

The Absence Of God

THEOLOGY OF THE WORLD

(Seventeenth in Series)

By BISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN

This verdict has been passed by our contemporaries: God is Dead. There is no great mourning either among some of the young or the old. Man, it is said, cannot "come of age", or have full autonomy of self until the "One out there" is done away with. Our Lord predicted this state of soul: "Come on, let us kill Him and take over His inheritance" (Matt. 21/38) — which is the universe mastered by technology.

This acceptance of the Death of God is something psychologists have always said was possible. Hidden in the human heart are two great passions, which the Middle Ages called the concupiscible and the irascible, but which Freud renamed love and aggression. Both are strong; in our times love is mouthed, but aggression is practiced.

In its extreme form, the first comes out as carnalism, the latter appears in philosophy as hatred of God and religion, and in history as a Crucifixion.

Once an age affirms an idol, it takes a negative attitude toward God. If I make the self the standard of right and wrong, then the ego naturally becomes the object of adoration. God is then experienced as a "robber behind the clouds", an envious tyrant who dares demand detachment from something to which I want attachment.

The fact is that the hatred of God is as deep seated in man as the love of God, and hatred of the Church is as profound in hearts as the love of the Church. Dip deeply enough into any human heart and there will be found an urge to repeat the crucifixion: "We do not want this Man to be our King" (Luke 19/14)

Everyone surrenders to an absolute: today the freedom of the ego's conscience as the unmeasured measure of all that is good is the idol. In such a world, God and the Church contradict the ego that makes it feel "hemmed in".

The absence of God is not natural. No one is born an atheist; he becomes an atheist. The infancy of the individual and the infancy of the human race are both enveloped by a deep sense of the Presence of God. Any period of world history that becomes a mortician of Divinity and proclaims that God is dead, is an age that has lost its innocence.

Quite apart from the Presence by grace in the soul, there is a universal sense of God in nature. The earliest recollections of every child are of an encounter with the world of mystery. For this reason, the ancient myth persists that the souls of children come from heaven. A child beginning school, who professes himself an atheist, has already been stripped by someone of a heavenly Presence. If he has a feeling that God is dead, it is because someone killed the Presence. Wordsworth has expressed the sense of Presence in childhood by recalling:

"There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem appa'ring'd in celestial life."

In the higher realm of super-nature, where Christ abides as the Soul of the soul, there is a higher consciousness of this Presence. "The Spirit Himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God" (Rom. 8/16) But limiting ourselves to the natural, our innocence has been lost, and man has come of age and is no longer a child. This is regrettable for unless we become as a child, we cannot enter heaven.

Long before philosophers turned into morticians to embalm the Dead God, Thomas Hardy wrote a poem entitled "God's Funeral", in which he wondered what would take the place of the "blessed assurance" of His Presence:

"How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blessed assurance He was there!
And who or what shall fill His place?
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes
For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?"

He who has had a great love and lost it, feels the absence more than one who never has experienced it. Darkness always seems the blacker after one turns his eyes from an intense light. That is why our God-is-Dead times are so tragic.

Willing the Death of God

God may be killed either by an act of the intellect or by an act of the will. By the intellect, if one denies that from the visible things of the world we can conclude to the Power of the invisible God. By the will, when one decides that there is "greater freedom" without Him or His Body on earth. The psychology of such a negation is that it makes one invulnerable to Divine Truth, responsibility and the upright ordering of heart.

"Anyone who acts shamefully hates the light, will not come into the light, for fear that his doings will be found out. Whereas the man whose life is true comes to the light, so that his deeds may be seen for what they are, deeds done in God" (John 3/20-21) As Nietzsche puts it in one of his works: "I have killed God because He separates me from men, and now His death isolates me more than ever. I will not allow this great Cadaver to poison my human friendships." As a German philosopher put it: "If it could be absolutely proved that God existed, I should still deny His existence because He set limits to my independence." Madame Simone de Beauvoir, at the age of fourteen, said that she deliberately gave up her faith and did so with tears. But, she added, she had to give up God in order to affirm her freedom.

Andre Gide's atheism was also willed. He felt that if he could kill conscience, then he could kill God. When Paul Claudel tried to arouse his conscience at the end of his life, Gide answered, "I have ceased to worry about my soul, conscience, and salvation." But he did continue to worry. In his work *Strait Is The Gate*, there is a satire about God and conscience. God is pictured as a wealthy banker who at one moment hands out

wealth to every passerby, and the next moment boxes the ears of those to whom He gives wealth. God would not let Gide alone, so Gide would not let God alone.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, there is again the theme of conscience in which Prometheus, full of gratitude and guilt in regard to the Divine Lover, is devoured by the eagle, which is his conscience. Then he hits upon the idea of devouring the eagle; from that point on lives in "peace."

The point is that through the denial of conscience, Gide seeks to arrive at the denial of God, which is necessary in order to avoid responsibility and judgment. The theme of religion and conscience appears again in the form of a Protestant minister who takes a young girl into his home to educate. Under the spell of his love, he makes her believe there is no such thing as sin. She later on realizes her sin and drowns herself. The pastor revolts against religion, which made a sin of what was a sweet experience in his life. The denial of God is forged not out of thought but out of an evil life.

Still using religious themes to defend irreligion, in his *The Return Of The Prodigal*, Gide pictures himself returning again to the Father's house, but before entering, being seized with a nostalgia for those sinful wastes from which he had fled. This is the tragic secret of his life. Writing about the work, he said: "Christ's words blazed out before me like the pillar of fire which let the chosen people through the night and amid the thick darkness into which I determined to plunge."

In what appears to be atheism, there is a terrible frightening consciousness of Christ. In his fragments of a spiritual diary entitled, *Numquid et Tu*, Christ frightens him out of his false peace, His words standing out like pillars of fire, as he writes: "Terrible flite, the flite of sin. Ashes left by an impure flame, dress — canst Thou cleanse me from it all, O Lord? that with pure voice I may sing Thy praise."

A few months later appear in his diary frightening words about the devil: "If I could at least relate his drama, could depict Satan as he is when he has taken possession of a man, could relate how he makes use of him to influence others! An absurd notion, you may think. But I have lately come to understand it for the first time. — You are not merely taken prisoner, but the evil which is an active power demands from you an activity in its service. You are compelled to fight in a false and perverse cause."

Effects of the Death of God

Once God becomes absent, three consequences follow: one for the person himself, the second for society and the third, the way God reacts to man.

These three are: Psychological — Historical — Theological.

Psychological Effect — Loneliness

When God is not present to the soul as an object of faith, He becomes present as anxiety and a restlessness. Life becomes an inexplicable void, without meaning, very much like having a thirst and denying the existence of water. The soul feels a nakedness which comes from a denuding or a deprecation. A feeling arises of having ruptured the umbilical cord which attached one to the totality of being. As Karl Rahner expressed it: "Men are frightened at the absence of God from the world; they feel that they can no longer realize the Divine. They are terrified at God's silence and His withdrawal into His Own inaccessibility."

The absence of God is something like the state of a grown son who was told by his mother that he is a bastard; that her husband who died was not really his father, and that he might just as well go out and tell the world about it. There would still be left the alternative of knowing that he had a father somewhere, whom he might try to find; or he might just continue to live in that deep sense of loss. In either case there follows the same dark night of the soul, which St. John of the Cross, on a higher level, expressed when he bemoaned: "Whither, having wounded me, hast Thou vanished?"

In the drama, *Peer Gynt*, this loneliness is compared to the peeling of an onion in which layer after layer is stripped off to find the core:

"What an enormous number of swathings!
Is not the kernel soot coming to light?
I'm blest if it is! To the innermost centre
It's nothing but swathings."

Albert Camus, in *The Fall*, overcomes this sense of loss by making the ego the new god: "I conceived at least one great love in my life, of which I was always the object. I was too much in love with myself not to want the precious object of my love never to disappear." The same idea was expressed by V. Ivanov: "The question of faith is no longer 'Do you believe in God?', but, 'Do you believe in your Ego, that it truly exists, that it transcends your ephemerality and darkness, and is greater than you in your impetus and littleness?'"

In this world of the absence of God, Faulkner, knowing that carnal love would take the place of Divine Love, wrote of its failure in his *Wild Palms*: "Love if you will; because it can't last. There is no place for it in the world today. We have eliminated it. It took us a long time, but man is resourceful and limitless in inventing, too, and so we have got rid of love at last, just as we have got rid of Christ. If Jesus returned today, we would have to crucify Him quickly in our own defense. If Venus returned, she would be a soiled man in a subway lavatory with a palm filled with French postcards."

This restlessness of the soul in a universe where God is Dead is depicted by the atheist Sartre in his work *The Flies*, where there is a character, Oreste, who is the perfect free man because he is "emancipated from all slavery and all beliefs, without religion, without profession, free for all commitments and yet knowing that he must never commit himself."

But what does his freedom bring him, since he is liberated from nothing and is bound to nothing? He kills his mother and her lover in order to rise above anxiety and remorse. But what is this

(Continued on Page 18)

LETTERS

to the editor



War Is Hell

Editor: Vietnam is a dirty scene. I have not seen for myself the agony we have inflicted and received ten times over. But I know the emptiness caused by missing someone who is there. It's so far away and not just in miles but in pain and commitment.

Our men are there, but they go reluctantly and wondering. If they should die... is it for the preservation of democracy, to honor a weary commitment or is it really to seize such stunning victory and manslaughter as to end war at last forever?

There is never an easy reason for a dying. There's so much of living caught up in it. And there are so many reasons for living — people who care and whom you care for, where you have yet to go and what you have yet to do.

Just so there is only one reason to fighting — to survive and to go on living after all the terror.

On the radio, on the TV and splashed in the news, war has become commonplace. It permeates every free breath I take. Can it be that being so familiar, it is less horrible? Why can't we see it for what it is? A killing is another life gone out, another dream lost forever in a world that's short on dreams.

If it were to stop suddenly, there would still be grieving parents, blasted land and artillery terror that a million quiet nights won't ease. And it should be so. For if we are to end war, it will not be ended in forgetting.

And so I pray for peace. And I try to carry peace because of my very real anger, so that my peace and anger should check each other.

—Joan F. Davis, Rochester.

that every student should have the opportunity to reach this maximum potential.

A strong educational base requires good achievement in the three "R's". With so many elementary school students under-achieving today, it is clear that the teaching of these fundamentals must be improved. If Rochester children are to have the opportunity of choice when they reach high school...

Elementary school classes and teaching must be aimed at accommodating the special needs of youngsters who are under-achieving.

A wider range of educational opportunities must be available to more high school students than at present. The potential drop out must be encouraged to complete high school by looking forward to a program which appeals to his special occupational interests.

An urgent educational need today is to enlarge the availability of courses designed to meet the needs of the 42% of city high school graduates who go directly into work. The occupational education annexes, which seek to fill this need, have proved their worth for the relatively few students who have been able to attend them.

The nearly 1,000 students attending the annexes are all that the present, rented facilities can accommodate. We need an expansion and consolidation of vocational and technical education at one location, including a new Edison Tech. The proposed 9.8 acre site on West Main Street fully-meets requirements.

—Stephen May
Councilman-at-Large,
Rochester.

Fight Questioned

Editor: Father Finks' column (4/4) appears to place the Rochester City School Board in the role of persecutor and Rev. Mr. Franklyn Florence in the position of the persecuted. The writer indicts the Board for not waiting its rules for the benefit of FIGHT.

Citizens are told that they can speak at the beginning of a board meeting in the order in which they sign up beforehand. FIGHT members are no better than the rest of this community, and they do not deserve any preferential treatment. School Board President Ashford is to be commended for maintaining his position.

Further, I question the true sincerity of Franklyn Florence and FIGHT. Having been present at the March 27th School Board meeting at West High School, I noticed that once the radio microphones and TV cameras had picked up his opening remarks demanding special consideration, he and his disciples promptly stomped out. Apparently he had received the one thing he wanted — publicity.

Had he really been determined to present his views, he could have joined several others present who had not given notice of their intentions to speak but were allowed to do so at the conclusion of the meeting as per Board rules. These people abided by the regulations and still managed to be heard.

—James R. Boehler, Rochester.

Public Schools

Editor: Recent articles in the Courier-Journal are a helpful contribution to a healthy community dialogue about quality education in the city public schools. Basically, this concept means

Pope Tells Bishops, 'Be Accessible'

Vatican City — (RNS) — A bishop "should be easily accessible and constantly present among the people of his diocese and 'affable, helpful, open to dialogue and conversation particularly with his priests and seminarians.'" Pope Paul VI told the members of the Italian Episcopal Conference in an audience here.

The bishops, who had been attending their national meeting in Rome, had earlier appealed to the Pope for firm new statements on clerical celibacy and for more firm directives on such questions as jazz or folk Masses and "unorthodox liturgical services."

Other features of their final communiqué:

- A reaffirmation of priestly celibacy as "an irrenounceable good whose necessity is clearer than ever."
- An expression of "deepest worry over the condition of public morality and the consequences of that condition."



"TURN THE ALTAR AROUND, TURN THE ALTAR AROUND" — THEY'RE LIKE A BROKEN GRAMOPHONE RECORD!

Word for Sunday

What the U.S. Needs -- Saints

By Father Albert Shamon

On Holy Thursday night, the powers of evil tried to wrest from Christ His kingdom through the betrayal of Judas. This dastardly deed was typified long before when Absalom sought the kingdom of his father David through the treachery of Achitophel. Christ took the same route David did in his flight from Jerusalem.

As He walked in this bitter hour to Gethsemane, He kept trying to dispel the sadness of His disciples. "Only for a little while will you lose sight of me," He told them; "then you will in a little while again see me and your grief will be changed to joy."

Like muffled drums, the phrase "little while" kept beating the refrain: "Sorrow is short-lived. Be brave. Don't look backward, like Lot's wife. Look ahead!" The Christian life is not cyclic, going around in circles, getting nowhere; it is linear, eschatological, forward-looking, heading toward a certain future.

We are so like the disciples: we get bogged down in trivia. On the night before He died, Christ talked about some of the greatest truths of His life — about the Holy Spirit, about unity, about the love that dies for its friends. And yet the disciples got "hung up" about chronology. "What does he mean by this little while?"

We see similar reactions in the Church and our nation today. In Vatican II, the Church spoke of her stance in the modern world and of all the great truths that could renew her and the face of the earth. Yet all the while we seem to be getting "hung up" on trivia — on such peripheral matters as religious garb, liturgical minutiae, even on words like commitment, involvement, and so on and so on.

At a time when all should be forging a renewal of faith and society, when zeal should be white hot to bring every individual and the entire nation to God, when loyalty to the Church should at least equal that of the Marxist to his party, we find the many fiddling with "little whites."

The same charge is true of our nation, from the Supreme Court down to the classroom. Our forefathers left us a legacy of law and order, a heritage of moral and spiritual values so great that Justice Clark in one of his dicta called this a Christian nation.

And yet when university anarchists should be promptly padlocked in jails, when the perfidious Soviet Union arming the men who kill our boys in Vietnam should be as roundly denounced in the halls of Congress as Cato did Carthage in the Senate of Rome, when journalists should

brand evil as evil and execrate crime, drugs, and pornography and adopt a policy of "up with people", we see what?

We see everyone missing the point: talking of meeting the demands of revolutionists, building bridges to godless and tyrannical nations, heading off criminals and criminality, splashing marines with pictures portraying things that Bob Hope said he "would not do in bed."

Is it a "little while" for the Church in America and for America? Communists say, "By 1970 America will fall like a ripe plum into our hands." Lenin is alleged to have said on his deathbed, "All my Russia needed to be saved was not five-year plans, but ten St. Francis of Assisias." All America needs today is a few saints.

Will you who read this say one Hail Mary each day, starting today, that God will raise them up in America? It is only a "little while" to 1970.

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