

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

natural sciences, as physicists are quick to point out, an experimenter has some effect on the system he examines. With social scientists clearly inside the subject they study, distance is impossible, says Bellah. Failure to recognize this produces incomplete theory. Thus, German economist Max Weber (1864–1920) claimed to pose scientific truths empty of “sacred values.” Yet Weber’s works betray a constant tension between his desire for brotherly love and his conviction that the quest for power impels human behavior.

Fortunately, says Bellah, some social scientists today are beginning to admit their ethical aims. In *The Last Half-Century* (1978), Chicago sociologist Morris Janowitz proposes a goal for his colleagues—helping individuals develop the self-control necessary for the survival of democracy. And German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), returns to the Aristotelian dilemma of what constitutes a “good society.” It is this matter that “belongs at the head of our agenda,” writes Bellah, “something social science for a long time has not wished to believe.”

How Near Is God?

“The God Who Is Involved” by Anne Carr,
in *Theology Today* (Oct. 1981), Princeton
Theological Seminary, P.O. Box 29,
Princeton, N.J. 08540.

During the 1960s, “God is dead” became a major, and controversial, precept for many Christian theologians. Two decades later, leading Western and Third World theologians are proclaiming, à la Mark Twain, that such rumors were very much exaggerated. These scholars—e.g., Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Karl Rahner—argue, however, that images of God must change substantially to fit shifting human needs. So writes Carr, a University of Chicago theologian.

For starters, Christians need to change their prime orientation from the past to the future. God, writes Schillebeeckx, is “the ‘One who is to come’ . . . who is *our* future.” Faith is the trust that God is beginning to “change the course of history for the better.” Theologians Schubert Ogden and David Tracy add that views of God as unchanging should be replaced by concepts of a dynamic force that not only affects but is affected by human struggles. The Creation event is a continuing process; “Creation out of nothing,” says Langdon Gilkey, refers to God as the source of everything—from the universe’s beginning to the end.

Redefining God has major political and economic implications. Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Naomi Goldenberg argue that traditional references to God as “He” and “Father” help legitimize oppressive patriarchal societies. In Latin America, liberation theologians such as Juan Segundo and Gustavo Gutierrez propose a partisan God, on the side of the powerless. Claims Gutierrez: “To know God is to do justice,” not just through individual charity but by participating in liberation struggles. In more affluent Western Europe, Johannes Metz

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

depicts a God opposed to social trends that weaken human community—individualism, consumerism, apathy.

These new visions of God share a crucial aspect, writes Carr: a belief that God is so deeply involved in human existence that God's very being cannot be separated from humanity's. Thus, Küng depicts Christ as God's continuing advocate for mankind, while Ogden asserts that trust in the worth of present and future human experience constitutes an affirmation of the reality of God. And, says Rahner, God is the incomprehensible, transcendent nature that all humans are aware of within themselves; human experience of the "self" is not possible without a simultaneous "ultimate experience of God."

African Gods and African gods

"'Arise, O God!' The Problem of 'Gods' in West Africa" by Patrick J. Ryan, in *Journal of Religion in Africa* (vol. 11, no. 3, 1980), E. J. Brill, Oudij Rijn 33a-35, Leiden, The Netherlands.

When North African Muslims first ventured into black West Africa around A.D. 1000, they were appalled that the natives seemed to worship many gods. About 500 years later, Christian explorers were similarly dismayed. Only in this century have anthropologists recognized the region's long tradition of belief in a single Supreme Being, reports Ryan, who teaches religion at the University of Ghana.

Reverence for ancestral and animist spirits is common in West Africa. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, for example, honor *oriša*—generally, the spirits of clan members' earliest paternal ancestors. Each *oriša* created or now rules its own domain in nature (rivers, rocks, diseases)—at the bidding of the God, *Oloдумаре*. The indolent *Oloдумаре* is considered absolutely transcendent over the *oriša* as well as over humanity; he has no descendants and is honored with virtually no direct ritual worship. By contrast, the Akan tribes of southern Ghana worship a more activist Supreme God, *Onyame*, who created the world single-handedly. But they too venerate lesser, transcendent spirits, from whom they are descended.

Some Westerners have likened these spiritual hierarchies to the Semitic imagery of God and the angels, but Ryan finds this comparison simplistic. Unlike Jews and Christians, West Africans pray to the *lesser* spirits, largely because they believe that the Supreme Being pulled back from the affairs of the world after Creation, leaving his deputies in charge. (Akan hold that an old woman pounding mashed yams kept striking *Onyame*, symbolized by a nearby sky, until he withdrew from human reach.)

The West Africans probably have believed in one supreme God longer than Jews, Christians, and Muslims have, Ryan concludes. The Yoruba and Akan have always given one God prominence over lesser spirits. By contrast, some Biblical scholars cite Psalm 82 (which states that "God presides in the divine council, in the midst of the gods adjudi-