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Assault Upon the Living God

Three well-known American religious spokesmen here discuss implications and overtones of current God-is-dead speculation. They are Dr. Gordon H. Clark, head of the philosophy department at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana; Dr. Russell V. DeLong, Nazarene educator and evangelist, who served as president of colleges in California and Idaho for nineteen years; and Dr. Bernard Ramm, professor of Christian theology at California Baptist Theological Seminary in Covina, California. Moderator of the discussion is Editor Carl F. H. Henry of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. The panel is one of thirteen produced by Educational Communication Association in the series "God and Man in the Twentieth Century," offered for public-service television use.

Henry: Gentlemen, I think you will recall a statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer written shortly after the Nazis had imprisoned him. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer writes that man has now learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis. Of course, Bonhoeffer is referring especially to science and to art and to ethics; but he adds that for the last one hundred years this has been increasingly true of religious questions also. It is becoming evident, he says, that everything gets along without God and just as well as before. Now, will anyone dispute this assertion, that much of modern life has experienced what some of the death-of-God theologians call "the eclipse of God"?

Clark: This phrase, "the death of God," is a little silly if you think of the supreme God ceasing to exist. But it is to the credit of these men, and particularly Professor Gabriel Vahanian of Syracuse University, that they describe very accurately the secularism of our culture. Professor Vahanian unmasks the hypocrisy of modern religion and shows the essentially secular nature of what goes on in most of our churches. His criticism of American religion is devastating and salutary. I appreciate his writing.

DeLong: It seems to me, Dr. Clark, that there really are two kinds of atheists. First there is the theoretical, philosophical atheist, who says there is no God and acts like it, which is really the Communist approach. The second type I would label practical atheists. They would say, yes, there is a God, but they ignore his existence. If you asked the average professional man "Are you an atheist?" he would be insulted.

Henry: The Gallup polls indicate something of this, don't they?

DeLong: Yes. Millions of people would be insulted if you labeled them atheists. And yet, practically, if God were dead it wouldn't change their pattern of living. They never pray; they never go to church. Their God is sort of a dead concept buried in the intellectual cemeteries.

Ramm: Well, I think that there is something very critical in the God-is-dead emphasis, and that is, a program in theology. But this program only works *if* the validity of the New Testament – its theology, its interpretation of Jesus Christ, and its life of Christ – is destroyed. As long as there is any possibility that the New Testament is the authentic document of the life of Christ, that who

he was and what he said and did comes through its pages – I say, as long as there is this possibility, then this movement can't even get off the ground. So the prior question then is not "Is God dead?" but "Is the New Testament reliable?"

Henry: So that as a Christian theologian you are suggesting that this God-is-dead theory rests on the premise of the invalidity, the fallaciousness, of the Apostles' Creed, the invalidity of the biblical revelation, the collapse of the whole Christian view of God and the world.

Ramm: Well, let's say – you have to have quite a funeral procession! You have to have "the Old Testament is dead"; "the New Testament is dead"; "the Apostles' Creed is dead"; "the great issues of the Reformation are dead." And only as you have successfully taken this trip to the cemetery can you say "God is dead."

Henry: Is an attack of that kind on the Christian view of God something essentially new and modern?

Clark: Oh, no, no, no! There is nothing new or earth-shaking in this. There have always been attacks not only on the Bible but on religion in general. The phrase "God is dead" was of course used by Nietzsche. Ludwig Feuerbach, about 1840 or so, provided some of the arguments and even some of the words that these people use. With some existentialist trappings, this God-is-dead movement can be viewed as a last gasp of reaction against the Hegelian absolutism of the early nineteenth century. There's nothing new, nothing earth-shaking.

DeLong: Well, if it isn't new, why is so much publicity given to it?

Clark: Yes, that's a question, isn't it? Why is it so popular? Well, I don't know. Why is it?

Ramm: I think one difference between this movement and Nietzsche and other men of the nineteenth century is that these men of today are attempting to give a theological justification for it, a theological interpretation of it, so that "God is dead" is not just the raucous protest of an unbeliever but a methodological conclusion of people who are following a certain track in theology. And this, partially, is why it has received such a tremendous hearing – it's a theological program, not a program of protest.

Henry: Do you mean that there is a development of a trend in modern theology which has made concessions farther back along the way, and that these, when consistently applied, lead to this more radical and extreme denial of religious propositions and beliefs?

Ramm: Yes. I think that in the time of the German enlightenment and French materialism and English deism there was a repudiation of the historic grounds of Christianity. Now sometimes it might take two hundred years for the real disease to develop. So I think the God-is-dead movement is the only kind of theology – if you can call it theology – that's consistent with a denial that took place a couple hundred years ago whereby we are now neo-pagans; we are no longer Christians bound to the authority of Holy Scripture.

Henry: At least those who are caught up in this rebellion are in this predicament.

Ramm: Yes, that's right.

Henry: What accounts, however, for the fact that the death-of-God theology has taken hold in our time in this way?

DeLong: It seems to me that this modern movement is being championed by so-called Christian theologians, whereas some of the God-is-dead movement in the past has come from men like Nietzsche, Spinoza, and some others who were not professedly Christians. This makes it more astonishing today, the fact that Christian theologians would come out and say God is dead.

Henry: And then, the press has helped to popularize the position, in a day of mass media. It seems also that the alumni of some Christian institutions have carried the revolt to the attention of their constituency by way of critique of what is going on in their institutions.

Clark: Dr. Ramm spoke about methodology in theology. I think this is one of their poorest points. They accept some modern scientific ideas, some existentialism, some remnants of the Judeo-Christian tradition, plus this or that or something else. They also reject some of these.

Henry: Perhaps you can spell this out just a bit.

Clark: The point is this. They accept some parts of existentialism, some parts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but they reject other parts. Now the question I want to ask is, On what basis do they select some things and reject others? What criterion, Dr. Henry, do they use in putting together this amalgam of their positive program? What's the basis of their choice – or in technical language, what is their fundamental epistemological principle? If you read their books you have great difficulty in discovering any answer at all to this question. They seem to accept and reject at random, and this to my mind is a serious philosophical defect.

Henry: There is a certain amount of intellectual irresponsibility here, you feel?

Clark: Well, you can put it that way.

Ramm: Dr. Clark, pressing just as hard from another direction are the great number of people who are deeply afflicted by physical disability, physical sickness, maybe even emotional disturbance. It would be catastrophic to come and tell these people that God is dead, because they have a tremendous spiritual vitality. It keeps them going day after day with these afflictions. So I think that anybody who buys a theology has to buy the practical consequences that go with it. And the consequences of this God-is-dead theology are very drastic when you talk to a cripple, a wheelchair case, a cancer patient.

Clark: You're talking like a pastor. Of course I'm a professor and I don't meet those cases.

Henry: I suppose you're saying that, in contrast with the theology of the Bible, the God-is-dead philosophy is spiritually and morally powerless.

Ramm: Yes, you've got to live with the cases. I grant, Dr. Clark, that they're not academic cases or instances; but I know of such people, and I know that they are kept alive by a very powerful faith in the living God. I for one would not have the moral courage to go and tell these people that this is all just a mistake, a dream, a soliloquy that they're having among themselves.

Henry: Well, if you were convinced that God *is* dead, would you feel an obligation to tell them?

Ramm: There are some times when it is more humane to shut up than to try and tell somebody he is mistaken.

Henry: Well, do you think that God *is* dead?

Ramm: The question I have in my mind is: Whoever got the idea that God is alive? Go back to Exodus where the name of God is given as Yahweh, which comes from the verb "to be" or "to be alive." And God said to Moses, "I am the *living* one." So the whole motif of the Bible is that here out of nowhere comes the God who is the living God. The real question to me is not, "Is God dead?," but, "How come we happen to have had the idea for centuries that God is alive?"

DeLong: Let me ask you this, Dr. Ramm. I'm not a theologian, but it seems to me that this God-is-dead declaration is the logical, maybe the next, step of those who during the past fifty years have denied the supernatural and those who have championed humanism; that divine revelation has been relegated to the theological dump heap, and now the Deity who makes this revelation possible is cast aside as an unnecessary and nonexistent being.

Ramm: Yes. Historically, Christian theology should be the critic of culture. In the God-is-dead movement we have a sudden reversal in which culture becomes the critic of Christianity. And if this is true, then God is dead and the Bible is dead and all of Christian theology is dead. So it's back again to Dr. Clark's question of methodology. If you've got your methodology backwards, you're going to come out to some mighty sick conclusions.

Henry: Isn't there a whole tidal wave of organized atheism in the world today?

DeLong: Yes, it seems to me that this movement makes a good atmosphere and a good soil for the spread of atheistic Communism. The God-is-dead movement is dangerous, very dangerous. If it becomes widespread it will cut the vital nerve of ethical living. If there is no God, there are no higher values. If there is no God, there is no Christ who is the Son of God. If there is no God, there is no Calvary, no salvation, no immortality. Human beings are merely hunks of protoplasm floating over the briny sea of life. We then live a life with no meaning. We're sort of bodies without souls living in a universe without a God. It seems to me that it's impossible to have a vital, dynamic ethics that isn't rooted and grounded in a meaningful metaphysics.

Henry: Of course, some of these God-is-dead theologians do postulate an ethics of sorts. But you're saying that if they were really consistent with their major premise they would scuttle it.

DeLong: Yes. If God is dead, what is the purpose of living?

Ramm: If God is dead, the Great Commission is also dead. And if the Great Commission is dead the Church is dead, because the function of the Church is to execute the Great Commission. So once again I see a fascination with an idea without a real calculation of everything it pledges me to. When you start to articulate what you are forced to deny, in saying that God is dead, it becomes rather frightening. Yet this list ought to be made up.

Henry: These God-is-dead theorists retain a certain passion to leave a mark upon the world that is derived from Christian presuppositions. But the Great Commission, and the relation of a small body of men or believers to the world, really ought to be erased if you scuttle the presuppositions on which the whole rests.

Clark: Now it is obvious that when people today talk about God they have various concepts. For accurate thinking we ought to know just what we mean by God, the living God. Personally I like the definition of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, that “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” There you have something definite; you know what you’re talking about.

Henry: I have a feeling that these God-is-dead theorists, or philosophers in general, really obscure the living God whenever they say that one cannot have rational knowledge without any reference to his revelation, his self-revelation in Christ and the revelation of truths about himself and about his purposes for man and the world – in other words, whenever they cease to speak of the Bible as God’s revealed word. Do you see a connection between this tendency in modern theology and a loss of awareness of the revelation of the living God?

Ramm: Right at this point, you see, we have a certain treatment of the Bible. This theology is not based on looking at texts in the Scripture and saying, here is the meaning of these texts. Rather, it is, shall I say, philosophical theology in the sense that it’s dealing with ideas, not with the concrete materials of biblical revelation. And I as a Christian in the tradition of nineteen centuries want to say that this is wrong, seriously wrong.

Henry: You know, last night I picked up my Bible – one that happens to be falling apart, actually – and I thought, Well, look at this, the way it’s been marked for devotional study, for preaching. I read the death-of-God theologians once, maybe twice, perhaps three times to get a nuance here and there. I don’t think anybody reads that literature with the sense of permanent possession and treasure that this Book holds for those who have searched it through the ages.

DeLong: The leaders of the God-is-dead movement, as I understand it, call themselves Christian atheists. To me that seems to be a misnomer, for I don’t see how a man can be a Christian atheist any more than he can be an honest thief or truthful liar.

Clark: Or a Mohammedan Buddhist or a Jewish Hindu. The combination is untenable. The word “God” just doesn’t have any meaning in a sentence that says God is dead, and a Christian can’t possibly be an atheist. I don’t see how they get these combinations.

Henry: Dr. Ramm, let me ask you this question. Do you think that these men have made any contribution besides what Dr. Clark has said, that is, that insofar as they speak of the secularism

of modern society, they do give an apt characterization of it? They are not the only ones who have made this characterization, and it doesn't depend for its effectiveness or its accuracy on their thesis that God is dead. In denominational circles today we so often hear references to the "insights" of these God-is-dead theologians and the "great contribution" they are making to the religious dialogue of our time, how they have stirred up new interest in the Christian faith, and so on. What do you think of all this?

Ramm: I have a sort of glassy look at this because it just shows me one particular thing: If you do not accept the truth of God as embodied in Holy Scripture, then you can go anywhere. This shows one of the simply off and crazy places where you can go, where you can put together, as Dr. Clark and Dr. DeLong have said, such contradictory notions as God and death. So it has deepened me in my own convictions about how I'm to think about Christian theology and about Christian truth.

Henry: There is one point where these two notions do come together dramatically in the Christian faith, and that is in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the great center of Christian faith. But these death-of-God theologians destroy the center.

Clark: Well, the crucifixion, the atonement, doesn't mean of course that God ceased to exist. Jesus was crucified and died and was buried and rose again, but that doesn't mean that God ceased to exist for three days.

Henry. You're exactly right.

Ramm: There is another interesting angle to this. The earliest origin of this concept was to scare people into Christianity. A German philosopher, poet, litterateur, Johann Richter, used this notion that God is dead to show how terrible it is to be an atheist. Here we have the odd turn that something that started out to drive people *to* Christianity is now used for the annihilation of Christianity.

Henry: Which means that evangelists perhaps ought to be especially careful what theological devices they use to get their message across.

DeLong: I'd like to raise this practical question – we've been dealing with theory a great deal. Of course, we all deny this God-is-dead movement; we believe in the living God. But how are we going to put God back into the thinking of modern youth especially, and of non-church people? We can't very well do it through divine revelation or through prayer. It seems to be we've got to begin at the foundation and through a dialectic process point out that intelligence is the most satisfactory and rational solution of all that exists, with our spaceshots, moonshots, and all the evidence of order and purpose and law. It seems to me that we've got to ask, Did this all come from nothing? Is it the result of blind, inner, chaotic matter or of Intelligence – the answer to intelligence that we find in the universe? And this Intelligence, then, we would label God. We would have to define God after that. But it seems to me that we are going to have to reason with our people that God or a Supreme Intelligence is the only rational option. The Bible says, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God." I think that any man who concludes that all that exists

came from nothing, that there is no Supreme Intelligence, is rationally foolish to reach such a conclusion.

Ramm: Dr. DeLong, if I may retranslate it into my language, what you are saying is that the Christian doctrine of creation is dead and the Christian doctrine of providence is dead. So as soon as you say God is dead you've got a funeral procession that is a rather lengthy one.

Henry: And if you start with the living God as the Bible does, as the presupposition without which everything makes nonsense and which alone makes sense of everything, then it's the God-is-dead theology that is inverted. Now, gentlemen, I think we've just about come to the end of our time. Perhaps we have just a moment for a concluding statement from each of you.

Clark: I would say that the inability of these men to show how they select what they like and how they reject what they don't like – this philosophical defect spells the death of the death-of-God movement.

DeLong: I feel that our need today is not to kill the concept of God but rather to put God back into our homes and schools and our churches and our businesses and more vitally in our minds and hearts. My conviction is summed up best in the words of that renowned British historian Arnold J. Toynbee: "The great need of the modern world is a rebirth of a supernatural belief; without it man, unregenerate man, is hardly to be trusted with the dangerous toys the laboratories have hatched."

Ramm: If God is alive, which I believe he is, then we reverse the funeral procession and come from the cemetery back into the city of the living.

Clark: A resurrection.

Ramm: Yes.

Henry: It seems to me that the God-is-dead theory proves nothing so much as the depravity or corruption of man, and that the modern theologians are no more exempt than we are from corruption and the need to divine rescue and redemption. Gentlemen, thank you very much for sharing time out of your busy lives on this important subject of debate and controversy today.