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DEATH OF GOD REPRISÉ:
ALTIZER, TAYLOR, VATTIMO, CAPUTO, VAHANIAN

Review of Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir*. Foreword by Mark C. Taylor. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. xviii + 191 pp. ISBN 0791467570

John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*. Edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins. Afterword by Gabriel Vahanian. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 204 pp. ISBN 9780231141246

Mark C. Taylor, *After God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xviii + 416 pp. ISBN 0226791696

These recent titles by a few seasoned cultural critics analyzing what the death of God continues to mean for theology, religion, faith, culture, and life in general, are significant for the common ground they share and for the criticisms that crisscross between them, sometimes identifying each other by name. In his latest book, *After God*, Mark C. Taylor alludes to a “looming disaster” and “peril” before which “it is difficult not to despair,” as he postulates that the most pressing dangers we currently face result from the conflict of competing absolutisms that divide the world between oppositions that can never be mediated.ⁱ Nothing is more dangerous, in his view, than the growing devotion to dualistic either/or ideologies in a neither/nor world (AG, 349). Thomas J. J. Altizer’s most recent book, a theological memoir titled *Living the Death of God*, understands the deepest challenge of our time as a fathoming of the depths of darkness enveloping us in the form of nihilism, a nihilism brought on by the death of God and the end of our historical world.ⁱⁱ As compared with Taylor, Altizer pursues a more intimate and interior struggle—his effort is to generate a light of active understanding in the darkness, a movement of life that would transfigure the satanic subjection that is the apocalypse of our world into an actively sustainable *Ereignis*, to borrow Heidegger’s term.ⁱⁱⁱ “If only through Heidegger, we can know that nihilism is an ultimate question for us, and yet it is extraordinarily difficult to understand nihilism, and there is certainly no common understanding of nihilism at hand” (LDG, 165). He points out that we can hardly be sanguine in this task given that Nietzsche, our nineteenth-century forefather in this effort, was “shattered” by the attempt to conquer nihilism.

Viewed in tandem, Taylor's analysis offers a more outward focus on, let us call it, *the abyss between*, coping with the chaotic tempest of absolutist ideological passions and conflicts unleashed by the death of God and the correlative technological transformation of our world, while Altizer's preoccupation is with *the abyss within*, coping with the engulfing darkness and silence of a universally negative theophany, which for him is manifestly nameable as an apotheosis of Death. "Nothing more clearly distinguishes a uniquely modern vision than does its deep ground in evil, or in a pure negativity, a pure negativity wholly unknown in the ancient world, or in a pre-Christian world" (LDG, 37). In this overwhelming midst, Altizer's method is to seek a dialectic that would enact a salvific wholeness, a yes-saying apocalyptic joy, that can only evade us as long as we dwell in an unmediated undialectical "night," a night of univocal nihilism without relief, and, equally, as long as we opt for an unmediated undialectical "light," a light of heavenly salvation or cheap grace divorced from the evil and damnation that constitute our actual world. For it is our real world of horror, of disaster and devastation, that cries to be transformed, or transfigured, if genuine transfiguration is to occur. Nothing less than this will suffice for redemptive joy to be authentic, rather than an evasion of our deepest responsibility.

Altizer's theology has always battled against two undialectical antipodes: on the one hand, a pure nihilism that would vanquish all joy in an unrelieved night of horror, a no-without-yes, and, on the other hand, a pure gnosticism or "spiritualism" that would void joy of its constitutive darkness, and in that sense deprive it of the power to "save" or "redeem" anything whatsoever, a yes-without-no, for "how is it possible to understand redemption if we cannot understand damnation? . . . And how can Christ truly be known apart from Satan?" (LDG, 39). Certainly, Altizer's lifework has wagered that the temptation to escape from real life and actual history, repairing to a realm of illusory light, is ultimately the more perilous danger. We are better off facing straight on the dread beast of nihilism—the fiercest of all opponents inasmuch as it defies every possible illusion—wrestling with it however we can.

So Altizer's strategy is a relentlessly negative dialectic: a yes-only-through-no. While this is modeled on an Hegelian dialectic, to be sure, it is a post-Nietzschean variant that privileges total negativity, "a total No," as the condition of interior redemption (LDG, 87). "Negate thyself" is its command; no triumphalism of Spirit is possible, God is dead, paradise is lost, and embodied spirit can find authentic salvation only in a lost paradise—or as William Blake expressed this, it "builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."^{iv} Altizer recapitulates this principle in his memoir:

One of the principles that I absorbed as a theological student is that genuine faith cannot only absorb the deepest possible challenge but that it becomes even more truly faith in meeting such a challenge. Once again Augustine is a true model here, but so, too, are Pascal and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. Is such a movement of faith impossible in late modernity? A dialectical principle is fully present here, that the deepest or truest faith is not possible apart from the deepest No to that faith, and

this principle is fully present in all genuine apocalypticism, for an apocalyptic light can only be manifest and real in the purest darkness, just as that light itself can only dawn in a horizon of total darkness. (LDG 91)

While Altizer trusts in a yet more comprehensive dialectic, an über-dialectic that would imbue Hegelian method with all the shattering iconoclastic negations of Blake, Nietzsche, and their more recent heirs, an approach he calls “Yes and No,” Taylor trusts in a Neither/Nor that would outfox the logic of dialectic from within. Taylor locates hope for creativity and new life in a Derridean evasion of dialectic through the play of difference. “The imagination,” Taylor argues, “involves the interplay of figuring and disfiguring in which there are two moments—one constructive, the other deconstructive.” Because figures have as the condition of their figuration something that cannot be figured, figures are “always disfigured *as if* from within” (AG, 307, 20). Figures are breached by an “interior exteriority” that, by disfiguring them, leaves them open for further emergence.

But the capacity to *refigure*, which is the creative moment, must not be squelched by a poststructural insistence on difference that becomes so totalizing that it disallows any commonality, unity, or wholeness, banning the very possibility of figuration. Instead, Taylor argues, the refiguration that should be privileged is that involving nontotalizing structures that nonetheless act as wholes—as complex adaptive networks do. Complexity that responds and adapts as if it were a whole constitutes the neither/nor. “The neither/nor of complexity simultaneously makes possible and renders incomplete the both/and of monism and the either/or of dualism. The complexity of this neither/nor harbors the theoretical resources and practical principles for negotiating the conflicts of the twenty-first century” (AG, 310). Taylor intends a faith structure characterized by live responsiveness, creativity, resilient adaptivity, an ability to organize itself and thrive not as a fixed identity or dialectical binary, but as a self-configuring and -reconfiguring, and indeed self-disfiguring, complex system.

If Altizer’s two chief worries for faith are nihilism and modern gnosticism, Taylor’s are the complementary inadequacies of monism and dualism. Taylor envisions an adaptive faith that accommodates complexity and figures wholeness without suppressing difference or insisting on identity. For this to be possible, both monist and dualist thinking would have to be displaced by complex emergent interconnectivity, the “one” that is “many” corroborative events in tandem, that achieves “wholeness” only by virtue of functional differentiation, multiplicity, and complex emergent co-adaptivity.

Monism and dualism are both theologies of death: in the former, individual differences collapse in the entropic totality where Eros becomes Thanatos; in the latter, oppositional differences negate themselves by destroying each other. To overcome this destructive nihilism, it is necessary to cultivate emergent creativity in complex

adaptive networks that figure, disfigure, and refigure what once was believed to be the substance of things seen and unseen. (AG, 311–12)

Taylor and Altizer both attempt to confront a thoroughgoing nihilism—as manifested in its many protean forms today—hence both are concerned with the possibility of sustaining *faith* in the midst of nihilistic darkness. Their contrasting external/internal focus becomes manifest here. With his eye on the multiplicity of interreligious conflicts, Taylor accents the need for faith to serve as a kind of anti-absolutist, interrelationist praxis for living creatively in a twenty-first-century world, commending “a faith that embraces uncertainty and insecurity as conditions of creative emergence,” which “harbors the only hope that remains” (xviii, 185). Altizer, by contrast, remains focused on the disaster within historical Christianity, digging into that disaster as its own most powerful resource for transfiguring itself: “Naming the enemy is a genuine theological challenge, but every real theologian knows that the enemy is most deeply within, and most deeply within faith itself” (LDG, 104–105). Altizer contends that the challenge to Christianity can only be met by “a deep inquiry within Christianity itself” (LDG, 104).

Far from providing a praxis for a less conflictual and violent world, Altizer understands faith as a self-immolating wrestling with the beast that is one’s own deepest and darkest consciousness—hence his embrace of Nietzsche as his theological master, one who is a theological master by virtue of being “the greatest anti-theological thinker in history” (LDG, 88). The genre of the memoir has allowed Altizer to divulge more forthrightly, even downright confessionally, what is palpable in his theological oeuvre overall: a passion for theology (102) as the calling of a sick soul (106), which he has experienced as a curse (181), the lifelong fruit of which is nothing less than a hatred and horror of God (105). For “surely there is no more terrible deity in the history of religions” than the Christian God, a God who is well masked by theologians as “incomprehensible” given that he is “too terrible to contemplate” (105).

Frankly, I genuinely respect those who are repulsed by an Augustine, a Luther, or a Kierkegaard. I do believe that they are our deepest pathologists, or deepest apart from Nietzsche; yet Nietzsche truly belongs within this tradition... These are the very thinkers who call forth the most terrible God, that God who has predestined all humanity to an eternal Hell, and only released from that inevitable destiny a tiny elect whom He has freely and gratuitously chosen, and the very Heaven given this elect is inseparable from the eternity and the sheer horror of Hell. (LDG, 105)

The dominant stream of modernity was determined to awaken from this nightmare of God, and it began to succeed to “forget” (repress?) judgment, damnation, and hell as the principal institutions of God’s inscrutable justice. Nonetheless, Altizer considers Kafka the purest witness to God in the twentieth century (LDG, 106), a hidden God who is “visible” only in the form of absolute judgment, overwhelming guilt, and immense darkness created by the

unattainable light of the law. All of us know God, Altizer claims, insofar as we can name our deepest darkness (LDG, 180). In exorcising this nightmare, the consuming abyss within, a healthy-minded turn to superficial atheism is insufficient. A radical theology of implosion is the only therapy.

Yes, this may be a disaster, but it is uniquely *our* disaster, a disaster of our historical-spiritual making, and we cannot pretend that we have another calling, Altizer thinks, or imagine that we can evade or set aside this unfinished, unresolved project in our deepest consciousness (our “souls”) or our world. Before we will see clearly to recommend any “religious” strategies to others or move forward ourselves in a global society, we must contend with the log in our own eye—that “log” that is our God and his history. That God is “dead” does not make him less powerful. Indeed, it only makes him more dangerous, his authority more oppressive—or repressive as the case may be. This is not a job for Christian theologians alone, or for Christian believers and ex-believers alone, but for anyone involved enough in the disaster to feel called to help sort it out. The wound, having been inflicted in the world, lies open to the world, and anyone in the world is justified to respond. Admittedly, Altizer does not overtly *say* this, but his appeal to a universal audience is implicit. His use of “we” does not narrow-mindedly assume that his reader is Christian, only that his reader, for better or worse, has been “touched” by the Christian God.

The enormous power of this God as it has been manifest outwardly historically is a power rooted *within*—embedded in the deepest levels of Western consciousness and unconsciousness. Hence to become liberated from this God, Altizer believes, the event of liberation must be an interior process, as no exterior treatment can achieve release where the grip has been strongest. This explains Altizer’s gratitude to modern writers such as Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett, who take on God’s power imaginatively through subversive irony, grotesquery, and blasphemy, for “even Nietzsche pales in the wake of *Finnegans Wake*” (LDG, 25). Only the *lèse majesté* of blasphemy and heresy can transfigure the terrors and curses of the God within, converting his Satanic lacerations into the stripes of Christ, the Lamb who saves.

Indeed, Altizer expresses bafflement that the imaginative visions of God by writers and artists in modernity are so much more powerful and alive than the unimaginative treatments of God by modern theologians. He contrasts the embarrassment of riches provided in the epic visions of Dante, Milton, Blake, and Joyce with the stultifying lack of imagination and deadened conservatism among modern theologians. “In many ways theologians are their own worst enemies, for we find it impossible to believe that we have been given such opportunities, impossible to believe in the grace of theology itself”; “how ironic that our imaginative vision should be so richly theological whereas our theological thinking is so constricted and confined” (LDG, 26, 42). Altizer confesses that he felt most encouraged in his theological calling by nontheological colleagues, by literary scholars and the like, “nontheologians who knew far more deeply than I did that ultimate crisis which had become our destiny, a crisis shattering modernity itself, and therefore dissolving modernity’s

comprehensive negation of theology itself" (LDG, 24). Certainly contemporary theologians are in denial of cultural reality to the extent that they ignore and neglect the idea of the death of God, which is perhaps the signature idea shaping modern history and consciousness. Altizer points out that the profound theological negations of Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche "are truly missing in modern theology," which makes him wonder whether a truly "modern" theology has yet been conceived (LDG, 94).

Well, let it be said, those who have had it with the Christian God's torturous history and want a swift exit will have no patience with Altizer and are better off turning to Taylor for a new territory for faith. Taylor, in refiguring faith's twenty-first century possibilities, is looking for new paths to health and wholeness rather than battling moribund disease and pathology. But precisely the healthy-minded intent of Taylor's effort can make its prescriptions seem a bit abstract and unreal, too easily recommending a remove from the abiding temptations of absolutist metaphysics, and too unlike any "religion" or "faith" we actually know.^v Taylor is prospecting for a "religion without God," an "ethics without absolutes," and possibly he is right that this is the thing most needful in our time—but it is also the thing most absent. So despite his strongly pragmatic orientation, in a sense Taylor is the greater idealist as compared with Altizer. While Altizer confronts an actual disaster, Taylor quests for a more adaptive, less absolutist "religion" that hardly seems to exist today, at least as a position conscious of itself as such.

What is "religion" that we should be justified not only in our aspiration to study it, but to practice it "after God" and "without God"? Both Altizer and Taylor remark on how "religion" has been analyzed by recent scholars as a modern categorial invention and betrayal of that which it seeks to name. Altizer points out that Karl Barth was able to use (or abuse) this category theologically by positing an absolute dichotomy between religion and faith (LDG, 53). Partaking of this strategy to an extent, Altizer seeks to loosen faith as a free-thinking theological quest from "religion" as a social and institutional system. Taylor, on the other hand, embraces faith in the form of "religion" rather than theology on the grounds that theology's heyday is over "after God." Reviewing critiques of "religion" as a constructed category by Jonathan Z. Smith and others, yet seemingly undaunted by them, Taylor puts forward a definition of religion that he considers adequate because it is based on a theory of complex adaptive systems, and includes a stabilizing and a destabilizing moment in its structure: "Religion is an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure" (AG, 12). A de-absolutized religion is a religion conscious of itself as "without God" that may nonetheless be "after God" in the sense that it is a faith incarnate in the form of the eternal restlessness of becoming (AG, 377). Taylor intends the ambiguous meaning of "after" to include chasing after an ever elusive ultimacy or infinitude: "after is never present as such but is the approaching withdrawal and withdrawing approach that allow presence to be present" (AG, 345). This leads Taylor to make the most definitive theological statements in *After God*, that "the Infinite is not God but is always

after the God who is after it": "the true Infinite is neither dualistic nor monistic but is the creative interplay in which identity and difference are codependent and coevolve" (AG, 345, 346).

God is not the ground of being that forms the foundation of all beings but the figure constructed to hide the originary abyss from which everything emerges and to which all returns. While this abyss is no thing, it is not nothing—neither being nor nonbeing, it is the anticipatory wake of the unfigurable that disfigures every figure as if from within. Far from simply destructive, disfiguring is the condition of the possibility of creative emergence. (AG, 345)

Reading this definition of God might help us to understand why Nietzsche admired Emerson, for here Taylor seems to have identified the moment in which a post-Christian deconstructive thinking reinvents the perennial philosophy on its own terms.

Despite his resolutely post-Christian stance, Taylor's strongly intentional and prescriptive approach to "religion" in *After God* is unexpectedly reminiscent, I find, of the work of the Harvard theologian Gordon D. Kaufman. Both accent relativization (as against absolutization), coherence with evolutionary biology (as against biblical Creationism), and the critical role of creative novelty in human existence. But Taylor is more embracing of organic-mimetic metaphors, hence his accent on "emergent self-organization" through "complex dynamic morphogenesis" as opposed to Kaufman's self-conscious "construction" as an image for how post-critical religious figuration occurs. Undoubtedly, Taylor's notion of "religion without God" would seem most palatable to those who think of themselves as least religious. It could be that the strongest appeal of Taylor's "religion"—like the widespread appeal of Paul Tillich's theology in the 1950s—will occur among "secular" people exploring the possibility of being more "religious" than they know. Indeed, it is one of the key arguments of Taylor's book that "secularity is a *religious* phenomenon" that grows out of the Judeo-Christian tradition as it develops in Protestantism, that secularity covertly continues a religious agenda (AG 132), and concomitantly that there is an "unrecognized religious dimension of globalization" that is Protestant through and through (AG, 3, 44).

Taylor's take on secularization closely parallels that of Gianni Vattimo in *After the Death of God*, the third recently published volume under consideration here, who contends that an adequate theory of secularization would recognize in many traits of the modern world the basic features of Christianity (ADG 97-98).^{vi} He argues that "we" (like Altizer's "we") modern secularists cannot but speak from a Christian point of view, because "we are fundamentally incapable of formulating ourselves, fundamentally incapable of articulating a discourse, except by accepting certain culturally conditioned premises," which include the liberation narratives of the Bible, Christian moral teachings, in short, the historical impact of Christianity. Pushing this point very far, Vattimo ventures

the notion that “Voltaire was a good Christian” because by standing for freedom against authoritarianism, he stood for Christianity (ADG, 36–37, 97).

In recent books that wax biographical at points, Vattimo has confessed that after a religious youth, which was followed by a period of disenchantment, he experienced the paradox of recovering Christianity through Nietzsche and Heidegger.^{vii} This unexpected recovery of Christianity through the key thinkers of nihilism caused him, he attests, to accept secularization as “a constitutive aspect of the history of Being, and therefore of the history of salvation, for our way of living the return of religion” (AC, 25). This embrace of secularization as intrinsic to Christianity’s destiny allows Vattimo to advance his “apology for nihilism” in *The End of Modernity*, claiming that our destiny is to become “accomplished nihilists” who understand nihilism as our sole opportunity.^{viii} He finds this strong affirmation in Nietzsche, as Nietzsche realized that the occurrence of the death of God corresponds to the dissolution of metaphysics (ADG, 91). Likewise, Vattimo considers Heidegger to be part of the history of the accomplishment of nihilism, despite Heidegger’s hope that it is possible to go beyond nihilism, for “nihilism seems to be precisely that mode of thought beyond metaphysics for which he is looking” (EM, 20). Not only does hermeneutics lead to nihilism, but nihilism appears only thanks to the work of hermeneutics (ADG, 103).

In *After the Death of God*, Vattimo sets his sights on an emergent and hoped for Christianity—deeply paralleling Altizer at this point—precisely *through* the deepening impact of nihilism: “Christianity is a stimulus, a message that sets in motion a tradition of thought that will eventually realize its freedom from metaphysics” (ADG, 35). Given that Vattimo defines metaphysics as the “violent imposition of an order that is declared objective and natural” (ADG, 93), treated as inviolable and beyond discussion, he welcomes nihilism as an incomparable liberator.

Our tradition is dominated by the idea that if we only had a stable foundation we could move and act more freely. But philosophical foundationalism does not promote freedom. Rather, it is for the purpose of obtaining some desired effect or of consolidating some authority. When someone wants to tell me the absolute truth it is because he wants to put me under his control, under his command. . . . The future of Christianity, and also of the Church, is to become a religion of pure love, always more purified. . . . The truth that is able to set us free is “true” precisely because it frees us. (ADG, 43, 45)

So Vattimo welcomes accomplished nihilism’s power to release Christianity from the historical religion’s own alien tenets—to de-foundationalize and de-absolutize the liberative faith and the call to love that is Christianity’s essential impetus; he hopes to see Christianity purified by a progressive reduction of “all inflexible categories that lead to opposition,” citing the examples of property, blood, excesses of absolutism (ADG, 45). While Vattimo’s de-foundationalized Christianity seems less abstract than the generic “religion” of which Taylor writes, it may plausibly be viewed as the concrete instantiation, in the case of one

historical tradition, of the de-absolutizing and risk-accepting spirit that Taylor is recommending for all “religions.”

Vattimo’s stance on Christianity is remarkably consonant with Altizer’s more fully elaborated and sophisticated analysis of the Christian faith’s historical self-annihilation, though Altizer’s oeuvre is virtually unknown to Vattimo, as the latter openly states (ADG, 91–92). Here a bit of advice is not out of place for those with ears to hear: anyone pursuing questions of Christianity and nihilism should read the post-1960s Altizer, who through sustained systematic work has established himself as the leading contemporary thinker of theological nihilism. Altizer’s most mature contributions to this field begin in 1970 and continue in the four decades thereafter; especially recommended for their systematic coherence are *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1990), *The Genesis of God* (1993), and *Godhead and the Nothing* (2003).

John D. Caputo’s passing critique of Altizer in *After the Death of God* suggests that he has not seriously encountered Altizer’s later work. He objects that in Altizer’s kenotic theology the “absolute center” shifts from transcendence to immanence, so that “the full presence of a transcendent God was transported to the plane of immanence” (ADG, 68). Caputo imagines that this is what Altizer means by “total presence” in his later work. Taylor’s critique of Altizer in *After God* makes a similar error—though in his case it is clear he has read Altizer’s mature oeuvre.^{ix} As Taylor interprets Altizer, “in the Incarnation, the transcendent God who had been absent from space and time becomes *totally present* in history” (AG, 202). Not at all: this is an utterly undialectical reading of Altizer. What Caputo and Taylor do not grasp is that “total presence” in Altizer is the presence of a total absence, and indeed could more aptly be named “total absence”: it is the final and irreversible annihilation of transcendence, which releases a universal negativity or actual nothingness that Altizer calls “perishing,” a consuming groundlessness whose wake necessarily eliminates the very distinction between transcendence and immanence. Here Taylor is keen in his observation that “Altizer ends by rendering difference indifferent” (AG, 204); or, as I would rather put it, there is only one difference that matters *ultimately* for Altizer, and that is the irrevocable difference between God transcendent and God crucified: the Passion. In Altizer there is no Parousia of presence; to the contrary, there is only universal perishing, nihilism without end, and it is this consuming nothingness in the form of universal perishing that is “totally present,” not God or a substantial immanence. The “absolute center” that is everywhere is a God-immolating black hole, and this actuality is the Cross upon which all things are born to perish *in imitatio Dei*. Altizer argues that this dissolution of God is not a merely private experience, a personal subjective “piety,” but a broadly historical movement in which “we” all participate, like it or not. Which is to say that even in death God continues to be a public not a private concern.

While Altizer finds Christian light and joy in this darkness, perhaps it is a healthy-minded horror of such darkness that incites his critics to imagine in its place precisely the opposite: a “metaphysics of immanent presence” (Caputo on Altizer, ADG, 68). Certainly this straw man is easier to critique than the relentless

dark night that Altizer actually proposes. Caputo makes clear that for him deconstruction of God clears the way for a more “upbeat” position than those of Altizer and Taylor:

The more some people use the word *God* the more I find myself praying to God for the death of God, asking God to rid us of God, to cite a very famous mystic. There is surely something to be gained from undertaking a deconstruction of the name of God precisely under the auspices of a “death” of God. . . . The work of burning off the old metaphysics of omnipotence, which can never cease, must always be a way to fan the flame or build the fire of the event that transpires in the name of God. Mark Taylor’s famously downbeat description of deconstruction as “a hermeneutics of the death of God” is but a moment in a more upbeat description of the theology of the event as a “hermeneutics of the desire for God.” (ADG, 67)

In Caputo’s critical assessment, Taylor hardly observes the “/” in his a/theology, thus failing to protect the undecidability of the question of God, and instead allows the *theos* to disappear into thin air, with the result being an atheology rather than a genuine a/theology (ADG, 68). Caputo may find, however, that *After God* comes closer to an a/theology than do Taylor’s earlier works.

Caputo goes on to express apprehension about the omnibus “we” as it is used by thinkers such as Vattimo, Altizer, and even Taylor. His worry is that a secularized Christian triumphalism still abounds in such *we*-think, first and foremost an implied triumph over Judaism as the “religion of the Father”:

My lingering worry is that the death of God theologies are themselves thinly disguised *grand récits*. They are theologies of history that tell the big story of how we go from the religion of the Father in Judaism, to the religion of the Son in the New Testament, to the religion of the Spirit in modernity (Altizer) or in postmodernity (Taylor), which is the Final Story. Despite the fact that Taylor is telling us deconstruction spells the end of the Book and of History, he does not resist this schema. Indeed he completes or perfects it. . . . Deconstruction, which is much more distrustful of these periodizing and incarnational schemata, has been sent into the world (if I may be so ironic) to break up such illusions and to dispel gospels of economic exchange in the name of the gift. (ADG, 68–69)

Given its iconoclastic role, deconstruction is “something more of a Jewish science” that does well to resist the incarnational schemes of death of God theologies, Caputo thinks, for fear of “filling up someone’s pocket with the transferred goods of divinity” (ADG, 80). It is risky business to say “we” on a global stage where many countries and religions are in play (ADG 78). It is to fail to take religious difference seriously as *the abyss between*, and here Taylor is far less culpable than are Vattimo and Altizer.

Caputo's strident criticisms are well taken. But the hub of contention between these thinkers concerns what the phrase "death of God" really means. Caputo interprets it as the latest revivification of "an ancient and venerable tradition, the ongoing work of the critique of idols," this time effecting a purgation of the name of God so thorough that not only *ousia* and *hyperousios* vanish, but even the name of God itself may disappear in the event; the event itself, however, remains irreducible (ADG, 116–18). Deconstruction protects the event from fixation and ascription, and guards desire from idolization, but the undeconstructible, the unconditional, perdures (ADG, 119, 186n.13). Altizer, on the other hand, understands the death of God as a real *death*, a transformation of God so final and irrevocable that every vestige of unconditionality perishes; only a naïf would go back to "desiring God" as if absolute annihilation had not taken place. Erring between these two is the neither/nor of Taylor, for whom both Caputo and Altizer remain too positively metaphysical (even if Taylor underrecognizes how thoroughly negative is Altizer's metaphysics). Finally, for the least theological of this company, Vattimo, who speaks of Christianity rather than God, what remains as a criterion and guide amid endless transformation and deconstruction is "charity" or *agape* (ADG, 41, 54, 98)—surely an important thought, but his exposition of it is sparse in the book.

Despite their discrepant understandings of its meaning, these books taken together witness to the immense difficulty of counting the "death of God" as equivalent to the rapid dissolution of God's importance. God's pervasiveness—especially of secularity itself—cannot be cast off overnight by a dismissive atheism. Instead, a deep and conscious effort toward transfiguration is required to effect a new equilibrium. The God of "our" history was believed and thought into place over the course of several millennia; it will take a sustained conscious effort to unthink and rethink that place even while navigating the flux of a disconcertingly novel global reality. Toward this end, these books collectively testify that *only* theology, or *only* religion, or *only* faith can enable a new phase of cultural-spiritual development that is emancipated from a past God's fateful metaphysical-moral grasp.

Only *theology*? Only *religion*? Only *faith*? In fact, it has only become more difficult to specify a stable referent for these terms in the wake of the death of God, let alone to characterize their interrelations with one another. We live in an era when it is thinkable to discuss a "religion" without rituals and beliefs, a "faith" purged of religion, a "theology" without God, and an atheism that is "an inevitable expression of faith itself" (LDG, 93). These supercharged, unstable terms will not settle any more than "God" will settle, or as Gabriel Vahanian implies in his afterword, the "God" haunting our language harbors every ambiguity, "laying in a word as empty as a tomb on Easter morning" (AGD, 168). For Vahanian, as for Caputo, the phenomenon of the death of God needs to be deconstructed at least as vigilantly as "the ontotheism of which it bears the secret" (ADG, 172). And while we may be drawn to the radical otherness of God-language for "its emancipating fragrance" (ADG, 172), as Vahanian notes, what we get in the language at large is open to chaotic interpretation from all quarters:

“God is dead!” But is that a dead end? Unbeknownst to its specialists and other pallbearers, hasn’t indeed the Bible, miraculously fallen in the public domain, taken away from its official interpreters and entrusted to whomever, having eyes to read, can read and in whose eyes, Scripture unfolding itself into new scripture, it interprets itself, deconstructing a future to which it would otherwise be fated as well as a past by which it would inevitably be obsessed?

But this only returns us to our overwhelming question: Whither is “God” straying “after God”? Plunging toward a virtual infinitude of interpretations? Is the scent we smell the divine decomposition—or its recomposition? Are we necessarily playing a part in this story—whatever we happen to think of “God”—because innocence of *this* word is an innocence we have long since lost? Have we yet made measurable progress beyond the searching questions posed by Nietzsche’s madman, more than a century later? Have we yet managed to unchain this earth from its sun?

These authors might be characterized as apologists for the vocation of straying toward an infinite nothing, or erring “after God,” or waiting for the Messiah who never comes, or loving one’s neighbor in the void as the only alternative to the bad faith of arbitrarily declared absolutes. Yet the half-life of the most absolute of absolutes may persist for a very long time. If Taylor and Vattimo are right that secularity is, at its core, a religious phenomenon, then Altizer is keen in his pronouncement that “the real question here is whether or not a final or ultimate atheism is possible” (LDG, 93).^x

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ⁱ Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. xviii, xvii; hereafter cited in the text as AG.

ⁱⁱ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 156, 177; hereafter cited in the text as LDG.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Sheehan emphasizes that Heidegger understood the original etymon of *Ereignis* not as *eigen* (“own”) but *eraugen/ereugen* (connected with *Augen*, “eye”), “bringing something out into view”; see Thomas Sheehan, “A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 34 (2001): 183–202, quote on p. 196.

^{iv} William Blake, “The Clod and the Pebble,” in *Songs of Experience*, 1794.

^v Taylor asks, rhetorically, “Since emergence is aleatory, life is always surprising: plans are frustrated, schemata shattered—who would want it otherwise?” (AG, 346). Well, in fact, probably most religious conservatives, beginning with the paradigmatic Augustine, whose principal existential complaint is that his heart was agonized and restless until it found haven in an eternal immutable God.

^{vi} John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins, with an afterword by Gabriel Vahanian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 36; hereafter cited in the text as ADG.

^{vii} Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 3, and *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 33. *After Christianity* is cited in the text as AC.

^{viii} Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 19; hereafter cited in the text as EM.

^{ix} As witness Taylor's preface to *Living the Death of God*, pp. xi–xviii. See also his earlier assessment: "Altizer's Originality: A Review Essay," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (September 1984): 569–83.

^x A few remarks about these books as *books*. Altizer's *Living the Death of God* is serious in intent and execution, while often crazily entertaining in its autobiographical details (especially chaps. 1 and 4): it is nonetheless packed with veins of theological gold, only a few of which have been tapped here. Taylor's *After God* strives too hard to be comprehensive in my view. It would have been more powerful had it been distilled into a far more compact argument, leaving more common knowledge implicit and assuming a more sophisticated peer reader. The Caputo-Vattimo volume is an odd congeries of texts and interviews that do not really add up to a book, which need not be a problem if you are not expecting one—like being served an eclectic variety of appetizers not to be followed by a meal. Interesting insights are introduced but in a brief, off-the-cuff form that is undisciplined and at points highly questionable; none are sustained or properly argued.

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