

The Living God of the Bible

Carl F. H. Henry

Carl F. H. Henry is the dean of Baptist and evangelical theologians, having written, taught and lectured for over fifty years. His publications now include more than thirty volumes, numerous edited materials and scores of articles. Perhaps his crowning achievement is his six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority* (1976-1983). This article first appeared in 1982 in the fifth volume of that project. All quoted Scriptures are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted. The founding editor of *Christianity Today*, Henry is now Senior Research Professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

That God lives is at once the simplest and profoundest statement to be made about him, for his life embraces the full reality of his sovereign being and activity.

Both the Old and New Testaments speak of “the living God” (2 Kings 19:16; Acts 14:15). That the Father “has life in himself” (John 5:26) is no figure of speech but a declaration of God’s essential being. Pagan gods and idols simply have “no breath in them” (Jer. 10:14). There is no other God but the one living God (Deut. 4:35; 2 Kings 19:15); God alone is God and there is none like him (Ex. 8:10, 15:11; 1 Chron. 17:20; Ps. 86:8, 89:8).

For this very reason the formula for an oath in Old Testament times was “as the Lord liveth,” “as God lives,” or “as the God of Israel lives.” When Hebrews were menaced they used this phrase to present Yahweh as the living One who, in contrast to the lifeless nonexisting heathen gods, evidences his existence and presence in absolute supremacy. Only rebels dispute God’s active sovereignty (Jer. 5:12); only fools deny that God exists (Ps. 14:1, 53:2; Job 2:10). By a self-affirming oath, Yahweh himself confirms the dependability of his promises and warnings: “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord” (Ezek. 17:16, 33:11, NIV).

What God’s life is cannot be determined by analyzing creaturely life and then projecting upon deity a vitality that characterizes intricate living creatures. The Bible never depicts life as an observable phenomenon, something known by empirical investigation that enables us to comprehend transcendent divine existence. God’s life is not a unique configura-

tion of impersonal processes and cosmic events. Nor is it merely a more durable form of the vitality imparted to lifeless man when God breathed into him “the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7, NIV) and the bearer of God’s image (Gen. 1:26). All conjectural attempts to refine the being of the world and of man into some generalized concept that can be projected upon an imagined deity are more hindrance than help for comprehending the One who through his own self-revelation makes himself known as the living God.

God is “the fountain of living waters” (Jer. 2:13, 17:13), “the fountain of life” (Ps. 36:9). The Father “has life in himself” (John 5:26), that is, originally and absolutely. Christ is “the Author of life” (Acts 3:15, RSV), or, in magnificent brevity, “the life” (John 14:6; Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4; 1 John 1:2). The agent in the creation of all the forms and structures of the universe was the divine Logos (John 1:3); as the incarnate Logos or God-man he additionally received from the Father the divine prerogative to bestow redemptive life upon the penitent, and resurrection life in the age to come (John 5:26).

God is the incomparable “I am that I am” (Ex. 3:14). “There is no plainer description of the divinity of God,” Barth remarks, “than the phrase which occurs so frequently in the Pentateuch and again in the Book of Ezekiel: ‘I am the Lord your (or thy) God,’ and it has its exact, New Testament parallel in the ‘I am’ of the Johannine Jesus.... In this biblical ‘I am’ the Subject posits itself and in that way posits itself as the living and loving

Lord.... He who does this is the God of the Bible.”¹

The Bible has no twilight zone of demigods and semigods; it knows only the living *theos* and inert and false *theoi*. Unlike much conjectural philosophy, the Bible is not concerned merely with divinity or being in general; its hallmark is the highly particular self-revealed God. It is no happenstance that the definite article is used (*theos*) to designate the God of Israel. The Old Testament is well aware that outside Israel both *El*, the generic term for God, and *elohim*, the plural polytheistic term, were in common use throughout the ancient world. In biblical theology, however, the living God as the one and only God wholly fulfills the species *El* and except when referring pejoratively to the pagan gods, the biblical writers use *Elohim* with a singular verb for the one living God. *Elohim* concretely and fully manifests divine reality (“Know therefore that Yahweh thy *Elohim*, he is *Elohim*, the faithful *Elohim*, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations,” Deut. 7:9; “If Yahweh be *Elohim*, follow him,” 1 Kings 18:21, “that this people may know that thou art Yahweh *Elohim*,” 1 Kings 18:37). In these passages *Elohim* is called God absolutely, the one who alone is essentially divine (“Unto thee it was shown, that thou mightest know Yahweh; he is *Elohim*; there is none else beside him,” Deut. 4:35). The living God claims not only exclusive validity among the Hebrews (Ex. 20:2 f.) but declares himself to be also the only God of the Gentile world and in fact of the entire created universe (Isa. 45:18-23).

Greek, Roman and other ancient civilizations used the term *theos* even of outstanding rulers or emperors whom they

worshiped as essentially divine. Homeric mythology postulated living gods that lack eternality but nonetheless outlast man’s mortality; the Epicureans ascribed to their gods not nontemporal eternity but unending duration in time. But the Bible provokes debate not only over the authentic nature of divine life, but over that of human life as well. It affirms that God makes known his *vita* on his own initiative and that the *imago Dei* imparted at creation confers upon mankind a creaturely life superior to that of animal existence; in no case, however, has man or any creature a latent potential for divinity. Ancient religious philosophers applied the term *theos* to impersonal cosmic powers; by the easy device of capitalization they then conferred metaphysical status upon the Divine, the Good, the One, and so on (modern counterparts are similarly dignified as Space-Time or Being or Ground). By such postulations God and the cosmos, in part or whole, become identical; certain elements of the world—its supposed intrinsic necessity, irrevocable laws, or evolutionary powers—are considered divine. Instead of acknowledging God as living and transcendent, Greek philosophers—notably Heraclitus and the Stoics—tended to equate God simply with the living essence of the world. But Scripture sanctions neither this ancient Stoic conception of the universe as a psychophysical divine organism, nor the modern Hegelian regard for man and nature as evolutionary manifestations of the life of the Absolute, nor deity misdefined by process philosophy as the immanent ground of the universe and an aspect of all experience. The biblical God is a transcendent reality who preexisted both the world and man.

Process philosophy professes to over-

come a Greek “static” God that obscures the deity’s ever-active relation to man and the world. But it also restructures the biblical revelation of the living God and opposes central emphases of scriptural theism. This it does by substituting a necessary divine creation of the universe for voluntary supernatural creation, and by excluding the once-for-all miraculous as a misreading of natural processes. Process theology also considers the universe as God’s body, obscuring both the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the church as the regenerate body over which the Risen Christ reigns, and strips the grace of God of such decisive historical acts as Jesus’ substitutionary atonement and his bodily resurrection from the dead. Process philosophy further dilutes the biblical revelation by excluding propositional conceptual content from God’s self-revelation, and by correlating God’s salvific activity not primarily with historical redemptive acts but rather with man’s inner faith response to an interpersonal divine human encounter. Whatever process philosophers may presume to gain by such alternatives to a “static” deity, their projected reconstitution of God’s nature actually deprives deity of major perfections and activities characteristic of the living God of the Bible, and results in a view of the divine that is inadequate philosophically, scripturally, and experientially. The theory that created reality is necessary to God, and is in some respects divine, departs in crucial ways from the biblical revelation of God. On the basis of God’s own self-revelation, biblical theists reject notions that make the universe God’s body and essential to his life; they disavow views that replace the scriptural doctrine of God’s primordial creation of graded orders of life, like that of Schubert Ogden, for whom God

himself changes as “the ever-present primordial ground” of an evolving universe.² Ogden’s insistence that God exists necessarily, but that his essence is in part dependent upon the universe, is self-defeating, for if God exists necessarily, he cannot be essentially dependent; on the other hand, if God is essentially dependent, he does not exist necessarily.

Far less does the Bible approve such naturalistic notions as that food and water or material factors fully account for man’s survival; such nourishment does indeed nurture human life, but it is God who gives (Luke 12:15) and sustains it (Matt. 4:4). However much the twentieth century pursues a higher quality of human life—one that the Bible commends in its own way—the quality of divine life will always transcend the human, unique as it is, and even at its best. Redemption can indeed lift the creaturely life of fallen man to the incomparable human joys of “eternal life” (John 3:16) by providing an imperishable human life fit for time and eternity. But God lives his own distinctive life; an immense ontological chasm separates man who “became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7) and bears the divine image (Gen. 1:26) from the living God who created man and endowed him thus.

The God of the Bible eternally has life in himself. As theologians have sometimes put it, he has *aseity*, or life from and by himself in independent freedom. His essential life does not correspond merely to his personal relations to the cosmos and to human beings. Nor should the life God has in himself be contrasted with the life of creatures by asserting merely that creaturely life exists through his will and purposes. The fact is that though heaven and earth, the work of his hands, shall perish (Ps. 102:25f), God himself “endures.” He

neither became the living God by his creation of the universe, nor did he become the living God at some point in eternity past; he is the one living God, and is so eternally. He lives in eternal self-affirmation. His life is all that he thinks, decides, and wills in creative freedom. God perpetually wills and purposes his own being; this being depends upon nothing external to himself yet is not internally necessitated as if he exists forever whether he wills to do so or not. He wills eternally to be himself in the fulness of his independent vitality, and never ceases to be himself. God exists in absolute plenitude and power. He is wholly free to be himself and removes the mystery of his own being by making known his inner nature by voluntary self-disclosure.

The pagan gods cannot help others; they cannot even help themselves. They are mere zeds or zeros: “. . . There is no breath in them. They are worth nothing, mere mockeries” (Jer. 10:14, NEB). The idols are “useless” (Ps. 31:6, NEB). Samuel pleads: “Give up the worship of false gods which can neither help nor save, because they are false” (1 Sam. 12:21, NEB). Jeremiah adds: “Our forefathers inherited only a sham, an idol vain and useless” (Jer. 16:19, NEB).

The living God is to be obeyed because in self-disclosure he has declared his commanding and directive will; the false gods have neither mind nor will; they issue no summons to obedience, nor can they direct human action. “The Lord alone led him (Israel), no alien god at his side,” declares Moses (Deut. 32:12, NEB). Jeremiah speaks of the pagan gods which are “no gods” (2:11); he rebukes Israel’s rebellion and apostasy through Yahweh’s pointed question: “How can I forgive you for all this? Your sons have forsaken me and sworn by gods that are not gods” (Jer. 5:7, NEB).

Isaiah speaks by contrast of the whole earth as full of the glory of the living God (6:3).

While false gods are not authentic divine powers, the Old Testament indicates that through fallen man’s imagination they gain a power of attraction in human experience, captivate the will and elicit religious response. Such response not only victimizes adherents but it also evokes Yahweh’s displeasure, for Yahweh is a jealous God: “You shall fear the Lord your God, serve him alone and take your oaths in his name. You must not follow other gods, gods of the nations that are around you; if you do, the Lord your God who is in your midst will be angry with you, and he will sweep you away off the face of the earth, for the Lord your God is a jealous god” (Deut. 6:13-15, NEB). Here one must cite especially the Decalogue: “You shall have no other god to set against me. You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Exod. 20:3-5, NEB; cf. Deut. 5:7-9). The living God is jealous not of false gods as real entities but of the power they exert over those who imaginatively invest idols with ontological existence and volition (cf. Deut. 4:23 ff.).

The God of the Old Testament is indeed a God of social justice, as many expositors today stress above all else, but he is no less prominently the living God who challenges the false gods that lure away man’s attention and preempt his energies. This indictment of evil powers gives biblical religion great force in Asia and Africa where invisible spirits wield extensive influence over daily life. It is no less significant for European and American life, however, where secular man despite his

intellectual dismissal of a transcendent world places himself in idolatrous relationships to material things and natural processes. Harvey Cox reminds us that “from the perspective of Biblical thought, neither the garden nor the machine can save man Yahweh creates man to enjoy and attend the garden, but not to sacrifice to it; to make things for his own use, but not to pray to them.”³ The passion for things and lust for money have become such a hallmark of materialistic Western culture that tangible realities hold priority among life’s values.

The pseudo-divine and the demonic inspire much of twentieth century life in both the Occident and the Orient. Non-Christian Formosan workers have a god of the living room, of the dining room, of the kitchen, of the bedroom, of the bathroom. Besides worshiping ancestors and numerous household gods, workers also revere the gods of their profession—farmers, for example, fishermen, merchants, even beggars and prostitutes worship their own special god. The more miserable one’s situation, the more gods one will implore. The farmer lacking scientific techniques will worship the sun god, the rain god, the river god. Even rural road workers using modern machinery sometimes refuse to work until or unless they first pray to the local gods.

Surviving in this invocation of invisible spirits is the blurred conviction that the living God is concerned with all human activity. But while subdividing the deity into multiple divinities with a superstitious kind of reverence may preserve regard for the transcendent, this course is ridiculed by the younger generation under the pressures of modern learning. Some students say they have no use for the church simply because they are students; they do not believe in God

because disciplines like computer science can solve all problems accurately and quickly. The scientific desacralization of nature helps breed the presumption that science dissolves the supernatural. Only the biblical revelation which banishes false gods and at the same time challenges the myths of modernity such as materialism, scientism, and eroticism avoids human capitulation to naturalism, be it Marxian, secular capitalist, or scientific.

Some expositors ground the Old Testament case for Yahweh’s exclusive divinity in man’s internal response rather than in cognitive considerations. Instead of giving an unbiased statement of the Hebrew view, their explanation reflects the influence of the decision-oriented dialectical and existential theology of recent decades, or involves lingering concessions to evolutionary theories of religious development. Obviously the Old Testament account of the living God is not a metaphysical discourse interested only in intellectual delineation; while its proximate interest is knowledge of God, its call to obedient faith in the living and active God stands everywhere in the forefront. But the revelation of the God of the Bible is not subcognitive. Hence we are not reduced to the alternatives of conjectural argumentation on the one hand or personal trust on the other. Of itself the latter would not be decisive for knowing the truth of the one God (even rebellious demons are said to share this, cf. James 2:19).

Only decision-oriented theology can supply a basis for Gottfried Quell’s protest that “there is perhaps an excess of rational argument in the complaints of the prophets” and for his disparagement of supposedly “arid, theoretical statements in the later literature.”⁴ Quell has in mind specially Daniel 11:36, with its prophetic reference to the willful king who speaks against “the God

of gods;" Malachi 2:10 ("Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?"); and the statement in Psalm 82:1 that "God . . . judgeth among the gods," that is, among magistrates who rule as his representatives. But these passages are hardly as arid as Quell implies and they surely do not exhaust the cognitive elements through which Old Testament revelation exhibits the one living God.

Kenneth Hamilton thinks that the Hebrew conviction that no God exists other than Yahweh arose as the end-product of a history of spiritual obedience to Yahweh, and emerged "through a long process of education of Israel's imagination rather than a direct appeal to the intellect."⁵ It is of course the case that an insistent divine demand for faith and obedience accompanies the biblical revelation of Yahweh. But to suggest as Hamilton does that as an intellectual commitment ethical monotheism has no Hebrew roots earlier than the eighth-century prophet Isaiah⁶ grounds earlier monotheistic faith extrarationally in volitional response, if not in religious imagination which Hamilton elsewhere depicts as the special domain of the pseudo-divinities. The Decalogue does indeed set the affirmation of Yahweh against other gods (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7) in the context of a call to obedient love, but one hardly does justice to Mosaic representations to say that "it did not matter greatly whether the people believed that the gods of the nations had some kind of independent existence or whether they were pure fictions, empty 'wind.'"⁷ Elijah demanded a clear choice between Baal and Yahweh (1 Kings 18:21), a choice that required trust and obedience to be sure, but hardly on that account, as Hamilton would have us believe, one that involved no "illumination of the mind by knowledge."⁸

Hamilton extends his "volition-centered" interpretation of biblical data to the New Testament as well. He thinks that, discouraged at Mars Hill by "little response from the philosophically minded. . . to Paul's apologetic efforts," the apostle thereafter preached Christ crucified "without regard to the Greek search for intellectual truth"⁹ and followed what Hamilton supposes to be the Old Testament precedent of witnessing to God's acts instead of insisting on the intelligibility and reasonableness of faith.¹⁰ Hamilton even deplors any attempt to state religious truth in "cool reason"—that is, in objectively valid terms—as an effort to demythologize, and insists that only "through personal encounter" can we justify a personalized view of the universe.¹¹ So too when he expounds Paul's comments on eating food devoted to idols as turning on obedience rather than on knowledge,¹² Hamilton seems to confuse knowledge that is translated into obedient love with love in the absence of knowledge.

At the very opening of the Bible the Hebrew creation account leaves no room intellectually for other gods, nor does the Decalogue. Although in the Bible, as Hamilton says, "the 'nothingness' of idols is never asserted as a general truth to be known by itself," that is, apart from a summons to worship the living God alone,¹³ it hardly follows that the Hebrews did not intellectually know the nothingness and powerlessness of the pagan deities.

In certain important respects the Hebrew monotheistic revelation strikingly differs from Greek philosophical monotheism, one crucial difference being the forefront Hebrew emphasis on worship of Yahweh over against the rather secondary and subordinate role that Greek philosophy assigns to worship. We need not

on that account, however, subscribe to Hamilton's thesis that "monotheism as an intellectual system may be said to have been invented by the Greek mind."¹⁴ Greek philosophers indeed presented their views more rigidly in an orderly philosophical scheme, independently of progressive divine revelation and premised on creative rational analysis which led to many rival expositions. But the Hebrews were not indifferent to concerns of logic and consistency. They did not, however, present their teaching about the one true and living God as a conclusion derived as an inference from the character of the cosmos or nature of man. They traced monotheism, both intellectually and volitionally, not ultimately to the invention of any human mind, Greek or Hebrew, but to the living God's self-revelation.

Some Greek philosophers conceived the cosmic elements and powers as "abstract and inexorable;" whether because of recalcitrance (Plato) or because of pure potentiality (Aristotle), matter itself was thought to be evil and resistant to the divine will. Even ancient Near Eastern astrology and divinization of cosmic as well as astral powers had anticipated some of these features. Near Eastern religions connected cosmic forces with benevolent and malevolent divinities. Zoroastrianism ranged light and darkness against each other as good and evil principles, whereas Platonic philosophy connected matter with evil as an impersonal force.

The biblical writers on the other hand speak of superhuman powers as rebellious personal agents hostile to God's good governance of the world yet ultimately subject to the Creator. Insofar as pagan polytheism had any ontological basis, it came about through the corrupt

elevation and idolatrous worship of such spirits, worship that sacrificed the unity of the living God and exalted rebellious creaturely agents or mere cosmic forces to an absolute divine role.

But when Hamilton suggests that the Hebrews "personalized" the cosmic powers, and that Hebrew monotheism was experiential rather than intellectual he obscures the doctrines of satanology and angelology as well as underestimates the rational revelational basis for biblical monotheism. In a universe that Near Eastern religions populated with gods and intermediary beings, the Hebrews assign a remarkably subordinate role to angelology, one that nowhere reflects polytheism. While it remained for Christianity to give full expression to the fact that "no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39, JB), the Old Testament call for exclusive trust in the one Creator and Lord already implies this. By emphasizing that the whole realm of "principalities and powers"—or elemental spirits and energies—is subordinate to the Creator's agency, and that nothing can permanently frustrate the personal action and purpose of the Lord of the universe, Paul stripped cosmic elements and forces of any paralyzing power over mankind and removed the temptation to divinize their elusive mysterious nature. As Hamilton well says, "the antidote to fear of the abstract powers was the concrete revelation in Christ of the living God, the Creator still personally active in his world."¹⁵

Writing of "the ambivalence of the being and nonbeing of the gods, of the power and folly of idolatry," Helmut Thielicke says: "The Old Testament attack on pagan gods and idolatry brings out the ambiva-

lence that is their characteristic. They can win power and yet they are empty. Yahweh is the first and the last, and besides him is no god (Isaiah 44:6). Yet in a way that accepts the existence of the gods he can be compared with them and extolled as incomparably superior (Exodus 15:11; 18:11; 72:18ff.; 86:8, 93:3; 96:4).¹⁶ "In comparison with the one true God the gods are impotent, vain and unprofitable (cf. Isaiah 44:8; 2 Kings 18:33ff.; Jeremiah 16:19 f.)."¹⁷

In relation to the created universe, they are "entangled" in creation and implicated in "what is created and perishable." In relation to man, "if God is my only Lord, the gods are disarmed and . . . nonexistent. If God is not my Lord, either because I do not yet know him and am outside the covenant, or because, as a weaker brother, I accept him only partially, and my spiritual life is still immature, then there are ethically unredeemed spheres to which God's lordship has not yet extended, and here the beaten gods can fight a rearguard action and set up pockets of resistance where nothingness can win power over me and come to existence."¹⁸

This ambivalent status of other divinities than Yahweh is not a result of evolutionary development from polytheism or henotheism to monotheism, but reflects rather the ambiguous ontology of the world of rival powers and spirits. The gods initially gain their standing merely as human conceptions, as products of human thought and imagination (Isa. 44:9-20). As Thielicke says, "this origin of the gods, this feature that they are creature rather than Creator, is the reason for their impotence, their nondeity As products of men's hands or minds the gods can have no reality independent of man."¹⁹ When man fashions gods, they are "empty" and "useless" (Jer. 16:19ff.; 2

Kings 18:33 ff.; Ps. 106:19 ff.; Jer. 2:24) for they cannot respond to man's need (Jer.2:19). Unlike Feuerbach, the Bible nowhere gives the impression that the gods, as postulations of hope and projections of fears, remain sheer fantasy with no power. These gods somehow do get men in their clutch. In biblical theism Satan and other fallen angels have an objective existence. Although they are only products of idolatrous imagination, the false gods nonetheless accumulate a coercive power that lends them demonic force.

The apostle Paul writes on the one hand of so-called gods (1 Cor 10-19 ff.) and on the other of "gods many, and lords many" (1 Cor. 8:5). Nowhere does he compromise the fact that the Christian knows that there is only one God, the Father of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:4 ff.), and that faith in the self-revealing living God alone effectively disarms false gods by exposing them as mythical constructs. He unqualifiedly rejects the thesis that the idol "really amounts to anything" (1 Cor. 10:19 ff., TEV), "itself is real" (JB), "really exists" (Phillips), or that idols "are really alive and are real gods" (LB). The Christian must nonetheless be careful not to regard idols as realities or to assign them an actual captivating power, for pagan practice, when properly seen, is nothing less than surrender to demons (1 Cor. 10:18-22). Theological truth must not be sacrificed. But moral sensitivity to weak brethren is nonetheless an issue. Yet the Christian must leave no doubt that those who regard false gods as powers and beings having majestic predicates and attributes pervert and reject the truth of the one living God.

Thielicke, therefore, seems to overexistentialize the Christian response to false gods when he relies on faith alone to cancel their latent power: "Within

God's sphere of power, i. e., faith, in which God is the only one for us (1 Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:16 f.), the gods are disarmed and cast into the nothingness of nonbeing. They have no more being or significance for us."²⁰ It is true that vital commitment to the alternative, that is, to the God of the Bible, precludes merely adding Jesus Christ to one's household or shelf gods. But atheistic movements also appeal to ideological faith to demythologize not only the false gods, but the one living God as well. And nonbiblical religions often appeal to sheer commitment to exclude the God of the Bible as an alternative.

Yet the Bible, in proffering its revelationally reasonable case for the divine self-disclosure of the living God, strips the false gods of ontological status and leaves no doubt that because of fallen man's perversity it is God only who can now win the battle over the false god (Rom. 1:21 ff.; 1 Cor. 1:21). By disregarding God in his revelation fallen man in a catastrophic repudiation of the created orders changed the truth into a lie; enlightenment rationalism, in turn, discarded the biblical god along with false gods.

The most radical modern cults of self-realization sponsor a contemporary kind of idolatry under the guise of humanistic self-esteem. Selfism elevates the subjective ego as the only god; here the living God becomes the self-exalting ego. Paul C. Vitz alerts us: "To worship one's own self (in self-realization) or to worship all humanity is, in Christian terms, simply idolatry operating from the usual motive of unconscious egotism."²¹

Even Erich Fromm's rather moderate work, *The Art of Loving*,²² declares the god of Christian theology to be an illusion. And in *The Dogma of Christ*²³ he dismisses Christianity as a fantasy compensation for human frustrations and debunks Christian

doctrines as childish medieval beliefs. The concept of God, Fromm elsewhere informs us, has developed to the point that man is God; whatever realm of sacredness there is centers in the human self.²⁴

Summarizing the philosophy of one of the recent self-assertion and self-deification cults, Carl Frederick writes: "You are the Supreme being. . . . You are IT. Choose . . . Choose to BE what you know you are."²⁵ This mood, as Paul Vitz points out,²⁶ is highly reminiscent of the existential atheism of Jean-Paul Sartre "Life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose."²⁷ Here by asserting self-divinity, the renegade human spirit in a mighty counterstroke of rebellion against the living Lord seeks to escape the doom that awaits man as sinner, and the death and nonbeing that must climax human destiny in a world without God.

Otto Baab notes that many biblical passages distinguish the "pure worship of Israel's superhuman and transcendent God" from idolatry by emphasizing that idols are mere personifications and objectifications of the human will. "When the idol is worshipped, man is worshipping himself, his desires, his purposes and his will."²⁸ It tells something about man's spiritual deterioration that the Creator who images himself distinctively in man later enjoins the death of any man who murders his like (Gen. 9:6) and explicitly prohibits man from imaging God in created things (Exod. 20:4); fallen humanity, in turn, supremely exhibits its foolishness and futility by exchanging "the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:22). In ancient times, pagan Gentiles looked upon their earthly rulers as divine; in modern secular circles,

a misguided cluster of intellectuals consider themselves divine.

Kenneth Hamilton comments that although supernatural polytheism and graven images have long been intellectually and culturally unfashionable, Western culture has not by any means discouraged idolatrous imagination, nor excluded subtler manifestations of polytheism. "As happened in Israel," he remarks, "conscious profession of faith in the one God does not prevent the imagination of men's hearts turning them back to worship 'strange gods.'"²⁹ The idolatrous imagination which in past centuries shaped graven images, in our time projects equally corrupt and corrupting alternatives to faith in the living God.

Like the fascination that pinups of a bikini-clad beauty hold for the single male, even if she be only an artist's conception with no life in the real world, so the conscious and subconscious projections of a renegade humanity acquire artificial magical compulsion and imagined power. Conferring realism upon the merely imaginary at the expense of objective truth seems more and more to become a deliberate ambition of modern commercialism, a force which routinely commends its products through symbols of status and sex. Imagination elevates creaturely entities into superhuman influences that then take control of human experience. As Hamilton suggests, imagination is an "interior workshop;" here man fashions idolatrous images of God formed internally of concepts and ideas no less than externally of wood and stone.³⁰

Hamilton observes that "the imagination of men's hearts," as the King James Version translates the original language of Scripture (Gen. 6:21; Deut. 29:19; 1 Chron. 29:9; Prov. 6:18; Jer. 23:17; Luke 1:51), re-

flects the seventeenth-century connection of the term imagination with unreality—that is, "the *imaginary* rather than the *imaginative*."³¹ Seventeenth-century writers assigned to imagination a constructive as well as illusory role.

Hamilton even credits imagination with a superrational capacity to resolve some questions of truth and error and suggests that in the Christian life "personal decisions must go beyond 'knowledge' and rest on 'love.'"³² Contending that "every philosophical or religious doctrine presupposes" an imaginative picture and images of the real world,³³ he nonetheless emphasizes that we should "labor to make our imaginatively conceived convictions look intellectually respectable."³⁴ Quite apart from this somewhat ambiguous image-dependent epistemology that demotes the cognitive elements basic to Christian commitment, Hamilton nonetheless offers incisive insights into the forms of idolatry that currently preempt the devotion of secular Western man and, for that matter, all too often powerfully confront even professing Christians. The modern emphasis on imagination—the human mind's power to call up images—gives new force to the biblical contrast between Christ, the express image of God, and the idols or false images of God. The Old Testament and New Testament alike associate graven images with faithlessness toward God. Throughout the entire biblical era, idol-worship was the most characteristic phenomenon of Gentile religion. Nothing so precisely sharpens the contrast between the pagan and Christian concepts of God as the pagan charge that the early Christians were atheists because they neither venerated prescribed images nor had images of their own.

As indicated, idolatry in the Bible in-

volves far more than the worship of man-made images of wood and stone; it includes also the imaginative deification of powers and concepts to elicit supreme allegiance and absolute respect. Unlike ancient Babylonian astrologers, Moses and the ancient Hebrew prophets deplored sun-worship, moon-worship, star-worship and worship of other created elements (Deut. 4:19; Jer. 10:2; Ezek. 8:16). But, as Donald J. Wiseman comments, although the astrologers yielded the cosmos and life to the control of impersonal mechanical fate and drew signs from "the relations of the moon to the sun, eclipses, or, less extensively, from . . . planetary movements . . . their observations were never applied to individuals." Israel he adds, knew that "direct Divine revelation . . . rendered divinatory techniques unnecessary;" because of their fidelity to monotheism the Hebrews avoided "the polytheistic practices of their neighbors who worshipped planets and stars."³⁵ In Paul's time, observes G. B. Caird, the polytheistic gods of the Graeco-Roman world had been largely displaced by impersonal law or superhuman elemental spirits; these were thought to control the universe and consequently sapped individual life of meaning and hope.³⁶ Augustine argues against pagans who applied astrology to individuals.

The Pauline protest against "vain imaginations" (Rom. 1:21, KJV; cf. JB: "they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened") thus gains force against the secular priorities of the modern civilized world no less than against the crude spiritual aberrations of remote primitive tribes. When loosed from the constraints of rational divine revelation, religious imagination plunges man readily into spiritual idolatry; creative imagination confers an imagined reality and dynamic

power upon the nonexistent to shape and direct cosmic and human affairs; it becomes the playground of imaginary idolatrous divinities, those sham-gods of both primitive and literate cultures.

Hamilton identifies "relevance," "change" and "liberation" as specially influential contemporary cultic images. These catchwords gain added authority through the modern communications media and the slogans and clichés of Madison Avenue. The notion of inevitable progress, still somewhat current in contemporary philosophy, and the premium placed on change both work against inherited and traditional conceptions of God, truth and the good. If progress and change are the very stuff of reality, then even deity, as Hamilton observes, must "conform to the idea of progress."³⁷ Setting the mood for all things both human and divine, the "perennial new" nurtures the idea that supernatural Christianity must yield before novel views of God and Christ; the Bible, it is said, must decrease in value for modern man. "Anything labeled relevant is above criticism, anything labeled irrelevant is beneath contempt. The affirmation of the supreme worth of relevance becomes an article of faith, and the pursuit of relevance a cult."³⁸ Relevance or immediate appeal thus displaces even worth and goodness, and tradition is deplored as the very essence of irrelevance. When the spirit of the age dictates which beliefs are acceptable or unacceptable, their relevance has become "an absolute power."

Thomas J. J. Altizer pontificates that "nothing delights the enemy of faith so much as the idea that faith is ever the same yesterday, today, and forever, with the obvious corollary that faith is hopelessly archaic and irrelevant today."³⁹ The equally

obvious corollary—which Altizer seems blithely to ignore—is that even Altizer’s alternative cannot be permanently relevant. The cult of the perennially new must anticipate the sudden death of its own mental offspring. On close reexamination such offspring often gain a measure of staying power by adopting preferred fragments of inherited views and parading them in contemporary dress.

Hamilton’s protest against relevance sometimes seems overdrawn. After all, among the virtues of divine revelation and divine redemption is their relevance for all men in all generations. By contrast many items promoted as indispensably pertinent to human welfare soon reveal their irrelevance to human good and destiny. Hamilton himself argues for the permanent validity of the divine commandment against graven images, a command which on first thought may seem irrelevant for our day. Basic to the argument of his book *To Turn From Idols*, says Hamilton, is “the contention . . . that the warning against worship of idols given in the Second Commandment remains very pertinent to our own culture.”⁴⁰ Just as early Christianity recognized the first commandment “to be as pertinent as ever in the context of contemporary culture”⁴¹ so, too, nothing is more urgent for mankind today than to hear Yahweh’s call “to turn from the idols that exercise power over contemporary imaginations” and to resist “conformity to the pattern of the present age.”⁴² What Hamilton protests, in other words, is the absolutizing of relevance in the process of demoting all other concerns. “If relevance is absolutized,” he says, “the wholeness of truth is . . . completely inconceivable. . . . All that anyone needs to know is what is declared to be relevant for contempo-

rary man . . . and all that is relevant is given in the Perennial New. Relevance is asserted by repeating slogans and catchwords, thus arbitrarily ruling out any rational discussion of truth and falsehood, and by-passing by dogmatic pronouncement the delicate, exacting task of trying to examine an issue comprehensively and in its proper context.”⁴³ What Hamilton does is shift emphasis from the perennially new to living tradition, from catchword-dogmatism to reverence for truth. But unless living tradition is itself subject to a permanently valid norm, it, too, will not escape impermanence. And reverence for truth, important as it is, cannot of itself establish the truth of revelation. Indeed, if personal trust is more decisive for monotheism than are rational considerations, as Hamilton elsewhere indicates, then truth does not seem to matter all that much.

While idols are truly nothing, as Paul stresses (1 Cor. 8:4, 10:19), idolatry is something, and a very serious something—indeed, it is a terrible sin (1 Cor. 10:7; cf. Acts 7:40ff; 1 John 5:21). Not only does idolatry eclipse worship of the living God but it also entails bondage to demonic powers that intimidate and dominate the human spirit (cf. Rom. 1:23, 25; Gal. 4:8; Eph. 2:2). “What gives Paul’s battle against idolatry its seriousness and what distinguishes it from the rationalistic arguments of Hellenism,” Ethelbert Stauffer observes, is the fact that idolatry involves not merely so-called gods that are in themselves nothing, but also a real world of demonic powers.⁴⁴

Early Christianity rejoiced that those enlightened by divine revelation and by the Holy Spirit have the “ability to distinguish true spirits from false” (1 Cor. 12:10). The apostle John affirms that human be-

ings need to assess spirits abroad in the world on the basis of their witness or nonwitness to Jesus Christ (1 John 4:1-3). Just as in his Gospel John emphasizes that the Holy Spirit witnesses to Jesus Christ (John 15:26, 16:49 ff.), so in his First Epistle he stresses that in view of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ his son we must be on guard against idols (1 John 4:4-6). Corrupt religious imagination fashions notions of deity that have no basis in divine disclosure and scriptural testimony.

Only in daily experience can the creedal confession of monotheism be put to constant test. Service of the living God requires repudiating all idols—be they the philosopher's deifying of elemental forces of the cosmos (Gal. 4:8ff.); the political tyrant's imposition of obligations that God disallows (Acts 4:19, 5:29); the secularist's idolatry of mammon ("You cannot serve both God and Money," Matt. 6:24, NIV; cf. Luke 12:19); the glutton's capitulation to appetite ("whose god is their belly," Phil. 3:19); or even the Western tourists' tolerant curiosity about ancient temple idols (2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9).

The living God calls us from worship of false gods to the permanent responsibilities entrusted to us at creation. The living God is himself the God of life and death (Num. 27:16; Deut. 32:39; Job 12:10; Luke 12:20; 2 Cor. 1:19; James 4:15). Death does not belong to life but contradicts it as its opposite. God governs the book of life in which he inscribes the names of his people (Isa. 4:3) and assures their heavenly felicity (Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Mal. 3:16) in view of their obedient response to his Word that calls for life-or-death decision (Deut. 30:15-20, 32:47). God reveals himself as the absolute and exclusive God of human existence— as man's creator, preserver, judge, redeemer and compan-

ion even in and beyond death (Ps. 23:4, 6, 72:23 ff.). He is judge of both the living and the dead (1 Pet. 4:5). Since life is a gift of God, the Bible does not view death as natural or necessary, but as a consequence of sin. Life in God is indestructible, whereas creaturely life is conditional. God can declare human beings dead ("in your transgressions and sins," Eph. 2:1; cf. Col. 2:13) while they are still physically alive (Matt. 8:22; Luke 15:24) or he can declare them eternally alive even in the face of physical death (John 11:25 ff.; Phil. 1:23).

Eschatological life is of course not wholly new in all respects; in it God contravenes the vulnerabilities of man's earthly existence by arresting and reversing the power of sin. While eschatological life remains somatic, it involves also the indestructible life that God confers in association with the resurrection body. Natural immortality of the soul is not a biblical tenet. Christian belief in the soul's ongoing divine preservation (Mark 1:27) and in bodily resurrection should remind us that the living God alone is the real life-giver.

The resurrection of the crucified Jesus becomes in New Testament context the central historical reality upon which resurrection faith focuses. Christ's triumph over death strips death of its sting (1 Cor. 15:56), that is, of its "power to hurt" the believer (TEV).

The difference between the biblical revelation of bodily resurrection and pagan theories of spirit-immortality involves more than simply realistically rejecting idealistic notions that man's psyche is inherently divine and therefore indestructible. Scripture teaches that sin involves a violent rupture in the created relationship between God and man, and requires a radical negation by divine redemption.

The New Testament portrays the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as a threshold event, one that inaugurates the new eschatological age and guarantees the future resurrection of mankind. But the regeneration conferred even now by faith in Christ the Redeemer already involves participation in eternal life (John 5:24, 25; 1 Tim. 6:12, 19). Life, whether creation life, redemption life, or resurrection life, is not a vitality inherent in man, or something that he can develop. It is a supernatural gift. Even now, on the authority of the revealed Word of God and by faith in the substitutionary death of the Savior for his sins, the alienated sinner may enjoy this gift of eternal life (Eph. 2:5 ff.). Cancellation of spiritual death already now in the present frees redeemed man for new daily possibilities of life in the Spirit. The force of physical death is experientially neutralized since the believer identifies himself with the historical death and resurrection of Christ who in his coming final victory will completely abolish physical death. The apostle Paul pinpoints the believer's perspective by the words: "dying, and, behold we live" (2 Cor. 6:9). That the redeemed sinner may in virtue of divine preservation and grace live eternally in God's intimate presence gains its wonder not only from the fact that myriads of creatures are intended by creation to have only brief temporal existence, but also from the fact that the redeemed will forever enjoy the company of the supernatural bestower of creation, redemption and resurrection life, and that God will even express his own proper life in unobstructed spiritual and moral union with all who love him. In other words, the very real facts of day-to-day existence occur within the dynamic relationship the believer already bears to the risen Christ; from the eternal order

Christ the Lord is mediating to him love, joy, peace and other virtues distinctive of the age to come.

But God's personal relationships to his creatures, and particularly to human beings, do not exhaust his interpersonal activity, nor do these divine-human relationships take divine priority. Throughout eternity the living God is active within himself, active in unending interpersonal relationships in the Godhead. This fact we discern only on the basis of his self-revelation. What we know of God's attributes and activities is not arrived at through conjecturing some abstract being-in-general, a being that is first contrasted with all finite beings and then dignified as divine and glorified with all the appropriate perfections. The dipolar deity projected by process philosophy is much more abstract than the self-revealed triune God presented in the Bible. Process thinkers, like some rationalistic philosophers before them, thrust an identity upon God that they infer from the functions of the cosmos, the cosmos being gratuitously viewed as his body. All the attributes or characteristics that appropriately belong to his being the God of the Bible makes known in living self-disclosure. Any distinction that we properly make in God we make only if we acknowledge one or another perfection that he, the living, self-revealing Lord, has revealed to man. For Jesus, faith in God is first and foremost faith in the true and living God self-disclosed as holy, loving and merciful, but also as the God of wrath and judgment. The Gospels consequently remind us that God is true (John 3:33), good (Mark 10:18), holy (John 17:11), loving (John 3:16), merciful (Luke 6:36), righteous (John 17:25), wrathful (John 3:36) and so on. These and other emphases recur in the Epistles. Nu-

merous statements bearing on the nature of the living God speak on the unlimited and unrivaled fullness of his perfections: he is “God only wise” (Rom. 16:27), “who only hath immortality” (1 Tim 6:16), and who in brief is the “only wise God” (1 Tim. 1:17; Jude 25). Only because the living God by cognitive disclosure lifts the veil, as it were, on the inner life of the Godhead do we know that from all eternity he decreed to create the temporal universe, proposed the incarnation of the Logos, freely elected fallen sinners to salvation, and much else.

God publishes his holy will to the human race, as the living God relates himself to the forces of the cosmos and the experiences of mankind, hears the prayers of his creatures, providentially governs the fortunes of the redeemed (Rom. 8:28) and sovereignly influences the direction of human history toward the sure and final triumph of righteousness (Rom. 8:29 ff.).

In its affirmations about him the Bible does not set before us simply the fact of God’s personality and stop there; it implements that fact by maintaining centrality for the living God’s personal revelatory disclosure. When John boldly declares “God is love” (1 John 4:8) he is not equating God with some impersonal power; rather he is characterizing the personal God who is the source and norm of all love (1 John 4:16). When he declares that “God is light” (1 John 1:5) he is not reducing deity to some impersonal aspect of the natural universe; rather he is presenting the self-revealing personal God as the source and norm of all light— natural, rational, moral and spiritual.

In attesting the personal self-disclosure of the living God Jesus frequently used the term *theos* in correlation with *pater* (“Father”), or the name Father instead of the term God. Yet few turns in the history of

thought are stranger than the fact that almost from the beginnings of Western secular philosophy worldly-wise scholars have insisted that one must choose between divine personality and divine sovereignty; God is sovereign, but not personal and living, they have argued, or conversely, God is personal and living but not sovereign. All the more ironic is the fact that even Judaism, not because of disbelief but because of excessive reverence, came to avoid the name of Yahweh, so that, as Karl Georg Kuhn remarks, “this name for God continued to exist only as a written symbol, not as a living word.”⁴⁵ No less ironic is the fact that in the mid-1800s Hegelian modernism disputed God’s personality. The living God of the Bible became a conjectural abstraction to be freely manipulated by elitist philosophers.

ENDNOTES

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³Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 300.

⁴Gottfried Quell, “*Theos*: El and Elohim in the Old Testament,” *TDNT* ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 3:89.

⁵Kenneth Hamilton, *To Turn From Idols* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 18.

⁶*Ibid.*, 18 ff.

⁷*Ibid.*, 21.

⁸*Ibid.*, 20.

⁹*Ibid.*, 27 ff.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 33, 34.

¹²*Ibid.*, 14 ff.

¹³*Ibid.*, 20.

- ¹⁴Ibid. , 23.
- ¹⁵Ibid. , 29.
- ¹⁶Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 93.
- ¹⁷Ibid. , 98.
- ¹⁸Ibid. , 98 ff.
- ¹⁹Ibid. , Vol. 1, 94.
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- ²¹Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 93.
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- ²⁸Otto Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949) 105 ff.
- ²⁹Hamilton, *To Turn From Idols*, 40.
- ³⁰Ibid. , 54 ff.
- ³¹Ibid. , 29.
- ³²Ibid. , 31, 32.
- ³³Ibid. , 32.
- ³⁴Ibid. , 39.
- ³⁵Donald J. Wiseman, "Astrology," *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 42.
- ³⁶G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950) 51.
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- ³⁸Ibid. , 67.
- ³⁹Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Commentary," *The Religious Situation: 1968*, ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) 242 ff.
- ⁴⁰Hamilton, *To Turn From Idols*, 12.
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- ⁴²Ibid. , 228.
- ⁴³Ibid. , 134.
- ⁴⁴Ethelbert Stauffer, "Theos," *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 3:100.
- ⁴⁵Karl Georg Kuhn, "Theos," *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 3:93.