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THINKING THROUGH THE DEATH OF GOD

Most simply put, the first thing that a Buddhist tantric guru (let alone a more conventional Buddhist teacher) would likely tell Altizer would be to stop writing so openly about the good news of the apocalypse. His work would be regarded as esoteric, not to be published for public consumption on the fear that it would be misused.

—Janet Gyasto

A review of *Thinking Through The Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J.J. Altizer*, eds. Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder. SUNY Series in Theology and Continental Thought. Douglas Donkel, ser. ed. Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004. xxix + 254 pp. ISBN 0-7914-6219-6 (hardcover, \$73.50); 0-7914-6220-X (paper, \$24.95).

SO IT IS WITH THOMAS J.J. ALTIZER'S LEGACY at this point in our time. Just the name—*Altizer!*—strikes fear and abjection in the hearts and minds in great halls of theology in the United States. (Just try whispering his name around your local *X Theological Seminary* or *Divinity School* of *X University* sometime.) His personae and theological voice invokes the often-misinterpreted courage of his ancestor, Gen. Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson (that’s the “J.J.” in Altizer’s name), knowingly or not to those who have encountered his work, even peripherally, in the theological academy. The boldness and hardheadedness of Altizer’s thought often is as difficult to enter as it is easy to dismiss; as such, like his infamous Confederate ancestor, Altizer’s theology is open to misinterpretation or non-interpretation by the “mainstream” of academic theology.

Is it that Altizer’s thought is “regarded” as so “esoteric,” as Janet Gyasto speculates, that Altizer’s message is too dangerous to be consumed by theologians drunk with the popular French currents gusting out of AAR meetings? Altizer has long preached that theology is unthinkable in our age; and Mark C. Taylor has gone so far to declare Altizer as the actual *end* of theology (long before such pronouncements were so *cliché*). Or is Altizer’s otherness in our

current theological landscape actually the most genuine attempt at theology in our time? Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder's helpful "critical companion," *Thinking Through the Death of God*, addresses this latter question from a variety of intriguing and insightful perspectives.

Edward Casey responds that the reason why Altizer's thought seems so alien to mainstream theology (or philosophy, for that matter) is because he writes in "the language of Western metaphysics" (125), a language foreign to most contemporary thinkers. Altizer is perhaps the most serious effort in the interpretation of Hegelian metaphysics as a *specifically Christian* metaphysics; and, Casey observes, is in fact *the theological* response to Derrida: Altizer's "reversal of reversal" reaches "beyond the moment of negation as skepsis." "The result," he writes, "is not exactly deconstruction...perhaps we could say that it is a unique form of *àpres*-deconstruction" (126). Casey suggests a different, more suitable term to describe Altizer's method within the context of Derridian/post-Heideggerian postmodernity, which is really Altizer's term, *dismemberment*: literally, "'auto-deconstruction,' self-dismantling, or self-dismemberment" (127).

D.G. Leahy's difficult essay, "The Diachrony of the Infinite in Altizer and Levinas," suggests a more strictly theological take on the same texts, offering a similar notion of God's self-damnation or "self-laceration" as an act of liberation (110). Life is liberated from death by becoming joined with death in the abyss of the *novum*: that is to say, "the liberation of corporeality which is the immanence of life, neither one nor the other, *essentially* transcends the dialectic of the exhausted self" (122). As a *liberation* theologian, then, Altizer offers the most *radical* liberation thinkable in a Christian theological system, namely, the liberation of any sense of immutability or exhaustibility of divinity, a notion that Altizer believes to be both absolutely *Christian* and *Biblical*.

To this end, Altizer is a *Biblical Theologian*. This is not to necessarily say that Altizer is by any means a "biblical theologian" in the historical-critical tradition of the likes of Gerhard von Rad or Walter Brueggemann (which, I will add, is a contentious discipline in itself, often an anti-Semitic and counter-productive enterprise). Instead, Altizer's system of theology as a whole suggests that the thread that holds the Torah to the New Testament (and other authors) is an apocalypticism that presents, as Ray Hart describes, "the very enfolding/unfolding of 'Spirit' itself" (60). Brian Schroeder further explains:

While Altizer's use of the term "eschatology" is conventional ... [there is a] division between a primordial and apocalyptic thinking, a division that is most pronounced theologically in the difference between preprophetic Hebraism and early Christianity. The divide between the early Old Testament and New Testament thinking is obviously nothing new, but neither is it unbridgeable. In fact, central to Altizer's thinking is the

conviction that prophecy is an ongoing phenomenon, its very continuation attesting to his thesis that history is apocalypse. His unwavering insistence on the foundational significance and continuation of the prophetic tradition, a line connecting not only preexilic to postexilic Israel but extending to the present era, has led him to expand the theological canon to include such heterodox voices as those of the philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche. ... However, of far greater concern to Altizer is the relatively recent separation between theology and New Testament studies. Here Altizer falls on the side, not of theology, as might be expected, but of biblical scholarship. Despite the philosophical tone of his theology the guiding insight is scriptural—the kenosis or self-emptying of the Godhead. (73)

The atonement of God disclosed through kenosis—that is, the self-damnation or self-subversion of the divine—is both symbolic and historical. In other words, for Altizer God *actually*, as the Bible reports, “took on the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7); and God *actually* allowed Godself to perish on the cross. And not only did these things happen *actually*, but they happened *ultimately*: God does *absolutely* negate Godself; the death of God is an *absolute* death.

As such, God is perpetually changing and kenoting, and the Christian God is one who must be characterized as constantly *dying*. This conception of Godhead places spiritual ultimacy in the present, where humans are caught up between, amidst, and participating in the eternal conflicts of good and evil. The present may only be thought of as a perpetual apocalypse, not only because the *genesis* and *omega* of history are apocalyptic but because Christianity is a religion where ethics is essential to a sustained theology as a “reversal” of the *status quo* (see Edith Wyschogrod, 101). Such thinking is also very Biblical and Pauline: in 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul also places a clear Christian historiography where Christians can understand their own personal role in Christendom as a secure benchmark between the Christ-event and the second coming. Altizer is the only contemporary theologian who articulates, however subtle, a truly apocalyptic ethics that is distinctly both Pauline and Nietzschean.

Altizer may also be thought of as a *Pastoral Theologian*. While the very thought of this may be laughable or absurd, the essays of this volume point to a theologian whose systematic theology addresses ethics, culture, and liturgy in new and creative ways as have few other twentieth century thinkers. Carl Raschke finds in Altizer a theologian concerned with *sacrality* and the violence of victimization of the Divine. Those partaking in Christ’s death must understand, according to Raschke, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of victimizer and the victimized *with* the “singularity of the Word itself, the Word made flesh, the Word qua flesh” (9). A sacramental or liturgical theology, then, finds a worshiping community entering into a much more violent and apocalyptic event “when two or more are gathered” than they would probably like to know. David Jasper similarly points out that apocalyptic thinking is “at the heart of liturgy, though a primitive

liturgy far from contemporary liturgical practice within the church, which has forgotten the apocalyptic prayer that is most truly the language of Jesus” and evoked in the words of Eucharistic liturgy. Through the kenosis of genuinely apocalyptic liturgical language, Jasper concludes that in Altizer’s treatment of language, “language is fully found only in a self-emptying and therefore is in the silence that lies at the heart of the celebration of the sacrament, that is a reversal, in the death of God, of everything, and an apocalyptic moment beyond anything realized within the church, its liturgy, or its formularies” (191). A “celebration” such as the Eucharist, then runs “the ultimate risk” for the pastor and her community, because it *celebrates* a festivity that is “only found, paradoxically, in the deepest solitude, in the deepest darkness where is affirmed the No which evokes a Yes.” To this, Jasper notes, “[i]t is in the insistence of this that Altizer remains a preacher—along with van Gogh, Barth, Blake, and the poets” (193).

Finally, Altizer’s theology is pastoral in nature because it is ultimately rooted in religious experience. (In fact, one might say this makes Altizer’s theology genuinely *evangelical*!) Alphonso Lingis quotes from an unpublished manuscript, “A Vision of Satan,” a story that will be similarly told again in Altizer’s forthcoming memoir, *Thinking Through the Death of God*:

This occurred in the spring of 1951 ... when I was almost twenty-five years old and a theology student at the University of Chicago, a period of immense turmoil for me, when I was not only visited by a deep depression but locked into a genuine isolation, and again and again as I walked to campus over the Chicago midway I would acutely experience deep tremors in the earth, tremors threatening to open up into the depths below, where I would be consumed by a threatening abyss. This was my condition when one night as I was struggling with a recurrent insomnia, I suddenly awakened as through from a deep sleep, and awakened with a full vision, a vision paradoxically of darkness itself, a pure darkness, and so luminous that I could see the very face of this darkness, a face that I could only know and name as Satan. Nor did I simply see this Satan, for this was a seeing in which I was consumed, I could actually experience myself as being drawn into the very body of Satan, one which I could experience as an ultimate bonding, a horrible but ineradicable union, and one which I have subsequently known as changing my life forever. (199)

Aside from the jaw-dropping material of this story, what shocks me deeply is that the passion of such a story would not be typical from a writer who, as Theodore Jennings once observed (in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. D. Musser and J. Price), is one of the few twentieth-century theologians who has neither been ordained nor primarily employed in a theological school. Yet at the base of Altizer’s system is more than a mere “conversion story” or “second birth,” but a *theosis*. But this *theosis* is the reversal of what is typically thought of in Protestantism as *theosis*, poached from John Wesley’s trope of a “heart strangely warmed.” To be sure, Altizer’s *theosis* is described as more *strange* than *warm*, it is a genuine terror or horror, such as that expressed in Edward Munch’s

“The Scream.” To make an analogy to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, it is a vision which sees more fully Godhead in such a way that allows for Kurtz speaking through the thickness of the riches and mystery of the jungle. Here darkness cannot be avoided, and Christianity—along with its theology—must be taken seriously enough to address theodicy as something that not only affects humans, but also God.

This thesis, as a reversal, is heretical, which is what makes Altizer’s theology very deeply American. To be clear, for a theology to be rooted in experience is a very subversive (and American) Wesleyanism foreign to contemporary American Methodism, and may only be similarly manifest in the personae and music of Johnny Cash, who invokes the terror of the apocalypse in one breath—“Hear the trumpets/Hear the pipers/....It’s Alpha and Omega’s kingdom come”—and celebrates that “My God is real/For I can feel/Him in my soul” in the next. Such is the seemingly contradictory and heterodoxical vision of a distinctively American Christianity, and it is both practiced and celebrated in the black mass of Altizer’s writing.

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Despite Janet Gyasto’s hesitance, the theology of Altizer needs to have a greater exposure. Lissa McCullough’s “Historical Introduction” itself admits that a comprehensive or definitive historical treatment of Altizer’s biography and the Death of God movement has yet to be written. Altizer is one of a handful of remaining systematic *Christian* theologians, and the academic theological (and pastoral) enterprise is, without question from me, at a loss for not engaging Altizer more seriously. To be sure, I cannot understand why Altizer is not given more attention in today’s theological landscape, particularly with such attention being paid to notions such as “the public theologian.” Make no mistake: for Christians, Altizer *was* our last truly public theologian.

The work that remains to be done, in my view, is two-fold. First, although McCullough’s excellent “Theology as the Thinking of Passion Itself” and Alphonso Lingis’ “Kenosis” together may be employed as the best and most accessible introductions to the thought of Altizer yet written, a true theological introduction to Altizer or a carefully-assembled introductory text collecting essays by Altizer needs to be made public to introduce his thought to a new, younger, and wider audience. Such texts have, in my opinion, rescued Karl Rahner’s theology from being obscured from a modern audience—and Rahner’s theology is as expansive and difficult to enter to the untrained and inexperienced reader as Altizer’s system. Altizer’s theology is clearly a systematic theology and must be presented as such in a genuinely accessible manner. Perhaps his new

memoir, *Living the Death of God*, will serve this purpose; however, a systematic presentation of Altizer's career, as is typically done of other important theologians, would be very helpful, if not essential, for future researchers.

Second, a critical response to Altizer from a more representative group of theologians is needed. While I applaud *Thinking Through the Death of God* for assembling intellectually diverse sources for responses, a project is now sorely needed to encourage those from "mainstream" schools of theology to engage Altizer as a challenge. Feminist theology, to make a generalization, seems to me to be extraordinarily hostile toward Altizer's thought; however, now that some dust has cleared since the death of God media sensation of the late 1960s, would feminists still read Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* honestly without noticing the similarities in the basic premises between Daly and Altizer's earlier works (namely, Daly's notion of the gerundive deity)? Similarly, the current feminist discussion over kenosis seems to be unfortunately handicapped by not engaging Altizer, who decades ago connected kenosis to self-dismemberment. It seems unthinkable, though true, that the theologian who has most extensively (if not most seriously) engaged kenosis in the last century is completely ignored in the contemporary landscape of thinking on this very idea.

Similarly, I also believe that a serious neo-Evangelical response to Altizer would be very different today than has been in the past, now that Altizer's thought has achieved a new sophistication in the past thirty years while some corners of academic Evangelicalism have become more philosophically literate. I believe that few academic theologians take the Bible as seriously as does Altizer, and as such Altizer offers a compelling challenge for Evangelicals today. Along these lines, I would encourage responses from liberation, black, homiletic, liturgical, "queer," "post-liberal" and "radical orthodox" theologians, as well as from Tillichian, Barthian, and "New" Nietzscheans. Furthermore, Mark C. Taylor's very interesting methodology for thinking about Altizer as a contrary theologian of culture ("Betraying Altizer"), I think, would be fruitful among those theologians seriously engaging popular culture. It will not be until Altizer is engaged or encouraged in the mainstream of academic theology that his thought will gain more prominence.

Perhaps, though, movements such as Altizer's are meant to be and can only exist as subversive, counter-cultural movements. And if this is true, and if Altizer's system in time proves to continue to be substantive and to be a productive conversation partner both to those doing genuine theology and to those inquiring about or obsessed with the language of "God," its legacy will remain authentic to itself for years to come.

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