

THE FAILURE OF MODERN RELIGIOSITY

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In America's beginning everyone talked about God. William Bradford's history of Plymouth Plantation was saturated with allusions to the Providence of God. "In God we trust" became the American motto.

Then, sometime during the twentieth century--about the time of our own generation--people stopped talking about God. You could talk about God in church. You could talk about God when you told the story of the first Thanksgiving and you mentioned God when you pledged allegiance to the flag. But that was all. Two people didn't sit down in their living room and talk about God. Students didn't discuss God over a hamburger and a coke in the union. You didn't read about God in the newspaper or hear about God on the radio. God belonged in his own little niche--and he had better stay there. The gulf between the sacred and the secular--the gulf between religion and everyday life--grew wider and wider...

And then someone said, "They're too far apart. God doesn't mean anything today. The church and the world have nothing to say to each other." And a man named Thomas Altizer said, "The death of God is an historical event...God has died in our own time...in our existence." And Malcom Boyd, an episcopal minister, said, "Most organized religion provides a direct line to a phony tribal god who sits on a throne in a proverbial Heaven tossing bits of manna to his angels." And, then, everyone was talking about God. Young men sat up all night in fraternity houses talking about God. Businessmen talked about God during their coffee breaks. Articles were published in the New York Times, the National Observer, Time, Life, Newsweek, the New Yorker...and most of them said, "The gulf between religion and everyday life is growing wider and wider..."

Because of this, I want to consider two things. I want us to see 1) How modern religiosity has reduced God to tired sentimentality, and 2) The need for a changing God in a changing world.

Contemporary events have only served to accentuate the bafflement and doubt of many people. J. Milton Yinger, who has done a noted sociological study of religion in America, attributes this to the inflexibility of religious creeds--to the inability of a sect or denomination to let go of--to cast aside--an insignificant, disproven belief. Because these specific, unimportant beliefs are unacceptable to many people--particularly to educated, thinking people--the entire realm of religion, the entire concept of God, may be rejected. As organized religion stubbornly insists on clinging to outdated beliefs, the rift between science and religion grows. Yinger has said, "Science disproves specific religious beliefs, but it does not disprove religion." However, because much modern religiosity demands that these disproven beliefs remain a part of worshipping God, new skeptics and new cynics are born--new voices are raised in the cry, "You are wrong! Science has proven you wrong. Your God has died!"

Gabriel Vahanian has said, "If God has died, it is religiosity that has killed him." Now, let us clarify the meaning of this word--religiosity. Religiosity is not faith in God. In religiosity man substitutes superstition for faith in God. And men cling to this superstition--he clings to all of the little beliefs surrounding this superstition--and he won't even listen to anyone who questions these superstitions--because he's afraid. He's afraid he might be wrong, and science might be right. And he foolishly, but sincerely believes that if there is no God like the God he imagines, there is no God at all.

Young men and young women are taught by their parents, not the importance of God, the universal spirit, God, the natural force, God, the guiding power, but the importance of an anthropomorphic God--God, the man, God--the good old wizard our grandfathers worshipped. And these young people go to school where they learn how waves that are transmitted from a city hundreds of miles away are intercepted to become pictures on a television screen. They learn about Freud. They learn about nuclear physics. And they look at what they've learned, and they look at the God they've been taught about and they ask, "What does this God have to do with all these things?" And they say, "I can't believe in this God." And they think that because they can't believe in this God they can believe in no God. For no one has told them that just because you stop praying to an old man with a white beard you don't stop believing in God. No one has ever told them because you can't believe in the man upstairs doesn't mean you can't believe in God the Spirit.

This is the failure of modern religiosity. The living Deity is worshipped with dead men's creeds and forms. We reduce God to a tradition, a tired sentimentality. And we wonder why so many people say that God means nothing.

So if God is to mean something, God must change. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that our concept of God must change. The picture that comes to mind when we hear the word "God" must change. The old man with a white beard--the good old wizard of our grandfathers--must die. Vahanian has pointed out that man's conceptions of God have always emerged from his culture, and that the understanding of God today is distorted--even idolatrous, because it reflects only a past culture--a culture no longer relevant and meaningful to contemporary man. This God was, after all, only an approximation, and never really identical with God. And this approximation--this God of past cultures--must die. This God must die if the living God is ever to be found. Bishop John A. T. Robinson, in his book, Honest to God, has stated his belief that the church in our time is being called to nothing less than a revolution. And we must put off this old, dead God for the living God, the God of the Spirit, whom we have obscured behind a mask that we call by his own name--God.

Modern religiosity has reduced God to a tired sentimentality. We must have a changing God to meet the needs of a changing world.

Robert Oppenheimer, a world-known physicist has said, "This world of ours is a changing world. The nature of human community, the order of ideas, the order of society, the unity of knowledge, the very notions of Society and Culture have changed; and they will not return to what they have been in the past."