

MODERN MAN'S SEARCH FOR GOD

Remarks made by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, D.H.L., Temple Beth Am, Miami, Fl at the Biennial Convention of the Southeast Council of Reform Congregations, Jacksonville, Fl, October 30, 1966.

The Methodist student magazine, "Motive", recently ran an obituary on God which went this way:

"Atlanta, Ga., November 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'".

The Methodist magazine is, of course, reacting to the recent rash of theories all of which tend to inform us that, "God is dead". While the advocates of the new "radical theology" are all Christians, we, as Jews, can benefit from a discussion of some of the problems which have given rise to their extremist viewpoint.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to set some limits to our discussions concerning the reality of God in modern times. First of all, we will have to admit with Albert Einstein that "man can never understand the universe more than primitively". It would be fair to say that Einstein was as brilliant a mind as our generation has produced. Einstein stated that he believed in the existence of a "higher beauty" beyond the beauty that we are able to comprehend. He believed in the existence of a "higher wisdom" beyond the wisdom that we could perceive. Nonetheless, he concluded, no matter how much men will be able to learn about the universe and creation, they will never understand "more than primitively". We have to accept as our first limitation that in trying to understand our Creator we are like babes. This humility is the beginning of religiosity.

The second limitation that we have to accept is the teaching of the Zohar, that mystic book of the Jews of the Middle Ages. The Zohar includes the statement, "Each man understands God according to his own ability". We have to admit that each of us comes to the study of this question with different needs, different insights, different experiences, different intellectual and emotional faculties. Each of us understands God differently, and we are all partially right and partially wrong. Yet, as Martin Buber has pointed out, "a man's definition of God is a measure of his own greatness". How we conceive of God will determine how we lead our life.

WHAT THE "GOD IS DEAD" BOYS ARE SAYING

Put in simple terms, those teachers like William Hamilton, who want us to believe that "God is dead" are saying, "God does not serve as the fulfiller of needs or the solver of problems". They are saying that God's influence on the affairs of men is nil, non-existent. Translated into terms familiar to the Jewish tradition, these men are saying that God is not a "Shom-ah ta-filah", He doesn't hear prayer. They are saying that God is not a "so-mach nof-li", He does not support the falling or raise the fallen. They are saying that God is not a "ma-tir ah-su-rim", He doesn't release those who are in bondage, he is not able to help those who are imprisoned.

By and large, what Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Altizer and their compatriots are saying is equivalent to a philosophy of humanism, that is to say, they are appealing to men to help each other rather than to call upon God to help them. To their humanism they add the figure of Jesus who is interpreted as some kind of ideal or inspiration. In either

case, Jesus (that is, man) becomes the sole regning god.

We began by saying that while this is a Christian controversy, we, as Jews can hope to learn something from it. What these Christian radical teachers are saying, many people, including Jews, have been thinking, at least, in part. Slowly, modern man has been loosening his hold on God, and I believe that there are certain very good reasons that this is true.

1. Modern man, following the teaching of Christianity, has tended to describe God as a being "wholly other", so spirtual that He could hardly have any real contact with man and his small materialistically-oriented problems. God has continually been described as acting "over against" man, rather than with him. Following this viewpoint, Christian theologians have gradually drawn God out of this world and made Him king of the "next world", rather than this one. In the "next world" the good will be rewarded and the evil punished. We will come to know God best, we have been told, once we have relinquised out body and the demands of the body, and become ourselves spirit. A God so wholly withdraen from this world soon ceases to be the object of concern. Ultimately, one is certain to wonder if, indeed, He is really there at all.

2. While describing God as Lord of the "world to come", most Christian theologians have not hesitated, in the same breath, to say that God controls every thing that happens in this world. It is He who causes airplanes to crash, babies to die at birth, and wars to explode, even while he causes Tom Smith to be promoted to President of the company and wonderful George Ball to be demoted. God, we have been told, is the Puppeteer extraordinaire, and we are but puppets on a string, dancing the way He wants us to dance. Thinking men rightfully have wondered, if we are but puppets, how can we be blamed for being evil? If God controls everything, how could He let World War ll erupt, and how could He let lovely Mary Cohen get cancer? A God who controls everything is as difficult for modern man to accept as a God who is withdrawn from the world. The "withdrawn" God is simply forgotten. The all controlling God is actively rejected as being incompetent or even unethical..

3. A third reason for the seeming "death" of God in modern times is the separation of "faith" from "works". Christianity, especially since Luther, has emphasized the fact that man is saved, not by his deeds, but by his "faith", his faith that salvation is with the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Presented in this way, Christianity became an abstract religion untied to the affairs of everyday life. Unfortunately, many Jews accepted this interpretation of their own religion. Where God becomes a being who exists only in the church or synagogue and not in the market place and wherever men come together, then He seems to be quaint and ineffectual.

4. The modern emphasis on individual, rather than on group, prayer has tended to make idolaters of us all and to fragment the image of God. So much emphasis has been placed upon calling on God to help us in small and insignificant matters peculiar to the circumstance of individual lives that our praying gradually became a projection of our own selfish and infantile wishes. To be sure, individual prayer has its place, but God is best evidenced in the consecrated community. When individuals all pull in separate directions, each manufacturing an ethic for himself, it is hard to find God. When the members of a group try to support the best in each other, the reality of God is most clear. When one man is alone, set aprt from all other human beings, he is most apt to think that God has departed also. It was with much wisdom that an ancient Rabbi taught, "The prayer which does not conclude in behalf of the whole community is no prayer at all".

5. A fifth reason for the seeming "death" of God is that our affluent society insulates us from the realities of life. Nothing seems real to us except that which is unreal. History records that Emperor Nero fiddled while Rome burned. He couldn't see

or feel the consuming fire. All he could hear was his music. We are glued to our TV sets while Viet Nam burns. Tens of thousands of human beings are pouring out their life's blood on that distant battle field and it is to us like a distant dream unrelated to reality. If Bat-Man is real how can Ho Chin Minh be real? If James Bond is our idol what can we know of God?

In the few minutes left at my disposal, I have time to tell you only one story, but let this story be with you always. You will find this story in the Bible. Read it and re-read it. It teaches us something about how we might distinguish a living encounter with God from a shallow or fraudulent "meeting". In the Book of Exodus we are told that Moses ran away from Egypt after he had struck an Egyptian overseer who was whipping a Hebrew slave. In the desert of Midian, Moses became a shepherd, and there found comfort and security. After some time in this secluded life, Moses was tending sheep one day when he seemed to see a bush suddenly burst into flame. Even while he rubbed his eyes, Moses seemed to hear a "voice" exclaiming, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob".

In this incident we have the blending of two aspects of God. God "appears" to Moses in what is for him a completely new and personal way, yet God is identified as the same God from whom the patriarchs had learned. He is a God of the present, but He the God of the past. The character of this God is not left to the imagination of Moses. The "voice" speaks and says, "I have surely SEEN the affliction of My people.. and have HEARD their cry...for I KNOW their pain...". This is a God who identifies with the suffering of mankind. Far from being a personal genii who appears only to satisfy the selfish wishes of Moses, this God then summons Moses to a task. He says, in effect, "You can not stay here in comfort and safety. You must go back to your people and help them".

This classical story can be our guide in trying to re-discover God in the modern world. We have every right to seek God for ourselves and to attempt to discover new truths about Him, but we must be careful that we do not create new idols, mere projections of our own vanity. The God we seek must be, at least in part, the "God of our fathers" who has helped man in his search for a meaningful world. For our religious experience to be real and living, we must, like Moses, hear a voice which says, "I have HEARD your cry...I have SEEN your affliction...and I KNOW your pain". For our contact with the divine to be dynamic, we must also hear a call to duty directing us to go back and serve those whom we have passed by.

It seems to me that we have the best chance of "seeing the burning bush", of "discovering God", if we will re-learn what our tradition teaches, that God does not operate alone in the world. He needs us to help Him. His power is diminished if we do not recognize our responsibility as His agents. On the other hand, if we attempt to ignore the reservoir from which we come, if we attempt to play "god" ourselves, man will find that life will taste more and more like dust and ashes. Not man alone, says our tradition, not God alone, but man and God, interacting together, in a creation that knows no end.