The Diseases of Man and the Death of God

by Hamish Swanson

Fr Fergus Kerr (*Slant* 9, *June-July*, 1966) presents as self-evident the proposition that 'theology is primarily a way of talking about *man*', and supports this with the historicist description that 'every major breakthrough in our understanding of God issues from an equivalent breakthrough in our understanding of man'. Our anthropology has undergone a revolution, so it is plain that our theology must, if it is to survive, undergo an equivalent revolution. It might at first appear that Professor William Hamilton of Colgate Rochester Divinity School is the man to work the revolution. After the *New Reformation* and the New Morality, the *New Essence of Christianity*?[1] He is certainly aware that 'all our theology, even our essences of Christianity, must be done afresh in every generation', and makes a brave attempt at this doing afresh. I want to say something here of how brave the attempt is and why I think that it ultimately fails to engineer the revolution. The kind of thing that Fr Kerr and Professor Hamilton presume about revelation and theology is perhaps easiest conveyed by suggesting that the case of the prophet Hosea has become our paradigm. Hosea's understanding of his own condition, of his continuing love for the unfaithful Gomer, led him to understand the continuing love of Yahweh for the unfaithful Israel. Hosea's longing for the return of his wife was not a longing for this or that aspect of her character but a longing for the woman herself, for Gomer. So Hosea thinks of Yahweh's redemptive hope for Israel as a promise for the whole people. In this his theology differs radically from that of Amos and Isaiah whose experience led them to speak in terms of a remnant of the people having a share in the kingdom. Hosea has first of all made an effort to understand his own situation and has then been able to understand something of God. He has made his experience into a sign for the whole society of Israel. As Kerr says: 'God reveals himself in a new light to people who have gained some new insight into what they are'. Therefore 'our political thinking and our theological thinking can no longer be separated or carried out independently of one another because they are both, finally, explorations of what we are'.

It is noticeable that Kerr speaks of our theology in terms of 'exploration'. We have to feel our way, to reckon with the strangeness of truth, to be tentative in the business of life. Hamilton,

[1] *Darton Longman and Todd* 15*s*.

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certainly, in making a theology out of his own experience, is most careful and hesitant:

> We are reduced to fragments, partial vision, broken speech, not because of the unbelieving world 'out there', but precisely because that unbelieving world has come to rest within ourselves.

It may be suggested that this uncertain tone is simply the necessary after-echo of the brazen 'Here I stand'. This does not of course, even if true, make it a less honest confession. Even if true, this does not make it less important as a sign of what is going on around us. For many there is uncertainty within. As Tillich once wisely remarked:

> To the man who longs for God and cannot find Him; to the man who wants to be acknowledged by God and cannot even believe that He is; to the man who is striving for a new and imperishable meaning of his life and cannot discover it – to this man Paul speaks. We are each such a man.

We are each discovering the meaning of the fear and the trembling with which the working out of our salvation is accompanied. Those who have anything to do with the religious instruction of young people today – certainly this is my own experience in a Grammar School and a College of Education – will recognise the mood of Hamilton's remark:

> Those of us who are trying to make the Christian faith intelligible to ourselves and to others have probably spent too much time and too many words saying that we saw and believed what we did not truly see and believe, and we did not like the experience of having deceived ourselves, even if we deceived no one else.

The temptation in this situation is to engage in vigorous denials – which are no more use than the old vigorous affirmations. Hamilton understands this well enough. In this book, at any rate, he rejects the journalistic label 'death of God'. For him neither this nor 'absence of God', nor 'disappearance of God' is an adequate phrase for his present account of his experience:

> In one sense God seems to have withdrawn from the world and its sufferings, and this leads us to accuse him of either irrelevance or cruelty. But in another sense, he is experienced as a pressure and a wounding from which we would love to be free. For many of us who call ourselves Christians, therefore, believing in the time of 'the death of God' means that he is there when we do not want him, in ways we do not want him, and he is not there when we do want him.

We are aware, he says, at once of God's disappearance and the rightness of praying to him near us. We wait on Godot. 'We only know enought to be able to say that he will come, in his own time, to the broken and contrite heart, if we continue to offer that to him'. Those who enjoy some knowledge of Augustine's life and writings, or those who can distinguish the darkness of mysticism, may be able

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to categorise such knowledge. In our own terms Bishop Robinson has described the predicament with his customary acuteness:

> Is not the situation of many of us today that we feel we *must* be atheists, and yet we *cannot* be atheists? God, as we have been led to posit him *is* intellectually superfluous, *is* emotionally dispensable, *is* morally intolerable – and yet, in grace and demand, he *will not* let us go.

The Old Testament tables have been turned. Many Christians feel themselves today like the desperate prophets of Baal Melqart on Mount Carmel, and the men of confident secularity seem to have taken for themselves Elijah's part, calling out to us: 'Cry louder, for he is a god; either he is musing, or has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened'. How then are Christians to begin today speaking to God? By proving his existence? Many must be of Newman's opinion: 'I am far from denying the real force of the arguments in proof of a God, drawn from the general facts of human society and the course of history, but these do not warm or enlighten men'. To such calm logics we give but a notional assent — or, as Hamilton would say, we do 'not truly see and believe'.

It seems fashionable again (I have just done it myself) to begin with a discussion of suffering. Lucien Jerphagnon, in *le mal et l'existence,*[2] starts here, introducing his account with a half-quotation from Newman: 'Of all points of faith, the being of God is, to my own apprehension, encompassed with most difficulty', which leaves an impression of Newman being oppressed with 'difficulty' whereas the cardinal went on to affirm, 'and yet borne in upon our minds with most power', which chimes with the opinion of Professor Hamilton. Jerphagnon employs for his own purpose also the words on Newman's memorial tablet at the Birmingham Oratory (he seems to think that the inscription is at Rednal) to demonstrate how solemn the whole business of theological talk really is:

> L'on comprend J. H. Newman, qui fit graver sur sa tombe ces mots douloureux et pleins d'espoir à la fois: *Ex umbris et imaginibus ad veritatem*

On this Aquinas once remarked: *imago* pertineat ad novam legem, *umbra* vero ad veterem (I-II, 101, 2 c.). However Jerphagnon does make a serious effort to deal with the presence of suffering in our world. His is a personal little book: *Ce petit livre date des débuts de mon itinéraire philosophique. Bien des choses ont changé dans le monde et dans ma propre vie.* He always speaks in the first person, deriving every argument from his own experience. In this he is very like Hamilton, and like Kazoh Kitamori, whose work on the *Theology of the Pain of God*[3] is on a similar theme and begins in a similar way:

> The heart of the gospel was revealed to me as the 'pain of God'.

[2]*Foi Vivante* n.p.

[3]*S.C.M. press.* 22*s.* 6*d.*

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> This revelation led me to the path which the prophet Jeremiah had trod (Jer. 31.20). Jeremiah was a 'man who saw the heart of God most deeply' (Kittel). I am filled with gratitude because I was allowed to experience the depths of God's heart with Jeremiah.

These three authors, who differ widely in many important respects, have at least in common the view that theology today must be carried through by honest self-examination and concern for the suffering of this world. Hamilton and Jerphagnon have also a common treasury of quotations from Pascal and Camus to substantiate this view.

Jerphagnon is unlike Hamilton in his happy use of *mystery*. He makes a valiant effort to avoid the theology that Marcel describes as '*un jeu, une forme de prestidigitation intellectuelle*' and to be innocent of the attempt '*de degrader en probleme le mystere du mal*'. But though this is a worthy aim it is a little difficult of achievement. It simply does not help to say:

> *Il faudrait avoir beaucoup aimé, il faudrant n'avoir jamais refusé un sourire ou différé un service pour savoir qu'au-delà du mal, bien, au-delà, il y aura toujours les ressources indéfinies et miraculeuses de la vie, et pour entrevoir dans cette générosité même de l'Etre quelque chose comme un signe d'un Amour infini et d'une présence mysterieuse.*

This kind of thing proliferates in modern European theological enterprise. In a set of reflections on similar themes, *Pain and Providence*,[4] Ladislaus Boros, a distinguished pupil of Karl Rahner, declares his intention to talk again of 'mystery':

> We know also that for a person who is suffering deeply no merely human consolation is sufficiently consoling. That is why we would like to lead him out of his narrow world into the broad uplands of mystery. We shall speak as plainly as possible about simple and familiar things: about creation, paradise, heaven; about the selflessness of those who love, the happiness of those who are silent; about Christ's friendship for men; about eternal glory and – above all – constantly about the mystery of Christian joy.

The editorial and royal plural, and the confident assurance that the 'things' listed are both 'simple' and 'familiar', make this a very difficult book to read. Like the Frenchman this Hungarian does not seem to have enough sense of the complexities of human existence. The German, Carl Goerdeler, in his Gestapo cell waiting for death after the failure of the July plot in 1944 did not think things so simple:

> Unable to sleep I have asked myself whether there is a God who is interested in the fate of the individual. I find it hard to believe so, for this God has permitted a few hundred thousand men bestialized, insane or blinded, to drown mankind in rivers of blood and agony, and crush it under mountains of horror and despair. He lets millions of decent people suffer and die without raising a finger... and still I seek through Christ this merciful God. I have not found him. O Christ, where lies the truth, where is the consolation?

[4]*Burns Oates 12s. 6d.*

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It is easy to demonstrate the lack of sophistication in Goerdeler's desperate cry. He does not ask the hard question: Why floods and avalanches? taking these for granted and using them as metaphors for human cruelty, and he does not see Camus' fine analysis:

> There is the death of children, which means a divine reign of terror, but there is also the killing of children, which is an expression of a human reign of terror. We are wedged between two kinds of arbitrary law.

But he does see that for a Christian any answer must come from the crucified Lord. Hamilton in his early work on the *New Essence of Christianity*, and in his 1966 Wieand Lectures, takes it as evident that the great problem is the problem of innocent suffering, and most orthodox-like comes to the conclusion that it is only by a renewal of our Christology that any answer could come and that our Christology must be based on Jesus' emptying of himself. Hamilton points out that the incident at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8.27ff) is not significant because it shows Peter's grasp of what being the Messiah meant but because it shows 'the great gulf between Peter's understanding . . . and Jesus' understanding. Peter meant by Christ power and authority Jesus spoke of the suffering of the Son of Man; Peter said such a thing could not be; and Jesus bitterly rebuked him'. Our Christology must take its start from Philippians 2.6ff:

> Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.

Dostoievski in this, as in so much else, had a proper sense of reality when he shewed Christ silent before the cardinal inquisitor. Bishop Robinson, too, finds this emptied Christ in the incident on the road to Emmaus, 'he does not confront the couple on their walk as the Christ, but simply as the stranger who comes alongside them in their questioning and their sadness. It is only from there, as the man for there, as the man for others and with others, that he can make himself known to them as the Messiah of whom their Scriptures spoke'.

It is Christ the sufferer that Hamilton acknowledges as Lord. Taking as his epigraph the words of Bonhoeffer in the reconstruction of his 1933 Berlin lectures (this theologian seems to be as much a touchstone of orthodoxy in some circles as Teilhard is in others):

> If we are dealing with the divinity of Jesus we must speak especially of his weakness,

Hamilton warns against the popular notion that 'theology is Christology' in order that we shall avoid the extreme kenoticism of Altizer for whom the 'death of God' means that God died in Christ's crucifixion. Hamilton admits, however, that the great question is always 'Do you believe in the divinity of Christ?'. The difficulty of answering is, Hamilton says, that we appear to have two known categories, Jesus the man and the divinity of God, whereas we have really only the first and a decision of faith that Jesus is the Lord, the one through

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whom God meets us. 'What we do not have is knowledge of a separate divine essence by means of which we can define Jesus'.

Hamilton warns us too against the simple saying that 'the pattern of the Christian life is the man Jesus', since 'we really do not know enough about Jesus as a man before men'. We can only say in general that the imitation of Christ must be an imitation of the sufferer – the one who accepts the world as it is and does his best to change it. In a piece of exegesis likely to surprise some Roman Catholics Hamilton suggests that we ought to imitate Mary, who 'is reported to have been rebellious, or at least sceptical, at the angel's first approach to her (Luke 1.29, 34), though finally she humbly receives his word (1.38). Perhaps the truly Protestant understanding of Mary might see her as suggesting both in rebellion and resignation, the relation of the Christian to the world'. If Hamilton had followed up this notion of a realist revolution then he might have made a better attempt at the problem of evil which is essentially not a metaphysical matter but a moral one. Instead he determines to heap up a few loose stones as marks in a new metaphysics and renew the inquiry into the nature of God.

Hamilton thinks that his emphasis on the Lordship of the Suffering Servant makes a whole new set of problems for orthodox theology:

> For example, what becomes, along these lines, of the classical Christian refusal to speak of the suffering of God? Patristic orthodoxy, for a number of reasons, always felt that to ascribe suffering directly to God made him a victim of men's evil and deprived him of his role as victor.

Instead of engaging in a strict dialogue with the arguments of Patristic orthodoxy Hamilton asserts with rhetorical flourish that the impassive God will not do. He opts rather for Bonhoeffer's God who triumphs by forgiving his enemies, declaring the classical hesitations to be caused by a fear that the Christian God will seem too much like the pagan gods of the Graeco-Roman world. He adduces very little support for this substitution from either his own or other men's reasoning. He might have found something in the work of Kazoh Kitamori who is not in awe of the western categories. Kitamori deploys the Japanese tragic principle of *tsurasa*, which refers, it seems from from his asides and footnote illustrations, to both a man's own pain and his sympathy with the one on whom he inflicts pain in the cause of love. This gives him a way of talking of the pain of God – which is both that of the Father and the Suffering Son. Kitamori seems to think that if the Greeks had had a tragedy of *tsurasa* we should have had a different theology. This may well be a useful corrective to western attempts at writing the 'private life of God' – though his example of the *kubuki* play of *terakoya* does not appear to offer any situation unknown to the spectators of *Iphegeneia* – but for us there yet remains the problem of shaping our theology so that it is accessible to ourselves in our society.

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This means that we must take note of our society. We have to begin our theologising not with the individual man who wants an explanation of his way of life but with the way of life within which a man is what he is. Hamilton may seem to be much concerned with the modern world but really he is concerned with the single self of modern man. His theology is characterised by a rather Hamlet-like quality of reflection upon his own individual condition. The paradigm of his work is the personal confession. There is not much in his work of that necessary awareness of social responsibility. He has little notion of the main-springs of Kerr's analysis, that 'human nature is a culture' and that persons depend 'on social relationships for their even being persons at all'. His is a severely Protestant theology – witness his distrust of Oscar Cullmann's thesis that 'Christian man is most truly himself when he is man in the church', not because he is suspicious of ecclesiastical trammels but because he is concerned with the right of the individual to be 'apart from society, alone', and averse to 'the morbidity of human sociability'. This is another aspect of his infatuation with Bonhoeffer's kind of Protestantism.

The individual can never find meaning for himself apart from the society, for apart from the society he is meaningless, he is not the individual. We are our relationships, our sympathies and our antipathies. We are Christians because we are members of the Christian society. The joining of the Christian society and the living the life of this society is our believing in the divinity of Christ. We have to put aside the self-seeking questions of the soliloquy and take part in the discussion and the choral singing.

We have to realise our involvement in the community of sin before we can realise our rescue in the community of Christ. In Miss Bowen's novel *A World of Love* there is a splendid miniature theology in this dialogue of woman and child:

> 'I mean to say what next? – We're the instruments of each other's destinies right enough, but absolutely I won't agree that I caused you. Perfectly evident you had to be – what the world had done to deserve you, one can't say. What has the world done to deserve most things?'
>
> 'Sinned', Maud said, not without satisfaction.

We are caught up in one another and the first requirement of any theology or anthropology is that it should recognise the complex of our humanity in Adam and in Christ. This is the great virtue of Pauline theology. What makes Paul's theology so much more modern than that of Hamilton is that the autobiographical manner in Paul's epistles is disciplined to produce a picture of man in his environment which each can recognise, while in Hamilton it often appears an excuse to avoid making the effort towards the resolution of our general difficulties. Certainly Paul's theology is as much a matter of fragments as that of any theologian (and the strenuous efforts of some commentators to erect a systematic theology from his

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casual writings do not belie this) but Paul never seems proud of his fragmentary writing nor pleased that he can only stutter.

If Hamilton were more aware of the social demand that Christianity makes he might come nearer to a proper formulation of the problem of innocent suffering. Once Maud's answer is understood, and it is admitted that we have a community of sin, it is not so difficult to accept that we have a community of suffering. This we can see in our own experience. Archbishop Beran, speaking from the experience of Gestapo and Communist prisons, said in the Council that he had come to understand the persecution of his people as the proper result of their community with the past members of their society:

> In my country the Catholic Church seems to be suffering expiation at this time for defects and sins committed in times gone by in her name against religious liberty, such as the fifteenth century burning of the priest John Hus, and the seventeenth century forced re-conversion of the greater part of the Czech people to the Catholic faith on the principle *cuius regio eius religio*.

The justice of God that Goerdeler could not see and which Hamilton thinks has vanished from the world is working out in the schemes of the Communists. When confronted by the question 'Why has this evil occured?' we may hope the Christian does not answer with so much satisfaction as did Maud; the Christian realises that the important question is 'What shall I do about it now?'. Christ has made it impossible for anyone to complain that he is being treated unfairly. That God should take on such a burden silences all complaint. That God should make of suffering his way into the kingdom gives us a hopeful meaning and a task.

The meaning of man is given us by God. M. Sartre sees the issues clearly and might well teach Hamilton something of Christianity. Sartre's analysis of the problem is succinctly expressed thus:

> The war exists only for God
> But God does not exist
> And yet the war exists.

Things do not make sense, do not add up, do not have meaning, unless we recognise God. Then things do not become easier, they become. We might do better if we gave up reading Bonhoeffer for a while and took up the writings of his contemporary Alfred Delp, the young Jesuit hanged by the Gestapo at Platzensee on 2 February, 1945. He wrote in his prison cell before his execution:

> A man needs other men to give him a sense of completeness, he needs the community. He needs the world and the duty of serving it. He needs eternity or rather he needs the eternal, the infinite. This is what is new about our humanism, it recognises God.

This seems to be a better phrasing of the new essence of Christianity.

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