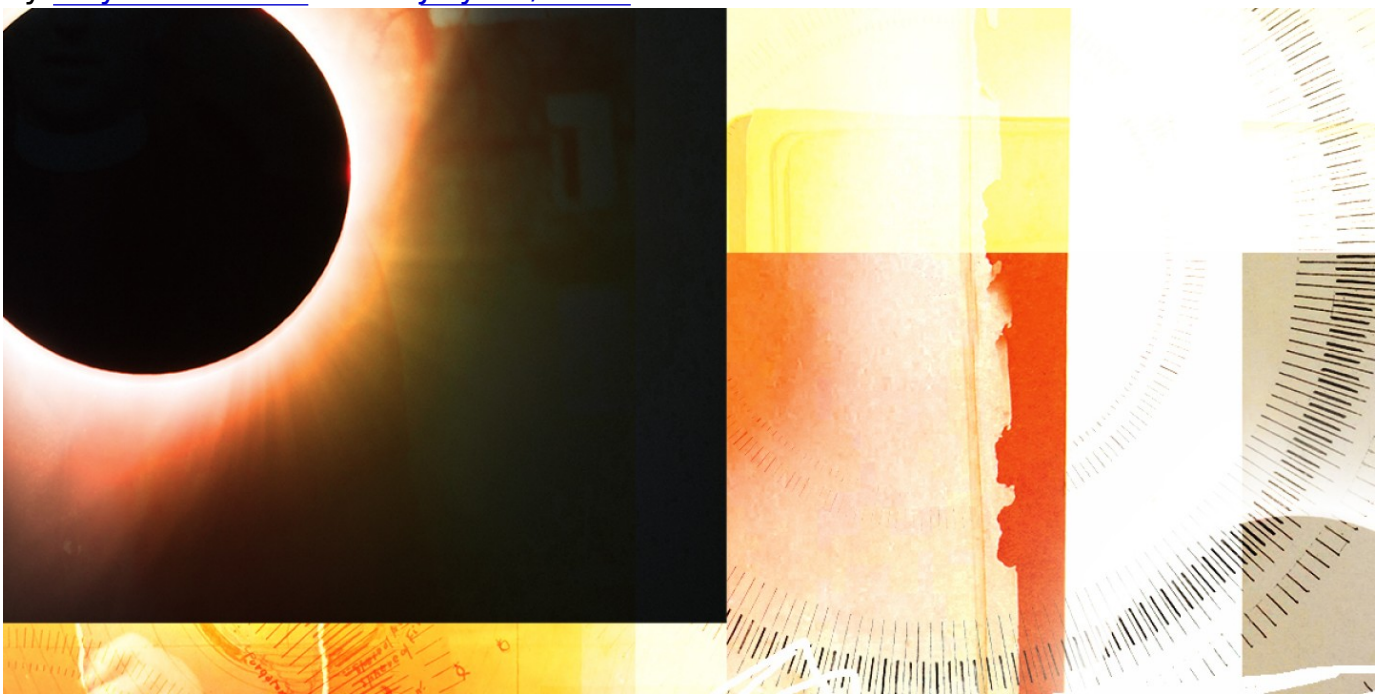
Is God still dead?

The legacy of 1960s radical theology

by Lloyd H. Steffen in the July 27, 2022 issue



(*Century* illustration)

Students at Lehigh University recently dedicated one of their campus-wide debates to the question, “Is God dead?” I was curious why this question was being raised by Generation Z college students. Any controversy the question could generate seemed dated, like a revival from the 1960s.

When I was invited to address the issue, I wondered if the students were expecting me—I’m the university chaplain at Lehigh—to discount the question and offer a stout defense of God, the Christian church, and all manner of religious and theological matters. But my own history had taught me that the question they were raising is a very serious one.

Add to that the many challenges to faith young people face today—from doubts about their own futures to larger worries about the pandemic and the undermining of democratic institutions—I felt they were right to ask. God’s death could be taken

as a metaphor for all the problems that seem beyond our ability to solve. So it felt like a good moment to revisit the controversy that inflamed American culture more than half a century ago.

The death of God, as we mean it today, received its most enduring and influential exposition in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882). God, Nietzsche said via the character of a God-seeking madman, had been murdered by humanity. Now the fixed order of value was loosed from its metaphysical moorings. God—as the guarantor of truth and goodness, rationalism, the ideals of progress and basic morality—was no more. God was dead.

Nietzsche's philosophical affirmation persisted and gained vital expression in the postmodernism of the late 20th century, which decentered Enlightenment values by subverting faith in reason. The movement toward a transcendence-free secular world that could evolve beyond any need for God—this is one way to describe Nietzsche's vision—persisted historically, and it found fertile ground in mid-20th-century theology.

When death of God theology rose to prominence about 60 years ago, it generated enormous commotion in Christian theological and ecclesiastical circles. The question "Is God dead?" which famously appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine on Good Friday 1966, was to many minds diabolical—a notion reinforced when a copy of the magazine was displayed prominently as a prop in the 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby*. Today, however, the question lacks the power to arouse the kind of furor it did in the 1960s, when it gained widespread cultural prominence as a sign that the cultural ferment of that decade had come to visit the Christian church.

But students who ask the question today are still asking something equally important. They do not associate the death of God with anything diabolical, but they may be expressing a sense of alienation in a desacralized world. They may be wondering about their own power to act in a world beset by crisis. They may be wondering what anchors—philosophical, rational, moral—are available for them today and what God does or does not have to do with that. As such, students ask, "Is God dead?" out of intellectual curiosity, with no obvious agenda—and the question has new force.

The two major Christian theologians in the 1960s death of God movement were Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton. Altizer adopted a Hegelian perspective. He

saw God emptying the Godself of transcendence into the immanence of the world. For Altizer, the death of God was an event in history, with God having died in the person of Jesus, whose death itself poured the spirit of God into the world with this result: the sacred becomes profane and the profane sacred. Each depends on the other. God was absent, and that absence signified God's presence in all things.

These paradoxes led one critic, Robert McAfee Brown, to charge that for Altizer God was not dead at all. For his part, Altizer defended Christian atheism, denied any relevance of his theology to the Christian church, and proclaimed that the movement of immanence so emptied God that God became Jesus, who, as the Christ, is not exalted in ascension but humiliated in Passion, suffering with humanity as godlessness becomes necessary for any revelation of the sacred in the modern world.

William Hamilton, drawing on the World War II experience, found initial inspiration for his theological project in the later work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer explored the idea of a religionless Christianity and contemplated "a world come of age," which Hamilton interpreted as a world that had matured and no longer needed the transcendent God avowed by neoorthodox Christianity. Hamilton was steeped in Karl Barth's theology, including Barth's neoorthodox separation of divine and secular, and this undoubtedly led Hamilton to engage Bonhoeffer's musing that Christianity could be separated from religion.

Hamilton was less of a Nietzschean God killer and more of a God detective. He became a cultural analyst, looking in all kinds of places for evidence that God had died. He found in Herman Melville a worthy companion for his post-Christian journey, and his theological-literary-cultural analyses—which attend to figures as disparate as Dostoevsky and Buckminster Fuller—are remarkable for their insight and theological framing.

For Hamilton the death of God represented a humanistic apotheosis calling for a celebration of the secular. It was for him a language event, a metaphor for the experience of God's absence, which then pointed beyond the old ultimate realities that had not withstood the test of time or the demands of (post) modernity. While continuing to latch onto Jesus as a Christ without God, Hamilton dispensed with the God of ultimate and radical transcendence, the God who could be relied upon to solve problems. World War II had put the lie to this understanding.

Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein pushed even harder on divine absence. Rather than celebrating the death of God, as Hamilton did, Rubenstein declared that “the death camps caused me to reject the whole optimistic theology of liberal religion.” He asked, “How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz?” It was clear that God did not solve problems. The omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God who would not use a divine power to stop the slaughter of innocents was unworthy of belief.

In the 1960s, the question “Is God dead?” was an inflammatory, passion-arousing question. A Christian theologian delving sympathetically into the implications of death of God thinking was subject to savage criticism. Theologians like Altizer and Hamilton were driven out of religiously based schools into secular ones. They received numerous death threats.

Today it would be hard to find that kind of vitriol over the work of theologians. Still, the legacy of death of God theology has been a powerful one. Before this movement, most people had seen God as a problem solver. Although faithful Christians would affirm that God was spirit and ought not to be anthropomorphized, many also affirmed a personal relationship with the Divine—often making God too person-like, which in turn easily translated into a God like Michelangelo’s, that bearded White man extending a potent finger to Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The metaphors and images of divine reality were familiar and understandable images of power, only upgraded to better accommodate the divine reality.

So God was male, God was White, and God was the guarantor of moral meaning and approver of the existing social order. And to affirm this picture of things, Christians asserted a view, once dogma in the Catholic Church, that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” Exclusivism was the cultural and social context in which the death of God presented itself for consideration and debate.

After the death of God, the White, middle-class version of the US church experienced a series of transformative confrontations. Women began to seek a place in ecclesiastical structures. Feminist theology took center stage, with calls for goddess thinking giving new life to that Nietzschean plea for new values and new gods. Black theology became a power player in theological circles, and racial injustice issues were directed at the very God question that had so obsessed radical theologians like Altizer and Hamilton. In 1973 Black theologian William Jones asked in his first book title a question unthinkable before death of God theology: *Is God a White Racist?*

One of the most significant opportunities created by the death of God was a challenge to religious exclusivism and the possibility for a new religious pluralism. A. Roy Eckardt, a Lehigh professor who helped create the modern field of religious studies, assumed leadership in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Eckardt did not like radical theology, thinking it a fatuous fad for theological malcontents, yet the conversations between Christians and Jews—and others between Muslims and Jews and Christians and Buddhists—became possible because of a radical change in Christian perspectives. Interreligious dialogue is only possible if one loosens their grip on the certainty that one's own tradition is true and exclusively so, and interfaith encounters become possible because of a cultural and ideological shift that fits quite comfortably under the rubric "the death of God." The dialogue between religions taking place today shows a respect for pluralism, and pluralism in religious affairs is made possible through a death of God experience.

If the God concept is stripped of Whiteness, maleness, exclusivism, and the power structures that support and legitimize such things, what happens to Christian identity? Arguably, many who remained in service to the Christian church found a new freedom to explore religious meaning and the theological nature of ultimacy. Others doubled down on old hostilities with new belligerence.

A serious question remains—one that today's students are perhaps attempting to confront: Once the God concept is evacuated of anthropomorphic images and the trappings of exclusivism, what is left?

For some in a post-Christian era, what is left is a non-dogmatic theological liberalism. Others are led to a wide-ranging inclusive spirituality ("spiritual but not religious"). Others find their way to agnosticism and atheism. And still others react to an environment that is so menacing that the necessary step is to reassert and shore up with certainty the challenged traditions. The death of God movement provided intellectual excitement that extended beyond the church, but many within the church found the idea of God's death threatening to the most important aspects of their identities.

Some Christians hardened their traditional beliefs in the face of the radicals' challenge, so that the death of God may in some ways be responsible for helping to unleash the energy of the religious right. With traditional sources of theological meaning and institutional power under threat, some looked to politics for an alternative power base sufficient to withstand the godless Christianity of radical

theology. Accordingly, part of the legacy of radical theology has been reactionary theology, which inspires a religiosity that is exclusivist, unwelcoming of strangers and outsiders, sometimes supportive of White supremacy and other forms of oppression, and unwilling to advance a Christian ethic emphasizing compassion and concern for others. This kind of religiosity is ultimately destructive and dangerous, and to the extent that it is in part a reaction to death of God thinking, then this, too, is radical theology's legacy, unwanted and unexpected though it may be.

The death of God identified human aspiration while exposing human limitation. The radical theologians, for all the creative energy they infused into the culture, may not have paid enough attention to the meaning of those limitations. They were not lacking in imagination and creativity, but imagination is always bounded by finitude and the limitations of thought. When it comes to the question of God, one not only bumps into the end of thought but also opens up something beyond that end, which the radicals did by intimating that God does not exist even if there is a God.

The difficulty is that if existence is the wrong predicate to attach to God, it is still necessary for our conceptualizing. Everything has to fit into being or nonbeing or into the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" These categories serve our purposes and make understanding possible, but they cannot possibly exhaust the reality that extends beyond the limitations of thought and imagination. The radical theology of the 1960s opened up the idea that God had died, but it may also have opened the depth of what Augustine once wrote: *Si comprendis, non est Deus*. If you understand it, it is not God.

The death of God that was proclaimed in the 1960s was understandable. A particular form of religious thought associated with theism was challenged and died then; it did not die for everyone, obviously, but then again religion cannot be reduced to theism. Today's students are living in the aftermath of that death, for good and for ill. When I tried to imagine what to tell them about that previous death of God moment and then the one they are living through today, I thought that perhaps, at their best, the radical theologians of the 1960s were saying this: that even if God is absent and nonfunctional, religious visionaries like Jesus or the Buddha can still exemplify the best human beings can be. They can open pathways to deeper spiritual realities—realities that we grasp but stumble over due to the limitations of language and metaphor and our own lack of imagination.