

# The Meaning of God for Modern Man

P. DAVID

Let us state the case for the contrary, i.e. the meaninglessness of the God-phenomenon for modern secular man. He finds it difficult to see meaning in the following phenomena and is baffled to reconcile them to work-a-day life to which he is accustomed; for the substance of modern man's faith is: Nothing comes out of nothing; it is foolish to ask for the origin of things; work and earn; eat and live; 2+2 make only 4 whatever the way of counting; heavier things sink and lighter ones float; dead men are gone from us for ever; we die too; strive always to secure happiness and to avoid pain and suffering. This is the substance of what modern man believes. What he cannot reconcile himself to are the God-phenomena that express themselves in the following examples:

- (1) That he created the world by a miraculous supernatural act.
- (2) That he chooses a particular nation or individual to be the redeemer of the world.
- (3) That a Son is born of the Virgin Mary or through an unnatural process.
- (4) That he raises Jesus from the dead.
- (5) That the Christian Church is a supra-human organization.
- (6) That he allows such miracles as water being converted into wine, two fish and five loaves filling thousands of people, that Jesus walked over water, etc.

These phenomena and many others like these simply cannot physically or logically happen. Therefore the modern secular man cannot make sense out of the God-language or the God-phenomena that the religious people speak of. It may immediately suggest itself, as Harvey Cox says: If secular man is no longer interested in the ultimate mystery of life but in the 'pragmatic' solution of particular problems, how can anyone talk to him meaningfully about God? If he discards supra-historical meanings and looks in his 'profanity' to human history itself as the source of purpose and value, how can he

comprehend any religious claim at all? Should not theologians first divest modern man of his pragmatism and his profanity, teach him once again to ask and to wonder, and then come to him with the Truth from Beyond?

No. Any effort to desecularize and deurbanize modern man, to rid him of his pragmatism and his profanity, is seriously mistaken. It wrongly presupposes that a man must first become 'religious' before he can hear the Gospel. Pragmatism and profanity, like anonymity and mobility, are not obstacles but avenues of access to modern man. His very pragmatism and profanity enable urban man to discern certain elements of the Gospel which were hidden from his more religious forebears.

Further, the religious people that believe in these phenomena are not in any peculiar way different from other human beings with whom they live and work. To take a few illustrations: they share all the physical and mental bases of origin and growth; they are all prone to fall and rise; there is nothing that *qualitatively* separates the religious people from others. This is true both on the level of individuals and also on the level of collective life as Church or community.

Thus the modern secular man is baffled to see any sensible meaning in the extraordinary claims of authenticity and authority for the God-phenomena. There he is: we may look at him in surprise or in sympathy or with scorn and hatred. But his difficulty is *real*. It is real in a twofold sense: it is based on logical and scientific assumptions; it is also based on the closed fundamentalistic attitude of the religious authority. Therefore his difficulty must be analysed and he must be helped to see the meaning of God for life and progress.

### 1. The Problem of God

In any analysis of the difficulty of modern man we have to take into account two sets of facts—facts based on logical thinking, and facts based on physical occurrence. Thus analysed, we have the idea of God and the reality of God.

#### *The idea of God :*

It should be observed that it is man who worships God, not animals. The root meaning of 'religion' in Sanskrit is 'thought' (*man* is to think, and that which is thought is *matam*). Man is a thinking animal and he thinks of God and worships him.

In his primitive stage of living he was influenced in his thinking by fear of starvation, disease and death; he considered the heavenly bodies such as sun and moon, sky and earth, air and water, etc., as *devas* (shining-ones or gods) who can help him to evade disease and death, and to secure long life and prosperity. He dreamt dreams in which he saw his own soul moving about and communing with other souls and deities. Thus the idea of

a supernatural phenomenon, God, was formed in the mental life of primitive man and did influence his physical activity. But we must not forget that the existence of this God originated with the idea or thinking of man. Thus Anselm's and later Descartes' ontological argument for the existence of God emerged out of this type of thinking.

What is the ontological argument for the existence of God? The idea of an absolutely perfect being arose in the mind. If a perfect being existed only in idea and not in reality, it could not be perfect. Therefore the idea of a perfect being should comprehend the existence and reality of such a being. Thus God as idea has come to be taken as reality without any relevance or reference to life and experience.<sup>1</sup>

That is why Immanuel Kant took serious objection to this proof and directed his destructive criticism against it. The assumption of a reality *in idea* does not directly or *ipso facto* lead to identity with the reality. Whatever the content and consistency of logical thinking, it cannot be the identity of an objective reality. If we should allow this possibility, there would be infinite danger and mischief. The logical consistency that is being used as criterion is sought between idea and idea without any relevance to or connection with life and experience. That is, individuals and nations argue and fight on the basis of ideas or ideologies without any reference to reality of life and experience. This was what had happened in the field of philosophy and religion, as also in the field of politics. Karl Marx was said to be the grandchild of Hegel who pushed to the extreme the Platonic and Kantian idealism. Therefore Kant's criticism of the ontological argument for the existence and reality of God must be taken seriously, for in all our creeds and theological formulations the ontological line forms the basis implicit or explicit.

For example, consider our creeds and confessions. There is no doubt that there was life and experience behind their formation. But the theological formulations worked over in the context of heated debates and bitter controversies certainly followed the *ontological* line rather than giving relevance to life and experience. Consistency between one idea and another, one argument and another, is the criterion of validity, not relevance to life. One can read the creeds and test them for himself whether this is so or not. One should also assume that he is a modern secular man, not a believer of the Apostolic community.

An inquirer asks with cogency:

'... Can the Christian today give any account of his words? Can he say what he means, and does he mean what he says, when he repeats the ancient apostolic creed or confession? The

---

<sup>1</sup> P. David, *The Contemporary Debate on God*, pp. 174-176.

unbelieving philosopher has spoken more sharply than the believing theologian, but their questions are closely related. Taken together, they pose the central question for contemporary faith and theology.

‘... In theology we speak about God. We say that he creates, that he is good, that he saved the world. Now if these statements have meaning beyond being mere expressions of feeling, then there must be some way in which the truth can be established. We may put it another way around. If these statements have meaning, then they must make such a difference to our understanding of the world that certain kinds of things that could conceivably happen will not happen. For example, if we say that God is good, we mean that something which denies or refutes that goodness will not take place.’

Statements having to do with an invisible, ineffable God, transcendent ‘absolute’ and the whole field of classical metaphysics in reality could be neither proved nor disproved. Having no empirical function, they could not be called true or false, and they were consequently regarded as meaningless.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Reality of God:*

When we speak of the *reality* of God to others, particularly to modern man, we face certain difficulties.

(a) The difficulty of *Language*: When we say ‘God’, has this word an intelligible sense in the language in which it is used? Has it an ‘object’ corresponding to the word ‘God’? What is the relation of this ‘object’ to time and space? The believers get wild and say: This is a brute question. It should not be asked of God. The modern secular man does not pester you further. He accepts that it is a ‘brute’ question but nothing less will satisfy him. He parts company with you.

But remember that Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples, asked of Jesus the same question—an empiricist question: ‘Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe’ (John 20:25). Jesus himself said: ‘See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have’ (Luke 24:39).

Harvey Cox contends that the English word ‘God’ has no sensible meaning for the secular man. He even suggests that it can be dropped. ‘This may mean that we shall have to stop talking about “God” for a while, take a moratorium on speech until the new name emerges. Maybe the name that does emerge will not be the three-letter word God, but this should not dismay us. Since naming is a human activity embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu, there is no holy language as such, and the word God is not sacred. All languages are historical. They are

---

<sup>2</sup> P. M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, p. 15.

born and die. Presumably God will continue to live eons after English and all other present languages have been totally forgotten. It is only word magic to believe that there is some integral connection between God and any particular linguistic vocable.'

But he elucidates and interprets the meaning and content of God-experience from the Biblical and prophetic perspective. He says: We speak of God to secular man by speaking about man, by talking about man as he is seen in the biblical perspective. Secular talk of God occurs only when we are away from the ghetto and out of costume, when we are participants in that political action by which He restores men to each other in mutual concern and responsibility. We speak of God in a secular fashion when we recognize man as His partner, as the one charged with the task of bestowing meaning and order in human history.

Speaking of God in a secular fashion is thus a political issue. It entails our discerning where God is working and then joining His work. Standing in a picket line is a way of speaking. By doing it a Christian speaks of God. He helps alter the word 'God' by changing the society in which it has been trivialized, by moving away from the context where 'God-talk' usually occurs, and by shedding the stereotyped roles in which God's name is usually intoned.

Paul van Buren also expresses the same difficulty with regard to the use of the word 'God'. He says, as a metaphysical postulate, it does not yield any sense or meaning to modern man. He, therefore, resorts to certain expressions such as 'blik', 'historical perspective', 'situation discernment'. He borrows them from linguistic analysts.

It must be said to van Buren's credit that he here lays hold of God-phenomena in a tangible and meaningful context. But replacing the word 'God' by other expressions serves no new purpose if the metaphysical postulates with 'God' are eliminated.

(b) *Science* and *Technology* have confirmed the secularist and empiricist objections and difficulties. Science operates in the realm of natural phenomena, and technology achieves results in the specialized areas of this realm. Modern man glories in the empirical and experimental methods of science and technology and would challenge the reality of the God-phenomena by putting them to stand the test of empirical verification. To mention only a few broad religious truths: the incarnation based on the virgin birth, the resurrection, the story of creation, the many miracles narrated in the Bible, etc. Can these be empirically verified?

We have to pause here a little and see where we are heading, and what is involved in our searching questions. After an elaborate process of search and questioning, Descartes came to realize that his own *self* should inevitably exist (*ergo sum*) in order to doubt all that he had been questioning. This gives us

one clue to follow. When we consider man's experience of God-phenomena, we have to assume three important facts to have been operative: man's initiative, his interpretative skill, and his life of community. Given this, we may be able to help modern secular man to discern meaning in God-phenomena in individual and social life, in history, and in nature.

## 2. The Meaning of God

Many attempts have been made in recent years to explore into the nature and being, as well as the meaning of the God-phenomena. Each attempt has its own contribution to add to the general discussion of the theme. But the problem persists and will continue to persist, because God is an inexhaustible and insoluble, as well as inevitable, entity in the context of human life and society. It is man who creates and runs after gods and worships them, not animals. Man initiates, interprets, and lives and works in a community. We have to understand carefully the deeper implications of these traits—man's initiative faith, his interpretative skill, and his life of community. Given this human context, the God-phenomenon is inevitable. Nay, it is coeval with and organic to the human situation. Neither is true without the other, neither exists without the other. Therefore the Hebrew genius rightly puts it: 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"' (Ps. 14:1).

But the conclusion is not so easy or neat. Those who deny God's existence and reality are not all fools. The Russian cosmonauts who denied the reality of God are not fools. Buddha and Socrates, Bertrand Russell and Ingersol, and a host of others who did not subscribe to the reality of God as a supernatural entity were not considered by history as fools.

In our contemporary world there are many avowed atheists whom the world gratefully acknowledges as good and great men for their life and activity. Therefore, we must seek for a dimension and depth in the total phenomena of human-divine encounter which will lead us to discern clearly the meaning of God for modern man.

We have already cited Harvey Cox's interpretation of God-experience as Biblical and prophetic. While he suggests the dropping of the word 'God', he looks for the emergence of a new word or new name in the total context of God-experience in the changing society and history. God is not an entity 'out there' or 'up there', but is organically involved in the process of action in history and society. He says: 'God manifests himself to us in and through secular events. The meaning of the word God will be altered or a new name will emerge as we encounter that presence in events which draw them into the history of which we are a part, the history of God's liberation of man.' Secular talk of God is pointing and naming. As van Peursen says:

'... it is in a functional way that man comes into contact with the reality of God, that God acquires a meaning in history... As the Church we have to respond to the world through our acts... transmitting the old message of a Name... which is taking on a new meaning in history, and especially in the functional history of our time.'

Bishop Robinson's exploration and analysis of the God-experience is most helpful. He thinks the word 'God' as traditionally used is fast dying. But the reality for which the word 'God' is used he commends. He says: 'Yet it has had its value in drawing attention to a phenomenon which I believe is more than the absence, silence or eclipse of God. It is registering the fact that for millions today the living God has been replaced, not by atheism in the sense of a positive denial of God, nor by agnosticism in the nineteenth century sense, but precisely by a dead God. The reality of God has simply gone dead on contemporary man in a way that has never quite happened before. This is not a matter of people being argued out of one conviction into another; nor does it involve the discrediting of one intellectual position. To those for whom God has not "died" in any existential way there appears no particular problem and no case to answer. Indeed, they genuinely wonder why the old language will not do: for them, and for a part of many others (among whom I would willingly include myself), it continues to serve. But for increasing numbers God is simply not available as a live option.'

He conducts lucid research into the depth and dimension of the God-phenomena. He grapples with the reality of God, seeking to locate it in the structures of existence, life and society. Again he says: 'We live,' as van Buren says, 'in an age in which statements about "how things are" are expected to have some sort of relationship to men's experience of each other and of things. This is a test which I believe theology should welcome. For its statements are not about realities outside our experience of each other and of things. They are statements about our experience of each other and of things in depth, as these relationships are shot through with an unconditional graciousness and demand for which men have found themselves driven to use that brief and pregnant word "God".'

In order to work toward a meaningful interpretation, he further says: 'Theism rejected the depersonalization of God in deism but retained its projection. Can we reject the depersonalization of God in pantheism but retain its projection? Can we, in fact, depersonify but not depersonalize?'

If that is done, what he is after is 'pantheism'. God is at work *incognito* in all phenomena of life and existence.

There are two obvious difficulties seen in all the 'secular' theologians. They all reject the metaphysical postulates traditionally associated with God's nature and being; on that account they cannot see any reality corresponding to the word 'God'.

In 'secular' theologians there is an attempt to locate the reality of God-phenomena in society, in history, and in nature. Robinson portrays it as 'panentheism'. This is very helpful as it is Biblical and prophetic. When the reality of God touches and inheres in all layers and levels of existence and life, it may not be possible to lay hold of it as an empirical whole; but the reality is comprehensive, earthly and historical: there is nothing supra- or supernatural about it. But yet we cannot grasp it as we can a sparrow or a stone. We have to accept it all as given: we are all in a predicament of *givenness*.