
Editorial

by Harold B. Kuhn

There is always an element of risk involved in an attempt to characterize movements of thought prevalent in brief periods of time, such as decades. At the same time, major thought currents are frequently capable of being isolated and defined. The period now known as “the sixties” appears in retrospect to have been marked by theological developments which have a common denominator, at least of sorts.

Theologians of the sixties of non-evangelical circles seem to have made common cause in assuming for themselves radical independence from norms which have traditionally guided theological thought and elaboration. Three major forms of liberal religious development appeared, each being taken very seriously by its respective advocates, and each being time-bound in a manner which seemingly foreordained it to a short life-span.

The theology of hope offered promise of building a bridge between “liberal” forms of theology and evangelicalism. In a real sense, this theological form survived the sixties but shortly blended into other and seemingly alien shapes. The God-is-dead movement, which was in reality a quasi-religious phenomenon centering in the motif of mortality, came and went. It affirmed, in its radical form as expressed by Thomas J. J. Altizer, God’s ontological demise and was so bizarre that it soon degenerated into a faddist and paperback theology.

Paul Van Buren’s attempt to rescue it in terms of the assertion that God-language was archaic and obsolete, and in this sense God was “dead,” had no success. The movement as a whole shortly collapsed of its own weight, lacking even any visible connection with the growing secularity of the period.

The rise of “theologies of secularity” got off to a spectacular start with the publication of Harvey G. Cox’ *The Secular City*. Best-seller

Dr. Harold B. Kuhn is Editor of The Asbury Seminarian and Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Asbury Theological Seminary.

response gave status to an attempt to place a halo upon the brow of "technopolitan man." Secularity was asserted to be the inevitable historical outcome of the application of Christianity to culture, and we were urged to welcome the technopolitan man, with all of his worldliness and his "profaneness," as typical for a new age.

The faddist character of this "theology" soon became apparent, and before the end of the sixties, new concerns, such as the alleged need for play and jubilation as qualities of the "religious" life, appeared. Little out of the typical factors marking this disarray of the theology of the period seemed capable of survival.

The seventies showed little prospect of bringing order from the theological chaos which it inherited from the previous decade. The informal acceptance of the secular world as normative for the erection of theologies now became institutionalized. The catchword became, the church must "take her agenda from the world." Conciliar bodies sought to embody this theme in a reordering of priorities, and especially a restructuring of missions in terms foreign to the Great Commission.

The theology of hope seemed also to get lost in the so-called Christian-Marxist Dialogue. Continental thinkers seemed to hope that a bridge might be erected, on the basis of such a theology, with the Marxist world. In some circles, at least, this was seen as a ploy. Latin American avant-garde theologians saw little "hope" in the movement.

The seventies has been a period of proliferation of liberation theologies. Starting from the viewpoint of disadvantaged groups, national thinkers sought to shape the Gospel into a force which would harness national or regional Christian forces to social and economic amelioration. Today we see a variety of such "theologies," women's liberation, black liberation, Latin-American liberation and latterly Asian liberation theologies. These types of theological formulation grow out of regional needs and concerns and show a sensitivity to local conditions.

If there be a common denominator for this variegated pattern of "theologies," it is that of a need for redefining historic Christian theology in terms of local and regional situations. Traditional Christianity is frequently regarded to be the tool of the oppressor — a charge which is not without some validity. The common weakness of the "liberation" theologies seems to be the assumption that theology can be "done" rather than developed from revelation.

Editorial

Those who hoped that the disarray in which much of theological thinking found itself in the sixties would be corrected in the seventies have found little grounds for satisfaction. It is true that the forms of theology which replaced the far-out and bizarre movements of radical secularity have proved to be more need-centered and nearer to the crying problems of the world. But the disarray and lack of overall conformity to historic Christian norms continues not only to exist, but as well, to intrigue the dwellers of theological academe.

Could it be that the laypersons and non-elite in the Church are becoming increasingly skeptical of the leadership which they are receiving from the top, particularly from the seminaries and the schools of religion? Is it possible that these, reacting against the disarray and lack of coherence in the conventional liberal theological wisdom, may in the eighties take things into their own hands? The Sisyphean nature of those who “do theology” apart from historic Christian norms becomes increasingly evident. Should not evangelicals be praying earnestly that a new direction may be found in the mainline churches, in which the “Thus saith the Lord” may once again be taken with great seriousness as Christian faith is articulated for our time? ■