

## Article

# The Death of God as a Turn to Radical Theology: Then and Now

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**Abstract:** This article begins with a short reconstruction of the long-forgotten Death of God movement and its development of the concept of a Radical Theology during the 1960s in the United States of America and in Western Germany (The “Death of God” as a Signature of Secular Culture). In my view, protestant theology and the church have thus far failed to discuss Nietzsche’s proclamation of the “Death of God” as a genuine signature of modernity in a constructive way. In refusing the debate, they did not see the theological potential of the diagnostic and ambiguous metaphor “Death of God” as a “tremendous event still on its way”. With regard to a current perspective on Radical Theology (The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism and the Renaissance of Radical Theology), the intention is a creative and radical interpretation of this heretical concept as a step towards a modern religiosity after (the Death of) God which includes a new awareness of the finitude of human life and of its limitations. The theological symbol of the “Death of God” in my concept of “Heretical Religiosity” leads to a new approach to the theology of wisdom as symbolized in the Hebrew Bible by the book of Ecclesiastes (Heretical Religiosity: Radical Theology and Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Bible).

**Keywords:** secular society; death of God-theology; Nietzsche; Theology after Auschwitz; religious fundamentalism; wisdom literature

“Is God dead?”<sup>1</sup> This question appeared in bright red letters on the otherwise black front page of the US magazine *Time* on 8th April 1966.<sup>2</sup> The cover story *Is God dead? Toward a hidden God* (Elson 1966) by John T. Elson (1931–2009) was published, ironically, on Good Friday, and for a short period of time attracted great media attention towards a theological movement in the United States of America.<sup>3</sup> In the most dazzling and momentary debate of theology’s recent history, it was the theologians, and not the critics of religion, agnostics, or atheists, who proclaimed ‘God’s death’ in ‘God’s own country’. By the end of 1965, journalists had already discovered this new theological movement of Christian atheism and called it “The ‘God is Dead’ Movement” (Christian Atheism 1965): “that set off the flurry”.<sup>4</sup> However, national radio and television, commentaries, sermons, and church magazines did not report on this ‘sensation’ until shortly after the cover story had been published in 1966. In short: “Nineteen sixty-six was a difficult year for God” (Peterson 2014, p. 1). Although a great number of “quickie books” (Dorrien 2006, p. 215) have been published about this event, a comprehensive theological review of ‘God-is-dead-theology’ and a history of its reception is lacking to this day.<sup>5</sup> The theologians whose texts and thought experiments had triggered this debate were initially overwhelmed by the rapid development and being labeled as the “‘God is dead’-movement”, “‘God-is-dead’-theology”, or “‘Death of God theology’”. However, their concerns were more diverse than these journalistic labels may indicate. According to my foundational thesis, the rapidly developing process of secularization that brought upon the loss of theistic faith conceals the existential attunement of a crisis of meaning in the current age. This crisis reaches its climactic expression in Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous phrase “Gott ist tot!”<sup>6</sup> [God is dead], which *Time*’s front page alludes to. In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche had his “mad man” exclaim: “Gott ist tot! Gott bleibt tot! Und wir haben ihn getödtet” Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder?” KSA 3: 481) [God is dead. God remains dead. We have killed him. How do we console ourselves, we murderers to end all murderers?]. Like no other



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diagnosis, this call became the identification mark of the present (Schäfer 1970, pp. 39–40), and is deeply engraved in the consciousness of posterity (Biser 1998). This world-shattering call of the “mad man” (Janke 2018, p. 201) was heard by the God is dead theologians. They were guided by his radical this-worldly orientation (“[. . .] brothers, stay true to the world and do not believe those who talk to you about unearthly hopes!”; *Thus spoke Zarathustra* [Also sprach Zarathustra] (Nietzsche 1999a); KSA 4: 15) and they listened to his call, a call that many other theologians had dismissed as an attention-grabbing slogan (Wagner 1988) and a temporary trend (Jüngel 1977, p. 57). Based on Nietzsche’s teachings, they were looking for new ways of theological thinking and were turning radically towards the greatest recent event—that “God is dead”. Only this earth is real. If the God of the hereafter is dead, then life on this earth becomes free of any connection to transcendency. Up until this point, God had been the transcendent subject of history; now it is mankind who takes this place in radical loneliness and full personal responsibility.

It is hardly known that from the beginning, the representatives of the so-called ‘God is dead theology’ had named their project by a self-chosen term: “radical theology”. They belonged to the small group of theologians who were convinced that “the-death-of-god-theology is [not] only about a trendy and temporary phenomenon. Trendy, in their opinion, are mostly the bright colors that are used. However, these are exactly the colors that are qualified to accentuate that in a changed world, the Christian faith has to radically remember what it is and who it deals with” (Seckler 1979, p. 185). A relentless battle has been fought within theology as well as the church over the sovereignty of interpretation regarding God’s speech and his asserted death. Therefore, the backdrop of my considerations is defined by the thesis that in the 1960s, theology and the church allowed a small timeframe to pass them by; an opportunity was missed to integrate constructively and critically the innovative and disruptive potential of speech about the death of God into an enlightened theological reflection about divine things and a cultural-hermeneutic interpretation of the present. This serious failure to constructively notice the phenomenon of the spreading talk of the “death of God” in its ambiguity continues to have a lasting impact on theology and the church. To illustrate this, I am going to consider the beginnings of radical theology in the USA during the 1960s. I will then turn my attention towards the current revival of radical theology against the backdrop of a reinvigorated religious fundamentalism. In the third part, I will show the importance of radical theology for a “heretical religiosity”, using considerations on the Hebrew Bible, its wisdom literature, and its experience of worldly existence and absolute distance to God.

The following preliminary considerations define the basis for the three parts then to follow: Radicalism is one of the great fascinations of the modern age (cf. Konersmann and Westerkamp 2012). Originally, the term “radicality/radicalism” (Elling 1992; Goerdts 1992) was used in its political meaning to describe the supporters of democracy. This changed in the 20th century when the term began to be used to describe the political ideologies of extremists. This included individuals and groups on the left as well as on the right of the political spectrum. Furthermore, etymologically, “radical” originates from the Latin word *radix* (English: “root”), but its meaning also includes that in which something has its origin: to act radically means to follow something back to its roots. Such an undertaking is methodically (de-)constructive. It does not only examine the possibilities of extensive religious rethinking, but also considers the restorative reflections on potential restitutions. Neither of the two approaches exclude the possibility of making way for the new and unexpected. This, however, is only possible through the willingness to take risks and potentially fail. Even in major philosophical and theological concepts, destruction and restitution always go hand in hand; in other words, “radical thoughts of great philosophers are followed by moderate interpretations. However, these interpretations exist not because these thinkers were afraid of their own grit, but because they are courageous enough to stay true to it; because they are resolute enough to develop the results of their wildest thoughts; because they have a strong enough imagination to also explore what lies beyond their usual

interpretation [...]. Every truly radical philosophy acts moderately at the crucial points” (Seel 2012, p. 264).

If the radical and the moderate belong together to a certain extent, then the same must be true of the transformation of Christian content. Radical theology, therefore, faces a two-sided challenge. On the one hand, various achievements and changes in the modern age have theology questioning the reasoning behind its own foundations. On the other hand, these developments also result in radical theology’s counterfactual foundational idea, the death of God, serving as a description of the attitude towards life in the modern age by means of a (de-)constructive-critical revision of the previous Christian discourse. For this reason, radical theology’s only option is to take its fundamental crisis, as well as the attitudes towards life based on God’s death, radically seriously, and thus to think (de-)constructively through the questionability of its own theological consequences.

### 1. The “Death of God” as a Signature of Secular Culture

The beginnings of the so-called Death of God Theology are quietly hidden within academic discourse. Largely unnoticed by the public, the Franco-American theologian Gabriel Vahanian (1927–2012) referenced Friedrich Nietzsche’s diagnosis of modernism in his book *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*<sup>7</sup>—a diagnosis which is radically linked to Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God in *The Gay Science* [*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*] (1882/1887). In 1961, Vahanian arrived at the conclusion that our age may only be referred to as being religious in a post-Christian manner.<sup>8</sup> The demise of Christianity in modern times is imminent because it has not grasped the problem of correlating the truth of the Christian faith with the empirical truths by which human life is governed (Bultmann 1965, p. 111). In a time shaped by a scientific worldview *post mortem Dei*, God is no longer considered necessary (Vahanian 1961, p. xxxii). The self-conception of modern man leads to a culture without God.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Vahanian does not belong to the Death of God movement’s radical core. The title of his book is the primary reason as to why he was associated with this group.<sup>10</sup>

This is different with regard to Thomas J. J. Altizer (1927–2018) and William Hamilton (1924–2012), whose volume *Radical Theology and the death of God*<sup>11</sup> was published in 1966 “In Memory of Paul Tillich”.<sup>12</sup> By intentionally dating their Preface “January 1, 1966”, the two authors emphasized that they saw the beginning of a new era in “radical theology”;<sup>13</sup> drawing on Nietzsche, they understood the “death of God” as a culture-historical event that became part of the center of human experience in the 19th century.<sup>14</sup> They focused their research on finding answers as to why this former God, having been adored, worshiped, and believed in, no longer is, as well as *why* this change of mind occurred, *when* it happened, and *who* was responsible for it: “If the death of God is an event of some kind, *when* did it happen and *why*?” (Cf. Altizer and Hamilton 1966, p. x). In order to answer the *when* question, radical theology, as Death of God theology according to Altizer and Hamilton, has to investigate the time frame from the French Revolution to Sigmund Freud in terms of “the intellectual history and literary criticism”. The same has to be performed with “philosophy and behavioral science” to answer “the ‘why’ question” (Cf. Altizer and Hamilton 1966, p. xi). Altizer and Hamilton understood their concept as “an attempt to set an atheist point of view within the spectrum of Christian possibilities” and “a whole new way of theological understanding” (Cf. Altizer and Hamilton 1966, p. ix). For Altizer,<sup>15</sup> the paradoxical speech of the ‘death of God’ simultaneously represents both the unique Christian symbol of the crucifixion as the source of redemption and an equally unique modern atheism as the demise of Christianity (Altizer 2002, p. 1). The challenge in understanding the ‘death of God’, according to Altizer, is understanding just how this death can be the death of *God* (David 2017). God remained the lifelong focus of his theological interest, but God cannot be thought of separately from his opposite: The Nothing (Altizer 2003). Altizer believed something absolutely new could only arise by going through this dichotomy. For William Hamilton, in contrast, theology is only possible *without* God. He therefore refused to join the ranks of theologians who keep trying to describe the conservative concept of God in

new ways. He distanced himself from “the redefiners” and joined the radical theologians—the “doers without” (Hamilton 1974, p. 31). The following, therefore, applies to his then soon-to-be-undertaken effort of transforming theology into literary studies (Hamilton 1985, 1993): “God is dead. We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God” (Hamilton 1966a, p. 28). From the very beginning, this new theological course in dealing with a deeply rooted atheism and the lack of religion in its time has been a plural movement whose concerns cannot be reduced to a common denominator.

Richard L. Rubenstein, who in 1966 initiated the debate about (a) *Theology after Auschwitz* with his book *After Auschwitz. Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* [...], joined Death of God theology.<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Rubenstein saw “a type of Jewish-Christian heresy” (Rubenstein 1993, p. 118) in German National Socialism and decided to “rather live in a futile cosmos than believe in a God who inflicts Auschwitz on his people” (Rubenstein 1993, p. 118).<sup>17</sup> The connection between Death of God theology and *post-Holocaust theology*, however, had not been explicitly presented until the volume *The Death of God Movement and the Holocaust. Radical Theology Encounters the Shoah* was published in 1999 (Haynes and Roth 1999). In memory of Paul M. van Buren, the volume documents a conference of the “Religion, Holocaust, and Genocide Group” that took place in New Orleans and was hosted by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) thirty years after the *Time* magazine title story. These essays remind us that the consequences of the Shoah continue to cast their shadows on the moral, political, and religious life of the world.<sup>18</sup> This access to Death of God theology shows to what extent the thinking of four of its key representatives was affected by the Holocaust; this includes scholars from the 1960s as well as from the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> For Altizer, for example, the Christian God of providence died in the Holocaust. If God is the origin of all events, then it is implied that he was also responsible for the Holocaust: “The simple truth is that it is no longer possible to affirm a Providential God unless one affirms that God wills or effects ultimate evil, and this is clearly a consequence of the Holocaust” (Altizer 1999, p. 19). Otherwise, we would have to ask: Was the God we knew actually Satan? After all, if we were to deny evil, we would also have to deny the Holocaust (Altizer 1999, pp. 19–22).

Experiencing the absence of God in the extremes of the Holocaust and the secular living environment of the post-war period in the 1950s and 1960s led to a diversified theological rethinking of ‘God’s death’. The ideas of Hegel and Nietzsche, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and, in particular, Paul Tillich served in a variety of ways as stepping stones for an experimental train of thought that was more of a seeking movement that did not want to find quick solutions to the problems. William Hamilton already drew attention to this in *The New Essence of Christianity*, which was published the same year as Vahanian’s cultural analysis. In this article, Hamilton explores the fragment as the form currently suitable for theology. At this moment, there is little theological certainty (Hamilton [1961] 1966b, pp. 11–20). His thought revolves around the idea that we simply have to live with the empty space that is left behind by the death of God. There is nothing that could potentially replace the presence of God. Our only options are either to wait for God or to follow Jesus. Simply talking about God is futile, but Jesus could potentially be the way to create a model for a radical way of life that could serve as a criterion for assessing authentic action.<sup>20</sup> By having an open dialogue with Modern Culture, Altizer, Hamilton, Rubenstein, and Vahanian were radically looking for new ways of religious life in post-Christian times, but an ongoing ambiguity in the communication about the ‘death of God’ was already recognizable even during the early 1960s. American media was not the only entity that used the paradoxical term ‘Death of God Theology’ to summarize their suggestions for new theological ways of thinking. After making its way from *God’s Own Country* across the Atlantic, the term was also used by German-speaking theology and the German church as a “fighting word for theological opponents of all kinds” (Mourkojannis 2007, p. 210; cf. Daecke 1969). In its remarks, the theological and ecclesiastical establishment propagated deliberately and effectively “distorted images of an unagreeable theology” (Mourkojannis 2007, p. 210). In this way, said establishment tried to trivialize the new ways of interpreting



the transformational process of the modern world as a “temporary fad”. This reaction was based on the fact that it judged the “Death of God” as a “slogan” (Thielicke 1968, p. 311) and “emotive term that was used by Nietzschean philosophy as a journalistic tool” (Thielicke 1968, p. 311), “an astonishing trick, to gain for a fiercely contested discussion topic an attention that they were unable to attract with their own topics” (Thielicke 1968, p. 311). From these thoughts of the theologian Helmut Thielicke, it is easy to pick up on the establishment’s utmost desire to turn back to simply managing their own tradition in order to ignore such critical demands. However, this did not prove to be easy, because “driven into German extremes—God’s death was also haunting our theology” (Thielicke 1968, p. 311). Herbert Braun and especially Dorothee Sölle were responsible for this development, and were therefore faced with intense reactions. Today, this theological line belongs to the almost forgotten periods of modern theological history which have not fully been dealt with in the German-speaking reception either.

Whereas there is a revival of discussions about the concept of the death of God in Anglo-American theology and philosophy, there is no similar development in German-speaking Protestant theology. In Germany, the debate virtually ended with Eberhard Jüngel’s integration of the meaning of speech about the Death of God into Christology (Jüngel 2014). Only Falk Wagner, an “outsider” (Fischer 2002, p. 270) within academic theology, did not let himself be put off by this. Wagner worked on uncovering and overcoming the fundamental crisis of theology and using it as an “opportunity” (Wagner 1990, p. 130); at the same time, he wanted to understand modern-day Christianity in a new way by examining the beginning of Christianity from a new theological perspective. Part of this process was to systematically and theologically rethink the motive of God’s death as a “revolutionary idea of the concept of God” (Wagner 1999, pp. 120–66; 2014). Being aware of theology’s modern fundamental crisis, in which “theology itself has become the problem” (Wagner 1990, p. 131), Wagner says: “Shortly and metaphorically speaking, this fundamental crisis can be summarized in one sentence: God is dead”.<sup>21</sup> (Wagner 1990, p. 139). Wagner expresses the hope that the very consciousness of the Death of God that qualifies the modern age will open the eyes of Christian theology to the singularity of its own beginning (Wagner 1990, p. 139). However, by following a theology that was inspired by Hegel for an extended amount of time, he distanced himself from the so-called death of God theology and its connection to Nietzsche.

Whenever a theology is currently marked as “radical theology” in the German context, this is conducted based on an understanding influenced by a theology of revelation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, neither was a systematic-theological discussion on the religious-philosophical level of US-American theology initiated (cf. Ritschl 1989, p. 251), nor has there been a push for a comprehensive theological discussion with the initiators of this movement. This may partially be due to the fact that the concerns of Death of God—or Radical Theology—have not been discussed in actual academic theological works (cf. Ritschl 1989, p. 250). In addition to this, the theological issues that have been pointed out in this context did not receive much attention and have therefore been left unfinished. Both a problem-centered historical classification of God’s Death and the discovery of its existential meaning, which can no longer be summarized in traditional *theologia crucis*-terminology, were left unfinished. This movement has raised many of these issues and questions, but only a few have been answered to a satisfying degree by the movement itself and its critics. In the same vein, academic theology has left many of the movement’s questions unanswered, worked on some hesitantly, and ignored others entirely. After all, thou shalt not fall for a fad (Ps. 14:1). The idea that theology could no longer be saved if it is “consciously done without God” (Wagner 1990, p. 139) is widespread. Nevertheless, the questions that Death of God theology has raised remain: How can we continue to talk about God in a secular society? What should radically new ways of Christian life look like in post-Christian times? Is the future of faith a religion without God? (Dworkin 2013). And, last but not least, a fundamental question is: “Have we taken Nietzsche seriously enough?” (Depoortere 2008, p. 1; cf. Tongeren 2021; David 2023, pp. 317–38, 639–54).

## 2. The Rise of Evangelical Neo-Fundamentalism and the Renaissance of Radical Theology

In 2014, almost half a century after *Time* magazine published its famed cover, the discourse on “God’s death” was rediscovered in the USA.<sup>23</sup> Like the original cover page, the title to a new volume, *Resurrecting the Death of God*,<sup>24</sup> was also printed in red letters on a black background. However, the authors of this new volume were not only interested in exposing the motives and constellations of the ‘Death of God theologies’ of the 1960s. Rather, they were especially interested in a revival of ‘Radical Theology’ as an option for a contemporary faith in an altered historical context.<sup>25</sup> It is no longer the secular society of the 1950s and 1960s whose loss of faith has led radical theologians of that time to their views on a post-Christian ‘culture without God’<sup>26</sup>, but a society that, despite its strict separation of state and religious institutions, understands itself to be fully religious.<sup>27</sup> The pieces in this volume oppose an ideology they consider to be dangerous (followed by [Hamilton 1989](#)), in which faith in a male and violent God sanctions pre-emptive wars and endorses US nationalism. Currently, they argue, this kind of faith is the norm in US churches, the military, and among conservative politicians.<sup>28</sup> Under these circumstances, it is time to return to radical theology in order to end the life of a God like this.<sup>29</sup>

American society is not the only context that needs *Radical Theology* and its religious and cultural prowess in interpreting talk of ‘God’s death’ as an active counterpart to the ‘return of religion’ in its neo-fundamentalistic garment and the strengthening of evangelical Christianity. Due to the fact that religious fundamentalism, especially the fundamentalism of Protestant Christianity, is becoming stronger, these American Lutheran theologians see civil rights of liberty, critical thinking, scientific progress, and, last but not least, democratic principles massively threatened. Christian fundamentalism in particular is viewed as a culturally destructive force that sanctifies the unjust power of the oppressors, approves the accumulation of personal wealth at the expense of others, emphasizes the thought of divine providence against all scientific reason, ignores the ‘third world’, and claims the Gospel as well as worldly wealth for itself.<sup>30</sup>

Considering this situation, silence or indifference are no longer options. Liberal theology in the USA is not to disappear again and leave the field uncontested for biblicistic, fundamentalist, and evangelical theologies that also have massive economic and political interests.<sup>31</sup> In the revival of the discourse about the ‘death of God’, new radical theologians see a substantial opportunity to challenge the destructive ideologies of our time.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the past, radical theology now faces the task of proclaiming the Death of God in times of growing faith rather than in times of its decline. Briefly summarized, their task is: ‘Deicide’. What is intended by this declaration of war is murdering the God of conventional theism, the personal God who seems to be more dangerous than ever (followed by [Hamilton 1989](#). Cf. [Peterson 2014](#)). This entails the demand to reconsider<sup>33</sup> the future task of Lutheran theology in view of the “current cultural slumber” that was brought upon by uncritical conservatism<sup>34</sup> and that is known as “a culture of misguided faith” ([Peterson 2014](#), p. 3). William Hamilton’s theology is considered a model for the fight against fundamentalism<sup>35</sup>. Altizer’s theology of God’s kenosis into the world and of recognition of God’s dark side provides a theological framework for understanding the “bad faith” (Altizer) of fundamentalists who close their eyes to earthly reality and look up to an imaginary God in a self-created heaven.<sup>36</sup> With this in mind, the new radical theology sees itself as an active declaration of war to “eradicate”<sup>37</sup> the gods of fundamentalist Christians insofar as they threaten civil liberty, critical thinking, scientific progress, and democratic principles. To face this massive challenge and this religiously misguided countermovement to modernity and to educate about religion beyond academic and ecclesial boundaries is a courageous sign towards liberal theology. However, radical theology is only able to operate underground. In America’s politics and culture, it has lost ground to a biblically and evangelically oriented theology. Talking about ‘God’s death’ is meant to establish a fighting word in order to challenge the destructive ideologies of our time. I am going to discuss this approach of ideological criticism and readiness for battle in the third section of this article when I take a look at what stimuli from the personal

religious tradition are responsible for an attitude like this. The goal is to understand the attempts of simplification and to find clear foundations as well as alternatives for dealing with a world that is becoming more and more complex.

### 3. Heretical Religiosity? Radical Theology and Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Bible

Although the debate about the intellectual construct of God's Death has already been held again for multiple years in the Anglo-American world in order to draw attention to the fundamentalist threats to religion and society, the issue of God's death remains a topic for "outsiders" on the fringes of the theological mainstream. However, being in this position provides theologians with the unexpected advantage of being able to self-critically look beyond one's traditions and free oneself from dogmatic and traditional guidelines for testing purposes. The way of thinking of Hebrew Bible wisdom literature, as it occurs paradigmatically in the Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet), offers a model that is still compatible with modern thought. The Preacher Solomon was able to take a critical view in order to examine skeptically (*sképtesthai*) and freely from any bias, to ask prudently and sometimes ironically which parts of the tradition prevail—and which do not (Rosenau 2012).

For this reason, I would like to conclude by taking a look at a link between radical theology and biblical wisdom theology that Trevor Greenfield has also drawn attention to against the background of the heterogeneous programs of the Death of God movement in the 20th and 21st century.<sup>38</sup> Greenfield justifiably understands radical theology as "a journey from certainty to uncertainty" (Greenfield 2006, p. 29), which initiates a creative process of thinking: "'God is dead' offers a finality that seems to allow us the opportunity to put an entire mode of thinking and being behind us and move forward to create new ideas and expressions" (Greenfield 2006, p. 30). Greenfield, therefore, makes it clear that "[...] the denial of the objectivity of God is not necessarily a denial of an existent God, rather, a rejection of a particular type of supernatural deity" (Greenfield 2006, p. 29). This indicates a connection between the biblical tradition of wisdom and radical theology, which, according to Greenfield, can be understood as a current expression of cross-cultural wisdom based on the human experience. In addition to the mainstream theology of the cultus, the law, and the prophets, it is here where individual voices that can lead to a transformation of traditional ideas can be heard. This applies to Qohelet, who radically and occasionally also ironically examines his tradition in light of his situation (Willmes 2000). In a "fundamental crisis of Israel's religious life" (Rosenau 2012, p. 129)<sup>39</sup>, he did not hear the call back to the unchecked answers of the past, but set out to find new answers that were relevant to him now.<sup>40</sup> Being a prudent skeptic, he only entertains doubts when reality forces him to do so. He does not rush to pick sides. Instead, he carefully examines his options (*sképtesthai*). This way, the skeptical Preacher put together a "gospel worthy of consideration, a good news of the *joie de vivre*, even though it is written with the reservation of guarded questioning" (Rosenau 2012, p. 131).<sup>41</sup> Despite the loss of its metaphysical foundation, with a prudent program like this, a radical theology in the form of wisdom literature may maintain the capability of a religious interpretation of self, world, and deity, unfold its critical potential against dogmatic and ideological positions (Rosenau 1997, pp. 758–59), and ask about what may provide orientation in life in the face of the current psychological crisis about the meaning of one's life and experience in the absence of God.

Considering the transience of life, Qohelet calls for a life filled with joy (Eccl. 3:12, 3:22). This understanding of Ecclesiastes has been developed only recently in Hebrew Bible studies. For the longest time, the Book of Ecclesiastes was considered to be the pessimistic life plan of a skeptical philosopher and doubter, which could not be categorized into the general characteristics of the biblical tradition. His non-message was: Everything is vain, everything is absurd, and everything is void and a chasing, a grasping for the wind. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as it is in the New King James Version, the name of the well-known thematic frame of his work is: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity". More recent translations tend to translate the Hebrew word of the text "*haebel*" as a "breath of wind" (German: "*Windhauch*"), meaning dust, voidance, or impermanence.

Ecclesiastes asks (Eccl. 1:3): “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” And right before the end of the book, the frame verse appears once again in 12:8 “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity”. Today, Qohelet is read as part of a polyphonic, ancient oriental, and ancient Hellenistic-philosophical discourse (Stoa, Philosophy of Epicurus, Pyrrhonian skepticism) of the 3rd century BC. In the Mediterranean region, the question of the content and condition of the possibility of human happiness (eudaemonia) stood at the center of philosophical reflection.<sup>42</sup> It is Ecclesiastes’ goal to deconstruct pessimistic and nihilistic characteristics and instead show a pathway to true happiness against false but widespread ideas of happiness. Joy should be the prevailing mood (*habitus*) of the human being and, therefore, penetrate all human action.

In this educational process, the fictional character of the Preacher Solomon, the son of David, the king of Jerusalem, serves as a literary tool for understanding the wisdom-based development of the art of life. On the one hand, Qohelet repeatedly emphasizes the reliability of God’s providence despite God’s hiddenness. On the other hand, he continually points out the human inability to know what God is doing, he who is the foundation of everything (Eccl. 11:5). By withstanding the tension and in light of the continuous seclusion of God, the skeptical Qohelet asks himself (by looking around—*sképtesthai*) whether there may just be possibilities for a successful and pious life before God. In this case, God’s seclusion does not mean the absolute absence of God, but the present ambiguity in experiencing him.<sup>43</sup> Despite this experience and his obvious warnings about the frailty and futility of human effort and striving, Qohelet does not call for inaction and moping, but calls for living an active and responsible life in view of its unpredictability.

The anthropological experiences of eating, drinking, and loving are about the enjoyment of life (Eccl. 8:15). A purely material possession without any enjoyment is senseless (Eccl. 5:17–18; 9:7–10). With his precise observations and descriptions, Qohelet distinguishes himself from the lives of his fellow men, from their sheer endless efforts to acquire money and collect treasures, with which they believe they can add to their lives an alleged feeling of security. Qohelet offers the following wise advice: Those possessions are supposed to be maintained and multiplied, but at the same time they are to be considered valuable gifts and offerings.<sup>44</sup> Only in this way one can experience a joy that is not identical to the possession of commodities. True joy is experienced only in the consumption of these received gifts. According to Qohelet (Eccl. 5:18), joy, therefore, does not consist of the fact that God is giving wealth and treasures to man. God rather enables mankind to relish and to rejoice in all his possessions. There is nothing better for Qohelet than to rejoice and be cheerful (Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2003, pp. 141–42). However, he does not keep his *joie de vivre* to himself. Leaving the public life to ordinary materialism and the tendency to live as if God did not exist (*etsi deus non daretur*) is not an option for him. Nonetheless, Qohelet does not raise his finger in judgment to moralize and universally convict, but describes and interprets the social situation.<sup>45</sup> Neither does he require any knowledge of Israel’s salvation history: the exodus from Egypt, the temple cult, or prophecies. Qohelet was critical regarding the optimistic expectations of other contemporaries and did not consider their teachings of wisdom a reliable path to a joyful life. Likewise, he had no use for the hope of the prophet Isaiah, who strongly counted on a God who intervenes in history to fundamentally challenge the world. In his opinion, people also cherish an illusion if they expect divine retribution for each individual after death. A belief in the resurrection is strange to him as well. All the things that shaped the piety of many Christians after him for centuries do not make sense to him. The language and images of the Old Testament wisdom teacher do not require anything except the desire to observe life and to live more consciously—to live more consciously in the face of the experience of one’s limitations.

Qohelet does not offer a doctrinal system of simplistic answers, but pursues the goal of correlating the great variety of life with the one (Creator-)God. Even though God is the ground and guarantor of all life in the eyes of Qohelet, mankind is not able to unambiguously recognize him. This simple change of perspective—to live as if God existed



(etsi deus daretur) despite the persistent experience of God's absence—can, however, break daily routines and revive one's life. The goal of this type of wisdom is not primarily to create fundamental changes and long-term improvements, but to use small steps to get a life off the ground that is currently threatened by stagnation due to crises and problems. The Preacher, therefore, maintains: "To everything there is a season, and time to every purpose under the heaven" (Eccl. 3:1). For Ecclesiastes, our life and coexistence are not supposed to be absorbed in work and economic activity. It is equally important to appreciate the beauty of things and to enjoy the fruits of one's work and economic activity, the different times and forms of leisure time that we spend alone or in social gatherings are necessary. This includes after-work hours, festivities and holidays, the Sabbath, and Sunday. This leisure time does not only support the regeneration of one's work capacity and the soul, but also of leisure and the enjoyment of the community. It is this leisure time which gives a meaning to the ending of work, the restlessness of economic activity, and the acquisition of money.

#### 4. Conclusions

Radically criticizing religion in the name of religion is not a new concept. There are many famous precursors: Qohelet, Jesus of Nazareth, Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, as well as William Hamilton and Thomas J. J. Altizer. The present-day conversation about the death of God within heterogeneous radical theologies proves to be very productive and highly versatile in terms of secularization and the return of religion in its fundamentalist form. On the one hand, one can learn from Qohelet to link the happiness of mortals with God's reality. On the other hand, he also teaches us not to think about divine reality as otherworldly or something in the future, but as something that can be discovered in one's everyday life. Qohelet's theology of the here and now stands in constant tension with ancient and Christian traditions. In his narrative unfolding of the concept of happiness, he emphasizes four points. Firstly, Qohelet is concerned about the connection between human happiness and God's reality. In this regard, he distances himself from the idea that man himself can achieve permanent happiness. Secondly, in terms of content, the experience of happiness is a certain mode of experiencing pleasure. Hence, it is not a possession of goods of a material or social nature. Thirdly, it is all about happiness under the sun, which means that Qohelet is referring to the present, and not to the afterlife. The experience of happiness in the present can be compared to a process of disillusionment and reduction of illusions ("dying"), literarily illustrated in the king's transformation into a wise man. Fourthly, happiness is understood as something permanent. It is not identical with pleasant feelings that come and go. Like Martin Luther, he calls things by their name ("to call a thing what it is"). As people did in earlier times, there are many religious people today who experience the absence of God, but do not dare articulate it. All these traces help to follow radical paths of a godly and godless discourse in order to ensure that we do not forget the experience of the loss of God as long as nothing new appears under the sun. Until then, wisdom is not concerned with claiming absolute truth or ultimate metaphysical justification, but with a knowledge of experience and orientation that is suitable for everyday life while simultaneously being aware of its own limits and its historicity, that is lifeworld-oriented and aims for a prudent way of life.

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## Notes

- 1 *Time Magazine* iconic Cover: “Is God Dead?” ([Time Magazine Cover 1966](#)). This article is a revised version of the German contribution “Kultur ohne Gott? Radikale Theologien des Todes Gottes: jetzt und einst” in [David et al. \(2021\)](#), pp. 15–41. I would like to thank Herder publishing house Freiburg i. B. (wbg academic) for permission to reprint the translation of this article. I also would like to thank my staff members at the chair, Robert Martin Jockel, Lisa Kluge, and Paulina Schick, for their help with the research and translation. For the history of the idea of the death of God cf. now [David \(2023\)](#) [*The Death of God as Modernity’s Attitude towards Life. History, Interpretation, and Critique of a Phenomenon of Crisis*]. All translations from German sources in this article are my own.
- 2 According to a list compiled by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2008, this cover belongs to one of the twelve magazine cover pages that have deeply shook the world ([Los Angeles Times 2008](#)).
- 3 Cf. [Altizer \(2006\)](#), p. 12: “The truth is that journalists read the new theology more responsibly than did many, if not most, theologians, and for two years radical theology was at the forefront of the mass media; it was as though the country itself was possessed by a theological fever, and a radical theological fever, one in which the most religious nation in the industrial world had suddenly discovered its own deep atheism”.
- 4 “Historical Introduction” in [McCullough and Schroeder \(2004\)](#), pp. xv–xxvii.
- 5 Cf. [Altizer \(2006\)](#), p. 10: “We still lack a study of theological radicalism in the sixties”. There has not been another sifting through the available evidence after the late 1960s and early 1970s. This marks a contrast to the assessment: “It will be remembered as the last major reform movement in Protestant theology that was articulated by white academic males [. . .]. They are, as we say, gone but not forgotten”. Cf. [Carey \(1999\)](#), pp. 79–90.
- 6 [Nietzsche \(1999b\)](#). Translations are my own. On this passage cf. [David \(2023\)](#), pp. 319–38.
- 7 [Vahanian \(1961\)](#). Its publisher gave the book its subtitle; originally it was named “A Cultural Analysis”.
- 8 Cf. [Vahanian \(1961\)](#), p. xxxiii. Rudolf Bultmann mentioned Vahanian already in 1963 in a newspaper article: “This analysis was [. . .] the most exciting theological book [. . .] that I have read in recent years. There is a certain parallel to Karl Barth’s Epistle to the Romans. As Barth once fought against Schleiermacher and experiential theology, so Vahanian fights against religiosity as the real enemy of the Christian faith” ([Bultmann 1965](#)), pp. 107–12.
- 9 German title (*Kultur ohne Gott*) given by Joachim Scharfenberg and Reimar Keintzel: [Vahanian \(1973\)](#).
- 10 Although his name is associated with this theological orientation, his critical cultural and religious inquests complemented Karl Barth’s theology. Cf. [Vahanian \(1961\)](#), p. 4. [Buren \(1963\)](#) or [Cox \(1965\)](#) distanced themselves from this label.
- 11 [Altizer and Hamilton \(1966\)](#). Over more than two hundred pages, they collected some of their essays in this book, which had been published in different American journals regarding various occasions and topics between 1959 and 1965.
- 12 [Altizer \(2006\)](#), p. 10 remembers in his memoirs a self-description of Paul Tillich: “the real Tillich is the radical Tillich”. Cf. [Manning \(2015\)](#).
- 13 Cf. [Altizer and Hamilton \(1966\)](#), p. 5. But op. cit., p. 6: “The name I prefer for theological radicalism is the death of God theology”. Cf. [Altizer \(2012\)](#).
- 14 Cf. [Altizer and Hamilton \(1966\)](#), pp. ix–xiii, x., xi. Cf. p. x., p. xi regarding ten possible interpretations of the death of God.
- 15 There is a renewed interest in Altizer’s thought in the US. Cf. [McCullough and Schroeder \(2004\)](#). Brian Schroeder speaks of Altizer as “the most visionary thinker of the death of God” ([McCullough and Schroeder 2004](#), p. ix). David E. Klemm points out: “Thomas J. J. Altizer is nothing if he is not a theologian. [. . .] Altizer is the successor to the great theologians of the Protestant biblical tradition represented by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, among others” ([Klemm 2012](#), p. ix). Philosophers like Mark C. Taylor, Gianni Vattimo, and Slavoj Žižek were also influenced by Altizer.
- 16 [Rubenstein \(1966\)](#). In 1992, a second edition was published with the changed subtitle: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism. On the relation of the “Death-of-God Theology and Judaism” cf. [Rubenstein \(1992\)](#), pp. 247–64. Cf. [Anderson and Rubenstein \(2018\)](#).
- 17 Critics like [Fackenheim \(1970\)](#), pp. 67–98, gave him an answer: “Anyone who declares God to be ‘dead’ and abandons the Jewish faith after Auschwitz posthumously grants Hitler victory over the Jews and the God of Israel, which Hitler could not achieve in his life”. He urges: “If we stopped being Jews (and raising Jewish children), it would mean giving up our thousand-year-old testimony to the God of history. [. . .] It is forbidden for the Jews to let Hitler win in retrospect. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish [. . .]. Finally, it has been forbidden for them to despair in the God of Israel so that Judaism does not perish”. Quoted by [Moltmann \(2007\)](#), p. 154.
- 18 Thus, the editors in their series Foreword, p. ix.
- 19 Next to Altizer, Hamilton, and Rubenstein, Paul van Buren is also included. Cf. [Haynes and Roth \(1999\)](#), p. xvi.
- 20 In 1966, a revised edition of “The New Essence of Christianity” was published including a prolog by John Woolwich. The book *Honest to God* ([Robinson 1963](#)) attracted great attention in Great Britain and Germany in 1963; it was a “forerunner” ([Cooper 1988](#), p. 5) of US debates regarding Death of God theology in Great Britain and Western Germany (Cf. [Bartsch 1963](#)). Some Reactions to the book *Honest to God* ed. By David L. Edwards with a new chapter by its author John A. T. [Robinson \(1963\)](#).

- 21 The following quotations and paraphrases are taken from [Thielicke \(1968\)](#), p. 311.
- 22 E.g., [Dalferth \(2010\)](#), in his hermeneutical conception of a radical theology dedicated to Eberhard Jüngel, in which he seeks to deduce the task and purpose of Protestant theology from the root [lat. radix] of Christian Theology in the Christian faith (cf. [Dalferth 2010](#), p. 13). Dalferth clarifies that theology is concerned primarily with God, not with religion. Not only does radical theology consider everything in light of the presence of God, it also does so within a certain context and from a very specific perspective: that of a radical change in direction from unbelief to faith. Without this change, there would be no radical theology (cf. [Dalferth 2010](#), pp. 15–16).
- 23 This radical leap from the 1960s to the mid-2010s does not overlook the numerous drafts in the Anglo-American world that attempt to think of a theology after the death of God in various approaches, some of which I also discuss in more detail in my study [David \(2023\)](#) As in this article, the main focus of my book is on Protestant theology. I refer by way of example to the deconstructive theology of Mark C. Taylor (op. cit., pp. 475–99), the weak theology as a renewal of radical theology in the Catholic philosopher John D. Caputo (op. cit. 499–506) and the radical feminist theology of Mary Daly (op. cit., pp. 521–29) as well as the Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo and his impact on Catholic theology (op. cit., pp. 472–74) and the Nietzsche-inspired liberal Protestant theology of Don Cupitt in Cambridge and his Sea of Faith movement (op. cit., p. 540 note 40). Cupitt, who saw the post-metaphysical world heralded by Nietzsche’s cry “God is dead”, interestingly also influenced new views of high church Anglicans in their orthodox designs of political radical theological reflection, such as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. I would like to thank the peer reviewers for this last reference.
- 24 Cf. Articles by [Zbaraschuk \(2014\)](#). The rediscovery took place during a conversation in a coffeehouse between the editors about [Altizer and Hamilton \(1966\)](#).
- 25 Cf. also [Anderson and Rubenstein \(2018\)](#). Cf. also [Rodkey and Miller 2018](#), especially Part I: “Background and Introduction”, Part II presents 27 prominent figures of radical theology, and Part III presents 25 topics. Jeffrey Robbins is currently working on a radical political theology. Cf. [Robbins \(2014, 2016\)](#).
- 26 [Peterson \(2014\)](#), 5 represents the special meaning of Paul Tillich’s term “God above God” for Altizer and Hamilton, but also for Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether as well as Robinson, which ‘remains when the God of theism has left.
- 27 Ten years later, Newsweek reports on the growth of evangelical Christian movements. This leads to the question: “Why did this apparent reversal occur in such a short span of time?” ([Taylor 2007](#), pp. 1–2).
- 28 [Peterson \(2014\)](#), p. 2: “Western evangelical faith in God, the kind that sanctions preemptive war and American nationalism, the kind that Hamilton foresaw as ‘too male, too dangerous, [and] too violent to be allowed to live’ has become the norm in our churches, in our military, and among our politicians”.
- 29 [Peterson \(2014\)](#), p. 3: “Radical theology may have been crucified and abandoned by popular culture shortly after its inception, but its return today is absolutely imperative”.
- 30 Cf. [Peterson \(2014\)](#), p. 3; cf. [Taylor \(2007\)](#), p. 131, who speaks of “the Fourth Great Awakening” since the 1970s in the USA and refers to the dangerous rise of Christian neo-fundamentalism.
- 31 Cf. [Peterson \(2014\)](#), p. 2: “Megachurches thrive. Christian radio bombards America with preaching that calls for the ‘personal acceptance’ of Jesus Christ, and popular ministers [. . .] reach millions of people through television, the internet, and other forms of media. Even the appearance of the new atheism and with it a plea to reject faith in the name of reason presupposes the ubiquity of belief. To say, then, that ‘religion is making a comeback’ as the *New York Times* did in 1997, would now be passé. Religion at the dawn of the third millennium has arrived, and it is big business”.
- 32 Cf. [Peterson \(2014\)](#), pp. 14–15: “Those in our culture who speak on behalf of such gods demand the sacrifice of free and critical thinking. They call their listeners to deny the claims of science, to turn a deaf ear to climate change, and to ignore people of the third world (as evident in the prosperity gospel) who suffer so that their audiences can heap up mounds of material wealth in their god’s name for themselves. Many justify violence and war, and they do so—without flinching—in the name of God, Family Values, and Jesus Christ. Resurrecting the death of God marks one way to challenge the idols of our age”.
- 33 Cf. [Peterson \(2014\)](#), p. 15: “It calls us to think more deeply about how we understand ourselves and our experience in relation to whatever it is we deem ultimate”.
- 34 Cf. [McCullough and Schroeder \(2004\)](#), p. x: “even a ‘rude awakening’ [. . .] from our current cultural slumber, induced by an uncritical conservatism”.
- 35 Co-editor G. Michael Zbaraschuk tries to regain the lost legacy of William Hamilton and briefly outlines three overlapping phases (“the detective”, “the assassin”, “the artist”) of Hamilton’s development up to the publication of the book about the post-historical Jesus. Cf. [Zbaraschuk \(2014\)](#). Zbaraschuk’s assumption as to why Hamilton’s theology was not further received after the “media counter-attack”, although supporters of his idea were found, is remarkable: “There is the question of the institutional commitments, which Hamilton himself cites, among those who might perhaps share his views but still needed a seminary job and therefore could not alienate their more conservative supporters. This last point can always be coupled with a critique of the personal and institutional cowardice of some who believe that we are living in the time of the death of God yet fail to proclaim that fact as the most important religious one of the last century” ([Zbaraschuk 2014](#), p. 78).
- 36 Unfortunately, as Altizer says, this heaven is empty, and that God does not exist. Cf. [Peterson \(2014\)](#), pp. 8–9.

- 37 Cf. Peterson (2014), p. 3. The objective language at this point shows the author's astonishment about the powerful threat of fundamentalism; it must not only remain antagonistic, but must also show a way out of this opposition in the future.
- 38 Greenfield (2006), pp. 161–77: "God is Love, God is Dead; Radical Theology as Wisdom Literature".
- 39 Rosenau (2012) refers to further references to the theological interpretation of Ecclesiastes and its research results.
- 40 Regarding a constructive approach of Ecclesiastical skepticism and wisdom theology, cf. the systematic theological studies by Wölfel (1958) and Rosenau (2005); also the Hebrew Bible research by Saur (2021), pp. 107–34.
- 41 Cf. also Krüger (2000), Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2004) and now Saur (2023).
- 42 Cf. for example: Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2004) and now Saur (2023).
- 43 William Hamilton interprets the modern experience of the absence of God as God's death.
- 44 Qohelet emphasizes his thoughts on endless efforts of making money and risks that are related to the increasing accumulation of money as well as on vain effort (Eccl. 5:17–18): "All his days he also eats in darkness, and he has much sorrow and sickness and anger. Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage". Qohelet continuously emphasizes these claims in his book (Eccl. 2:24–25.; 3:13–14.; 5:17–18; 8:15; 9:7; 11:8). Repeatedly he calls people to eat and drink and let their soul be well in all its labor; and always remember that everything comes from God's hand. Without God's goodness, no one can eat, drink, and enjoy cheerfully. It is God who gives man the right attitude to enjoy life to the fullest.
- 45 In this way, he keeps up to the standards of biblical prehistory when he points out that God made everything good and beautiful. Not only in the first eleven chapters of Genesis have people alone made life difficult for themselves and each other—due to their high wisdom. A brief look at Ecclesiastes' time makes it clear: an economic revival did not serve as a benefit to the majority of the population; taxes were drastically increased, competitive thinking became widespread, and, consequently, individualization started to gain momentum, effecting a constantly rising pressure to perform. The experience of poverty has spread ever since.

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