Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was perhaps best known for pronouncing that “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 388). Thinkers of the death of God theology of the American 1960s such as Thomas Altizer insisted that “we must recognize that the death of God is a historical event: God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence” (Christian Atheism 61). Although these two conceptions of the death of God differed, they had several aspects in common: they faced opposition, they thought religion was a product of human necessity, they acknowledged the importance of coexisting opposites, they expressed a certain humanism and interest in individuality, they saw God and religion as products partially of human influence, and they saw that Christianity diminished to a nominalistic existence. Friedrich Nietzsche and the death of God theology thinkers recognized the death of God as the logical result of the secularization of their societies and the change in their culture’s ideas, and so they insisted on a parallel secularization of Christianity.

Nietzsche’s bold belief in God’s death grew out of his firm resolution that Christianity was a negative force. Christianity’s stress on the virtue of such things as meekness and poverty did not inspire people to better themselves; it simply made laziness and lack-of-progress appear to be acceptable if not recommended (De Botton 237). In addition to harmfully encouraging mediocrity, Christianity (according to Nietzsche) dangerously denied the importance of the individual by proposing predefined paths to supposed greatness. Christianity, therefore, robbed humanity of the personal vitality of living. According to Nietzsche’s belief in the necessary coexistence of good and evil, good things stemmed from hardships. Evil was a force to be embraced as part of the concomitant opposites of reality. On the other hand Christian theology perceived evil as a threat and insisted on its eradication (Nietzsche, The Twilight of the Idols 417). This unacceptance of the idea of necessary evils did not resound with Nietzsche’s own ideology. Nietzsche’s views were often discordant with religious tenets, which led him to question the validity of many Christian claims.

Another major clash between Christian beliefs and Nietzsche’s thought lay in the question of how to uncover the ideal self. Christianity insisted that identity was a product of spiritual inquiry and that people turned to religion and God out of emotional necessity (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 395). On the other hand Nietzsche asserted that core character existed within the individual and could not be grasped by exterior means. The ideal man that lurked beneath external superficialities was not the same man that was the model Christian. Nietzsche’s Übermensch (over man) had a well-defined, self-created individuality and moral code much different from Christianity’s imposed idea of goodness. In overcoming
societal influences, the Übermenschen acknowledged their animalistic natures and knew not to attempt to gain an extraordinary position within existence. Übermenschen focused on the present instead of a sort of ideal religious afterlife, and in doing so they accepted the self-control necessary to live amid the world’s paucity of certainty. The certain contrast between the Christian and Nietzschean ideal man could only add to Nietzsche’s disagreement with some core Christian canons.

Nietzsche’s only glimpse of hope for saving Christianity was the acceptance of God’s death as a new part of it. Mankind killed God in that it took part in the deterioration of the idea of Him. The contemporary notion of God was so convoluted by time and man’s own beliefs that it held little truth. Churches became memorials standing in His memory and were only ostensibly God’s houses. Nietzsche considered that Christians draw “from the conflagration kindled by a belief a millennium old, the Christian belief, which was also the belief of Plato, that God is truth, that the truth is divine. . . . But what if this itself always becomes more untrustworthy, what if nothing any longer proves itself divine, except it be error, blindness, and falsehood; what if God himself turns out to be our most persistent lie?” (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 392). For Nietzsche truth was the absolute authority; so, if God was a lie created by generations past then Christianity had a false basis. God’s existence was also false to Nietzsche as a result of his belief that nothing subsisted beyond the whole of the universe. The idea of a supreme being in addition to the sphere of existence created a challenge to the reality of the universe (Nietzsche, The Twilight of the Idols 417). Denying the existence of God was in effect accepting Truth and allowing for the continuance of life on Earth.

The death of God theology of the 1960s drew upon the concepts of several earlier thinkers and philosophers (among them Nietzsche) in order to develop a secular Christianity for contemporary America. In denying the existence of God by various means, these new thinkers began to weave fresh meaning into Christian theology and to create a Christianity that was free from God’s presence. The idea of God’s being an idol molded by society grew out of Søren Kierkegaard’s view of the distortion of the gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke to the need for secularization of the church and the concepts of the Bible. Thomas J. J. Altizer was influenced by the idea of opposites of Buddhism and William Blake. After drawing ideas from various individual sources, the men of the death of God theology began to develop an ideology that partly resulted from historical influence.

Mankind’s history, not just personal beliefs, had a great influence on the new religious concepts expressed in the 1960s. For example the emergence of capitalism and scientific reasoning liberated America from its earlier dependence upon uncertainty. Not knowing was previously a cause of reliance upon religious answers and faith in God almighty. The separation of church and state was another step towards the secularization of society (Toward a Hidden God 84).
People began to doubt Christianity's validity further when faced with the tragedies of war, sadism, and other worldly ills (Toward a Hidden God 87). The secular, troubled twentieth century seemed to be a place where God could not possibly exist.

Thomas J. J. Altizer expressed the view that God's death in society was in part the result of an overall secularization of America. Taking it literally that Christ embodied God, Altizer asserted that Christ's death resulted in an actual death of God (Carey and Ice 19). Traditional beliefs formed in ages in which religion was central to both society and government, so people's lives were logically religious. As America developed, it grew away from these spiritual origins. The existence of a sanctified God amid a secular society resulted in a conflict that needed to be resolved by using opposites. Removing God from Christianity would lead to a worldly religion capable of enduring. Following the influences of Buddhism and William Blake, Altizer stressed the importance of the reconciliation of opposites. Secular ideas were the tool that could return America to the sacred since they, and not religion, governed society.

A belief in the importance of empiricism led Paul van Buren to conclude that God was nonexistent. He thought that nothing could be if it could not be explained. He insisted that the Gospel was only true in its empirically-defined aspects (Shideler 115). Since the concept of God is beyond human language and expression, he denied God's being.

Men such as William Hamilton believed that love was the only consolation left for him and his fellow theologians. Love had the potential to solve the social, political, and technological problems of the twentieth century. This idea led him to stress the importance of Jesus Christ in a society in which the God of faith was dead (Hamilton 213). Amid the ignorance and fear of early Christianity, the belief in God was necessary; but contemporary America did not share that same need. On the other hand Jesus did exist to Hamilton. He embodied human compassion and, therefore, taught mankind to serve his fellow man (Hamilton 214). Disregarding traditional views of Jesus, Hamilton believed Christ to be more of an idea than a physical man (Adolfs 88). Jesus was the mindset that aided people in supporting one another in a country where God ceased to be.

As a result of his beliefs in cultural relativism, Gabriel Vahanian could not agree with America's ostensible concept of God. Vahanian deemed man incapable of knowing God's true essence, and so the human perception of his existence was then an idolization created as a result of contemporary culture. As a result of its being a product of early Christian and Greek ideas, early Christianity's vision of God could not be relevant to twentieth-century America. Therefore, if God existed at all, the expression of his presence needed to be redefined. American Christianity needed to adapt to the country's own secularization in order to embrace a spiritual ideology that its people could comprehend. This definition of
God’s death left open the opportunity for God’s return to American beliefs after an alteration in creed.

The new Christianity (sometimes deemed atheist) of the 1960s embraced a secularization of religion that did not escape opposition. The thinkers were criticized for turning Christianity into mere humanism in extracting God from religion and only leaving Jesus (Christian Atheism 62). Some deemed the death of God theology as simply ridiculous saying that the unbeliever was “like a six-year-old boy saying that there [was] no such thing as passionate love – they just [had]n’t experienced it [sic].” But even religious figures such as Francis B. Sayre (the Episcopalian dean of Washington’s National Cathedral) said that they were unsure of what God meant (Toward a Hidden God 83). The proposition of a new religious order threatened the mainstream belief system, so it could not endure without challenge.

In addition to both meeting opposition, Nietzsche and the death of God thinkers both thought that perhaps man formed his own perception of God out of his necessity to trust in a higher power. In early Christianity man needed to believe in order to have security and to explain his humanity. The modern world did not require this comfort since it distanced itself from spiritual reliance and turned to reason and technology among other explanations (Borowitz 93). Nietzsche was in accordance with this idea of religion’s fulfilling a certain need. In surpassing the weakness that caused need, man surpassed Christianity in its traditional form (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 395).

Traditional Christianity was discordant with the shared belief in the importance of coexisting opposites. While Christianity encouraged the eradication of all evils, Nietzsche stressed the importance of hardships and strife in birthing all good things. In discussing the reconciliation of opposites, Altizer suggested a change in Christianity to incorporate the conflict between spirituality and secularization. He never hinted at eliminating the conflicting state of affairs as Christianity might recommend. Evil and conflict were tools for refining Christianity according to those people who believed God to be dead.

Nietzsche and the death of God theologians both believed that contemporary God was a product of man’s own molding. Nietzsche’s celebration of the individual in contrast with Christian humility paralleled the 1960s view that man held enough personal power to affect his own religion. This humanism was a large part of the new Christianity that they proposed. Nietzsche went so far as to claim that man’s influence on the concept of God contributed to God’s death. The dearth of truth in the human perception of God rendered Him meaningless and, therefore, killed him. This similar assertion appeared in the philosophy of the 1960s in the form of beliefs such as Vahanian’s contention that cultural relativism contorted the perception of God. That man was easily influenced by his surroundings caused man’s interpretations to hold little legitimacy. The idolatry of
God and humanity’s formation of His image influenced Nietzsche and the theologians in their assessments of the validity of Christian beliefs.

In suggesting that Christianity evolved to a point where it only ostensibly held real meaning concerning God, Nietzsche and the death of God theologians in effect asserted that Christian thought became a matter of nominalism. The name and concept of God only held import within the parameters of a society’s own thoughts, and God was meaningless in the context of contemporary America. The religious incorporation of secularization appeared in such contexts as the stress by Hamilton and others on Jesus Christ’s importance. According to both the ideas of the 1960s and Nietzsche, Christianity needed to adapt in order to survive. The history of America brought the nation to a position where spiritual ideas could only exist as a part of the secular world; and in asserting that God was dead, Nietzsche and the thinkers of the death of God theology acknowledged this condition of society.