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Theistic or Non-theistic Talk about God

The emergence of a theistic or non-theistic vocabulary is a relatively recent phenomenon. Nevertheless, there is an amazing abuse of the terms “theistic” and “non-theistic”, since hardly anybody endeavors to clarify the meaning of these terms before he uses them. In this essay we will first try to elucidate the terms “theistic” and “non-theistic” and then we shall exemplify the non-theistic talk about God by quoting some of its prominent representatives. It is necessary that we are here extensively concerned with the non-theistic talk about God, because in recent years numerous attempts have been made to supersede with non-theistic conceptions an antiquated theistic vocabulary. Finally we have to ask if and how theistic and non-theistic talk about God is able to convey the Christian message.

Theism is a historically evolved term which developed itself in gradual opposition to the terms deism and pantheism. It stands for the belief in a personal God who is beyond and above the world, a God who has created the world out of nothing and preserves and governs it. The belief in a personal God who is seen in radical contrast to the world, but who is creatively and preserveringly active in it, is constituent for the term theism.

A pantheistic identification of God and world is rejected as well as a dualistic conception of God. Everything is attributed to God: He is the creator of the good and of the bad, He is the origin of salvation and damnation in the world, but He is not the origin of evil. No rational attempt is made to solve the paradox between the almighty God and the existence of anti-godly powers. The antithesis to deism is expressed in theism in such a way that God is not understood as fate coming from another world. Rather He is active in all processes of creation, He reveals Himself to man and He has the sovereignty to intervene in all events of our world. Theism is also distinguished from polytheism in recognizing only one God and not a plurality of gods; and it differs from henotheism which assumes a plurality of gods though it adores just one God. Moreover theism can express the belief in one God as in natural religion, or the belief in one God as expressed through revelation in history. This will become more evident when we trace the term theism in its historical development.

The term “theism” appears for the first time in European history of thoughts in the introduction of *Ralph Cudworth's* investigation

“The True Intellectual System of the Universe” (1678)¹. Though this lengthy work had many enemies in the beginning, it later was recognized as the standard work for the refutation of materialism and a-theism. Serving in this function for two generations it also was translated into Latin by Lorenz von Mosheim (in 1733).

The Cambridge Neo-Platonist Ralph Cudworth, a contemporary of Henry More, had accepted the lawful orderliness of natural science in his refutation of the a-theistic and materialistic world view². So the idea of a purely inconceivable, free and incalculable omnipotence lost its inherent dignity for him. Only if God as the holy, ethical and spiritual necessity gives us an existence which possesses the freedom to choose what is good and true, then the step from the powers of nature that are conceived in causal laws to a living almighty God above them is not a set-back from a rationally conceived world view to a rude and barbaric world view. From this understanding of God as the almighty power of the ethical good, which has its roots in this idea, there has developed since the 17th century an increasing estrangement from the God of the Old Testament. In Cudworth’s conception of God this means that the infinite goodness ranges above the infinite knowledge, and this ranges again above the human power. According to Cudworth, these three peculiarities and their corresponding relationship were already perceived in the Platonic doctrine of God and were then deeper developed as the rational fundament of the doctrine of Trinity in the Christian revelation. Thus Cudworth attains a harmonic unity of science, religion and Christian revelation. Who denies this harmony, deprives theism of its inner essential relation to human thinking and life, and thus disconnects man from religion and sponsors a-theism. Theism here means a way of understanding God which is opposed to a-theism, and which has as its starting point a harmonic unity of science, religion and Christian revelation and is most purely expressed in the Christian revelation.

Cudworth, however, does not always see a-theism in opposition to theism. His whole apologetic endeavor is directed against three fatalisms, the first is absolute a-theism, meaning the denial of the being and existence of a Deity. The second fatalism he attacks, is an “immoral theism”³, in which any natural justice and morality being founded in the Deity is denied. Finally, he attacks a kind of theism, which assumes the existence of a God, but denies “liberty from necessity, and a distributive justice of rewards and

¹ See further E. Hirsch, *Geschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie*, 1 (1949), pp. 188–195.

² R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe etc.*, ed. by Th. Birch, 1 (1837), p. 40. He uses the same tools as the a-theists and shows that from the very starting point of the a-theists, this means from atomism, one can refute a-theism and thus deprive it of its own arguments.

³ Cudworth (n. 2), p. 34.

punishments in the world''⁴. What Cudworth actually rejects in this close affinity between theism and a-theism is any kind of mechanistic world view. He is rightly afraid that with any kind of mechanistic theism, or, bluntly called, a-theism, modern a-theists would first assault Christianity, thinking that to be the most vulnerable, and then they would go even farther and demolish all religion and "vitalistic" theism⁵.

Thus theism is seen in close relationship to a-theism if it presupposes, similar to a-theism, a mechanistic and deterministic view of man and the universe. If theism, however, understands man and the universe in vitalistic terms then it is seen in close relationship to religion and Christianity and in opposition to a-theism⁶.

Antony Earl of Shaftesbury resumes the theism of Cudworth and develops it. First he defends the apologetic method of Cudworth in which he appreciates that Cudworth depicts the position of the a-theists with their own arguments before he refutes them. Thus he thinks that Cudworth was unjustifiedly accused of having collaborated with the a-theists. Shaftesbury then contributes to the development of the term theism in his work: "Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times etc." (1711) when he says:

"For as averse as I am to the cause of theism, or name of Deist, when taken in a sense exclusive of revelation, I consider still that in strictness the root of all is theism, and that to be a settled Christian, it is necessary to be first of all a good theist; for theism can only be opposed to polytheism or atheism."⁷

This remark reveals that both Shaftesbury and Cudworth do not consider theism as an exclusive phenomenon of revelation. Therefore theistic understanding of God is even possible without revelation.

⁴ Cudworth (n. 2), p. 35.

⁵ See further Cudworth (n. 2), p. 37. Thus the term a-theism is used much less ambiguously than the term theism, as a-theism always denotes a strictly mechanistic understanding of man and universe, whereas in theism we have to distinguish whether it is used in a mechanistic or in a vitalistic way.

⁶ Even Edward Martin, in whose *Five Letters* (1662) the word "theist" appears for the first time, uses this term in contrast to a-theist: "To have said my office... twice a day... among Rebels, Theists, Atheists, Philologers, Wits, Masters of Reason, Puritanes (etc.)". *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 11 (1961), p. 267.

⁷ A. Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, etc.*, ed. by J. M. Robertson, 1 (1900), p. 19.

Moreover Shaftesbury does not clearly distinguish and separate between deism and theism.

Though Shaftesbury concedes that there are various transitions possible from a strict theism to an absolute a-theism, he defines theism much more clearly than Cudworth. Shaftesbury states that a perfect theist believes "that everything is governed, ordered, or regulated for the best, by a designing principle or mind, necessarily good and permanent"⁸. However, to be a perfect a-theist is "to believe nothing of a designing principle or mind, nor any cause, measure, or rule of things, but chance, so that in Nature neither the interest of the whole nor of any particulars can be said to be in the least designed, pursued, or aimed at"⁹. Though theism is the direct opposite of a-theism, this does not exclude that there are transitory stages between theism and a-theism such as polytheism or demonism. A theist is convinced of an orderly universe, which has been designed and is governed by an ultimate principle or mind. An a-theist denies this ultimate reality and thus denies any order. He is more likely an anarchist, as he does not believe in anything that holds the universe together and thus denies its harmony and orderliness. Therefore a-theism is no longer understood as having a mechanistic and deterministic world view as in Cudworth, but rather as lacking any ultimate governing principle.

A Christian has to be a theist; otherwise he is an a-theist, a polytheist or a demonist. However, a theist need not necessarily be a Christian. Here it is noteworthy, and the history of theism shows this more and more clearly, that the theistic understanding of God need not coincide with the Biblical understanding of God. Thus Shaftesbury's conception of God fluctuates between a personalistic and a pantheistic view. Though he lays more stress on a personalistic conception of God, he tries to escape from its christological foundation, which serves usually as the basis of all personalistic conception of God. Shaftesbury, however, is only interested in developing a doctrine that can answer ultimate questions, and on which one can found one's life. But he assumes that no Christian doctrine can serve to attain such a goal because Christianity has assimilated many incongruent and conflicting ideas.

François-Marie Voltaire was strongly influenced by English deism and Newtonian mechanics during his three years' involuntary stay

⁸ Shaftesbury (n. 7), pp. 240f.

⁹ Shaftesbury (n. 7), pp. 240f.

in England (1726–1729). Upon his return to Paris he modified this English deism to which he was exposed and made it more radical¹⁰.

He concluded that the world led back to two ultimate principles: to matter and to God. Matter is the chaotic, the accidental and the dead, which became alive through God, who ordered it and structured it towards an end. God is conceived as the ultimate thought of a scientific explanation of the world, which however has nothing in common with a Christian understanding of God. Voltaire attacked the Christian so fiercely that he was regarded as an a-theist. But he considered himself a deist or theist without distinguishing between both terms. In his view theism or deism comprehends the conviction of an architect who has designed and constructed the world, and then allows it to run according to its own laws.

The harmonic unity of science, religion and Christian revelation intended by Cudworth has thus been transformed into a unity of science and religion which is indiscriminately named theism or deism.

In this historic situation Immanuel Kant distinguished in his “*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*” (1781) between theism and *deism* and thus created a terminological demarcation which is still effective today¹¹.

Kant first distinguished between the knowledge of a primeval being by pure reason and the knowledge of a primeval being by revelation. The former can be won by transcendental concepts such as “ens realissimum” or “ens entium”, and is called transcendental theology; or it can be derived from a concept borrowed from nature and, therefore, is called natural theology. Thus the transcendental theology is called deism and the natural theology theism. According to deism, the primeval being has all reality but it can be determined only so far as to call it the cause of the world; whether through the necessity of its nature or through freedom remains undecided. On the other hand, the theist maintains that reason is capable of determining that object more accurately in analogy with nature, i.e. as a primeval being that by reason and freedom contains all other things in itself and thus is the author of the world. From the constitution, the order and the unity in this world one can extrapolate the qualities and the existence of an author of the world. The natural theology of theism extrapolates from the phenomena of the world a supreme intelligence as the principle of all natural and ethical order and perfection. So we see that the theistic view of God is much more

¹⁰ See further Hirsch (n. 1), 3 (1951), pp. 65–85.

¹¹ See further I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by N. K. Smith (1929), A 631–634, B 659–662, pp. 525ff.

vigorous than the deistic. Thus Kant thinks we could deny that a deist believes in God, because we usually do not understand by the concept God only a blindly working eternal nature as the root of all things, but rather understand God to be a Supreme Being, which, through understanding and freedom, is supposed to be the author of all things. However, Kant admits that one cannot accuse the deist of denying something simply because he does not dare to make any assertions about the matter. Finally Kant arrives at the definition: "The deist believes a God but the theist in a living God."¹² Theism is not seen here in contrast to a-theism, but in its distinction from deism. Hereby revelation is deliberately excluded from any theism.

Since Kant does not define the knowledge of God on the basis of revelation, the question remains whether or not the belief in God as a living God as in theism is a constituent feature of the Christian understanding of God won by revelation. But in facing this question one should not forget that the way to knowledge in theism has nothing in common with revelation, because it is only determined by reason.

2.

Non-theism, in opposition to theism as it was understood from the origin of the term theism up to Voltaire, can only be comprehended as a-theism. A-theism means here a deliberate denial of the being and existence of God. Thus a-theism holds a mechanistic and deterministic view of the world and, as it denies the being and existence of a supreme mind, explains the orderliness and unity of the universe as mere chance and confusion. Non-theism as a demarcation from theism, as Kant understood it, can mean that one disregards the existence of a living God who is active in nature and history, without denying His being. Yet it can also mean a knowledge of God which comes not through reason in the sense of a speculative reason, but through revelation. Therefore non-theism as a demarcation from theism need not be equivalent to a-theism. But during the last decade voices have been raised, and once again in the Anglo-Saxon area, to depart from theism and to talk about God in a non-theistic way. In which sense, however, can this demand to be understood, as a demarcation from theism or in opposition to theism?

¹² Kant (n. 11), p. 526.

When we deal further with the non-theistic talk about God, it is necessary to illuminate the situation in which the demand arises to talk about God in non-theistic terms. Theism was originally understood in terms of a defense against the a-theism that was based on natural science. The non-theistic talk about God emerges from a similar situation. In our world that is shaped by science and technical appliances, the word God seems to be disrupting or even dispensable. There is a style of life and thought indifferent to God which determines everyday life, even in the life of Christians. Such a "practiced" a-theism is today the commonly accepted starting point of all rational reflections. This methodological a-theism very often leads to an a-theism in principle¹³. Confronted with this kind of a-theism, an increasing number of contemporary theologians claim that belief in God can only be expressed in a non-theistic way. Hereby we can distinguish *four different stages* of non-theism.

a) During the last few years the demand for a *departure from theism* was most fervently expressed in *John A. T. Robinson's* book "Honest to God". We do not want to deal here with Robinson's eclectic method with which he claims the most diverse theological systems for his thoughts, but rather we ask for his reason, his intention and his means of departure from theism¹⁴.

First, Robinson wants to avoid the supernaturalistic way of thinking which posits God as the highest being, whose independent existence above and beyond this world has to be proved. The naturalistic attack on this idea of God supposes that it has denied God Himself by rejecting this idea of God. But Robinson knows that denial of such proof of the existence of God cannot

¹³ G. Szczesny, the leader of the "Humanistic Union" in Germany and co-founder of the "Club Voltaire", may serve as an example for our Western culture. He claims in his book *The Future of Unbelief* (1961), p. 216: "Either we are convinced that human values can be conceived and defended without the aid of Christianity, or we must get ready to capitulate." As a vivid description of the a-theism in principle in the Eastern hemisphere, H.-G. Koch's book on *The Abolition of God. Materialistic Atheism and Christian Religion* (1963), states: "The more man relies on himself and the world, the less remains for God. But a man who has banished God from himself and the world cannot endure a godless world and creates new gods for himself. That is the ontological reason why hypertrophy develops into apotheosis" (p. 136). "Where belief in God has been given up, the way is open to apotheosis, even to the deification of man" (p. 137).

¹⁴ J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (1963), esp. pp. 29-44.

touch God, because "God is, by definition, ultimate reality"¹⁵ for whose existence there can be no proof. – Then Robinson wants to escape from the attack on mythical language. Thus he states, much as Bultmann does, that the mythical language as such is nothing specifically Christian, as it is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age. But God is not tied to this cosmology. – Finally Robinson wants to avoid connecting the Christian belief in God to a religious attitude, so that the Christian belief will be rejected, together with the religious attitude, by the commonly prevailing methodological a-theism. Robinson thus asserts, like Bonhoeffer, that God is not to be found in the private realm of our human needs, nor is He just for "filling gaps"; rather God as the ultimate reality makes us live in the world without using Him as a working hypothesis. So Robinson wants to overcome theism in order to save the Christian belief in God and to make it relevant again. He wants to go beyond the theism in which God has been made a heavenly, completely perfect person who resides above the world and mankind¹⁶. If Christianity is to survive and the secular man be recaptured from Christianity, then the Christian faith must be detached from the scheme of theistic theology.

When we remember the historical development of the term theism, it is then evident that Robinson rather unknowingly wants to preserve essential characteristics of this historical theism with which we have dealt. Consequently he demands a harmonic unity of the secular understanding of the world and Christian belief in God. The only reason for dismissing theism as he understands it is based on his claim that this theism is contradicting the secular understanding of the world. Furthermore he still understands God in personal terms, but he defines this differently by saying "personality is of *ultimate* significance in the constitution of the universe, that is in personal relationships we touch the final meaning of existence as nowhere else"¹⁷. Finally for him, as for the theism of Shaftesbury, the goodness of God is dominant in that he understands God as love.

However, he radically distinguishes himself from theism in one central point: The reason for his understanding of God as ultimate reality and his demand for a departure from theism is not based on a philosophical axiom, but on his understanding of Christology. He emphasizes the humanity and weakness of Christ, and thus arrives at an understanding of a God who lets us act responsibly in the world without guiding us, a God who seemingly is nowhere present and shows nowhere His power, but who is always here. Thus Robinson is not distinguished from theism by his demand of a

¹⁵ Robinson (n. 14), p. 29.

¹⁶ Also p. 39.

¹⁷ Robinson (n. 14), pp. 48f.

non-theistic talk about God, but rather by his christocentric understanding of God, in which he strongly emphasizes the humanity of God.

b) This trend is even more evident in the *secular talk* about God as represented by *Harvey Cox*¹⁸. Similar to Robinson, Cox emphasizes that God is not to be confused with an object among other objects. Cox objects to understanding God as simply a different way of talking about man, because God “is not an object of man’s knowledge or curiosity, He is also not to be identified with some particular quality in man or in human reciprocity, and He is not just a confused mode of speaking about relationships between men”¹⁹.

He even thinks it is a mistake to translate the Bible from mythical language into yesterday’s metaphysics rather than into today’s post-metaphysical lexicon. Thus he regards the philosophy of existence, which for instance Bultmann is closely connected with in his existential analysis of human existence, as the last member of the past Western metaphysical tradition²⁰. But to Cox, God is not a past metaphysical figure. So he is fervently opposing the endeavors to change the Biblical faith into a kind of a-theism that disguises itself by using Christian theological terminology. The Biblical doctrine of the hiddenness of God comports so well, at one level at least, with a certain characteristic of contemporary a-theism or non-theism, namely that God is not to be shown. However, this should not go so far that the hidden God of the Biblical theology will be confused with the “no-God-at-all” of “non-theism”²¹. According to Cox, the hiddenness of God that stands in the very center of the Biblical doctrine of God is founded in the fact that God conceals Himself in His revelation, in Jesus of Nazareth. God does not cease to be hidden in Jesus, but He disguises Himself “in the stable of human history”²² and He meets us as the unavailable “other”. He does not “appear” in analogy to a theophany of religions, but He shows men that He is acting in His hiddenness, in human history. Cox means that this history takes place in our presence today in events of social change, in events of everyday life and even in the relationship between two people²³. In these everyday events God comes to us today and therefore we must talk about God in secular terms.

¹⁸ H. Cox, *The Secular City* (1965), esp. pp. 248–268.

¹⁹ Cox (n. 18), pp. 259f.

²⁰ Also pp. 251f.

²¹ Also p. 257.

²² Cox (n. 18), p. 258.

²³ Similar also Cox (n. 18), p. 261.

In his way of talking about God, Harvey Cox rejects the same kind of a-theism as Robinson. But he goes beyond Robinson when he points towards the social changes as the place of the encounter with God, because thus he exemplifies the non-theistic talk about God and makes it more concrete. In accordance with the historical meaning of the word theism he seeks a unity of God and world, a unity of God's activeness and of shaping processes in the world. And he even has the same opponent as this theism, namely a-theism, or as Cox says "non-theism". But in the same way as Robinson, he is distinguished from this historical form of theism in that he bases the talk about God on an exclusively Christological rooting. By emphasizing the humanity of Christ, he moves from his starting point to an understanding of the hiddenness, the weakness and the suffering of God – and finally to a conformity of the activity of God with the social processes of the world.

c) This trend toward the hiddenness of God has been so intensified by *William Hamilton* that *the absence of God* is his leading topic. Robinson and Cox have already considered the absence of God and the death of God as a major theological question, but it was not until Hamilton that the absence of God became the leading topic of theological thinking²⁴.

Hamilton's starting point is "that the traditional sovereign and omnipotent God is a difficult God to perceive or to meet"²⁵. In His place, the impotent God, suffering with men seems to be emerging. This impotent and seemingly absent God turns into a dreadful and hostile God if one does not come to know Him by revelation in Christ. However, revelation in Christ does not mean that a God hitherto unknown discloses Himself. According to Hamilton, our experiences with God as Christ are completely dissatisfying. On the one side, God seems to have withdrawn from the world and its sufferings, so that we accuse Him of either irrelevance or cruelty. On the other side, He is experienced as a pressure and a wounding from which we would love to be free²⁶. God is there when we do not want Him, in ways that we do not want Him and He is not there when we do want Him. So God is felt as withdrawn, as absent and as somehow dead. This feeling of God's withdrawal and hound-

²⁴ W. Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (1966), and Thursday's Child. *The Theologian Today and Tomorrow: Theology Today* 20 (1963/64), pp. 487–495. In the later publication he expresses his thoughts even more radically.

²⁵ Hamilton, *Essence* (n. 24), p. 54.

²⁶ Also p. 65.

ing presence, according to Hamilton, even encounters us in Christ. In spite of the faith in Jesus the Lord, the God of the time of the death of God and the God who is coming in Jesus the Lord are somehow both with us, and as yet no conceptual way has offered itself that will permit us to assign each an appropriate place²⁷. It should be mentioned that this strong emphasis on the cross and on the lordship as humiliation does not correspond with a renunciation of the resurrection and the dominion of Christ, but Hamilton means that these parts of Christology do not have any precise meaning today²⁸. Man even as a Christian is a man without God but yet somehow with hope²⁹.

In the way he talks about God, Hamilton denies exactly the same kind of theism as do Robinson and Cox, and he also arrives at his non-theistic talk about God from an exclusively Christological basis. But he emphasizes the humiliation of God in Christ so much that he mainly uses the name "Jesus" instead of the term "Jesus Christ". The exalted Lord becomes unimportant. With this over-emphasis on the humanity of God he has abandoned a purely Christological basis for his theology. This becomes even more clear when he states that he can only accept the conviction "apart from Christ I am a Jew", and cannot accept the statement "apart from Christ I am an atheist"³⁰.

d) This dissolution of the fundamental Christian principles is further advanced by *Thomas J. J. Altizer*, who emphasizes the humanity of God so much that *the death of God* becomes his leading theological motive.

²⁷ Also p. 95.

²⁸ Similar also Hamilton (n. 25), pp. 115f. When he says: "In the context of this chapter, I would argue that the resurrection means the making present and available to men of faith the form of Jesus' lordship as a form of humiliation and suffering. He is risen, with the marks of its suffering still upon him" (pp. 116, footnote 34), so this is only half the truth. The risen Christ has the marks of His suffering still upon Him (cf. John 20:27), but He is also present in a completely new form and a new body (cf. John 20:26, Luke 24:36f. and others). Thus in the classical Biblical reference to kenosis (Phil. 2:5-11), the exaltation of Christ comes right after and in consequence to crucifixion. So Hamilton is right when he attributes the resurrection of Christ to His lordship, but he is wrong when he claims it for His humiliation; in contrary, it is the end of His humiliation.

²⁹ Also p. 64.

³⁰ Hamilton (n. 25), pp. 67f., footnote 29.

Altizer also starts from the fact that our time is absolutely secular and therefore it is no longer rooted in the occidental forms of the Christian faith³¹. He affirms that America is a country without history and the average contemporary American cannot associate a living moment with a moment of the past. But one cannot separate the Christian idea of God from its occidental form of appearance, because it is "obviously a product of the fusion of the Bible with Greek ontology, and in large measure the distinctiveness of the 'Christian God' derives from its Greek roots"³². Yet Altizer insists that the non-Biblical peculiarities of the Christian God are most distant from the non-Christian religions with the exception of those religions, such as Islam and Judaism, which are anyhow largely influenced by Greek philosophy. All modern Biblical scholarship and all historical understanding of the Bible thus contributes to the death of the specific Christian God because it proves the characteristic Christian idea of God as non-Biblical. The death of God is a historical event that not only pertains to the God of the religion as understood by Barth, but also to the God of the historical Christian church, and beyond the church, to the God of Christianity³³. This impasse resulting from a historical connection of the Christian idea of God with its Western form, and from the impossibility of reprimating this insoluble historical connection, can only be avoided by a radical negation of the past and an openness for the present. The acceptance of the present, however, demands an acceptance of the death of God, a *willing* of the death of God, because "apart from a free acceptance of the death of God there lies no way to our profane present"³⁴. This means for us that theology must be silent for some time before it finds itself again. The renewal of theology can only take place in a radical new form, "not the goal of converging the present and the past, but rather that of seeking a convergence of the present and the future"³⁵. Only from the religious world of the East we may once more learn the meaning of the sacred, "not because the sacred has never been present in Christianity, but because Christianity in our time is in a process of dissolution and transformation"³⁶.

With this attempt Altizer declares dead the God of the historically evolved Christianity, and even gives up the Biblical understanding of God. Thus the overemphasis on the humanity and weakness of God has first led to kenotic Christology, then to a one-sided understanding of the death of God as an unsurpassable historical event, and finally to a loss of the Christian Biblical

³¹ Th. J. J. Altizer, *America and the Future of Theology*: Th. J. J. Altizer and W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1966), pp. 9–21; first published as: *Amerika und die Zukunft der Theologie*: Antaios, 5 (1963/64), pp. 424–436.

³² Altizer (n. 31), p. 12.

³³ Also pp. 11f.

³⁴ Altizer (n. 31), p. 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

understanding of God. Altizer, however, has not turned into a representative of a-theism, as it is usually understood, rather has he become an advocate of a special kind of oriental mysticism. – This is even more evident when he regards the mystic Norman O. Brown as the most prophetic American thinker³⁷.

Altizer, similar to all representatives of historical theism, shows a loss of the central position of Christology. Some religious mysticism is found to be equal to the Christian revelation and God is understood in pantheistic terms. Thus the non-theistic talk about God has, at least in a formal way, become very similar to theism when it renounces the exclusiveness of the Christian revelation.

3.

What does this mean for our investigation in the theistic and non-theistic talk about God?

Theistic talk about God is always in opposition to a-theism. Theism understands God as a personal being and has as its basis the idea of an ultimate unity of religion, science and Christian revelation. Because of this unity theism assumes that God works in nature and history and it does not derive its knowledge of God exclusively from God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

The *new non-theistic way* to talk about God rejects the theism that has turned God into a heavenly perfect person that reigns above the world and mankind. In this so-called theistic picture of God, He is usually understood in a localized sense in contrast to the original theistic intention which Cudworth and Shaftesbury

³⁷ Altizer (n. 31), p. 18. – A further explication of this mystic tendency can be noticed in Altizer's latest book: *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966). There he wants to follow the eschatological enthusiasm of Joachim of Floris (p. 27) and he advocates William Blake's romantic mysticism as a representative of "radical Christianity" (pp. 24f. and in many other places). The humiliation of Christ is there expressed as a kenotic Christology (p. 90), for whom he is indebted to W. Hamilton who initiated him "into the possibility of a consistent kenotic Christology" (p. 11). However, the Christological and Biblical basis seems to be completely abandoned, when Altizer speaks of Jesus as "fully incarnate in every humanh and and face" (p. 71). Thus Altizer's standpoint could easily be identified with a universalistic mysticism of anti-Biblical and anti-Christian type.

have put forth. So non-theism actually attacks a caricature of theism that was never prevalent. Peculiar to non-theism is that it understands itself in *opposition to theism and a-theism*. However non-theism claims certain motifs of theism for its own, e.g., when it affirms the personality of God or when it has as a starting point an ultimate unity of the secular understanding of the world and the Christian faith in God. In a similar way it adopts certain motifs of a-theism for its own, when it presupposes the self-sufficiency of a mechanistic explanation of the world and the uselessness of talking about God's activity in the world and His sovereignty over the world. The real peculiarity of non-theistic talk about God in contrast to theism is its christocentric basis. When in its christocentric basis the humanity of God in Christ is more and more exclusively emphasized, this emphasis can develop to such an extreme that its christocentric basis is abandoned again and mysticism emerges.

What can we learn from this for a *Christian* and *Biblical* theology?

a) Similar to theism and non-theism, Christian talk about God must be seen in opposition to a-theism. Christian talk always occurs in attacking the denial and negation of God. As in non-theism, we can only speak about God in a Christian way if our assertions are derived from God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Because God has become man, and because this man is true God and true man, we can talk about God. Thus *the incarnation* is the presupposition of any discourse about God. Only because God has become man can the talk about God communicate with our human reality. Thus we can understand God as acting in and with the world and we can regard the world in its reality as the place where the knowledge of God is possible. The knowledge of God does not occur in things that are different from our reality, but rather God is present in, with and under our reality. This means that God cannot be demonstrated in the world as a special being or entity, but that He is present in its entirety. The Christ event prevents us from interpreting this pantheistically, because it is through this particular event in our world that all assertions about the relationship between God and world become possible. In contrast to non-theism one cannot content oneself with the worldliness and humanity of God, because the knowledge that God has become man is not self-evident. As with everything else in the New Testament, God's becoming man

can only be understood from the perspective of resurrection of Christ and must be interpreted from there. In the resurrection of Christ not only has Jesus been made Kyrios and thus the world's immanent circle has been broken, but also the world has been shown a new direction which is not within its own possibilities.

b) Thus, besides the incarnate aspect of the talk about God, *the dimensional aspect* must be stressed. This is the aspect that emphasizes the creative power of God and consequently shows the radical distinction and separation of God and world.

In the age of a continuing battle against a-theism, first by theism, now by non-theism, the proclamation of the Gospel of God can only take place within an affirmation of an authority of God in which one correlates God in His omnipotence and man in his impotence³⁸. In the light of the creative power of God, as it is experienced in the Easter event, the Christian faith in God has to be proclaimed in radical exclusiveness and universality. This is where both theism and non-theism fail. The Easter event determines the meaning and destination of the world as well as of the individual person, because it points to a new reality which dawned with the dominion of Christ and which will be fulfilled in the creation of a new existence. Thus God is to be proclaimed both as a suffering God, and as one who has conquered suffering and death. However, we cannot make intelligible God's world creativeness and the Easter event as such, because God acts and not we. Because the incarnation as knowledge and a confession of faith, in its full sense, is only possible through God's creative deed on Easter Sunday, so also God can be known and confessed as being present in the totality of our reality only if we begin with the Easter event. Thus the activity and presence of God in the world can be expressed only if we are convinced that God has acted in Jesus Christ. This means first of all that natural knowledge of God, as in theism, is no actual possibility in talking about the being of God in the world, because a priori one does not know anything about the intention of this being. This intention is

³⁸ This does not mean that we ignore a-theism or belittle it. We have to take it seriously not as a partner, but as a force that challenges our fundament and tries to replace it with a foundation that no longer rests in God but in itself. To this challenge, which cannot derive its existence from God, we must respond in proclaiming Him who cannot be replaced but who replaces everything (cf. Is. 55:8f.).

disclosed only through the Christ event. This means, in contrast to non-theism, that one can talk sensibly about the being of God in the world only if one starts with the activity of God in Jesus Christ. Thus the conviction of the suffering and absent God pertains only to the pre-history of the Easter belief, because this conviction expresses solely the love of God who lets His son suffer for us; it does not articulate the love of God who raised Jesus for us as Christ. This peculiarity of the understanding of God should be especially emphasized; otherwise the presence of God remains static and does not lead us towards the future of that which has already started, to a new creation as shown in Christ's resurrection. The knowledge of the absent God is thus a human possibility, which is inherent in the turning away from God. The knowledge of the present God, however, comes from faith in God's creative power, which should be experienced in constant opposition to our own possibilities, to our turning away from God. Thus the seemingly absent God is to be confessed as the present God, and in facing an a-theistic world neither an exclusively theistic nor an exclusively non-theistic talk about God seems to be sufficient. However, both can contribute considerably to an adequate talk about God.

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