LUDWIG FEUERBACH: STILL "A THORN IN THE FLESH OF MODERN THEOLOGY"?

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WE welcome this study from another new contributor. It is based on a paper read by Dr. Banks to the History of Ideas Seminar in the Institute of Advanced Studies, Australian National University, in May, 1970. Dr. Banks is Research Fellow in the History of Ideas Unit.

IN 1841, with the publication of *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Ludwig Feuerbach issued his dramatic and highly original reinterpretation of the Christian religion. In that work, which presupposed a broadly empirical understanding of reality and approach to knowledge, he developed by means of his theory of projection both a critique of religion, insofar as it created a realm in which man's innermost needs and desires were imaginatively objectified, and a defence of it, insofar as it dealt with that which truly belonged to the essence of mankind. "Religion", he wrote, "is the dream of the human mind. But even in dreams we do not find ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality; we only see real things in the entrancing splendour of imagination and caprice, instead of in the simple daylight of reality and necessity. Hence I do nothing more to religion—and to speculative philosophy and theology also—than to open its eyes . . . i.e., I change the object as it is in the imagination into the object as it is in reality."[1] As a result there took place what was essentially a reduction of theology to anthropology or, more precisely, a conversion of all statements about God and the Supernatural to statements about Man and the World.

Since Feuerbach's time, the criticism of religion by means of a theory of projection has become a commonplace in intellectual circles. Though it is not always clear whether the idea was derived from a reading of Feuerbach or not, a number of influential thinkers have endeavoured to earth Feuerbach's philosophical conception to the ideas they were developing in connection with their own disciplines. Thus Marx, though critical of its abstract rather

[1] *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (1957), xxxix.

than social reference, gave it a firm place in his analysis of society and used it as one of the bases for his attack upon bourgeois ideology.[2] Freud sought to give it support from his study of the activity of the unconscious in the repression of instincts and process of sublimation and thus attempted to fix it more firmly into the individual psyche.[3] Durkheim and the sociologists were also operating upon a similar premise, for, as P. Berger has pointed out, "a good case can be made out that not only Marx's and Freud's treatment of religion, but the entire historical–psychological–sociological analysis of religious phenomena since Feuerbach has been largely a vast elaboration of the same conception and the same procedure."[4] More recently, Erich Fromm has attempted to give the theory historical documentation through a Marxian-Freudian investigation of the OT and NT, Church creeds and dogmas;[5] Ernst Bloch has given to the idea a future dimension through his suggestion that religion is a projection not so much of what men are in themselves as what they will be in the future in the ideal Marxist society;[6] F. Sierksma has offered a more sophisticated version of the aspect of the fundamental activity of projection in which man, *qua* man, is continually engaged.[7]

In this whole development, however, Feuerbach must still be accorded the dominant position, at least so far as the criticism of Christianity is concerned. For among all these, as Emil Brunner has noted, "Very few of the others have taken any trouble to examine seriously what constitutes the Christian faith. Feuerbach, on the contrary, did not make his effort lightly; rather, he has tried to develop the naturalistic, that is the anthropological and phychological explanation of the Christian religion from the very foundation upward, so that it covers every detail of the articles of the Christian creed."[8] It is still therefore, I think, true, as H. R. Mackintosh stated of Feuerbach a generation ago, that "He has given to the Theory of Illusion in religion its most formidable expression, and it is impossible to read him without feeling

[2] See especially the pieces collected in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (1957).

[3] Most comprehensively in *The Future of an Illusion* (1928).

[4] P. L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (1969), 57-58.

[5] See especially his two books *The Dogma of Christ* (1963) and *Ye Shall Be as Gods* (1967).

[6] E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip der Hoffnung* (1959), vol. II, 1406ff.

[7] F. Sierksma, *De religieuze projectie* (1956).

[8] E. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (ET 1947), 244.

that his attack upon faith is the gravest of all and, in the intellectual domain, represents the ultimate antagonism."[9]

The influence of, and reaction to, the position of Feuerbach among theologians in the nineteenth century has been partially documented by S. Rawidowicz in his general treatment of Feuerbach's impact upon the major figures of the period.[10] Although occasional voices were raised in theological circles both for and against Feuerbach's interpretation of Christianity, it was not until the early years of this century that the seriousness of his challenge to the whole phenomenon of modern theology began to make itself felt among the theologians themselves. In 1912 Kurt Leese charged his theological predecessors and contemporaries with failure in their attempts to overcome the Feuerbachian critique. In particular he urged them to free themselves from the subjective theory of cognition upon which their whole approach to theology was based and to allow room for a conception of God independent of the experiential appreciation of His benefits.[11] Though this challenge appeared to make little impression at the time it did foreshadow the declaration, a little over a decade later, of Karl Barth's ultimatum to modern theology which was also constructed with Feuerbach in mind.

In a lecture on the history of modern theology delivered at Münster in 1926, a portion of which later appeared in essay form in 1928, Karl Barth traced out his understanding of the relationship between Feuerbach and previous liberal theology.[12] He speaks first of the common methodological starting-point of Schleiermacher and his followers with its question of whether and to what extent religion, revelation and the relation to God can be interpreted as a predicate of man. Examining the various theological edifices erected upon this base he claims that "Feuerbach's conclusion is the point of intersection in which all these lines seem to converge without hindrance. Can we deny that Feuerbach himself, like a not very cunning but slightly keen-eyed spy, let out the esoteric secret of

[9] H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (1964²), 121.

[10] S. Rawidowicz, *Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie: Ursprung und Schicksal* (1931¹, 1964²).

[11] K. Leese, *Principienlehre der neueren systematischen Theologie im Lichte der Kritik Ludwig Feuerbachs* (1912). For him, however, this meant a return behind Feuerbach to the idealism of Fichte, Hegel and Schelling.

[12] See K. Barth, *Die Theologie und die Kirche* (1928). The essay has since been translated into English and now prefaces the re-issue of George Eliot's translation of *The Essence of Christianity* (1957), x-xxxii. A modified version is also to be found in Barth's *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (ET 1955), 355-361.

the whole priesthood, as the saying goes, 'urbi et orbi', 'to the city and the world'? Theology has long since become anthropology."[13] Furthermore, neither their successors nor the generation following them—the Ritschlian school—understood that to start with religious consciousness was to open oneself up to the obvious possibility of reaching Feuerbachian conclusions. Therefore, "in order to construct an adequate defence against Feuerbach, one would have to be sure that along the whole line the relation to God is one that is in principle incontrovertible."[14] It is because German theology has consistently refused to do this that "the name of Feuerbach has become a thorn in the flesh of modern theology, and perhaps will continue to be so."[15]

Almost half a century has passed since Barth first insisted upon Feuerbach being a continuing embarrassment to modern theology and, in the absence of any other specific investigation of the subject, it is the purpose of this article to see whether this has been, and still is, the case today. Even a cursory examination of the literature demonstrates that Feuerbach is still a name to reckon with in theological circles. The widespread revival of interest in his writings has not gone unnoticed and it may well be that among theologians Feuerbach is enjoying a degree of attention unmatched in any period save the decade following the publication of his critique.[16] Whether one looks in conservative quarters, at the neo-orthodox disciples of Barth, or among the various schools of thought that may be loosely grouped together under the banner of neo-liberalism, Feuerbach has clearly not been forgotten. It would be unrealistic to attempt an examination of all the figures who theologically stand to the left of Barth, just as it would be unwieldy to inspect all aspects of their doctrinal position in the light of Feuerbach's alternative interpretations. I shall therefore confine myself to certain of the key thinkers in the 'existentialist' and 'secular' theological traditions, since those are the two streams of thought in which Feuerbachian influences are most likely to be

[13] *Essence*, xxi.

[14] *Essence*, xxiii. Cf. also his remarks in *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 3, ii, 564. In I, 1, 394, he points out how Augustine's argument for the Trinity on the analogy of human consciousness also has its logical end in Feuerbach.

[15] *Essence*, xxiv.

[16] For a long time the only full-length assessment of Feuerbach available in English was the preliminary treatment of W. Chamberlain, *Heaven Wasn't His Destination* (1941). Fortunately a more comprehensive and scholarly critique has recently been provided by E. Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (1970).

found, and, in particular, to the way in which the question of the reality and revelation of 'God' is treated in their writings. This is not unduly restrictive for, as John Macquarrie comments, " 'God' is the key-word in the theological vocabulary. . . . It is this word that, so to speak, organises and co-ordinates the others within a framework of significance. If we can show the fundamental signication of this word 'God', then we have the clue to all the other words in the theological vocabulary."[17]

I. FEUERBACH AND THE EXISTENTIALIST THEOLOGIANS

In his metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions, Bultmann is at once close to and far from Feuerbach. So far as this world is concerned, he conceives it along scientific-materialist lines so that there is no room for and no talk of 'interventions' in the natural order originating in the activity of some supernatural being. However, he does assert the existence of a reality behind that which the world presents to us and such a reality is to be spoken of as God, although this is at once qualified by his insistence that such a God is non-objective, non-metaphysical, and non-ontological. Secondly, investigation of the world and all that is in it is to be carried out purely along empirical lines. Knowledge of God, however, only occurs in the moment of existential encounter with him and cannot be gained or maintained in any other way. Feuerbach is correct when he asserts that God is not an Object to be deduced from metaphysical speculation upon the religious, moral and emotional character of man. However, this does not rule out the possibility of his being a Subject with whom one is confronted in unexpected and intermittent personal encounter through his self-revelation. Bultmann is therefore quite willing to admit that "man speaks of God because he knows himself beset by his own desires and fears, because he knows himself helpless before the unknown, before the enigma. He hypostasises his dream-wishes and fears into a being who can bring fulfilment or annihilation to his life." He then adds, however, that "this supreme being is certainly not the God of whom faith speaks."[18]

Has Bultmann escaped the Feuerbachian net with his affirmation of a God who is ineluctable Subject and of a knowledge which is exclusively existential? Certainly he has made a serious attempt to

[17] John Macquarrie, *God-Talk* (1966), 99.

[18] It is, nevertheless, an awareness, however distorted, of the true God. Cf. R. Bultmann, "The Problem of Natural Theology", *Faith and Understanding: Collected Essays* (ET 1967), 319ff.

do so, for he has sought to avoid Feuerbach's criticisms of the belief in a metaphysical God who is the Object of men's rational speculation, as well as affirm the validity of his theory of projection over a wide range of man's religious conceptions—even of Christian man's non-existential religious conceptions. The small niche he has carved out for a genuine transcendent reality with whom a genuine encounter can be experienced, however, must now be inspected more closely. According to Bultmann, knowledge of God can only begin and can only continue when God is *actually* speaking to man and man is *actually* listening to what is being said and, moreover, when he is actually relating it to his own existential situation.[19] As to the content of such knowledge, this is also hedged about with existential limitations, for it by no means involves a series of propositions or a body of dogma but neither more nor less than the living God Himself. This does not mean, however, an encounter with God as He is in Himself, for this aspect of God remains completely and utterly inscrutable to man and will always remain so. According to Bultmann "we can" in fact "say nothing about what God is in himself, but only what he does for us".[20] This involves, as a necessary corollary, "speaking simultaneously of myself as the person who is existentially concerned. To speak of the act of God means to speak at the same time of my existence".[21] Thus whether the form or content of the communication between God and man is under consideration there is no possibility of moving outside the existential relationship in which God and man, however infinitely and qualitatively different they may be from each other, are inextricably bound together.

It is precisely at this point that Barth takes issue with Bultmann, claiming that this existential way of speaking about God leads in the end to all theological propositions being reducible to affirmations about the inner life of man.[22] Bultmann denies that this is the case, arguing that, contrary to the accusation Barth is attempting to level at him, "my 'anthropology' is not that of Feuerbach, which recognizes nothing over against man,"[23] while what 'existential interpretation' deals with "is not the 'inner life of man' at all, which can be brought under observation while setting aside what

[19] R. Bultmann, "Bultmann Replies to his Critics", *Kerygma and Myth* (ET 1953), ed. H. W. Bartsch, 196.

[20] Op. cit., 202.

[21] Ibid.

[22] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 2 (ET 1960), 445-6.

[23] Quoted in T. C. Oden, *Radical Obedience: The Ethics of Rudolf Bultmann* (1965), 144.

is different from it and what it encounters (whether environment, fellow-men or God)."[24] This does not mean, however, that he takes Barth's attempt to dangle him over the Feuerbachian precipice lightly, for elsewhere he addresses himself explicitly to this particular challenge to faith. "When we say that faith alone, the faith which is aware of the divine encounter, can speak of God, and that therefore when the believer speaks of an act of God he is *ipso facto* speaking of himself as well, it by no means follows that God has no real existence apart from the believer or the act of believing. It follows only if faith and believing are interpreted in a psychologizing sense."[25] While it is true that faith cannot defend itself against the charge of illusion, since the encounter with God is not objective like a worldly event, this is also true of other realities in life such as the phenomenon of love which cannot be apprehended as love by objective observation whether on the part of the person who is experiencing it or another looking in on it from the outside.

Bultmann does, I think, successfully defend himself against the charge that in his theology the word 'God' merely expresses, in the form of an objectifying proposition, a mode of our existing.[26] The real question is whether his insistence upon talk of God only when it is bracketed with talk of man with its prohibition concerning talk of God which has God as he is in himself for its object, does not, at the very least, lead to a blurring of the distinction between the two.[27] This ambiguity is particularly present in the logical distinction drawn by Bultmann in his attempt to demythologize biblical concepts between existential language which refers directly to its proper subject, i.e., human existence, and existential language which is used *analogically* with reference to God, for especially when we remember that the call of conscience and the realm of the demonic are to be explained in terms of the structures of human existence, it remains to be demonstrated why the experience of God should not be similarly interpreted. Macquarrie, therefore, rightly observes that "In so far as Bultmann fails to give a satisfying answer, we must conclude that (his) approach to theological language . . . comes to a halt at the crucial point where we want to extend it to God."[28]

[24] R. Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics", *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (ET 1955), 259-260.

[25] R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 199-200.

[26] This is admitted, for example, by H. Gollwitzer, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith* (ET 1965), 22, whose own position is much more closely aligned with that of Barth.

[27] Cf. H. Gollwitzer, *op. cit.*, 30-31.

[28] J. Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, 41.

Bultmann may not have succumbed to Feuerbach, and he must be credited with a serious endeavour to overcome him, but the impossibility of speaking about God's own interest, his own reality 'in himself', because of the need in the same breath to talk about man, and the inadequacy of his argument for a special analogical use of existential language with reference to God when elsewhere he has insisted upon a demythological use of it when supernatural entities are under consideration, leave him in an especially vulnerable position.[29]

This conclusion is reinforced by a consideration of Herbert Braun, one of the most celebrated of Bultmann's disciples, who has no hesitation at all in resolving talk about God into talk about existential self-understanding. Braun's concern is to remove all obstacles that hinder twentieth-century man from coming to a meaningful and relevant understanding of the New Testament message. For him, this necessitates the avoidance of everything that turns God into a remote objectivized entity even, if need be, the very word itself. How then is God to be understood? In a rather cryptic paragraph he argues that God is encountered as the 'whence' of the intimately connected experiences of 'I may' and 'I ought', the sense of being both 'taken care of' and 'obligated'. The source of this double awareness lies not in something beyond man in the cosmos but in his fellow man. Thus "God is the whence of my being taken care of and of my being obliged, which comes to me from my fellow man," God is "where I am engaged; engaged in unconditional 'I may' and 'I ought' ", God is "a definite type of relation with one's fellow man." Therefore, he concludes, "I can speak of God only where I speak of man, and hence anthropologically."[30]

Braun, however, specifically seeks to distinguish his anthropology from that of Feuerbach, and draws a distinction between

[29] Similar ambiguities can be detected in the writings of Gerhard Ebeling and Ronald Gregor Smith who, in Germany and England respectively, have been Bultmann's two most responsible theological interpreters and who, in their own writings, have developed and refined his position. It was, incidentally, the latter who first brought Feuerbach back into prominence in English theological circles in his book *The New Man* (1956), 109, while his posthumously published *The Doctrine of God* (1970), is possibly the most lucid and rigorous exposition of the existentialist approach that has yet appeared.

[30] H. Braun, "The Problem of a New Testament Theology", *Journal for Theology and Church*, I (1965), ed. R. W. Funk, 182ff. See further the development of his views in "Gottes Existenz und meine Geschichtlichkeit im NT" in *Zeit und Geschichte* (1964), 399ff., and in *Post Bultmann Locutum*, I, ed. H. Symonowski (1965).

general truths which are accessible to anyone at any time and his idea of self-understanding which takes place only through the occurrence of an unexpected event. This self-understanding is only valid and binding in its actually being experienced, and it is only in the encounter with the event of Jesus that such takes place. It is doubtful, however, whether the distinction can be maintained. It could be argued, for example, that such 'existential' truths have their generality in the fact that they are a constitutive part of human nature and that it is possible for everyone to be appealed to for such experiences. In that case, the New Testament writers, and Jesus himself, would then become merely the historical explorers of this path toward self-understanding, the ones who initially opened up the possibility of such experiences being encountered. Furthermore, in his anxiety to avoid any limitation on human autonomy by an authoritative heteronomy, Braun insists that the encounter with the event of Jesus can only be understood when it is interpreted in categories which are given in all 'true cohumanity' so that it is open for anyone's conscience to test. This seems to indicate that the supposedly unique past event is in fact only illustrative of more general categories.

Braun's method clearly runs the risk of making God a being dependent upon his own existential actions, and even sympathetic interpreters fear that in his conclusions the existence of God has become identical with the self-understanding of man in faith.[31] Gollwitzer therefore suggests that if this is all the word 'God' means then "there is better ground for asserting (with Feuerbach who already said it all very precisely) that 'God' means nothing else but 'a specific kind of cohumanity' ".[32]

Though he does not appear to succeed, Braun does attempt to reserve a place for God and for the revelation-event in his theology, but this is not not the case with Fritz Buri who, in his proposals for a 'theology of existence', provides an even more radical application of existentialist categories to these phenomena. Thus, while endorsing Bultmann's methodology, he is critical of Bultmann's refusal to carry it through to its logical conclusion. Having set out to translate the biblical message into a language which talks about the possibilities of human existence, Bultmann nevertheless stops short at the kerygma, the saving act of God, refusing to regard this as such a possibility. As a result he is forced into drawing a sharp distinction between the biblical and philosophical portraits of

[31] So, for example, H. Zahrnt, *The Question of God* (ET 1969), 283-284.
[32] H. Gollwitzer, *op. cit.*, 96.

authentic existence. Buri suggests that the only way out of these difficulties is through what he calls the 'dekerygmatizing' of the Christian message, the abandoning of the claim that there is a unique act of God addressed to man which opens up new possibilities of existence for him. What then is left for theology? Its task is to draw out the wealth of existential meaning located in the Christian myth which by reason of its profundity, long tradition in the West, and number of remaining adherents is a necessary undertaking.

In this context is it still possible to speak responsibly of God? Buri addresses himself to this question in the following way. He begins with the concept of 'responsible personhood' which since it "occurs only in its enactment as I become aware of my responsibility, which at the same time constitutes my personhood" is thereby withdrawn from all objectification.[33] This is also true, however, of the personal being of another. Finally "we experience ourselves encompassed and borne in the entire sphere of the objectifiable by a similar mystery of the nonobjectifiable. Not just in our innermost 'I' but also at the widest horizons of our physical and spiritual cosmos, we come up against that mystery which announces itself at the limits of our objective knowledge."[34] Man, in other words, recognizes his creatureliness and his dependence, that he has not made himself nor the world and that he cannot redeem himself or determine his own destiny. In his view, then, revelation consists ". . . in the event which occurs when men become aware of their unconditioned responsibility" and though this may be mediated through the Chrisian proclamation, "we assume the freedom to appropriate out of the Christian tradition what corresponds to the essence of faith as unconditioned responsibility in personal community."[35] As for the term 'God', it is merely ". . . the mythological expression for the unconditionedness of personal responsibility, the transcendent dimension of our personhood, the voice that calls us to responsibility."[36] Barth's forecast regarding existentialist philosophy, if not fully in Bultmann and with slight ambiguity in the case of Braun, in Buri's writings then would seem to have proved itself true.

[33] F. Buri, *How Can We Still Speak Responsibly of God* (ET 1968), 19.
[34] F. Buri, *op. cit.*, 22.
[35] *Ibid.*, 26.
[36] *Ibid.*, 27. See further his *Theologie der Existenz*. It is interesting to note that Buri's first work, *Gottfried Kellers Glaube* (1944), deals with one for whom Feuerbach's lectures on religion in Heidelberg in 1849 had a decisive significance.

II. FEUERBACH AND THE SECULAR THEOLOGIANS

According to Thomas J. J. Altizer, the contemporary theologian must no longer like Barth and his successors attack the atheism of the nineteenth century and its present legacy, but rather meet the atheism of the modern world with acceptance and affirmation as the precondition of genuine Christian faith. The God who is depicted as the sovereign Creator, the transcendent Lord, the supreme Object is therefore to be repudiated, for radical Christianity, he claims, is inextricably linked with an assault upon traditional notions about God. This is not to say that one cannot continue to speak about God, merely that talk about *this* God is no longer possible for *this* God no longer exists, i.e., He is dead. Altizer means this statement to be taken quite literally. Though initially he spoke of the death of God as an event which had taken place in our time and in our history, that is in contemporary awareness,[37] he now speaks of its occurrence both in Christ's Incarnation and Crucifixion and in that recognition of it which has only widely dawned in our own era.

It is Hegel's notion of the role of negation in the being of God that provides Altizer with the conceptual means for affirming the death of God theologically. The self-negation and self-annihilation of God takes place in the Incarnation since in it ". . . he becomes fully incarnate, thereby ceasing to exist or be present in his primordial form"[38] but only ultimately in the Crucifixion since "the Incarnation is only truly and actually real if it affects the death of the original sacred, the death of God himself."[39] That is not all, however, for as in Hegel the concept of negation has an essentially positive thrust. Thus "The forward movement of the Incarnate Word is from God to Jesus, and the Word continues its kenotic movement and direction by moving from the historical Jesus to the universal body of humanity, thereby undergoing an epiphany in every hand and face"[40] with the result that "God progressively becomes actualized and real in history, finally dawning as an all-encompassing but immanent and imminent 'Kingdom of God'."[41] Christian man's inability to appreciate this means that he has been

[37] See T. J. J. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology" and "Theology and the Death of God" now both in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1966), pp. 26 and 102 respectively.

[38] T. J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), 43-44.

[39] *Ibid.*, 54.

[40] *Ibid.*, 83.

[41] *Ibid.*, 86.

looking in the wrong place for God, projecting all his denials of self and nature out of himself as God, conceiving in fact not a God but a Satan. In Altizer, the theory of projection is Nietzschean rather than Feuerbachian in form and, in the equation of God and Satan, supplemented by a notion from Blake.

Despite all this, however, it is still possible to speak of God and to commit oneself to him, and it is this aspect of Altizer's proposals that requires further scrutiny. The first implication of his announcement of the death of God is the recognition of modern man's apparent abandonment of God as being, in fact, the triumphant actualization of the self-annihilation of God taking place before our eyes. This leads on to his assertion that God is now manifest, as he puts it, "in every human hand and face" and imminently present throughout the whole cosmos, involved in the process of becoming ever other than he was in the past and increasingly all in all in the future. What is called for, then, on the part of the Christian is no longer "an attachment to the opposing other" but rather "a total participation in the actuality of the immediate moment."[42] This is not to be interpreted as an encouragement to yield up oneself to the brute reality and continual flux of history but rather to understand that the forward movement of God is a truly negative and self-emptying process, a process that is simultaneously negating both God and the world he embodies and which is moving beyond the present expression of both. What Altizer terms his "dynamic-process pantheism" does envisage them a distinction between God and the world that affirms God's freedom to be present in every Now without, however, becoming indistinguishable from any particular Now or from the whole sequence of Nows. Here a notion of transcendence to which men may commit themselves seeks to re-assert itself. By it, however, Altizer appears to mean nothing more than what is beyond the given, beyond the brute actuality of experience, what is, in essence, neither more nor less than vision. It thus appears as merely an aspect, a possibility, of the God-World totality which confronts the radical Christian and to which he must give himself in complete commitment.[43]

[42] *Ibid.*, 145.

[43] In a rather curious argument, Altizer does speak elsewhere of a certain continuing transcendence of God. He claims that in a Jewish context it is still possible to know and be in communion with a transcendent God in the usual sense. Because the Jew is not totally involved in our history, i.e. christian post-death-of-God history. and because he has preserved and perpetuated the eternal covenant with God throughout his exile from christian history, the Jew can actually be in communion with that past epiphany of God. For christians, however, this is impossible.

Altizer's virtual identification of God with the historical process, since the latter has as its most significant component the actualisation of human potentialities, thus leaves little room for a notion of God independent of those potentialities. In fact his central thesis—the death of God in the Incarnation of Christ—constantly reminds one of Feuerbach's statement that Christianity, by its nature and from its very inception, proclaimed that man had become God since this was the real meaning of the Christian assertion that in the Incarnation God had become man. What little room Bultmann preserved none too successfully for God was, as we have seen, soon occupied by man in the thought of his more rigorously existentialist contemporaries, Braun and Buri. What little ground Altizer also seeks to withhold has also been subjected to incursion in the writings of his two more rigorously secularist colleagues, Hamilton and van Buren.

It is not always clear what Hamilton means by the notion of the death of God, and his understanding of it would seem to have been changing on continued reflection. Initially, like Altizer, he located it as a contemporary event, but now he seems to regard it as having taken place in three stages, occurring first in the Incarnation and Crucifixion, then in the widespread collapse of faith in the nineteenth century and finally in modern man's experience of divine unreality.[44] The latter he first characterized as principally a consciousness of the profound difficulties involved in affirming God's reality, then as a frank confession of unbelief in God supplemented by the hopeful prayer for his 'return', and most recently, it would seem, as a forthright acceptance of the fact that God has gone for ever. This disappearance is not be lamented since God is, in any case, no longer necessary—human needs and problems, widespread injustice and suffering and control of nature, were matters in which men looked to God in the past but now need only look to themselves. This is not to ignore the transcendent element in human life and culture, but such experiences cannot be described as experiences of God.

In one of his articles, Hamilton asks whether this is, in fact, taking one's position alongside Feuerbach rather than Christianity.

It is unfortunate, he feels, that modern Protestants have trusted Barth as an interpreter of Feuerbach for "Feuerbach mistakenly

[44] The three stages may be traced from his *The New Essence of Christianity* (1961), through "The Death of God Theologies Today" and "Thursday's Child", *The Death of God and Radical Theology* (1966), 52ff. and 95ff. respectively, to his Wieand Lectures, "The Death of God: What Does It Mean?" (1966).

assumed that his foe, Christianity, was identical with Hegelianism. Since he was unable to see how deeply anti-Christian Hegelianism really was, his inversion of Christianity was really an inversion of Hegelian Christianity and thus, to say the least, more Christian in substance than Hegelianism ever was."[45] To stand alongside Feuerbach, then, is not necessarily to be in bad Christian company. Nevertheless, Hamilton considers that at two points his position can be distinguished from the former's atheism. Precisely in a waiting upon God and in a Christocentric commitment to the world is this to be found. As we have already seen, Hamilton appears to have since surrendered the first of these emphases, but the second still plays a key role in his thought. The primary meaning of our lives as Christians, he writes, is to be involved in the world in the place defined by Jesus, that is, alongside our neighbour, participating in his struggles and sufferings.[46] It is the centring of his humanism around the figure of Jesus then that, broadly speaking, alone distinguishes his position from that of Feuerbach.

The most articulate and systematic exponent of this approach to theology is Paul van Buren. In his book *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* he is not directly concerned with the problem posed by the theory of projection but with the challenge mounted against theology by empiricist philosophy. Nevertheless his work is symptomatic of the way in which Feuerbachian ideas are still very much alive today. Van Buren quite openly asserts that "Simple literal theism is wrong and qualified literal theism is meaningless . . . the idea of the empirical intervention of a supernatural 'God' in the world of men has been ruled out by the influence of modern science on our thinking . . . (while) linguistic analysis challenges the qualified theism of Bultmann as much as that of the more conservative theologians. Whether objectifying or nonobjectifying, language about a 'God who acts' must be interpreted in some other way."[47] Thus in view of its inability to meet the conditions prescribed by the principle of verification, van Buren insists that the word 'God' and its theological equivalents is either misleading or meaningless and that through the insights provided by linguistic analysis it is

[45] W. Hamilton, "The Death of God Theologies Today", *op. cit.*, 46n. See further pp. 52ff.

[46] W. Hamilton, "The Shape of a Radical Theology", *The Christian Century*, 82 (1965), 1221. A position very similar to that now adopted by Hamilton, though without the specifically 'God is Dead' element in his thought, is that of Werner and Lotte Pelz, *God is No More* (1963).

[47] P. van Buren, "Is Transcendence the Word we Want?", *Theological Explorations* (1968), 175-176.

possible to express the Christian message without recourse to such terms, i.e., in a secular or empirical way. Use of the word 'God' therefore must be avoided in order to be able to speak more directly about the human attitudes and viewpoints in question. This means, in effect, translating all statements about 'God' into statements about man.[48] By a different route van Buren thus arrives at the same point as Feuerbach, and in a passage very reminiscent of the latter writes: "I am trying to raise a more important issue: whether or not Christianity is fundamentally about God or about man. . . . I am trying to argue that it is fundamentally about man, that its language about God is one way—a dated way, among a number of other ways—of saying what it is Christianity wants to say about man and human life and human history."[49] In his remarks on the beliefs of the biblical writers and of Christ, Feuerbachian echoes do, in fact, abound. Of the former he asks "By what were they touched? By themselves? By their own strange creative imagination? By their own wild dreams? . . . Perhaps it is not too far wrong to say that their poets present this Yahweh as a great, mysterious, wonderful, but profoundly human, figure, but then we must add at once, human in just those ways in which Israel lived its own particular humanity . . .". Of the latter he speaks of "the dream which the prophet of Nazareth appears to have shared with the older prophets."[50] In the latter part of the book he seeks, in a manner not dissimilar to *Das Wesen des Christentums* though in a much more preliminary fashion, to translate some of the main theological doctrines into perspectives upon human life. Revelation, Predestination, Creation, Sin, Justification, Sanctification, Baptism, Preaching, the Lord's Supper, Prayer and Evangelism—all come in for re-interpretation in this way.[51]

Van Buren does seek to anchor his conviction that Christianity provides the correct perspective upon life in an experience which is given to and not created by the human mind, and to ground it firmly in certain historical occurrences associated with the life of Christ rather than a dream spun out of the human imagination. Nevertheless both the experience and the occurrences are treated as purely human events without reference to any transcendent reality from which they might be derived. Here, like Hamilton, however, he is caught in a contradiction, for the logic of his positive

[48] P. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (1963), 103.
[49] In an interview recorded by Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (1966), 76.
[50] *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, 100.
[51] *Ibid.*, 173-192.

assertions about the uniqueness of Christ seems to imply some such notion. Acknowledging the dilemma, he has recently indicated that the decisive position given to Christ in his book can now be dispensed with and that the perspective upon life drawn from the person of Christ may be supplemented by others coming from different sources.[52]

It is time to return to the point of departure, Barth's prediction concerning the fatal influence of Feuerbach on modern theology, in an attempt to sum up its applicability to these two streams of contemporary Christian thought. His influence, as we have seen, though not always direct, is certainly pervasive. Over wide areas of human experience these writers share with him a secular outlook though the roots of such an attitude are, of course, far more complex than dependence upon the thought of any one particular figure or reliance upon the categories of any one particular intellectual discipline. The theory of projection is widely used by them as a critique of much religious thinking, though their version of it draws not only upon his development of the notion but also, in some cases, upon the particular thrust given to it by Nietzsche. In spite of this Bultmann and Altizer have attempted to retain a space for God, though with dubious success, and the more thorough application of existentialist and secularist categories in the writings of their respective colleagues leads, in the case of Braun and Hamilton, to a weakening or relinquishing of the idea of God though an adherence to the centrality of Christ and ultimately, in Buri and van Buren, to the abandonment of the latter as well. The last two, in a manner reminiscent of Feuerbach, set about the task of translating traditional Christian doctrines into humanist terms, turning theology into anthropology, though in detail, of course, their reconstructions do not always verbally or conceptually agree with his.[53] In comparison with Feuerbach's reconstruction these efforts, though still it must be admitted unfinished, must be adjudged minor achievements indeed. They give the appearance merely of catching up with Feuerbach rather than surpassing him.[54] The one interesting development in the century and a quarter since Feuerbach wrote is perhaps the way in which such thinkers have been

[52] Cf. his remarks recorded in Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian*, 76.

[53] Writing of reductionist trends in theology in general, and of such attempts as these in particular, E. L. Mascall has therefore rightly observed that "The ultimate ancestor of the movement would in fact seem to be Ludwig Feuerbach": E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is* (1966), vi-vii. See also his *The Secularisation of Christianity* (1967), 7.

[54] Cf. A. Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (1966), 103.

produced within Christian circles and, at the moment at least. see no good reason for moving outside them. However, as Ronald Hepburn has remarked, albeit from an agnostic point of view, "The language of 'transcendence', the thought of God as a personal being, wholly other to man, dwelling apart in majesty—this talk may well collapse into meaninglessness in the last analysis. And yet to sacrifice it seems at once to take one quite outside Christianity."[55]

There are, however, other contemporary theological traditions that are consciously attempting to free themselves from the Feuerbachian tentacles. There are those, like Barth, who have sought to speak of transcendence in a new way, one that is not vulnerable to Feuerbach's attack upon theology, and others, like Tillich, who have sought for a new ontology in which to ground the objective reality of the divine. Barth himself, however, has written of one who stands in the Tillichian tradition that what his attempt amounts to is merely "speaking of God by speaking of man *in a loud voice*" while in return one of his severest critics has written of "Barth's inability to escape the sardonic grin of Feuerbach".[56] Are Barth and Tillich, then, also among the Feuerbachians? And what of those post-Barthians, post-Bultmannians and post-Tillichians influenced by the futuristic philosophy of Bloch and Teihard de Chardin and process philosophy of Whitehead and Hartshorne who have endeavoured to find yet new ways of talking about God? These are, to one interested in the fate of contemporary Christianity, tantalizing and fundamental questions, but ones that must be left to another time to explore.

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[55] R. W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (1958), 193-194.
[56] C. van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (1962), 441.