Is God Dead? | Apr. 8, 1966

THEOLOGY Toward a Hidden God

Is God dead? It is a question that tantalizes both believers, who perhaps secretly fear that he is, and atheists, who possibly suspect that the answer is no.

Is God dead? The three words represent a summons to reflect on the meaning of existence. No longer is the question the taunting jest of skeptics for whom unbelief is the test of wisdom and for whom Nietzsche is the prophet who gave the right answer a century ago. Even within Christianity, now confidently renewing itself in spirit as well as form, a small band of radical theologians has seriously argued that the churches must accept the fact of God's death, and get along without him. How does the issue differ from the age-old assertion that God does not and never did exist?

Nietzsche's thesis was that striving, self-centered man had killed God, and that settled that. The current death-of-God group* believes that God is indeed absolutely dead, but proposes to carry on and write a theology without theos, without God. Less radical Christian thinkers hold that at the very least God in the image of man, God sitting in heaven, is dead, and—in the central task of religion today—they seek to imagine and define a God who can touch men's emotions and engage men's minds.

If nothing else, the Christian atheists are waking the churches to the brutal reality that the basic premise of faith—the existence of a personal God, who created the world and sustains it with his love—is now subject to profound attack. "What is in question is God himself," warns German Theologian Heinz Zahrnt, "and the churches are fighting a hard defensive battle, fighting for every inch." "The basic theological problem today," says one thinker who has helped define it, Langdon Gilkey of the University of Chicago Divinity School, "is the reality of God."

A Time of No Religion.

Some Christians, of course, have long held that Nietzsche was not just a voice crying in the wilderness. Even before Nietzsche, S?ren Kierkegaard warned that "the day when Christianity and the world become friends, Christianity is done away with." During World War II, the anti-Nazi Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote prophetically to a friend from his Berlin prison cell: "We are proceeding toward a time of no religion at all."

For many, that time has arrived. Nearly one of every two men on earth lives in thralldom to a brand of totalitarianism that condemns religion as the opiate of the masses—which has stirred some to heroic defense of their faith but has also driven millions from any sense of God's existence. Millions more, in Africa, Asia and South America, seem destined to be born without any expectation of being summoned to the knowledge of the one God.

Princeton Theologian Paul Ramsey observes that "ours is the first attempt in recorded history to build a culture upon the premise that God is dead." In the traditional citadels of Christendom, grey Gothic cathedrals stand empty, mute witnesses to a rejected faith. From the scrofulous hobos of Samuel Beckett to Antonioni's tired-blooded aristocrats, the anti-heroes of modern art endlessly suggest that waiting for God is futile, since life is without meaning.

For some, this thought is a source of existential anguish: the Jew who lost his faith in a providential God at Auschwitz, the Simone de Beauvoir who writes:

"It was easier for me to think of a world without a creator than of a creator loaded with all the contradictions of the world." But for others, the God issue—including whether or not he is dead—has been put aside as irrelevant. "Personally, I've never been confronted with the question of God," says one such politely indifferent atheist, Dr. Claude Lévi-Strauss, professor of social anthropology at the Collège de France. "I find it's perfectly possible to spend my life knowing that we will never explain the universe." Jesuit Theologian John Courtney Murray points to another variety of unbelief: the atheism of distraction, people who are just "too damn busy" to worry about God at all.

Johannine Spirit.

Yet, along with the new atheism has come a new reformation The open-window spirit of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II have re vitalized the Roman Catholic Church.

Less spectacularly but not less decisively, Protestantism has been stirred by a flurry of experimentation in liturgy, church structure, ministry. In this new Christianity, the watchword is witness:

Protestant faith now means not intellectual acceptance of an ancient confession, but open commitment—perhaps best symbolized in the U.S. by the civil rights movement—to eradicating the evil and inequality that beset the world.

The institutional strength of the churches is nowhere more apparent than in the U.S., a country where public faith in God seems to be as secure as it was in medieval France. According to a survey by Pollster Lou Harris last year, 97% of the American people say they believe in God. Although clergymen agree that the postwar religious revival is over, a big majority of believers continue to display their faith by joining churches. In 1964, reports the National Council of Churches, denominational allegiance rose about 2%, compared with a population gain of less than 1.5%. More than 120 million Americans now claim a religious affiliation; and a recent Gallup survey indicated that 44% of them report that they attend church services weekly.

For uncounted millions, faith remains as rock-solid as Gibraltar. Evangelist Billy Graham is one of them. "I know that God exists because of my personal experience," he says. "I know that I know him.

I've talked with him and walked with him. He cares about me and acts in my everyday life." Still another is Roman Catholic Playwright William Alfred, whose off-Broadway hit, Hogan's Goat, melodramatically plots a turn-of-the-century Irish immigrant's struggle to achieve the American dream. "People who tell me there is no God," he says, "are like a six-year-old boy saying that there is no such thing as passionate love—they just haven't experienced it."

Practical Atheists.

Plenty of clergymen, nonetheless, have qualms about the quality and character of contemporary belief. Lutheran Church Historian Martin Marty argues that all too many pews are filled on Sunday with practical atheists—disguised nonbelievers who behave during the rest of the week as if God did not exist. Jesuit Murray qualifies his conviction that the U.S. is basically a God-fearing nation by adding:

"The great American proposition is 'religion is good for the kids, though I'm not religious myself.' " Pollster Harris bears him out: of the 97% who said they believed in God, only 27% declared themselves deeply religious.

Christianity and Judaism have always had more than their share of men of little faith or none. "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God,' " wrote the Psalmist, implying that there were plenty of such fools to be found in ancient Judea. But it is not faintness of spirit that the churches worry about now: it is doubt and bewilderment assailing committed believers.

Particularly among the young, there is an acute feeling that the churches on Sunday are preaching the existence of a God who is nowhere visible in their daily lives. "I love God," cries one anguished teenager, "but I hate the church." Theologian Gilkey says that "belief is the area in the modern Protestant church where one finds blankness, silence, people not knowing what to say or merely repeating what their preachers say." Part of the Christian mood today, suggests Christian Atheist William Hamilton, is that faith has become not a possession but a hope.

Anonymous Christianity.

In search of meaning, some believers have desperately turned to psychiatry, Zen or drugs. Thousands of others have quietly abandoned all but token allegiance to the churches, surrendering themselves to a life of "anonymous Christianity" dedicated to civil rights or the Peace Corps. Speaking for a generation of young Roman Catholics for whom the dogmas of the church have lost much of their power, Philosopher Michael Novak of Stanford writes: "I do not understand God, nor the way in which he works. If, occasionally, I raise my heart in prayer, it is to no God I can see, or hear, or feel. It is to a God in as cold and obscure a polar night as any non-believer has known."

Even clergymen seem to be uncertain. "I'm confused as to what God is," says no less a person than Francis B. Sayre, the Episcopal dean of Washington's National Cathedral, "but so is the rest of America." Says Marty's colleague at the Chicago Divinity School, the Rev. Nathan Scott, who is

also rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Hyde Park: "I look out at the faces of my people, and I'm not sure what meaning these words, gestures and rituals have for them."

Hydrogen & Carbon.

To those who do formulate a God, he seems to be everything from a celestial gas to a kind of invisible honorary president "out there" in space, well beyond range of the astronauts. A young Washington scientist suggests that "God, if anything, is hydrogen and carbon. Then again, he might be thermonuclear fission, since that's what makes life on this planet possible." To a streetwalker in Tel Aviv,

"God will get me out of this filth one day. He is a God of mercy, dressed all in white and sitting on a golden throne." A Dutch charwoman says: "God is a ghost floating in space." Screenwriter Edward Anhalt (Becket) says that "God is an infantile fantasy, which was necessary when men did not understand what lightning was. God is a cop-out." A Greek janitor thinks that God is "like a fiery flame, so white that it can blind you." "God is all that I cannot understand," says a Roman seminarian. A Boston scientist describes God as "the totality of harmony in the universe." Playwright Alfred muses:

"It is the voice which says, 'It's not good enough' —that's what God is."

Even though they know better, plenty of Christians find it hard to do away with ideas of God as a white-bearded father figure. William McCleary of Philadelphia, a Roman Catholic civil servant, sees God "a lot like he was explained to us as children. As an older man, who is just and who can get angry at us. I know this isn't the true picture, but it's the only one I've got."

Invisible Supermen.

Why has God become so hard to believe in, so easy to dismiss as a nonbeing? The search for an answer begins in the complex—and still unfinished—history of man's effort to comprehend the idea that he might have a personal creator.

No one knows when the idea of a single god became part of mankind's spiritual heritage. It does seem certain that the earliest humans were religious. Believing the cosmos to be governed by some divine power, they worshiped every manifestation of it: trees, animals, earth and sky. To the more sophisticated societies of the ancient world, cosmological mystery was proof that there were many gods. Ancient Babylonia, for example, worshiped at least 700 deities. Yet even those who ranked highest in the divine hierarchies were hardly more than invisible supermen. The Zeus of ancient Greece, although supreme on Olympus, was himself subject to the whims of fate—and besides that was so afflicted by fits of lust that he was as much the butt of dirty jokes as an object of worship.

Much closer to the deity of modern monotheism was the Egyptian sun god Aten, which the Pharaoh Amenophis IV forced on his polytheistic people as "the only god, beside whom there is

no other."

But the Pharaoh's heresy died out after his death, and the message to the world that there was but one true God came from Egypt's tiny neighbor, Israel. It was not a sudden revelation. Some scholars believe that Yahweh was originally a tribal deity—a god whom the Hebrews worshiped and considered superior to the pagan gods adored by other nations. It is even questionable to some whether Moses understood Yahweh to be mankind's only God, the supreme lord of all creation. Even after the emergence of Israel's faith, there is plenty of Biblical evidence that the Hebrews were tempted to abandon it: the prophets constantly excoriate the chosen people for whoring after strange gods.

The God of Israel was so utterly beyond human comprehension that devout Jews neither uttered nor wrote his sacred name.* At the same time, Judaism has a unique sense of God's personal presence.

Scripture records that he walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam, spoke familiarly on Mount Sinai with Moses, expressed an almost human anger and joy. Christianity added an even more mystifying dimension to the belief that the infinitely distant was infinitely near: the doctrine that God came down to earth in the person of a Jewish carpenter named Jesus, who died at Jerusalem around 26 A.D.

It was not an easy faith to define or defend, and the early church, struggling to rid itself of heresy, turned to an intellectual weapon already forged and near at hand: the metaphysical language of Greece.

The alliance of Biblical faith and Hellenic reason culminated in the Middle Ages. Although they acknowledged that God was ultimately unknowable, the medieval scholastics devoted page after learned page of their summas to discussions of the divine attributes—his omnipotence, immutability, perfection, eternity. Although infinitely above men, God was seen as the apex of a great pyramid of being that extended downward to the tiniest stone, the ultimate ruler of an ordered cosmos cooperatively governed by Christian church and Christian state.

Undermining Faith.

Christians are sometimes inclined to look back nostalgically at the medieval world as the great age of faith. In his book, The Death of God, Gabriel Vahanian of Syracuse University suggests that actually it was the beginning of the divine demise. Christianity, by imposing its faith on the art, politics and even economics of a culture, unconsciously made God part of that culture—and when the world changed, belief in this God was undermined. Now "God has disappeared because of the image of him that the church used for many, many ages," says Dominican Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx.

At its worst, the image that the church gave of God was that of a wonder worker who explained the world's mysteries and seemed to have somewhat more interest in punishing men than

rewarding them. Life was a vale of tears, said the church; men were urged to shun the pleasure of life if they would serve God, and to avoid any false step or suffer everlasting punishment in hell. It did little to establish the credibility of this "God" that medieval theologians categorized his qualities as confidently as they spelled out different kinds of sin, and that churchmen spoke about him as if they had just finished having lunch with him.

The Secular Rebellion.

The rebellion against this God of faith is best summed up by the word secularization. In The Secular City, Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School defines the term as "the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of all closed world views, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols." Slowly but surely, it dawned on men that they did not need God to explain, govern or justify certain areas of life.

The development of capitalism, for example, freed economics from church control and made it subject only to marketplace supply and demand. Political theorists of the Enlightenment proved that law and government were not institutions handed down from on high, but things that men had created themselves. The 18th century deists argued that man as a rational animal was capable of developing an ethical system that made as much sense as one based on revelation. Casting a cold eye on the complacency of Christianity before such evils as slavery, poverty and the factory system, such 19th century atheists as Karl Marx and Pierre Joseph Proudhon declared that the churches and their God would have to go if ever man was to be free to shape and improve his destiny.

But the most important agent in the secularizing process was science. The Copernican revolution was a shattering blow to faith in a Bible that assumed the sun went round the earth and could be stopped in its tracks by divine intervention, as Joshua claimed. And while many of the pioneers of modern science —Newton and Descartes, for example —were devout men, they assiduously explained much of nature that previously seemed godly mysteries. Others saw no need for such reverential lip service. When he was asked by Napoleon why there was no mention of God in his new book about the stars, the French astronomer Laplace coolly answered: "I had no need of the hypothesis." Neither did Charles Darwin, in uncovering the evidence of evolution.

Prestige of Science.

Faith in God survived scientific attack only when the churches came to realize that the reli gious language of the Bible is what Theologian Krister Stendahl calls "poetry-plus, rather than science-minus." Nowadays not even fundamentalists are upset by the latest cosmological theories of astronomers. Quasars, everyone agrees, neither prove nor disprove divine creation; by pushing back the boundaries of knowledge 8 billion light years without finding a definite answer, they do, in a way, admit its possibility. Nonetheless, science still presents a challenge to faith—in a new and perhaps more dangerous way.

Anglican Theologian David Jenkins points out that the prestige of science is so great that its

standards have seeped into other areas of life; in effect, knowledge has become that which can be known by scientific study—and what cannot be known that way somehow seems uninteresting, unreal. In previous ages, the man of ideas, the priest or the philosopher was regarded as the font of wisdom. Now, says Jenkins, the sage is more likely to be an authority "trained in scientific methods of observing phenomena, who bases what he says on a corpus of knowledge built up by observation and experiment and constantly verified by further processes of practice and observation." The prestige of science has been helped along by the analytic tradition of philosophy, which tends to limit "meaningful" ideas and statements to those that can be verified. It is no wonder, then, that even devout believers are empirical in outlook, and find themselves more at home with vis ible facts than unseen abstractions.

Socialization has immunized man against the wonder and mystery of existence, argues Oxford Theologian Ian Ramsey. "We are now sheltered from all the great crises of life. Birth is a kind of discontinuity between the prenatal and post-natal clinics, while death just takes somebody out of the community, possibly to the tune of prerecorded hymns at the funeral parlor." John Courtney Murray suggests that man has lost touch with the transcendent dimension in the transition from a rural agricultural society to an urbanized, technological world. The effect has been to veil man from what he calls natural symbols—the seasonal pattern of growth—that in the past reminded men of their own finiteness. The question is, says Murray, "whether or not a contemporary industrial civilization can construct symbols that can help us understand God."

Teach-in for God.

Secularization, science, urbanization—all have made it comparatively easy for the modern man to ask where God is, and hard for the man of faith to give a convincing answer, even to himself. It is precisely to this problem—how do men talk of God in the context of a culture that rejects the transcendent, the beyond?—that theologians today are turning. In part, this reflects popular demand and pastoral need. "God is the question that interests laymen the most," says David Edwards, editor of the Anglican SCM Press. Last month the University of Colorado sponsored a teach-in on God, featuring William Hamilton and Dr. George Forell of the University of Iowa's School of Religion; more than 1,700 people showed up for the seven-hour session—a greater turnout than for a recent similar talkfest on Viet Nam. At the University of California at Santa Barbara, students and faculty jammed two lecture halls to hear Harvey Cox talk on "The 'Death of God' and the Future of Theology."

"If you want to have a well-attended lecture," says Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a visiting professor at Manhattan's Union Theological Seminary, "discuss God and faith." Ministers have found that currently there is no easier way to boost Sunday attendance than to post "Is God Dead?" as the topic of their next sermon.

The new theological approach to the problem of God is not that of the ages when solid faith could be assumed. No serious theologian today would attempt to describe the qualities of God as the medieval scholastic did with such assurance. Gone, too, is any attempt to prove God by reason alone.* For one thing, every proof seems to have a plausible refutation; for another, only a

committed Thomist is likely to be spiritually moved by the realization that there is a self-existent Prime Mover. "Faith in God is more than an intellectual belief," says Dr. John Macquarrie of Union Theological Seminary. "It is a total attitude of the self."

Four Options.

What unites the various contemporary approaches to the problem of God is the conviction that the primary question has become not what God is, but how men are justified in using the word. There is no unanimity about how to solve this problem, although theologians seem to have four main options: stop talking about God for awhile, stick to what the Bible says, formulate a new image and concept of God using contemporary thought categories, or simply point the way to areas of human experience that indicate the presence of something beyond man in life.

It is not only the Christian Atheists who think it pointless to talk about God. Some contemporary ministers and theologians, who have no doubts that he is alive, suggest that the church should stop using the word for awhile, since it is freighted with unfortunate meanings. They take their clue from Bonhoeffer, whose prison-cell attempt to work out a "nonreligious interpretation of Biblical concepts" focused on Jesus as "the man for others." By talking almost exclusively about Christ, the argument goes, the church would be preaching a spiritual hero whom even non-believers can admire.

Yale's Protestant Chaplain William Sloane Coffin reports that "a girl said to me the other day, 'I don't know whether I'll ever believe in God, but Jesus is my kind of guy.' "

In a sense, no Christian doctrine of God is possible without Jesus, since the suffering redeemer of Calvary is the only certain glimpse of the divine that churches have. But a Christ-centered theology that skirts the question of God raises more questions than it answers. Does it not run the risk of slipping into a variety of ethical humanism? And if Jesus is not clearly related in some way to God, why is he a better focus of faith than Buddha, Socrates or even Albert Camus? Rather than accept this alternative, a majority of Christians would presumably prefer to stay with the traditional language of revelation at any cost. And it is not merely conservative evangelists who believe that the words and ideas of Scripture have lost neither relevance nor meaning. Suich a modern novelist as John Updike begins his poem Seven Stanzas at Easter:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body; if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle, the Church will fall.

The century's greatest Protestant theologian, Karl Barth of Switzerland, has consistently warned his fellow churchmen that God is a "wholly other" being, whom man can only know by God's self-revelation in the person of Christ, as witnessed by Scripture. Any search for God that starts with human experience, Barth warns, is a vain quest that will discover only an idol, not the true God at all.

Holy Being.

The word of God, naked and unadorned, may be fine for the true believer, but some theologians argue that Biblical terminology has ceased to be part of the world's vocabulary, and is in danger of becoming a special jargon as incomprehensible to some as the equations of physicists. To bridge this communications gap, they have tried to reinterpret the concept of God into contemporary philosophical terms. Union Seminary's John Macquarrie, for example, proposes a description of God based on Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy, which is primarily concerned with explaining the nature of "being" as such. To Heidegger, "being" is an incomparable, transcendental mystery, something that confers existence on individual, particular beings. Macquarrie calls Heidegger's mystery "Holy Being," since it represents what Christians have traditionally considered God.

Other philosophical theologians, such as Schubert Ogden of Southern Methodist University and John Cobb of the Southern California School of Theology, have been working out a theism based on the process thinking of Alfred North Whitehead. In their view, God is changing with the universe. Instead of thinking of God as the immutable Prime Mover of the universe, argues Ogden, it makes more sense to describe him as "the ultimate effect" and as "the eminently relative One, whose openness to change contingently on the actions of others is literally boundless." In brief, the world is creating God as much as he is creating it.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic propagandists for a new image of God are the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of Anglican theology, Bishop Robinson of Woolwich, England, and Bishop James A. Pike of California. Both endorse the late Paul Tillich's concept of God as "the ground of being." Pike, who thinks that the church should have fewer but better dogmas, also suggests that the church should abandon the Trinity, on the ground that it really seems to be preaching three Gods instead of one. Christianity, in his view, should stop attributing specific actions to persons of the Trinity—creation to the Father, redemption to the Son, inspiration to the Holy Spirit—and just say that they were all the work of God.

Discernment Situations.

The contem porary world appears so biased against metaphysics that any attempt to find philosophical equivalents for God may well be doomed to failure. "God," says Jerry Handspicker of the World Council of Churches, "has suffered from too many attempts to define the indefinable." Leaving unanswered the question of what to say God is, some theologians are instead concentrating on an exploration of the ultimate and unconditional in modern life. Their basic point is that while modern men have rejected God as a solution to life, they cannot evade a questioning anxiety about its meaning. The apparent eclipse of God is merely a sign that the world is experiencing what Jesuit Theologian Karl Rahner calls "the anonymous presence" of God, whose word comes to man not on tablets of stone but in the inner murmurings of the heart.

Following Tillich, Langdon Gilkey argues that the area of life dealing with the ultimate and with mystery points the way toward God. "When we ask, 'Why am I?' 'What should I become and be?', 'What is the meaning of my life?'—then we are exploring or encountering that region of

experience where language about the ultimate becomes useful and intelligible." That is not to say that God is necessarily found in the depths of anxiety. "Rather we are in the region of our experience where God may be known, and so where the meaningful usage of this word can be found." To Ian Ramsey of Oxford, this area of ultimate concern offers what he calls "discernment situations"—events that can be the occasion for insight, for awareness of something beyond man. It is during these insight situations, Ramsey says, that the universe "comes alive, declares some transcendence, and to which we respond by ourselves coming alive and finding another dimension."

A discernment situation could be fall ing in love, suffering cancer, reading a book. But it need not be a private experience. The Rev. Stephen Rose, editor of Chicago's Renewal magazine, argues that "whenever the prophetic word breaks in, either as judgment or as premise, that's when the historical God acts." One such situation, he suggests, was Watts—an outburst of violence that served to chide men for lack of brotherhood. Harvard's Harvey Cox sees God's hand in history, but in a different way. The one area where empirical man is open to transcendence, he argues, is the future: man can be defined as the creature who hopes, who has taken responsibility for the world. Cox proposes a new theology based on the premise that God is the source and ground of this hope—a God "ahead" of man in history rather than "out there"in space.

German Theologian Gerhard Ebeling of Tubingen University finds an arrow pointing the way to God in the problem in language. A word, he suggests, is not merely a means of conveying information; it is also a symbol of man's power over nature and of his basic impotence: one man cannot speak except to another, and language itself possesses a power that eludes his mastery of it. God, he proposes, is the source of the mystery hidden in language, or, as he obscurely puts it, "the basic situation of man as word-situation."

"The Kingdom Within You." For those with a faith that can move mountains, all this tentative groping for God in human experience may seem unnecessary. The man-centered approach to God runs against Earth's warning that a "God" found in human depths may be an imagined idol—or a neurosis that could be dissolved on the psychiatrist's couch. Rudolf Bultmann answers that these human situations of anxiety and discernment represent "transformations of God," and are the only way that secular man is likely to experience any sense of the eternal and unconditional.

This theological approach is not without scriptural roots. A God who writes straight with crooked lines in human history is highly Biblical in outlook. The quest for God in the depths of experience echoes Jesus' words to his Apostles, "The kingdom of God is within you." And the idea of God's anonymous presence suggests Matthew's account of the Last Judgment, when Jesus will separate the nations, telling those on his right: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink." But when? they ask. "And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' "

The theological conviction that God is acting anonymously in human history is not likely to turn many atheists toward him. Secular man may be anxious, but he is also convinced that anxiety can be explained away. As always, faith is something of an irrational leap in the dark, a gift of God.

And unlike in earlier centuries, there is no way today for churches to threaten or compel men to face that leap; after Dachau's mass sadism and Hiroshima's instant death, there are all too many real possibilities of hell on earth.

The new approaches to the problem of God, then, will have their greatest impact within the church community. They may help shore up the faith of many believers and, possibly, weaken that of others. They may also lead to a more realistic, and somewhat more abstract, conception of God. "God will be seen as the order in which life takes on meaning, as being, as the source of creativity," suggests Langdon Gilkey. "The old-fashioned personal God who merely judges, gives grace and speaks to us in prayer, is, after all, a pretty feeble God." Gilkey does not deny the omnipotence of God, nor undervalue personal language about God as a means of prayer and worship. But he argues that Christianity must go on escaping from its too-strictly anthropomorphic past, and still needs to learn that talk of God is largely symbolic.

No More Infallibilities.

The new quest for God, which respects no church boundaries, should also contribute to ecumenism. "These changes make many of the old disputes seem pointless, or at least secondary," says Jesuit Theologian Avery Dulles. The churches, moreover, will also have to accept the empiricism of the modern outlook and become more secular themselves, recognizing that God is not the property of the church, and is acting in history as he wills, in encounters for which man is forever unprepared.

To some, this suggests that the church might well need to take a position of reverent agnosticism regarding some doctrines that it had previously proclaimed with excessive conviction.

Many of the theologians attempting to work out a new doctrine of God admit that they are uncertain as to the impact of their ultimate findings on other Christian truths; but they agree that such God-related issues as personal salvation in the afterlife and immortality will need considerable re-study. But Christian history allows the possibility of development in doctrine, and even an admission of ignorance in the face of the divine mystery is part of tradition. St. Thomas Aquinas declared that "we cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not."

Gabriel Vahanian suggests that there may well be no true faith without a measure of doubt, and thus contemporary Christian worry about God could be a necessary and healthy antidote to centuries in which faith was too con fident and sure. Perhaps today, the Christian can do no better than echo the prayer of the worried father who pleaded with Christ to heal his spirit-possessed son: "I believe; help my unbelief."

*Principally Thomas J. J. Altizer of Emory University, William Hamilton of Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and Paul Van Buren of Temple University. Satirizing the basic premise of their new non-theology, the Methodist student magazine motive recently ran an obituary of God in newspaper style: "ATLANTA, Ga., Nov. 9—God, creator of the universe, principal deity of the world's Jews, ultimate reality of Christians, and most eminent of all divinities, died late yesterday

during major surgery undertaken to correct a massive diminishing influence. "Reaction from the world's great and from the man in the street was uniformly incredulous . . . From Independence, Mo., former President Harry S. Truman, who received the news in his Kansas City barbershop, said 'I'm always sorry to hear somebody is dead. It's a damn shame." *Almost impossible to translate, the name Yahweh means roughly "I am who I am" or "He causes to be." *Probably the most famous proofs for God's existence are the five ways of St. Thomas Aquinas, all drawn from the nature of the universe, that he sets out in his Summa Theologiae. Aquinas' first proof, for example, is that certain things in the world are seen to be in a state of motion or change. But something cannot be changed or moved except by another, and yet there cannot be an infinite series of movers. Therefore, there must be a first, or prime mover that is not moved or changed by anything else—and this is God.