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DIEVO MIRTIES TEOLOGIJA KAIP EMANCIPACINIS MĄSTYMAS

Death of God Theology as Emancipatory Thinking¹

SUMMARY

The article analyzes Death of God theology as an emancipatory way of thinking relevant to the contemporary context. Stressing the historicity of the Christian message, Death of God theology rests upon the premise that the world has come of age. On the one hand, it attempts to interpret the Christian message without any religious elements, on the other, it claims that the negation of transcendence and the immediate givenness, historicity and eschatological orientation towards the future are the essence of Christianity. If the contemporary cultural situation is also treated as givenness, the message of these theologians is an invitation to negate the contemporary *status quo* while not returning to the previous forms of thinking and being and not self-closing in an ahistorical shell.

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Dievo mirties teologija kaip šiuolaikiniame kultūriname kontekste aktualus emancipacinio mąstymo būdas. Akcentuodama krikščioniškosios žinios istoriškumą, Dievo mirties teologija atsiremia į prielaidas apie šiuolaikinio pasaulio „nereligioškumą“. Viena vertus, ji siekia aiškinti krikščioniškąją žinią be religinių priemaišų, kita vertus, teigia, kad transcendencijos ir bet kokios netarpiškos duotybės neigimas, istoriškumas ir eschatologinė orientacija į ateitį yra krikščionybės esmė. Esamą kultūrinę situaciją laikant dar viena duotybe, šių teologų skelbiamą žinią galima suvokti kaip tokią, kuri siūlo neigti esamą *status quo* negrįžtant nei į ankstesnes mąstymo ir buvimo formas, nei užsidarant aistoriniame kiaute.

INTRODUCTION

Death of God theology, *L'Enfant terrible* of the religious thinking of the 1960s

USA, still attains ambiguous evaluation. Even disregarding the silence or the ab-

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Dievo mirties teologija, krikščionybė, transcendencija, emancipacija, neigimas.

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solute rejection by the conservative wing, views on it are still divergent. Some treated Death of God theology, the main proponents of which were Thomas J. J. Altizer, Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton, and Gabriel Vahanian, as only a product of the spirit of the 1960s or that it was still an expression of the modern Grand Narrative and a logical consequence of liberal Protestantism, Barthian Neo-orthodoxy and Bultmannian demythologization (Tracy 2000: 240–241). Others think that it was the first proper wave of radical theology, which goes hand in hand with the contemporary world and has emancipatory purposes as its essence (Robbins & Crockett 2015: 2). This article will not only support the latter point of view, it will develop it further: Death of God theology will be analyzed as emancipatory theological thinking dealing with the contemporary Western world, which, according to Alain Badiou, can be treated as paralyzing any emancipatory thinking (Badiou 2013: xiv–xv).

Although the death of Death of God theology was proclaimed even in the times of its peak in popularity (Leavitt Pearl & Rodkey 2018: 55), this way of thinking finds its place not only in the '60s. Firstly, some contemporary authors find it relevant for the postmodern, post-secular situation. Secondly, the most famous proponent of Death of God school, Altizer, transformed his ideas for the

interpretation of the situation of the 21st century and emphasized the continuity between the original Death of God theology of the '60s and his contemporary theological thinking (Altizer 2002: x).

However, can this theology be treated as emancipatory thinking? There are a few aspects that seem problematic. Firstly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who is usually regarded as the main precursor of this school (and whose life is a perfect example of resistance), wrote that the boundaries between resistance and submission are unclear (Bonhoeffer 1959: 104–105). Hamilton asserts that Death of God theology is a manifestation of the bright and hopeful spirit of the '60s. Moreover, he claims that a contemporary Christian must not be an anti-bourgeois, individualistic person, contrary – the concept of rebellion and the praise of it common to the culture of the late 19th century – the first part of the 20th century has already staled (Hamilton 1966: 38). Altizer, although he stresses negativity, nevertheless invites us to accept the historical necessity of the present, which is described as the time of stasis and impossibility of rebellion (Altizer 2012: 25). However, these questions do not lead to the rejection of the emancipatory potential of Death of God theology; they lead to the reconsideration of the question of emancipation that is relevant in the contemporary philosophical context.

RELIGION AND “RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY”

The basic introductory premise for Death of God theology was formulated

by Bonhoeffer: the world has come of age. Bonhoeffer shared Bultmannian and

Tillichian concern about the relevance of the Christian message to the contemporary world (and Death of God school only radicalizes this concern) and claimed that world does not need God as a working hypothesis anymore. It is unnecessary neither as a link for the explanation of the world, nor as the filler of human emptiness (Bonhoeffer 1959: 124).

According to Vahanian, whose book *Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian era* is considered the first text of Death of God theology (Long 1999: 52) and the primary link between Bonhoeffer and Death of God theology, religion “only serves to fill the vacuum created by the breakdown of man’s understanding of himself and his relation to the universe and to the human community; ... is an expression of sublimated loneliness” (Vahanian 1961: 4). The essence of Christianity is not the concept of God-filler (this was common to the religious side of Christian theology from scholasticism to existential theology), therefore, the Christian message can be reinterpreted in the contemporary context without religious elements.

The idea of religionless Christianity, stemming from Bonhoeffer, is accepted by all Death of God theologians. But it is not only Bonhoeffer’s idea; it can be derived from Søren Kierkegaard, George Hegel, and Immanuel Kant. Among these three authors Hegel is the most important philosopher for Death of God school. For Hegel, religion, as art and philosophy, is the negation of the immediate givenness; it has emancipatory potential

in a specific historical time and context. But historically emancipatory power of religion has already vanished; it has become a conservative structure (Hegel 2010: 124; 735). Death of God theologians, while accepting Hegelian historicity, also accept his approach to religion.

Nevertheless, what makes Christianity exceptional among other religions? Altizer emphasizes its eschatological character. Instead of longing for the lost paradise, for the primordial, Christianity proclaimed *Absolute Novum*:

the very symbol of absolute novum was born in Christianity, a symbol originally enacted in Jesus’ proclamation of the advent of the Kingdom of God... Hence original Christianity was a revolutionary movement towards an absolutely new future, as for the first time a movement was born that was wholly and totally directed towards an absolutely new future, and only after this birth does there arise an actual movement towards a truly new future in history itself (Altizer 2002: 9).

This means that Christianity in its essence is progressive and directed towards the future in its pure sense. All past forms of religious Christianity that emphasize stable tradition, ecclesiastical order, and an unchanging concept of God and world betray the essence of the Christian message. The progressive element is also the axis of the emancipatory essence of Christianity. According to Altizer and the others, it is directly connected with the second premise of Death of God theology – negation of transcendence.

NEGATION OF TRANSCENDENT GOD

Negation of transcendence or the proclamation of Death of God is an aspect which conjoins all the authors of Death of God theology. However, the meaning of Death of God varies.

For Vahanian, the loss of transcendent power mainly means its disappearance from culture (Vahanian 1961: 7–8). He claims the victory of the secularized, post-Christian worldview:

Our culture is no longer transcendentalist but immanentist; no longer sacral or sacramental, but secularistic or profane. This transition is explained by the fact that the essentially mythological world-view of Christianity has been succeeded by a thoroughgoing scientific view of reality, in terms of which either God is no longer necessary, or he is neither necessary nor unnecessary: he is irrelevant, he is dead (*ibid.*: xxxii).

This statement is significant, although not only does it not look very different from Bonhoeffer's, but it also resembles Rudolf Bultmann's or Karl Barth's ideas. Culture is secular, but, according to Barthian Neo-orthodoxy, a Christian must not seek God in culture as Christianity and Christendom are separate things; Barth "makes the world atheistic" (Prozsky 1981: 49). Human must not seek God anywhere, as God is absolutely transcendent, and it is in his initiative to call a human. Nevertheless, here one of the main divergent points between earlier Protestant theology and Death of God school arises: the Christian message is inseparable from culture – "culture is as relevant to religion as the earth was to Adam's sweat" (Vahanian 1961: 161).

This idea is implicit in Bonhoeffer's letters, but it appears more explicitly in Vahanian's *Death of God* and is generally accepted by later Death of God theologians as one of the basic premises. Here Hegelian mediation overcomes Kierkegaardian difference, and nothing is left unmediated: transcendence is swallowed by immanence. That is why Vahanian states that "God's absence, or the death of God itself, has become what a man directly experiences" (*ibid.*: 187). There is nothing beyond immanent culture.

Hamilton and Van Buren develop these ideas in different ways. The former refers to God's absence, ultimately held on by Barthian Neo-orthodoxy: "this God, we used to say, will never let us go. But he has, or we have him, or something..." (Hamilton 1966a: 35). Hamilton concludes, that "my Protestant has no God, has no faith in God, and affirms both the death of God and the death of all the forms of theism". (*ibid.*: 37). Van Buren's negative diagnosis rests upon the premise that our age is empirically based (Van Buren 1969: 17). Using the methods of logical positivism and in the same way as other Death of God theologians seeking for the meaning of the Christian message for contemporary people, he analyzes not only the sources of theological culture of the 20th century (Bultmann, Schubert M. Ogden), but also the Gospel. Van Buren arrives at the conclusion, that "the problem of the Gospel in a secular age is a problem of the logic of its apparently meaningless language" (*ibid.*: 84).

If Bonhoeffer, Vahanian, Van Buren and Hamilton can be named non-literal

proclaimers of death of God (Lyas 1970: 2), Altizer is partly different. On the one hand, for him the absence of transcendence seems to refer to the cultural situation. On the other, he asserts, that “the Christian God belongs to Christendom” (Altizer 1966: 13). God as the transcendent has truly died firstly in the Incarnation, then in the Crucifixion, then in culture (Altizer 1966b: 54; 136). Here Altizer becomes more radical than his colleagues Hamilton or Van Buren. The latter ones avoid an essentialistic way of writing. Hamilton starts *The New Essence of Christianity* with revealing his intention that he “would not deliver the essence, once and for all, but rather an essence here and now for us – always ready to be corrected” (Hamilton 1966b: 12). Van Buren initiates *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* with words, that “we have no Archimedean point from which to make any final decisions about Christianity” (Van Buren 1969: xxiii). Altizer is also an anti-essentialistic author, however, he explicitly accepts Hegelian negativity (*kenosis*) as the essence of his thinking and as the essence of Christianity. That is why he claims that the negation of transcendence is the essence of the Gospel. Incarnation is the event in which transcendence actually becomes immanence (there is no transcendent, eternal, over-historical Godhead left after the Incarnation as the Incarnation is the event in which God transforms himself,

not some part of him), Crucifixion and Resurrection are the events in which sacred transforms into profane, history of the Christendom is the actualization, Kingdom of God is the completion of these processes (Altizer 1966b: 41; 54). Unlike in religious thinking, in Christianity immanence is not an illusory state; it is real. There is nothing beyond immanence, therefore, time and history are real. All previous forms of Christian theology and philosophy that keep ideas about the presence of the transcendent God are derived from Neo-Platonism and they all abandon the dialectical (real) meaning of the Gospel (Altizer 1966b: 42; Van Buren 1969: 40).

It can also be seen that the death of the transcendent God is treated as the Good News. It is the event of the liberation of Man from the transcendent authority. Van Buren interprets the figure of Jesus Christ as a completely free man who is the liberator of others for “being free for one’s neighbor” (Van Buren 1969: 163). Hamilton claims, that Christianity teaches to rebel against the Father (Hamilton 1966b: 140–141) and to move away from the cloister to the world (Hamilton 1966a: 36). Altizer stresses the joy that comes from the death of God (Altizer 1966b: 51). Incarnation is the first step towards liberation, Crucifixion is the beginning of its completion; the event in which a human being finally stands up on his own two feet.

NEGATION OF UNMEDIATED INDIVIDUALITY

If negation of the transcendent God can easily be treated as an emancipatory idea, it is more complicated with the ab-

soluteness of immanent mediation, culture. This aspect is the point where the perspectives of religious existentialism

and Death of God theology part ways. The latter appears as post-existentialist thinking, in which there are lots of references to the texts of the religious existentialists (Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, Bultmann, etc.), however, their ideas are dialectically negated.

Religious existentialism, initiated by Kierkegaard, claims the concrete historical self-caring human existence to be at its center. Nevertheless, it is also based on the idea of ontological individuality of concrete human existence. Ontological individuality is due to the individual's relationship with the transcendent God. This relationship and the human's ontological individuality can only be actualized by faith, which is ungraspable by any kind of mediation. This leads to the conclusion that neither God, neither the relationship, nor the individual are graspable by any kind of mediation; they overcome culture and history. The individual is transcendental to culture; the individual is over-historical.

Death of God theologians accuse religious existentialism of being "semi-existential because no dialectical theologian has been open to a contemporary form of Existenz" (Altizer 1966a: 10). Van Buren claims, that Bultmann "in binding faith to a particular incident in the distant past, has retained a mythological element which violates "modern man's "self-understanding" (Van Buren 1969: 9). He continues, that faith always involves reason, "for Christian faith is inseparably related to history, and history requires reasoning" (*ibid.*: 175). Hamilton agrees with such critique while adding that an open break with culture, common for existentialists, may be contrary

to the main principles of Christianity (Hamilton 1966b: 148) as Christian life "is a going out into the world. The self is discovered, but only incidentally, as one moves out into the world to tear off the masks" (Hamilton 1966a: 49).

Altizer's arguments against religious existentialism are interconnected with those of other Death of God theologians. While accepting the historical value of religious existentialism (it revealed that faith is only possible by negating Church authority and dogmas), he claims, that such thinkers "have clung to a non-dialectical dualism" (Altizer 1966: 147) where faith and the individual are "isolated from history, faith is independent of a historical ground, and thus totally autonomous" (*ibid.*: 10). That is why an individual who has fully actualized his ontological individuality – Kierkegaard's knight of faith – is out of time and space; it is an abstraction (*ibid.*: 124). The biggest danger of resting upon dualisms of religious existentialism (society vs. individual, culture vs. individual, reason vs. faith) now is the isolation which Altizer names Gnosticism – "a profound hatred of the world and the existence in the world ... a world-opposing form of faith in quest of a salvation that can be reached ... only by the most radical kind of world-negation" (*ibid.*: 19). In a post-modern, post-structuralistic way, Altizer proposes, that "ours is a time when the individual person has disappeared, or at least that form of the person has passed away which was a peculiar creation of the Western culture and society" (Altizer 1966: 14).

All this shows that Death of God theologians treat religious existentialism

(and any kind of thinking that rests upon the unmediated ontological individual) as over. It used to hold emancipatory power but became “one of the fashionable ideologies for the Eisenhower period in American intellectual life” and

“more and more turned man to his inner world, leaving behind the outer world” (Hamilton 1966a: 158). From the perspective of Death of God theologians, it has drowned all its emancipatory potential in the illusory innerness of the subject.

EMANCIPATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

If the transcendent realm (God and individuality) is negated, does it mean that Death of God theology invites us to the passive acceptance of the historical necessity of our age and the abolition of negation? Transcendence used to be the source of negation of the givenness, but now it does not seem to be so.

Death of God theology, if we see it rooted in the late modernity (the 1960s) and limited to its chronological borders, may seem silent about these questions. However, Altizer’s texts prove this is not the case. Continuing the line from the ‘60s he writes about the postmodern era, which he treats as a neoconservative time, where the new Father emerges. The new Father who proclaims pluralism, multiplicity, the end of the subject, history, art, truth, emancipation, etc. (Altizer 2002: vii; Badiou 2002: liii–lv).

Death of God theologians emphasize the eschatological proclamation of Kingdom of God, an absolutely new reality, as one of the main aspects of Christianity (Altizer 2002: 9). In the contemporary context it would mean not the passive acceptance of the historical necessity, but the negation of the postmodern conservatism of our age. “We must rebel against the father, and against everything for which the father is a symbol: the past, tradition, authority as coercive,

even religion and the church” (Hamilton 1966b: 140). However, negation does not mean the return to the previous forms of resistance and emancipation (existentialist, modernist), also it is not an escape from the historical reality to the Gnostic ahistorical shell. Analogies can be found in the relation between German Idealism and Kant: idealists negate Kantian dualisms while taking them into consideration, not trying to avoid them and not returning to the previous ways of thinking. Death of God theologians can be criticized for not providing actual content of the negation: they do not explain how to act “here and now” or what does “authentic historic existence” mean. Nevertheless, is not the emphasis on form instead of content an aspect very particular to the Christian message? And is not the unclear relation between rebellion and conformity the same as the relation between eschatological waiting and acting also what remains indefinable up to this day? Emphasis on form instead of content gives a lot of space for freedom and responsibility for the individual and for the group to negate the givenness and to create new content. That is why Death of God theology, proclaiming the emancipatory Good News, can be treated as remaining faithful to the Gospel.

CONCLUSIONS

The article has revealed Death of God theology to be an emancipatory way of thinking. Resting upon the ideas that the contemporary world has come of age, that Christianity is able to be religionless, and that historicity is one of the main elements of Christianity (Christian message is never separate from culture and historicity), Death of God theologians claim that the essence of Christianity is emancipatory. It is because of orientation towards the future and proclamation of the Kingdom of God – absolutely new reality. Emancipation

means the negation of the transcendent God and of any kind of immediate givenness while not falling into an ahistorical transcendent shell (God or individuality): such aspects leave human being only in the immanent sphere, provide freedom and self-responsibility. If the contemporary cultural situation is seen as the one which paralyzes any possibilities of emancipatory thinking, Death of God theology proclaims the negation of this situation without returning to the previous forms of culture and without escaping to ahistoricity.

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Endnotes

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