live as men in our time and history. When I say for us the word God is unsayable I don't mean this in a literal sense. Obviously we can and do use and speak the word God, but what I am saying is that it is impossible today for any man to say the word God and to say anything which could in any real sense be shared by a Christian who lived in the presence and reality of God. Upon our lips the word

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Bishop Pike

I can observe as a matter of empirical data in the universe a number of things which have reality. One is that it is a *universe*. It hangs together. It coheres. I can also observe a certain measure of order and on that order is based predictability and on that predictability is based what science and technology we have. I affirm by faith—not by proof (This conclusion is not entailed in the data but is a plausible inference from it)—there is a One that is a Unus in the *Universe*. I emphasize the *-us* ending. Sometimes I am quoted as saying Unum. There is a great deal of difference there. I will also settle for Una, ladies, but a personal ending—not the neuter ending. God is the customary word. I don't use the word in my private

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not. God in the last analysis was not pronounced dead in any final sense at all, nor did there seem to be any intention to pronounce Him dead. Issues centered on conceptualizations of God rather than upon His demise. This does not mean that the two speakers agreed as to what they meant by the idea of God—nor that they were particularly anxious to use the word as such. It does mean that each in his own way was hesitant to dismiss some concept of God altogether. Here the word God is used as a traditional word to point up what others have referred to as ultimately real, truly creative power, the ground of being or being itself.

“The stir which the appearance of Altizer and Pike caused in the hinterlands of the University and perhaps in the University itself reflected the absence of a working knowledge in the area of religious thought across the centuries. This absence of knowledge provoked an initial hostility toward the words ‘God is dead’ and it likewise aroused an undue sense of threat. This situation is perhaps one of the strongest arguments we can set forth for continuance and expansion of the notion of such religious dialogue. If nothing else, it awakens persons to the fact that there is a great deal more in history of religion than has been captured and capitulated in our well-defined credal and doctrinal

pronouncements. Too much attention has been devoted to the realm of moralism without really engaging the person who is to pursue these moral dictums in a real dialogue about the reasonableness or values of these moralisms. Some see the church as an opportunity for activism—without really becoming excited about the content of the area. This is a define-God - in - a - single - sentence - and - let us-move-on sort of attitude. In the last analysis, this reduces religion at best to mediocrity and does not engage the individual who pursues it in any awareness of being involved in something important—either in relation to himself, to others, or even to his own environment.”

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God becomes blasphemous, unsayable, because we are living in a world in which to speak in any real sense the word God is to bind oneself to repression, therein to refuse the life and the energy and consciousness and the movement of our own age in a desperate and nostalgic attempt to return to an age which is not recoverable, indeed is lost for us, a time in which the word God was sayable, was speakable in faith.

It is no longer possible to speak of truth in the classical Western sense. It is no longer possible to make statements which by one means or another intend to state an absolute, a universal, an objective truth. Every human statement only has meaning within its own particular context, mode of inquiry, methodology ground or historical ground and situation; once statements begin to be carried beyond their context they become meaningless, absurd, nonsensical. So when we say that God is dead, we have to realize this is a statement within a particular context. It's not a statement speaking abstractly and universally and objectively about God because first of all, all such speech has become impossible for us. It is speech within the context of a particular human and historical world and consciousness.

A new form of consciousness, of experience, of understanding is becoming decisively present in such a way as to annul or to replace a



Note-taking by students in the audience was not unusual

previous form of consciousness and experience. This new form can obviously be spoken about in many, many languages. I am only attempting to do it in a theological language, which in no sense assumes the invalidity of other languages. Indeed, as I understand theology, it depends on the validity of other languages and could not operate apart from the support and meaning of other languages. But, nevertheless, I am concerned, as are so many theologians today, to move to a new kind of theological language that will be appropriate to the new world, the new form of consciousness and experience in which we are moving.

From the Christian point of view we have known God as an absolutely sovereign, transcendent Lord to which the world is known as dependent or subordinate. Man here is in some sense totally dependent upon God. Theologically, I think we are coming to know a whole new form of reality. Whereas before it was God who was absolute and infinity, in a certain sense we are moving into a form of consciousness in which these old models of former modes of perception and understanding are becoming reversed. 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 it, a world that has lost everything that traditional Christianity knew as the contingency, the dependence of the creation upon the Creator. In a certain sense the world becomes All; in a certain sense world becomes absolute. The same thing roughly can be said about man, about life, about energy. All that energy which was once given to an affirmation of God is now given to an affirmation in world, time, man, flesh.

I think we can see that a whole new form, new image of Christ is becoming known to and celebrated by the Christian who now lives in a new form of consciousness and experience and who now in a certain sense is totally immersed in the world. In the old form of consciousness and experience, Christ was known as the Son of God, the Eternal Word. He was known in the image of the infinite and absolutely sovereign Lord or the way to the sovereign, absolute other Lord. This was a natural and appropriate vision of Christ *within the context* of that particular form of human consciousness and experience. *But now that form is passing away.* Now I would say it is no longer possible truly in faith for the Christian to know Christ as Lord in some sense of an absolutely sovereign, transcendent, omnipotent Lord. Living in our form of consciousness, we know Christ in some sense wholly, purely, and simply as the God who has become flesh. We are liberated from any presence of any authority of a God who is wholly Other. We can know Jesus Christ as the fullness of everything that the Christian once knew as God, in the world in flesh, in life, in energy. Every statement I said is only meaningful in terms of its own context. The only meaning of Christ which can be real to us is a reflection of what we can apprehend as the totality of life and energy *in* the world, *as* the world. Christ is God incarnate; Christ is the God who in Him has ceased to be Other, and therein has become manifest as a new totality in time, in world, in flesh.

If it's true that ethical principles inevitably have a historical ground, if that historical ground is passing away, then of course everything we will have known as ethical principles will be dissolving, as in fact they seem to be. I think that is one of the crises that the church and all men are going through in the U.S. today with regard to Vietnam; that we are finding it impossible to speak with any ethical power about Vietnam. If it is true that we can only move into our future by negating the past and only by fully actualizing the death of God, we must in a certain sense become totally responsible; we must accept the reality of Dostoevsky's warning that when God is dead, everything is permitted. In a very real sense, everything *is* permitted. In a very real sense, we do have a kind of ethical anarchy—there is no sense kidding ourselves about this; this is pretty frightening and dangerous. There are no sure paths here. It is my conviction that this is a price we have to pay and there is no getting around it.

Bishop Pike

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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. There's the charming line in a psalm which says, "Blessed be they who dash their enemy's children's heads against the stone," which in our liturgy is followed immediately by the Gloria Patria: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost." I know that's good patriotism, conditioning us to enjoy napalming the skins off babies in Vietnam. It doesn't seem to disturb the same kinds of bishops who are disturbed about prenatal abortion. They're not concerned about postnatal abortion these days.

I do affirm an afterlife. As far as heaven and hell are concerned, they seem impossible to me except as images of utter openness and wholeness and utter closed-ness in this life as well as hereafter. A heaven of an infinite bliss and a hell of infinite torment are a contradiction in terms, for the persons who qualify for this heaven would not be in infinite bliss knowing that all these have-nots are in torment without a chance ever to be whole or to become whole. They would at least stage a demonstration before the throne of the Most High. And failing that, they'd organize a secret rescue party and failing that, if they were the kind of persons who ought to be in heaven, they'd go to hell to be alongside them. That's what Jesus' servant image would say, where Jesus would be found. Assuming my affirmation of faith, this doesn't leave me living in another world or pie-in-the-sky or getting any motivation from it. It's a comfort in bereavement and gives a kind of long scope to the look of things. The motivational side isn't good. It says do these things and your Father will give you a reward in heaven; don't do these bad things or you'll burn for it. That may be prudence but it's not ethics. Ethics is: somebody needs you and you may sit up till three a.m. holding his hand and listening, just being there. Why? Because he needs you, because that's where you belong. Period. You don't put somebody down, because you don't treat persons as things. Period. I think man come of age should have the integrity to spurn all offers from on high or from the Bible that would muck up one's integrity in being decent because it's right and avoiding being indecent because it hurts a person. Period. I am here now. One world at a time please. I'm in no hurry for any second comings. I like it here and this is where I'm called to think and serve and work and love and hopefully be loved and enjoy.

I find it more plausible to believe in on-going life than not, and I grant it is a faith affirmation. I don't really see the death of the individual; I see many threats to individuality and I see new kinds of threats, or at least magnified ones in our particular culture. I also see the breakdown in society of those abstract blocks to individuals, those reified blocks like race and status in society and all this. I see more openness and therefore more chance for a person to be a person, which doesn't mean everybody is going to be as full and open and free and a man for others as he should be, but I see a lot of blocks being removed to this possibility.

All these affirmations—omnipotence, omniscience, and all that is going a long way from the data we see. I prefer not to affirm all these om's. When you do, you create the biggest problem of philosophy or theology, the biggest unanswerable problem. To put it crudely and vulgarly: if He's all that strong and He's all that smart and He's all that nice, why are so many things in such a mess? I think we've been affirming much too much about God.

A recent poll in Britain showed that less than a majority of the members of the Church of England believed in a personal God but

that two-thirds believed that Jesus is the son of God. That reminds me of some Latin Americans who believe that there is no God, but that Mary is his mother. I go with God is dead a certain way. God certainly figures less in things in Western culture; that is a matter of statistics. And if those of my own church prevail who would paint us into a pre-Copernican corner, He will figure even less. However, I'm not worried about God Himself. I agree with the 98th Archbishop of Canterbury, the late William Temple, who said with typical British understatement that it would not appear that God in His infinite wisdom has entrusted His entire mission to mankind to the Anglican communion. Certain traditional, past concepts of God are definitely dead. Recently I heard an expert who told us all about the plans for low-slung, low-cost satellites which when hooked to computers can give us the precise weather in a given area for two weeks. Well, we have in our prayer books prayers for rain and also one to turn it off. The God referred to in these prayers, the God that tinkers with meteorology is dead. For the communion of the sick in our prayer book we have a concept I call the fraternity pledge master concept of God. This prayer says, "Almighty God who doth chastise everyone whom Thou dost love." Well, that God's dead. And if He isn't, He should be.

I feel I'm a conservative in the church by calling doom if we don't change and suggesting change even if it does disturb some members of the firm. I think it is worth trying to save. I don't think it's utterly essential or crucial, so I'm kind of re'axed about that. I don't think all is lost if all churches collapse. We are, you see, social animals, and we will get them organized again. We're committee people. It has all been so exhausting though, why start all over again?

I think that an overwhelming problem for all of us today is a kind of immobility, silence, frozenness, impotence. In a very real sense, we can know something about the actual reality in which we live. The great problem is being able to give ourselves to it or being free in the presence of it, so that we truly affirm it and live it, so we are not simply spectators or bystanders.

The recent survey at Cal of the correlation between church membership and depth of involvement, amount of orthodoxy, number of doctrines believed, frequency of church attendance, numbers of church clubs and guilds belonged to and the socio-ethical attitudes the people hold is interesting and illuminating. There's a correlation between religion and ethics, except it's an inverse correlation. I can give you something of the general results. The more doctrines believed, the more frequent the church attendance, the more in-groups belonged to, then the more anti-Semitic, anti-Negro, xenophobic, generally un-Christian socio-ethical attitudes held. I mentioned this data to an eastern bishop not long ago and he said, "Jim, didn't you know this all along?" Now what's wrong here?

Ego satisfaction is one of the motivations of church affiliation—two of three persons involved in it are in it in terms of security of this life or the next, and only one-third for a cause or a challenge. As far as people wanting to congregate because they hold certain beliefs in common, this is perfectly normal. Stamp collectors have a club and why not those of common beliefs about ultimate meanings? But the role of the institution often blocks the fulfilling of a person, sprinkling holy water on status quo factors, which really block personal fulfillment, or providing a salve for people so they feel good, when doing evil.

The last mission we opened was in a bedroom housing community which stretched out on both sides of the freeway. We were the only church in the community, and we wanted to be in the center of the community. We didn't want to build a big thing up on the hill. We rented space in the shopping center building, something that you could use for something else if the idea flopped. We didn't have to pave any parking lot and it's flexible. This can be the place for the PTA, a protest rally, arts and crafts; it's convenient to the Safeway for a loaf of bread, to the liquor store for a bottle of wine, and we're in business. The church has been very much distracted from relating to the community by being over-capitalized, over-built, over-structured.

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