

CRITICAL REMARKS ON THE THEORETICAL  
SIGNIFICANCE OF VAHANIAN'S DEATH OF GOD THEOLOGY  
(BRIEF REVIEW)

Abstract

The aim of this article is to briefly present and analyse in the context of radical theology the theoretical significance of Gabriel Vahanian's death of God theology from the theological, philosophical and cultural viewpoints. Gabriel Vahanian was a French-Armenian distinguished theologian who played a significant role in the western religious, theological-philosophical thought. The main idea of Vahanian is that the death of God is a cultural phenomenon. God himself is not dead, but men's religious and cultural perceptions about God are dead as modern man has lost the sense of transcendence and the presence of transcendent God. That is, the death of God means his absence in the modern world. The existence of God and his reality are not self-sufficient realities anymore but are irrelevant for modern people, hence dead.

*Keywords:* radical theology, death of God theology, transcendent, immanent, religiosity, religionism, religiousness, religious formalism, secularism, secularity.

Introduction

In the world history, the XX century has been a period of unprecedented transformations when humanity started facing myriads of serious problems. It is not accidental that the XX century was called "century of global problems"; issues the solution of which not only conditions the progress of humanity but also the survival of human race in general. In the XX century in the world, and in particular in all areas of western civilization, crucial events (revolutions, world wars, genocides, ecological catastrophes, etc.) took place which brought forth fundamental facts to talk about the crisis of that civilization. Indeed, the crisis

was widespread and all-inclusive which was manifested in various areas of political and conceptual, as well as spiritual life. An expression of this crisis was the radical thinking which found its reflection in philosophical, cultural, religious and theological thought. German philosopher F. Nietzsche is the source of western radical thinking whose "God is dead" expression became the slogan of radical thinking. This crisis found its manifestation also in the religious thinking on behalf of radical theology which is otherwise known as the death of God theology.

In the 60s of XX century a new direction came forth in the theological thought in USA which is known as radical or death of God

theology. This new direction, which is a demonstration and form of religious modernism, drew wide attention of theological and philosophical circles, and, regardless of their points of view and professional occupation, various thinkers responded to this phenomenon in their own ways. The representatives of radical theologians were Gabriel Vahanian, Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, Paul van Buren and Harvey Cox who had developed the fundamentals and aspects of this theological movement independently from each other.

The aim of radical theology was to re-interpret the content and doctrine of Christian religion and adapt them to the modern socio-cultural environment and conditions. In other words, the radical or death of God theology on one hand was a manifestation of the crisis of spiritual and conceptual environment and religious consciousness in the western world; while on the other hand it was a certain course to overcome the crisis-transitional situation of religious worldview and consciousness. From this point of view the study of radical or death of God theology is important as on one hand it enables understanding the nature and scales of XX century spiritual and conceptual crisis better, and on the other hand to look for alternative ways to overcome that crisis.

The crisis of religion in modern world, especially in the West, is closely related to those phenomena that have been taking place in the XX century. Contemporary religious crisis is a demonstration and type of the XX century world-wide crisis. In social life of people and in the context of social-cultural setting the XX century is a century of unique transformations and changes, which created many problems for humanity in general.

Christianity was and is the religion of the Western world. But now the situation changed and Christianity has no more the influence on the Western culture and does not shape cultural, intellectual, and moral layers of social life as it was before. In Western society a culture is formed without belief in God or religion. The Christian church as a social institution loses its authority and the social role and function. There has been taken qualitative change or transformation in modern culture, if the Middle age culture was transcendental, then modern western culture is immanent.

The reasons for rising religious modernism are the present crisis of religion and the failure of theological programs which one by one change each other in order to restore the role and significance of religion in contemporary secular society and re-establish the connection between religion (here Christianity) and the world. The author considers that religious modernism is such a phenomenon, which has always accompanied religion and church during its existence. The goal of religious modernism is to be adequate and relevant to the modern world, that is, to make religion or church relevant to modern society and man. Through religious and theological modernism, the Christian Church or any religion aims at relevancy to those social changes that are taking place in modern society. Consequently, any form of religious modernism, i.e. transformation in theoretical-theological aspects and practice is forced means not only to be adequate and relevant to the modern secular world but also to restore the shaken position and authority of religion and church in modern society.

## Theoretical Significance of Vahanian's Death of God Theology

The death of God phenomenon is a product of western civilization. The death of God phenomenon is the main cultural event in the western world in the last two centuries. It is very complicated, difficult, comprehensive, multilayer, meaningful event-phenomenon. It has many dimensions and sides. It should be approached and understood from different angles and points if one wants to have a holistic, comprehensive understanding of that event otherwise will face a failure.

In western civilization and culture, the occurrence of "God is dead" motif is the result and manifestation of the qualitative change or transformation that has been taken place in the historically new – modern/postmodern men's self-consciousness in the last two centuries. In modern cultural context, "God is dead" motif would have its influence on one of forms of social consciousness that is religion and its intellectual entertainment or activity – theology. In that sense, radical or death of God theology is the variety of or the form of "God is dead" motif or the death of God phenomenon in the context of western civilization and culture and as well as the natural result of "God is dead" motif expressed in western philosophy, literature, and human consciousness.

Modern men have no more transcendent orientation and dimension but mostly immanent. If there is transcendent orientation, dimension or significance in this life even at a religious level then it is, philosophically speaking, a "self-transcendent" orientation, which does not deal with otherworldly presumed, conjectured reality or God and supernatural in general. Therefore, the collapse, destruction

of the past religio-mythological worldview and perception, the past thinking, the old/aged metaphysics and religious picture of the world and the becoming of the new is defined or qualified as the death of God or the age of the death of God in which God no more acts as "a working hypothesis" or the one who can solve man's problems. The reality of God is no more taken for granted. The modern men don't need God any more hence God became an idol or cultural "accessory," speculative empty notion or metaphysical idea. In other words, this kind of God is not necessary but irrelevant, therefore dead. That's why "God is dead" motif occurs in all possible forms of spiritual/cultural activities and consciousness of western civilization – philosophy, literature, theology, arts, ethics, aesthetics and so on. As Russian philosopher V. Gubin says "The death of God is whirlpool in European philosophy and culture" (Gubin, 2006, p. 22). It is not only an event but process which continues more than a century. It is a process which had revolutionary and turning point significance and influence on western philosophy and traditional theology. The death of God turned upside-down the existing at that time the whole metaphysical-ideological systems, worldview and axiological orientations that were under the control of the Christian church and religious consolation and in a sense, it brought chaos in human life.

The death of God theology had cultural, sociological, psychological, phenomenological, and ontological significance. The death of God theology was anti-metaphysical by its nature or it was anti-movement towards the metaphysical ontotheology and at the same time it was also the apophatic theology. The death of God theology shows the crisis in re-

religious language and incapacity of that language to talk of God or find the adequate concepts, expressions to describe him. In the contemporary world, the death of God phenomenon is one of the factors of transition from modern to postmodern. It is the change of, the transformation of consciousness that is the formation of the qualitatively new consciousness which has the characteristics of radical qualitative transformation. The death of God shows the destruction of past age of Christian civilization and culture and the dawn and beginning of the new age – post-Christian civilization and culture based on the past age and the grave of God. Post-Christian is a transition stage, the pick or focal point of tensions of the interrelationship between the old and new when the old or past age tries to keep its position but it surely goes to destruction, and when the new did not take its place yet.

In the contemporary world the death of God phenomenon is one of the factors of the transition from modern to post-modern. It is a change of consciousness that is the process of formation of the qualitatively new consciousness, which has the characteristics of radical qualitative transformation. For this reason, the death of God theology can be described as a demonstration of post-modern thinking and way of acting as well as hermeneutics or in the light of which it is possible to understand and explain modern world and man, present situation and conditions, and secular human beings.

In that sense, the death of God is the main cultural event that Nietzsche observed in his time and spoke loudly about it. Nietzsche's foresight or insight had truly prophetic signification for modern-post-modern age. The death of God phenomenon was wide-

spread in European culture. In modern world many philosophers and thinkers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Blake, Martin Buber, William Faulkner, Martin Heidegger, Jan-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Michel Foucault became aware of the death of God or the absence of God phenomenon and its significance.

Gabriel Vahanian was a French-Armenian distinguished theologian who played a significant role in the western religious, theological-philosophical thought. In my publications I have notably indicated that Gabriel Vahanian is the founder of the death of God theology in the context of radical theology (see Stepanyan, 2008, pp. 56-85; Stepanyan, 2015, pp. 81-96; Stepanyan, 2017, pp. 63-94). His understanding and theoretical construction of the death of God phenomenon that he described as a religious-cultural event by its distinctiveness, differs from other adherents of death of God theology. With his theological program of the death of God Vahanian started the beginning of this new theological course or trend and pointed out the problems facing the religious and theological thought of that period.

The development of the death of God motif begins in 1957 when he first uses the phrase "God is dead" or "death of God" in his "Empty Cradle" article (see Vahanian, 1957). The importance of this article is that Vahanian uses the expression "God is dead" or "death of God" for the first time, which is crucial and fundamental to the formation of his further religious-philosophical views. Vahanian's "The Death of God" book is the logical continuation and development of "the death of God" motif. Vahanian is the first theologian to

use in the context of theology the idea of “God is dead” or “death of God” in Nietzschean spirit in the cultural sense, by referring it to describe the character of the crisis of Christian culture in western civilization. Nietzsche and Vahanian are those thinkers who referred to such a phenomenon, both described and diagnosed the reality in which they themselves lived, both of them understood the death of God as a cultural phenomenon.

Later, he publishes a number of fundamental theological and cultural works in which he develops the death of God theme. In 1961 Vahanian published his book under the title “The death of God: the culture of our post-Christian era,” (Vahanian, 1961) which laid out the fundamental principles of the death of God theology. The development of his ideas is presented in a more complete form in his “Wait Without Idols” (Vahanian, 1964) and in his “No Other God.” (Vahanian, 1966<sup>a</sup>).

The first and second chapters of this book were originally printed as separate articles under the titles “Swallowed Up by Godlessness” (Vahanian, 1965<sup>b</sup>) and “Theology and the End of the Age of Religion” (Vahanian, 1966<sup>b</sup>). This is a book about theology in a secular era where the God is dead motif is raised, and in this sense, the book “No Other God” is a logical continuation of the death of God theme, initially introduced by Vahanian in his previous books “The death of God” and “Wait Without Idols.” In this book, Vahanian examines the meaning of the death of God phenomenon for theology, a phenomenon that has caused a great turmoil in American theological and philosophical world at that time, as the theologians appeared in the square, also

speaking from different perspectives about the death of God and declare the historic or metaphysical death of God (Th. Altizer, William Hamilton), or the word “God” no longer has any empirical significance in this secular reality for a contemporary man, for that word is dead and meaningless (P. van Buren). As the researcher R. Muska noted, Vahanian’s position on this issue is critical, showing how Christianity has diminished and turned into a Christendom, Christology into Christosophy, and theology into atheosophy. According to Muska, Vahanian tries to defend Christian faith and criticizes the wrong perceptions of that time (Altizer, Hamilton and van Buren) (Muska, 1967, p. 35).

The main thesis of Vahanian is that the death of God is a religio-cultural phenomenon. God himself is not dead, but men’s religious and cultural perceptions about God are dead as modern man has lost the sense of transcendence and the presence of transcendent God. In other words, the death of God means his absence in the modern world. The existence of God and his reality are not self-sufficient realities anymore but are irrelevant for modern people, hence dead. The modern man does not accept the religious-mythological worldview, because his thinking is completely secular and positivistic, and the worldview is scientific, perception of the world immanent and this-worldly. And since Christian faith is based on transcendental dimension and mythological outlook/worldview and expresses the mythological and metaphysical ways of past thinking, it is clear that as catholic theologian Robert Adolfs rightly states, “To a secular culture, which rejects the mythical and metaphysical, Christianity and its definitions of God become incomprehensible; belonging to

a past stage of culture, they are therefore no longer to be believed" (Adolfs, 1967, p. 86).

Unbelief is a typical phenomenon of our era. In Vahanian's opinion, such a situation means that we are living in the post-Christian age where the reality of God is no longer realistic and relevant. The death of God means his absence in the life of modern man. Meanwhile, if the death of God is not only theoretical, but also a practical phenomenon and lifestyle in the lives of many people, (then) massive disbelief not only supposes the post-Christian but also anti-Christian nature of our era. Since the widespread indifference to religion, the loss of faith and atheism in their nature are not post-Christian, but anti-Christian.

Vahanian concludes that there are three important reasons for the phenomenon of death of God: (1) the emergence of radical immanentism, (2) the emergence of humanism and (3) the gradual growth of Christianity's incapacity. These factors have contributed to the rejection of transcendent as well as the destruction of religious faith in the Western world.

According to Vahanian, not secularism, but secularity is important for Christianity. It refers to the contemporary crisis of religion. The modern man is looking for an adequate perception of the polar correlation between the sacral and the worldly/profane. Vahanian is right in his assertion that a man should not put his loyalty to God in danger of loyalty to this world. Dichotomy between this world and God must be solved by applying a Biblical model that a person must have a balanced and dialectical approach in the relationship between God and the world.

Vahanian believes that the right, adequate understanding of God must reflect the

human experience of God. A religious man must realize that between the transcendent reality of God and the limited understanding of human beings cannot be true correlation. The reality of God should be independent of the cultural environment in which he is perceived by a man. In this aspect, Vahanian is an adherent and advocate of Kierkegaard's idea of "infinite qualitative difference" between God and man and Barth's idea of "wholly other" God. Like Barth, he is also against "natural theology," that is, he denies the possibility of divine knowledge through natural theology. That means they are both apophatic theologians. And anti-metaphysical orientation is typical to and a distinctive feature of apophatic theology. In this sense, Vahanian's death of God demonstrate the anti-metaphysical nature of his theology, which is specific and peculiar to radical or death of God theologians in general.

Vahanian says that the forces or factors in the given culture, intellectual, social, moral, and religious, which play a normative and regulatory role in the society and culture, can distort the ideas of God by turning them into idolatrous ideas. And in this context Vahanian claims that the modern phenomenon of death of God is a religious-cultural event conditioned by the features of religiosity and radical immanentism of the modern era. Vahanian's view is adequate and right. He is actually trying to get rid of the idea of God from religious-cultural idolatry or on-going idolization by which people are trying to objectify and "privatize" God. As N. Berdyaev, a Russian philosopher, would say, "It is necessary to liberate the idea of God from distorting and degrading ... social-morphism" (Berdyaev, 2003, p. 505). Man sees God as he wants to

see him and worship. As Feuerbach rightly said: “The god of man is such as his thoughts and intentions” (Feuerbach, 1968, p. 54). Man creates God in his image. In reality, people worship the God they deserve. The modern man “worships God without God” (Vahanian, 1965<sup>a</sup>, p. 745) which is a form of or a manifestation of a new religiosity. It means believing in behalf of belief that is worshipping a religion because the means are turned into a goal.

Religiosity, rather, religious “formalism” or formalistic religiosity or religionism demolishes the content of true religion, if there is such, and deprives religion of its transcendental orientation and makes it immanent. Religiosity, especially when it is nationalized, becomes the most dangerous enemy of religion. In such religiosity, the formalism, religionism and idolatry simply strangle the sacral, the numinous in religion, making religion a social phenomenon, a power of tradition, when people attend a church, participate in religious ceremonies not for their religious convictions and not for the sake of God or the sacral, but because it is so accepted, it is a fashion, because this formal religiosity is an external demonstration of religionism which is not worshipping God (not a godliness), but it is a belief in behalf of or for the sake of faith, it is a “cultural” religion, a social phenomenon and the power of tradition, the national debt to be paid, civil religion when a person is a Christian, but not religious. Modern manifestations of religionism or religiosity are purely external in their nature, but in reality, they are deprived inside and empty, there is no inner content; they lost the sense of sacral, the numinous and transcendent in religion. Such a religiosity turns religion into a magic and gives it some

immanent significance. And according to Vahanian’s estimation, the death of God event in culture is conditioned by such phenomenon.

Vahanian, like radical theologians Altizer, Hamilton and Cox, waits for a new theophany (a new visible manifestation to humankind of God), that is when man tries to discover a new idea of God after the religious-cultural event of death of God. The former cultural ideas and images of God resulted in death of God phenomenon. Consequently, if a religious faith is to survive, man must leave idolatrous ideas of God and come to realize that the transcendent reality of God cannot be conditioned and limited by human imagination, since God and human definitions of him are not identical.

In the analysis of religious beliefs, Vahanian uses the Barthian approach of kerygmatic theology to reject any form of natural or rational theology. He also rejects the apologetic theology used by R. Bultmann and P. Tillich. Although he admits the relation between existentialism and Christianity, he does not accept the idea that any philosophical system can convey the truth of Christian faith. According to Vahanian, the human problem does not necessarily imply the problem of God and the reason is that it can lead to God or remove from him. The modern culture is anthropocentric and immanent because its basis has changed, that is, the transition from the sacred to the secular. Consequently, only a cultural revolution can save the modern religious crisis, the cause of which is the death of God.

Vahanian’s approach is conservative. Applying the Barthian version of the kerygmatic theology to the problems of Christian faith, it seems to somehow limit the possibilities for the solution of Christian issues. But

from the point of view of religion and theology, it is more appropriate to apply not only the kerygmatic, but also the apologetic approach of theology.

The kerygmatic theology focuses on the solution of the internal problems of Christian faith. This does not mean that Vahanian's theology is church-oriented because his theological program to transform Christianity and correspond it with or fit the world, involves different approaches. Vahanian renews the traditional theology's approach to the world. The main problem he sees is that theology is cut off from the world and human problems. "Theology," says Vahanian, "is truly ecclesiastical only to the extent that it is open to and assumes the world and its wisdom" (Vahanian, 1966<sup>a</sup>, p. 67). From this point of view Vahanian goes on to say, "Theology is no sacred science; it is used to be the channel through which the world understood itself as church and through which the Church asserted the reality of the world. Rather, theology is that critical and self-critical task of faith in terms of which the world understands itself as church and the Church manifests the reality of the world" (Vahanian, 1966<sup>a</sup>, pp. 67-68). In order to eliminate the gap between the world and Christianity, theology should focus its attention on the contemporary man and his problems and try to speak with him in a language he understands. To find a solution to the chief problem of our age, namely, God, theology "will have to enter fields of, e.g., literature, politics, and economics" (Vahanian, 1966<sup>a</sup>, p. 99). However, theology can perform that function only if the understanding of the church is radically changed as a religious structure but its current structure should be also destroyed. "Unless Christianity

wants to be wiped off the face of the earth," says Vahanian, "the Church must begin to think of itself not as a place retreat from the world, not as a society within society, but as a community that has no reality other than *through* the society of men" (Vahanian, 1966<sup>a</sup>, p. 99). In other words, the separation between the world and the church should be eliminated.

Referring to existentialism, Vahanian mentions that it "is to Christian thought as popular religiosity is to the idea of Christian culture" (Vahanian, 1961, p. 208). According to Vahanian, existentialism owes its existence to Christianity as its origins are Christian. There is kinship between them. Existentialism deals with the phenomenological analysis of the human condition and its situation. And since it has religious coloring and orientation and gives a Christian interpretation of certain phenomena, Vahanian considers existentialism as a form of religiosity, which is often referred to as religious philosophy. Consequently, according to Vahanian, "existentialism is possible only in a world where God is dead or a luxury, and where Christianity is dead" (Vahanian, 1961, p. 227). It originates in the decay and death of Christianity. It also assumes the death of God, although in some aspects it may wish that God had not died. In existentialism Christianity meets not a torture death but a quiet euthanasia (Vahanian, 1961, p. 227). Existentialism in the secular language and concepts reveals and transcribes man's devastating and sinful state condition before God and shows the tragic condition of his existence. Vahanian considers existentialism with reservations.

Thus, the approaches through which Vahanian tries to solve the problems of Christian-



ity require radical revision and transformation of the traditional-church form of Christianity and turn theology into sociology, literature and art, and the church as a worldly structure. "Such a new program of religious reform," writes Dobrenkov, "clearly shows the great price paid by contemporary theologians to preserve the importance of religion for the modern man" (Dobrenkov, 1980, p. 90).

Vahanian's assessments about the current religious crisis and the future of the faith are pessimistic. Religious reforms are in vain because they deal only with a narrow religious community. In order to correct and regulate the situation, Vahanian believes that a cultural revolution is necessary, as only that can free the modern man from his idolatrous ideas about God. And this means that there is a new iconoclast basis for a man to re-reveal the true nature of true religious faith, as well as a new, imageless image of God liberated from idolatrous ambitions. The solution of the modern religious crisis Vahanian sees in the revival of Biblical Christianity, which is possible only through the "cultural revolution". But Vahanian does not pay attention to the fact that the modern man and the world cannot return to the Biblical or early Christianity. It is impossible to return because man's worldview of that time was mythological, and the perception of the world was transcendental; the worldview modern man is scientific, the perception of the world is immanent. Vahanian himself realizes this radical difference very well, but it is unclear why he claims something that is unreal and impracticable.

In the modern world, Vahanian's program is unrealistic and improbable in overcoming the religious crisis. As to his suggestions, they are declarative and do not really correspond to

the reality. If Vahanian's theological program of religious reform proposes concrete solutions, his "cultural revolution" program, according to Dobrenkov's right definition, is a declarative requirement for the need of internal transformation of the post-Christian world" (Dobrenkov, 1980, p. 93). Vahanian believes that Christianity can have some development prospects only if there are changes in the modern world that will be able to destroy its "immunity" for Christianity. However, Vahanian does not say or he may not know how to make these changes and what kind of character they should carry. And what one might tell if the objective tendencies of the modern world lead to the destruction of social grounds that cause the religious phenomenon in all its forms. By observing and analyzing the growing pace of the modern world, one can conclude that the modern man feels less and less the need for religious illusions by which he tries to satisfy his spiritual needs and to understand his own life.

Vahanian's theological program is a utopian, uncertain and less likely to be restored to true Christianity through the "Cultural Revolution" and to create a new image and idea of God. It is not as convincing as it requires a large-scale and enormous activity, both of universal significance and scale, the possibilities of which are very small, almost impossible.

### Conclusions

Thus, the core theme of Gabriel Vahanian is that the death of God is a religious-cultural phenomenon. God himself is not dead, but men's religious and cultural perceptions about God and theological-philosophical notions are dead. For Gabriel Vahanian, the

death of God phenomenon conceived as a cultural event, means the end of Christian civilization or Christendom because the western world gradually becomes de-Christianized. Vahanian is an iconoclast theologian. He accepts the transcendence and the otherness of God. Vahanian is an apophatic theologian who denies any form of "natural" or rational theology. It means that the anti-metaphysical aspect is one of the main distinctive features of the apophatic theology. In that sense, Vahanian's the death of God shows the anti-metaphysical direction of his theology. In general, it is a peculiarity of radical theology which is by its nature anti-movement towards the metaphysical ontotheology. The death of God theology shows the crisis in religious language and incapacity of that language to talk of God or find the adequate concepts, expressions to describe him. The death of God theology is conceived as a demonstration of postmodern thinking and way of acting as well as hermeneutics in the light of which it is possible to understand and explain the modern world and conditions. Thus, the death of God phenomenon is the main cultural event in the modern world.

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