

THE DEATH OF GOD

Gabriel Vahanian

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GOD

The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

The Death of God
The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era
By Vahanian, Gabriel
Copyright©1957 by Vahanian, Gabriel
ISBN 13: 978-1-60608-984-2
Publication date 8/31/2009
Previously published by George Braziller, 1957

A MA FAMILLE

*dans l'affection où nous lie
la mémoire de Noëlle*

Acknowledgments

I WISH to take this opportunity to thank all those who—since I borrow or quote from their works—have influenced and shaped my thinking in a manner obvious to the reader: my hope is that this indebtedness to those I cite and sometimes forget to cite is not devious. I also wish to thank those who guided me in the years of my intellectual formation, in particular the late Professor Pierre Maury and Professor Paul Lehmann. My debt to them continues even though fellow students would agree with me that this book is hardly an adequate expression either of what we were taught or of my gratitude.

I am also indebted beyond measure to Professor Paul Ramsey for his painstaking reading of the manuscript and his careful suggestions. I must, however, assume the responsibility for the statements made in this work. Mrs. Marian Maury has rendered me the invaluable service of intelligently editing the final draft.

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Acknowledgments

I have incorporated into this book the following material which has appeared elsewhere. I have reproduced almost in its entirety "This Post-Christian Era" (*The Nation*, December 12, 1959) and quoted from the following: "The God We Deserve" (*The Nation*, February 20, 1960); "The Great Whatever" (*The Nation*, March 7, 1959); "Plea for a New Reformation" (*The Nation*, April 16, 1960); "The Empty Cradle" (*Theology Today*, January, 1957). I gladly record here my thanks to the respective publishers of these magazines for permission to make use again of these articles.

*When Zarathustra was alone he said to his heart:
"Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest
hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!"*

THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA
Friedrich Nietzsche

*To kill God is to become god oneself; it is to realize
already on this earth the eternal life of which the
Gospel speaks.*

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS
Albert Camus

*The god that can be pointed out is an idol, and the
religiosity that makes an outward show is an imper-
fect form of religiosity.*

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT
Søren Kierkegaard

*The most dreadful sort of blasphemy is that of
which "Christendom" is guilty: transforming the
God of Spirit into . . . ludicrous twaddle. And the
stupidest divine worship, more stupid than any-
thing that is or was to be found in paganism, more
stupid than worshiping a stone, an ox, an insect,
more stupid than all that is—to worship under the
name of God . . . a twaddler.*

ATTACK UPON CHRISTENDOM
Søren Kierkegaard

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Preface

OURS is the first attempt in recorded history to build a culture upon the premise that God is dead. The period *post mortem Dei* divides into two distinct eras, roughly at some point between the World Wars. Until that time, the cultural death of God meant something *anti-Christian*; after it and until now, the death of God means something entirely *post-Christian*. The author of this book writes mainly about the latter, and this is his distinct contribution to the analysis of present-day culture. This preface undertakes to speak mainly of the former as *background* for an understanding of *post-Christian* culture and the death of God in the second sense.

To speak of "the death of God" in its anti-Christian meaning is to invoke at once the name of Friedrich Nietzsche, that great genius in pain finally made mad by his perception into the inner meaning of Western culture. With him, still, we have to ask about the death of God.

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There are several stages in the myth Nietzsche tells of why and how God died. First, the many gods had to go. Theirs was not a doleful passing, although what followed was worse. The old deities did not "begloom" themselves to death. Rather, "a good joyful Deity-end had they!" They "*laughed* themselves to death once on a time!" This happened when "the ungodliest utterance came from a God himself"—when "an old grim-beard of a God, a jealous one, forgot himself in such a wise" as to say: "There is but one God! Thou shalt have no other Gods before me!" Then all the Gods "*laughed*, and shook upon their thrones." They exclaimed, "Is it not just divinity that there are Gods but no God?" and then they expired from god-shattering laughter such as only a god can enjoy.¹

The God that remained, according to Nietzsche, had never as much life as they. He could neither laugh nor dance. Obeisance to Him was bound to be culture-destroying; His, the spirit of gravity. The old classical deities had at least the energy bestowed on them by the fact that each was closely identified with the *nisus* of some human need or with some force in nature. The one God was, after all, only a conjecture. Moreover, the rub was that, as a transcendent God, he was a conjecture that reached beyond man's creating will. This Nietzsche wished to estop, in order to liberate the cultural creativity of mankind. "I do not wish your conjecturing to reach beyond your creating will," he wrote.² After the gods made in man's image, the God who proposed to make and remake man in his own image, that God too had to die.

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That is a more unsavory tale to tell. He was too much God-with-us, God in human, all-too-human form. He mixed too much in human affairs, even manifesting himself in this miserable flesh. In a sense, God's fellow-humanity killed him. Such a God must be wholly done to death, Nietzsche believed, else man as he now is would be certified from on high.

Man in his misery and weakness had a hand in this. Such was Nietzsche's vision of "the ugliest man," the epitome of all that should not receive divine endorsement but should be surpassed, "something sitting by the wayside shaped like a man, and hardly like a man, something non-descript." God's all-too-human pity and very un-Godlike demeanor was an offense to modesty. Therefore he had to be slain.

. . . he—*had to die*: he looked with eyes which beheld everything,—he beheld man's depths and dregs, all his hidden ignominy and ugliness.

His pity knew no modesty: he crept into my dirtiest corners. This most prying, over-intrusive, over-pitiful one had to die.

He ever beheld *me*: on such a witness I would have revenge—or not live myself.

The God who beheld everything, *and also man*: that God had to die! Man cannot *endure* that such a witness should live.³

Man could not endure the God who beheld him through and through. So man took "revenge on this witness,"³ and became the murderer of the God who set and besets him in his existence, and does

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not turn away his eyes or refrain from knowing it altogether.

Nietzsche's portrayal of the one atheist who has complete certitude that God is dead was of "the last Pope," now "out of service." He "served that old God until his last hour." He was, so to speak, at the bedside when God breathed his last. Yet even he is not free from the gravity of pious recollections. This may be taken as a symbol of the modern "religiosity," Protestant and Catholic, analyzed so well by the author of the present volume—a religiosity unable quite to forget that God once lived, yet unable to face this modern world and live freely within its culture without attempting to impose extrinsic limits or so-called religious interpretations upon the cultural products of men.

God had to die in order that man might be what he is to become, in order that man may become the unlimited creator of culture. On the one hand, Nietzsche is willing to speak for modern man and say that "if there were a God [in the old sense of divinity], I could not endure not being He." On the other hand, he is the spokesman of modern man in saying that he cannot endure that divinity should exist in its Christian meaning, for man cannot live and work creatively if he endures that such a condescending witness of his existence should himself be alive. This was for Nietzsche the grandeur of man's freedom in exercise even in the midst of his ugliest misery, that he refuses to allow this God to face him, or face with him the task of creating those new worlds man alone wants to

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shoulder. Man cannot be while God lives. He cannot be the self he would create, *or* the self he knows he actually is, while God remains significant in the world where autonomous man dwells. Such was Nietzsche's proposal as to what should be man's mode of being in this world, and his discerning description of man's actual mode of being in the modern period. To be alone in his cultural strength and future achievements, to be alone in his present weakness, and out of weakness to create his own strength by himself calling forth the things that are out of the things that are not—such is the enterprise of Western man in the present day. Therefore God had to die, and in his volume Professor Vahanian undertakes a cultural analysis of some of the laborious "religious" efforts to perform artificial respiration over the corpse. "Without God," Kierkegaard wrote with similar discernment into the present age, "man is [not too weak, but] too strong for himself."⁴ Without God, man is at the same time not too strong but too weak for himself. Attempting to be half with, half without the living God, and without God to have his religiosity still, and being unable to endure the living God, man is too weak for the task he has assumed.

It is important for the reader to know what the author of this book means by the "living" God who until recently still shaped this culture from which he is more and more missing. It is necessary to understand his thesis that "God dies as soon as he becomes a cultural accessory of a human ideal," and that by virtue of "the radical immanentism of

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our cultural religiosity," no one can suppose there is any hope in immanent religion for the revival of God—no one, that is, who knows what was ever meant by the living God as the premise of all the cultural works of man. A modern man who still believed in God, Pascal, expressed thoughts pertinent to this problem. His statement of radical Christian monotheism simply repeats God's living relation to man which offended Nietzsche so deeply, and which modern religiosity also—in the author's definition of it—is far from believing under its many disguises:

The Christian religion . . . teaches men these two truths; that there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him. It is equally important to men to know both these points; and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it. The knowledge of only one of these points gives rise either to the pride of philosophers, who have known God, and not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness, but not the Redeemer . . . We can have an excellent knowledge of God without that of our own wretchedness, and of our own wretchedness without that of God. But we cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing at the same time both God and our own wretchedness.⁵

This understanding of the living God shapes our understanding of the God who is now really absent. This denial men have made from at least the start (xviii)

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of the modern period; and we are now beginning to act accordingly. We are beginning also to know in political and cultural terms what that denial means, as all along we might have known from the clairvoyance of many great minds who either urged or regretted the event of the living God's demise.

To speak of "the death of God" calls to mind the names of other great men. Dostoevski (whom Nietzsche referred to as "the only psychologist from whom I have learned anything") and the central figures in his novels: Roskolnikov, the door of the *acte gratuit* to see whether he could "step over barriers or not" in *Crime and Punishment*; Kirillov in *The Possessed* who expressed the fact that "the highest point of my self-will is to kill myself with my own hands . . . without any cause at all" but "to prove in the highest point my independence and my new terrible freedom," and the revolutionaries in that same novel, and particularly their theoretician Shigalov, who starting from unlimited freedom came inexorably to unlimited despotism and boundless submission, and to "the last new principle of general destruction for the sake of the ultimate good"; and Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who was the epitome of Euclidian reason in morality, which led logically in Ivan to the view that all things are permitted, and actually in his half-brother to the murder of their lecherous old father. Albert Camus, who documents the occurrence of all that Dostoevski foresaw when in *The Rebel* he traces the steps from deicide to regicide to humanicide to conscientious murder or suicide

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and to boundless slavery and immorality without limits; and who declares forthrightly that "the philosophy of the age of enlightenment finally led to the Europe of the black-out."⁶ One could mention also de Lubac's *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*⁷ which demonstrates what was so plain from the beginning in the case in Nietzsche, that atheism in the West is not simply non-theism but *anti*-theism and moreover that it is *anti*-Christ in its innermost meaning.

The contemporary age *post mortem Dei*, however, is not so much *anti*-Christian as *post*-Christian though still religious. "Where the world has not become an object of God's attack little remains but frosty discussion of God as Creator,"⁸ and self-elected efforts to put ourselves in touch with him by means of conjectures thrown upon the blank screen of being that is said to be ultimate. This also means: where God has become a *datum* (sought, found, or missed) and not a living *mandatum*, little remains of vital significance for human affairs. Not that we do not have gods, and to spare. Like the *pre*-Christian Athenians, we *post*-Christians are a very religious people. Pale shadows of the pagan dieties—of sex and hearth, and battle, and of the city, civilization, and the outer spaces—have in fact returned to prevail over us. Such is the result of the, as yet, undissolved synthesis between divine and human creativity which the author of this book calls religiosity. "Men stand round in a circle and suppose," Robert Frost wrote, "while the secret sits in the middle and knows." Amid all this solemn
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supposing, the author speaks for what W. K. Clifford once called, "the still small voice that murmurs 'fiddlesticks.'"

While asking whether religiosity offers any hope of reviving God in this post-Christian era, Mr. Vahanian has a secondary theme close to his elbow as he writes. This is the question whether without the living God there can possibly be a fully human culture. A most intriguing thing about this book is the fact that the author seems to answer this question in the affirmative. To a large extent he goes with this age in accepting the complete autonomy of various spheres of culture. This culture is analytically described as resting on radical immanentism and not radical monotheism. It is no longer *anti*-God. In the *anti*-Christian phase of "the death of God," men were still determined culturally by "pious recollections"—recollections of a dead God who was still the mirror-image of the living Christ. In the *post*-Christian phase of "the death of God," Western man is post-Christian *culturally* as well as theologically. Atheism is not only a theoretical claim made by exceptional rebels; it is now also a *practical* possibility for countless men. The possibility of a practical and cultural atheism has been achieved in this *post*-Christian age in the independence and immanentism of all spheres of culture—including, in the author's opinion, religion. Find yourself and you will not need God; accomplish something in culture and evidently God is superfluous.

"The last Pope out of service" yet still not free

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from the gravity of pious recollections, is the proper symbol for the religiosity of the first phase of the death of God—a religiosity which secretly did not count on the living God yet was not quite able to let go of him altogether. What can serve, we may ask, as a fit symbol for the religiosity of the second and culturally *post-Christian* phase? Perhaps the picture Camus draws of two humanists, each “disclaiming divinity” as they prepare some historical action or cultural work: “They shall understand how they correct one another, and that a limit, under the sun, shall curb them all. *Each tells the other that he is not God.*”⁹ Such was Camus’ vision of a culture based on the intrinsic self-creativity and intrinsic self-moderation that would be forthcoming if all human life were made an *art*. While one humanist says this to another rather genially, half-humorously and without the dynamism of rebellion that affected the first modern men, there is here still too much memory of God for this fully to express the *post-Christian* period as Vahanian sees it. God is far more dead. The *present* religiosity simply does not understand the meaning of faith in the living God or of powerful rebellion.

And the *present* culture has achieved its autonomy and does not raise the question. It is based on the final achievement of the death of God now forgotten. *Post-Christian* culture is therefore a genuine possibility because it is an actuality. While the author may be mistaken in believing (if I do not misread him) that a culture based on the death of God can finally succeed in the attempt, (xxii)

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certainly his fine sensitivity for the cultural achievements of modern man enables him to see that many if not most or all revivals of religion in the present day seek to impose illegitimate limits on man's freedom to face the modern world and live freely within this culture.

I have chosen, however, in introducing the reader to this book, to prepare him for a most startling assertion in it: that since Christianity "universalized" and made relevant to the cultures of many nations the living God of the one people of Israel, the idea of "the death of God" is a purely Christian notion. "The irony of the cultural tradition of Christianity," Vahanian writes, is that "it has bequeathed us the idea of the death of God." The fact that "the missing God" is the missing Christ, or that modern atheistic humanism must be anti-Christian humanism, is evident everywhere in Sartre. This can be seen in the fundamental categories of his system of thought—indeed, in the very terms he uses—which apparently are designed to replace precisely the concept of the only living God, who is missing from modern Western culture. It is patent that since ('tis said) the living God of Israel was so much alive that he could become man and know him altogether, without any loss to his divine life, it has proved culturally impossible to "exclude God the Father" without a program for first excluding God the Son. Christ is the Word, and knowledge even, of that God who cannot longer be allowed in the land of the living.

This book, however, consists of straightforward

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cultural analysis of the religious, political, artistic, literary, and societal movements of our era. This is an unhesitating, unflinching analysis of an age which, Vahanian believes, has no concern even to deny God. Every revival of Christianity in the past three hundred years has revived less of it, and each was less and less an enduring revival. Religion has become acculturated—adjusted to what was lost, to a world in which God is admitted only as a lack. The efforts of theologians and philosophers, as well as of other leaders in our intellectual and cultural life, to reshape this age from within its presuppositions, are examined and found wanting. For all these efforts, our culture remains—in Sartre's phrase—a lack lacking.

Moreover, there is an increasing population on the periphery or wholly outside the Western lineage: beat Zen, square Zen, and Zen Zen, and hotel lobby religions of all sorts but one. An awareness of this fringe segment of our culture implies no lack of human feeling for the spiritual plight of countless people, or insensitivity to the difficulty of opening windows toward an ultimate heaven in this urbanized and mechanistic society. One cannot but regard all this as a breakdown of tradition that is without parallel. As weapons technology and military hardware (based on the one distinctive accomplishment of modern Western man: his science) went precipitately "from the wheel to the whoosh,"¹⁰ so Western religious faith has proceeded, and with this our culture itself, from the living God to a "whoosh." Modern man has not the

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power in himself to be a Captain Ahab—if, indeed, Ahab was. It is more and more impossible for us even to curse God and to mean what we say because we have lost the meaning of the cipher God—the living God—who may have us in his clutches. Were we at all like Ahab, we might have some ground for supposing that a new age of faith may yet dawn.

Professor Vahanian finds no evidence for such a conclusion from his analysis of the ingredients of an immanently religious culture. The evidence points only to a God who once lived and whose reality cannot be recovered from within this post-Christian culture. For God to be meaningfully dead he had to have been once meaningfully alive. The author of this book is apt to disagree with this, but it seems to me that it is still the case that the premise of contemporary culture (except in the sphere of autonomous science) is not merely the absence of theistic presuppositions, but the real absence of a God who formerly lived and had his dealings with men. It means “the death of God” still present. Probing still more deeply, the author questions whether such a God was livingly present to the so-called Christendom of medieval culture. This, if true, would mean that he was long a-dying—not so much by the rebellion and revulsion that have characterized the resolute atheists of the modern period, as by each stage of apparently triumphant interpenetration of a so-called Christian culture making him an appendage of man’s cultural work and institutions. In any case, by “the death of

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God" the author has in mind a decisive turning away from the notion of the biblical Deity.

The author's analysis may seem to reach strictly negative conclusions. This will surprise many readers who note that he is a professor of religion and that his is the Protestant persuasion. But the apparent negativity of the conclusions drawn from this cultural analysis has itself to be strictly understood. A discerning reader need not have it pointed out that the author's own convictions may not be those of the period he examines, much less that he believes that God can in reality be slain, for all the magnificent modern Western attempt to do this. He simply refuses to credit the excessively endorsed protests that Lo, here and Lo, there He is alive, when the religious fingers point to much worship and devotion going on. The worship goes on, it is true, but to deities that are the product of the fertile mind of man—which Calvin called a perfect factory of idolatry—and who have only such life as their identity with man's cultural vitality bestows on them.

Not improperly, therefore, I may draw upon two astounding footnotes which Sartre drops in the course of his ontological analysis of man's mode of being in a world in which God is dead, to indicate Vahanian's mind on the subject of the age he unpacks in the course of this volume. One may doubt whether Sartre has any basis for saying any such thing. Still it is remarkable that he wrote, toward the end of his own relentless analysis: "These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be (xxvi)

achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here"; and earlier: "... this supposes a self-recovery of being . . . [which] we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here."¹¹ One cannot imagine what sort of radical transformation of man's existence from the one he describes, Sartre may have had in mind. In any case, the promise remains unfulfilled.

The broad outlines of Vahanian's more positive analysis of a possible very human and very theocentric culture are clear, even if quite properly he refrains from discussing this here. He would certainly hold that gods that are conjectures reaching only a bit beyond man's cultural enterprises and drawing their life from this, are not transcendent enough to be living gods; and at the same time that every attempt of any age to be religious in this way bestows just enough life upon such deities for them in turn to prove inhumanly oppressive and to suck up into themselves the wellsprings of cultural creativity from which they spring by an immanent act of God-creation. In contrast, the transcendent God who lives his own life and creates man in his own image already has deity enough and is in no need of extrinsically limiting man's cultural life. From afar he can be unobtrusively near in the midst of man's work in culture. Only a living God can let man live, allowing him room to express himself and preserving him and all his accomplishments as wholly other than himself. The question is not whether God exists, but whether *man is*, and is a free creator of culture.

It was the living God, wholly unconstrained and

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unhurried in his eternity, who said, Let there be light, saw then that this was so, and judged it to be a splendid thing in its own right. Only a living God can say: Let man be. Idols exact a greater tribute whenever man lets them be. Only a God who from afar faces human culture leaves room for human action freely facing toward him and toward unfettered cultural enterprises. This ground for the self-recovery of modern man (precisely not a *self*-recovery but still a recovery of self in the midst of his cultural history), the description of which has no place here, must wait for the book Professor Vahanian has in him to write on "Protestantism and the Arts" or "Protestantism and Culture." If he does this, he will walk the narrow ridge between every form of religious heteronomy prejudicial to culture on the one hand and, on the other, an assertive humanistic autonomy on which (it is about time we drew the proper conclusion from the now long drawn-out attempt) it is not possible to build a culture worthy of the name, but only an inhumane civilization.

Professor Vahanian obviously prefers the independent cultural creations of an age from which even the memory of God has disappeared, to an age in which everything has to be stained with a little religiosity. He wants no going back to a "Christian culture" even if that were possible. Contemporary men should banish nostalgia and freely engage in the cultural enterprises of this present age premised as it is on the death of God. It is not impossible that fundamentally the freedom to
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go with this culture in its independence may be the only way to go with a God who is at all a living God. For the "living" God means the "freedom" of God. The radical freedom of God in his own transcendent life apart from man means that man has room to breathe. It also means that God is free to be inexpressibly near without driving human freedom out of the world or derogating upon the form or the substance of man's cultural creativity. It may be that by freely engaging in the production of a humanistic culture, a new approach (to speak improperly) will be found to the free and living God. Or to speak more properly: only in the course of free and originating cultural action is He to be expected, and not by the revival of some dead cultural god of the past. Amid a *de*-divinized historical epoch God may be found to be alive. At least, this is more to be expected than that God can become alive in a *re*-divinized culture.

PAUL RAMSEY

Princeton University

Christmas, 1960.