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#### INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER

Thomas J. J. Altizer is a radical theologian known for his creative exploration of the theological implications of the death of God in many books spanning over fifty years. Educated at the University of Chicago in the history of religions, with sociologist of religions Joachim Wach as his adviser and enjoying a close personal friendship with historian of religions Mircea Eliade, Altizer has ever viewed Christianity from a post-Christian comparative outlook. His early writings correlate Buddhist mysticism and Western apocalypticism. In 1965–66 the print media (first *The New York Times*, then *Time* magazine) discerned a “death of God movement” where none existed per se, giving the 38-year-old Altizer and several fellow scholars a platform from which to expound their theological perspectives before a very broad popular audience, provoking a wide range of responses from the curious and enthusiastic to the reactionary and hostile. A fervent national and even international media event was thus in fact generated, which peaked in the years 1966–68 and gradually ebbed in the early 1970s. Altizer’s deep immersion in the study of Hegel during the 1970s began to define the mature period of his thinking, which markedly begins at about age 50 with *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977) and culminates in *History as Apocalypse* (1985). The latter study establishes what Altizer has characterized as the Christian epic tradition, tracing profound interconnections between ancient Greek and biblical traditions and the imaginative writings of Dante, Milton, Blake, and Joyce. Conceptual breakthroughs of this period are more fully developed in Altizer’s later works, which embody a more and more systematic theological voyage, culminating in a radical Protestant understanding of the apocalyptic Trinity. This interview was conducted by e-mail and telephone, November 18 to December 8, 2012.

### Hegel-Nietzsche-Schweitzer

**Lissa McCullough:** Pardon my beginning with a long question intended to set the stage. Several of us who follow your work would characterize it as essentially a synthesis of Hegelian and Nietzschean insights into apocalyptic negation of the Christian God. Hegel “saves” the eternal absoluteness of Godhead, but in the form of a historical-dialectical self-negation that releases Godhead into historical determinacy. Nietzsche dissolves eternal Godhead into a self-transfiguring Will to Power. Both can be called philosophical expressions of the death of God. Your work is novel in conjoining these paradigms with the new understanding of Jesus that emerged from late modern New Testament scholarship (ranging from Franz Overbeck to Albert Schweitzer to Rudolf Bultmann); you correlate the apocalypticism of the original Jesus movement unveiled by these biblical scholars with the philosophical expressions of the death of God in late modernity. In a sense, as I see it, your theology displaces the triumphal “second coming” of Jesus anticipated by traditional Christianity with an apocalyptic “second crucifixion” of Godhead. God died in Jesus two millennia ago, but that death was soon construed by emerging orthodoxy as a *triumph over death*—an absolutizing of Life without death—rather than a universalization of death. Only with the dissolution of former Christendom and the death of “God the Father” is the claim to *immutabilitas* undone and the universalization of death completed. In effect, after two millennia of anti-apocalyptic counterrevolution, God at last becomes the apocalyptic Crucified. I think one of the most difficult stumbling blocks for your critical readers is this embrace and celebration of universal death. Why must divine death be embraced as the core meaning of Christianity—in diametric contradiction to those Christians who claim Christ’s absolute triumph over death?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** I am a committed radical Christian who has been inspired both by the Radical Reformation and by radical Christian thinkers and visionaries from Paul through Joyce. Perhaps the center of this Christianity is the apprehension that Christianity has profoundly reversed itself, becoming the very opposite of Jesus and primitive Christianity, as most decisively manifest in its reversal of an original Christian apocalypticism. But this reversal has itself continually been reversed in revolutionary Christian movements. The most open of these reversals is the uniquely Christian epic, one comprehending Dante, Milton, Blake, and Joyce, but with genuine philosophical parallels in Hegel and Nietzsche.

Of course, this is the most heterodox of all expressions of Christianity, but this is a heterodoxy that we can discover in such deeply Christian thinkers as Kierkegaard, the young Heidegger, and the early Barth, and it is writ large in the greater body of our biblical scholarship, so that orthodox theology has removed itself from truly critical biblical scholarship. Indeed, it is orthodox theology that is most moribund today, scarcely speaking outside the realms of practical ethics and ecclesiology, and then always speaking though the voice of the political right. The vast majority of people today can only encounter a

conservative or orthodox theology, and hence are closed to all Christian depth or subtlety, and thus are wholly closed to radical Christianity.

Nonetheless there are those of us who are called to bear witness to radical Christianity, and if this is now difficult to do through the churches, many paths are at hand through our most radical thinking and vision. While this is clearest in Hegel, Hegel is our most difficult thinker, and just as this radicalism is purest in Nietzsche, Nietzsche is our most offensive thinker; but when Hegel and Nietzsche are truly conjoined, as in Derrida and deconstruction, an enormous power is at hand, and thus it has been my path to conjoin Hegel and Nietzsche theologically. All too ironically, Nietzsche's *The Antichrist* (1895) may well be the philosophical work in which Jesus is most decisively called forth, and called forth as one whose own way has been totally reversed by Christianity, but reversing that reversal draws forth an actual way of compassion as is impossible in all orthodox theology.

Now it has been crucial to my way to recover or discover a genuine biblical theology, one that has virtually perished in our time, and here I have been most affected by Weber, Gottwald, Schweitzer, and Bultmann, and the real challenge here is to conjoin Schweitzer and Bultmann, one that is attempted in my book *The Contemporary Jesus* (1997). Note that this is the only book attempting to ingrate the Jesus whom we know critically through New Testament scholarship with the Jesus whom we know imaginatively in the Christian epic, and thereby Milton and Blake become decisively manifest as revolutionary theologians. Apparently this is of no interest to the theological world, but is that world now closed to radical Christianity? Or closed in its most manifest expressions even if not in its most powerful expressions?

Socratic wisdom itself was directed to the challenge and reversal of all manifest or common thinking, and if this inevitably led to the hemlock for Socrates, many Christians conjoin Jesus and Socrates at this crucial point, and repudiate every Jesus whose way is not the way of the cross. Thence we speak of the kenotic or self-emptying Jesus, and all too significantly it is Hegel who first gives us a totally kenotic philosophy; until then philosophy had been closed to Christian thinking. Kenotic philosophy fully dawns in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which is a revolutionary enactment of the death of God, but precisely thereby it is the discovery of an absolute self-negation, one that becomes the center and ground of a uniquely Hegelian philosophy. But *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is also our first apocalyptic philosophical work, one revolving about the advent of the final Age of the Spirit, and this is even a Joachite age of the Spirit that dialectically negates the ages of the Father and the Son.

**Lissa McCullough:** How does death figure in this apocalypticism?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Already in Paul, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are not only conjoined but identified dialectically, and if this creates a uniquely Christian dialectic, that dialectic is not fully developed until Hegel, even if it is imaginatively realized in Blake. Yet this dialectic is wholly lost in the great body of Christianity, as a pagan immortality usurps a

biblical resurrection (cf. Oscar Cullmann), and a uniquely Christian death threatens to disappear or is recovered only in the purest expressions of Christianity. How fascinating that Heidegger's recovery of a uniquely Christian death could have such an enormous impact on twentieth-century philosophy, just as Rilke's recovery of that death so deeply affected twentieth-century poetry, a Christianity that a Kierkegaard could know as having become completely pagan is now most challenged by authentic renewals of an original and radical Christianity.

That is the ultimate challenge of a uniquely modern realization of the death of God; it is far more deeply and purely Christian than is modern orthodox Christianity, and far more deeply biblical, too, as can most clearly be apprehended in Blake's vision. Blake's ultimate vision of the "Self-Annihilation of God" is a genuine renewal of that Kingdom of God enacted by Jesus, one that had wholly been lost in a de-eschatologizing Christian tradition, as it distanced itself from apocalypse. But that apocalypse is recovered by ultimate radicals such as Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche. This is possible only by way of a virtually absolute heterodoxy; if Gnosticism was previously the absolute heresy or heterodoxy condemned by Christianity, now that Gnosticism itself is inverted and reversed in modern thinking—far more so than it had been by Christian orthodoxy.

Is it not highly significant that heterodox Christianity is so powerful in late modernity, deeply darkening orthodoxy itself and calling forth a radical Christianity that is as promising as Christianity has ever been? And this is a heterodox or radical Christianity that dissolves all secularism or "atheism," for it is far more atheistic than "atheism," as witness not only Nietzsche but Hegel and Blake. Here ultimate depth is certainly called forth, one that theologians such as Tillich knew as a Christian depth, but one that is far more manifestly a Christian depth in Hegel and Blake. Yes, that Christian depth is a Christian death, but it is an absolute Death or Crucifixion, and therefore and thereby is Resurrection itself, but only by way of the ending of all Christian paganism, or all that is commonly and manifestly Christian.

**Lissa McCullough:** Can you provide a working definition of apocalypticism?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Apocalypticism is the final expression of biblical revelation, and thus the original form of Christianity, but one that was almost immediately reversed in the most comprehensive transformation of a world religion that has ever occurred. Nowhere else in the history of religions can one encounter such a pure and total *coincidentia oppositorum*, or full conjunction of radically dichotomous opposites. Even if it remains a mystery to us, here lies an absolute summons or calling. For the deepest expressions of modern secularism, such as Marxism, are genuinely apocalyptic, and no greater theological challenge exists than that of relating an original apocalyptic Christianity to its ultimately secular descendants. Now even if apocalypticism is the expression of a total and final ending, that very ending creates an absolute beginning in the totally new worlds that it calls forth. Each new world born from apocalyptic is a total assault upon every previous world, an assault inseparable from

its radical newness. Only here is there manifest a genuine *novitas mundi*, an absolute newness of the world, a new creation that is the very essence of the apocalyptic.

### Reformation–revolution

**Lissa McCullough:** Essentially, only the ending of an established world enables a truly new world to come into existence. It follows that any person or movement that strives to transform the world radically—in the direction of justice, for instance—embodies an apocalyptic impulse. Congruent with this, ever since writing *History as Apocalypse* (1985), you have shown keen interest in modern political revolutions as manifestations of religious reformation—and here I mean “reformation” in an expansive sense, including but not limited to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and after, encompassing the radical and tumultuous reformations of society that violently tore away at established Christian institutions and reconfigured the world as we know it. Here your work resonates profoundly with Jacob Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology* (1947). Would you say something about how you understand the relationship between “divine” or “sacred” authority and political revolution. The latter, it seems to me, introduces a new horizontal “authority” powerful enough to overthrow the authority of sacred hierarchies. Certainly modern science and technology have been key factors in this emergent new form of authority. How do you think about the interrelations of these forces: religious reformation, political revolution, and scientific-technological revolution?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Radical Christianity is inseparable from existence in an inverted world; only that inversion calls forth radical Christianity, so that a revolutionary consciousness is essential to radical Christianity, just as it is true that world revolutions have occurred only within a Christian horizon and world. Moreover, all world revolutions have been apocalyptic revolutions, beginning with the English revolution of the seventeenth century—which initiated world revolution—and continuing through the French and Russian revolutions, possibly up to that Maoist revolution that would have been impossible apart from a Marxism that was a consequence of the secularization of Christianity.

Indeed, apocalypticism has been the driving power of genuine revolution, even including the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, a revolution that literally turned the world upside down and created an absolutely new world. If Newton was the primary creator of the greatest of all scientific revolutions, it is not accidental that Newton was a passionate apocalyptic believer and creator, nor is it accidental that the deepest of all biblical revolutionaries is the apocalyptic Paul. For genuine revolution and genuine apocalypse are inseparable, just as counterrevolutions have invariably been anti-apocalyptic, as can be observed even in contemporary life.

Nothing is more fundamental in Christianity than its universalization of apocalypticism. Thereby an ultimately revolutionary power is released that provokes a counterrevolution in Christianity, a counterrevolution that itself becomes what we know as Christendom,

embodying the most dichotomous of all historical worlds: a world whose dichotomy inevitably arises from its revolutionary and counterrevolutionary poles. Yet this is a dichotomy releasing an absolute energy and life, one that can be and has been known as a Faustian energy, an energy embodying an absolute self-negation or self-emptying, and an energy that can be stilled only by the most ultimate passivity.

### **Authority-anarchism**

**Lissa McCullough:** If we accept your insistence that apocalypse and revolution are inseparable from each other, does this mean that to be a radical Christian is to be an anarchist? Today we see anarchist political philosophy emerging with renewed seriousness, advocated by highly respected figures including Noam Chomsky and David Graeber. But I am especially interested in hearing how you conceive the transformation of authority in apocalyptic revolution. Is all authority per se overthrown, or is a new radical understanding of authority needed to “fight fire with fire”? The New Testament gospels often remark that Jesus “speaks with authority.” Reformers of all stripes charged ahead on the basis of biblical authority, at least in their own minds, understood as authorizing the free Christian conscience to rebel against and assault corrupt “institutions of men.” What role for authority do you accept as a radical Christian thinker—or do you see it as dissolved into a freedom without authority?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Certainly an overwhelming pragmatic problem for radical Christianity is the question of authority, for even if it is dedicated to the inversion and reversal of all established authority, it cannot escape the actuality of authority. Already this can be observed in what little that we know of the Jesus community, and while we cannot know the nature of the authority that Jesus exercised, there can be little question that he deeply embodied an actual authority. We can observe a comparable authority in prophetic communities throughout history, as most fully manifest in the Hebrew Bible, for the canonical prophets were prophets with a canonically sanctioned authority. Of course, radical Christianity has been profoundly affected by noncanonical prophets such as Blake, who can even be known as antiprophets in inverting and reversing all established authority.

The Father is the primal authority in all established tradition, and this is true in the Bible, too, the primal Christian prayer is the “Our Father,” and Paul and the Fourth Gospel are truly challenging in minimizing the role of the Father, as is also the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Our most conservative traditions commonly speak in the name of the Father, a name that is virtually never evoked in truly radical movements. If Freud’s most radical thinking was his discovery of the Oedipus complex, nothing else has so challenged the reign of the Father unless it is radical Christianity itself. For radical Christianity is an ultimate challenge to the Father, a Father whom it can know as being dead, and whose death is the source of an ultimate liberation.

Now this liberation embodies an anarchistic freedom, as so deeply known by Milton and Blake; as Milton and Blake deeply dissolve the Law, the Law disappears as the Law of the Father and is reborn as an absolutely new freedom. But that freedom is inseparable from a dissolution or reversal of the Law, as first known by Paul, a revolutionary Paul who as such is an ultimate enemy of all establishments. Nonetheless there is no Christian authority that is greater than Paul's, not even the authority of Jesus, which the Christian can know only through Paul.

### Freedom

**Lissa McCullough:** It seems that freedom—or transformative *belief* in freedom—is the core revolutionary motive that empowers apocalyptic Christianity, both ancient and modern. Freedom is a product of faith. Even if Rousseau could write that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” it is much more historically accurate to claim that everywhere human beings are born under various forms of bondage and need to discover—or invent, rather—the idea of freedom, whether it can be realized or not. We take this revolutionary idea for granted today, not understanding how exceptional it is as an expectation, and how little human history confirms it from a multi-millennial point of view. How would you characterize radical freedom as it is invented by Jesus and Paul and the Jesus movement? How is it connected with love? Is there a negative or tragic aspect to this faith, a price to be paid? Are all these reformations and revolutions a quixotic quest to attain a freedom that must ever evade and withdraw? Is the struggle for freedom—or *faith* in freedom—the only form of freedom attainable?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Is freedom the primal motive empowering apocalyptic Christianity, both ancient and modern? If so, what could such freedom mean, does it have anything in common with modern freedom, or only with an Augustinian and Pauline freedom, in which case is it inseparable from predestination? A deeper predestination is profoundly modern, as in Hegel and Nietzsche, wherein necessity and freedom wholly coincide in a destiny that can be understood as an apocalyptic destiny. If Hegel is our greatest philosopher of freedom, and Nietzsche our greatest philosopher of destiny, can a *coincidentia oppositorum* be realized between them, one realizing apocalypse itself?

Now the Christian knows freedom as a gift of the grace of Christ, one only realized in the Crucifixion, which delivers us from the bondage of sin, a sin that is an ultimate slavery. Simply to become aware of that sin is to awaken to a fallen consciousness—one discovered by Paul as self-consciousness, thereby for the first time releasing an actual self-consciousness into the world. A unique freedom comes with that self-consciousness making possible a wholly new self-exploration, and with it a wholly new pride and illusion, although an illusion and pride integrally related to a new creativity. Only now does a profound imaginative creativity become possible, as inaugurated by Dante, one truly individual as creativity never is in the ancient world, and hence a consequence of freedom itself, even if a freedom inseparable from destiny.

Finally this freedom is impossible apart from apocalypse, but it is actual as freedom even in nonapocalyptic horizons, so that Hegel can understand freedom as the driving energy of world history and Nietzsche can understand antifreedom or an inverted freedom as the dominant condition of humanity. Both Hegel and Nietzsche are deeply Pauline thinkers—nowhere more so than in their understanding of freedom—for if it is Paul who first becomes conscious of an interior freedom that is an interior necessity, it is Hegel and Nietzsche who are our greatest philosophers of necessity, and are so as profoundly apocalyptic thinkers. Hence both are philosophers of an absolutely new age that is an absolutely final age, and both realize a profound freedom that had never been known before, and this is finally a necessary freedom for each and every one of us.

### Love-compassion

**Lissa McCullough:** In your published work, it is extremely rare that you write about love or even employ the word “love”—and this despite the great power with which many of your major influences write about love, from Paul and Augustine to Dante and Kierkegaard. Many think of Christianity as first and foremost a religion of love. Do you accept that characterization? If so, where is love in your theological thinking—is it in disguise?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** If nothing else Heidegger has taught us a new silence in confronting our primal questions, and above all the question of God; but this is true of other primal questions such as love, about which Heidegger and most late modern thinkers are silent. Once again our poetry is the decisive arena to explore, and most clearly so our epic poetry, and the ultimate transformation of that poetry between Dante and Joyce is certainly a transformation of everything that is actual for us as love. Now love is more comprehensive in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) than it is in any other epic, yet it is comprehensive as the apparent opposite of love, as an absolutely transfiguring power that turns everything into the opposite of itself, including all that we have known as love.

The word “love” occurs again and again in the *Wake* in truly multiple and even conflicting modes, but it never occurs as it does in our common or established speech, for the *Wake* is the most apocalyptic of our epics; it can only actually evoke an absolutely new world. Seemingly love disappears in that world, or everything that we have known and named as love, but this is absolutely necessary to evoke an absolute apocalypse, and an absolute apocalypse of love itself. This is what Blake knows as the New Jerusalem, and all too significantly it is Blake and Joyce who are our most erotic writers, or most profoundly erotic writers, and even as such our most challenging or offensive writers. Perhaps Dante is our greatest poet of love, creating a truly new love in which the love of God and the world and humanity and our beloved truly coincide, so that Dante gave us the most comprehensive love known to us, one that is repeated and renewed in Joyce. But this is a love that cannot be translated into a common language, or even spoken in such language; language that can give witness to it only by way of a new and comprehensive silence.

Now it is true that the New Testament is absolutely new in terms of its enactment of a new and total love or compassion, but it is inseparable from the death or crucifixion of God, and theologies incapable of speaking that crucifixion are incapable of speaking or evoking the totality of love. Moreover, as the world and theology itself have evolved, any such love becomes ever more unspeakable, then a silence about this love can be a genuine witness to it, just as all chatter about love is now a defamation of it. This is openly manifest in a new mass culture and society, as Heidegger and many other thinkers have decisively demonstrated, so that in such a world, silence, and silence about love, is truly necessary. Only thereby can there be a genuine witness to love in such a world. While we can encounter such witness in our greatest imaginative creations, as in Dostoevsky and Proust, these are absolutely discordant with everything that we commonly know and name as love, and only thereby can they be genuine evocations of love.

### **Sacrifice–evil**

**Lissa McCullough:** You just referred to a “new and total love” in the New Testament that is connected with the crucifixion, and you claim that theologies incapable of evoking crucifixion are incapable of evoking the totality of love. It seems to me, consistent with that, your theology evokes love primarily through the kenotic self-sacrifice of God. The theme of divine sacrifice, important all along in your work, seems increasingly prominent and tragic in recent books such as *Godhead and the Nothing* (2003), *Living the Death of God* (2006), and *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (2012). Whereas historically Christian orthodoxy affirmed a God who is at once absolute love and absolutely immutable, you counter that such a nondialectical God cannot be affected, touched, or transfigured. Only absolute kenosis manifests the Christian God as a God of absolute love (as in Phil. 2:6–8). Does real and actual love presuppose crucifying diremption, a fall into evil? Indeed, your work is obsessed with evil (fall, darkness, death, abyss, the Nothing); is this because evil is the condition of that which transcends it? Why must theology contend with evil? How do you understand evil theologically?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Yes, there can be no absolute compassion apart from absolute evil, no absolute Yes apart from absolute No, and this is true of the depths of the Godhead itself. Now even if we appear to be closed to the absolute No of the Godhead, this is not true of our depths, even if the No of God is disguised in virtually all our theological thinking. For it is not disguised in the depths of our imagination, as witness not only our deeper tragedies but our deeper novels as well. Indeed, neither would be possible apart from an absolute No, a No finally inseparable from the depths of God. Kafka embodies this most clearly, and the immense impact of Kafka is a primal witness to the universality of an absolute No, yet the darkness of Kafka’s writing is inseparable from the darkness of God, as manifest in the overwhelming theological impact of Kafka. Kafka stands forth as a primal prophet for us, the prophet of an ultimate and inescapable darkness, one not only omnipresent but absolutely ubiquitous.

Jacob Böhme first discovered the darkness of God, or first openly called forth the absolute No of the Godhead, a discovery that ironically made possible German idealism, the first absolute idealism of the West. Böhme profoundly knew a divine fall that is a *felix culpa* or fortunate fall, fortunate because it makes possible an absolute transfiguration that is the very center of German idealism. But that is a transfiguration impossible apart from a primordial fall of God—a fall deeply known to Schelling, Hegel, and Fichte alike—a fall realizing an absolute No essential to an absolute transfiguration and apart from which an absolute Yes cannot realize itself, cannot fully and finally be actualized. There can be no denying that such a transfiguration is finally a sanctification of evil, which is the ultimate scandal of this tradition or way, but this scandal has always been implicit in Christianity, at least in that Christianity deeply grounded in a *felix culpa* or fortunate fall.

Accordingly, the harrowing of Hell is the most marginal and hidden of all Christian dogmas, above all hidden as the final redemptive act of Christ apart from which there can be no redemption. Dante knew this profoundly, which is why the *Inferno* is so absolutely fundamental in the *Commedia*, just as Hell is absolutely fundamental in the epic visions of Milton, Blake, and Joyce. Hell is the very arena of an eschatological redemption, a Hell that is absolute evil, an evil that is inseparable from that redemption or inseparable from an absolute transfiguration. Could there be a greater sanctification of evil, or a greater realization of the necessity of evil, of the absolute necessity of an absolute evil?

### Nihilism-atheism

**Lissa McCullough:** You propose in *Living the Death of God* that it may not be possible “to think an absolute transfiguration without thinking nihilistically” (166), shattering our deepest theological categories. It seems to me that this thought connects with your affirmation of atheism as “an inevitable expression of faith itself” earlier in the book; for even a deep mysticism realizes a kind of atheism, “dissolving or negating every God who is manifest as God” (93). So then, as I understand your thinking, nihilistically dissolving God creates an “atheistic” moment in which God ceases to be other or transcendent and becomes—let us say—a holy spirit at work in the prophetic or mystical present, here and now. Is your nihilistic theology a quest for a God who can never become a fixed or idolized identity because it is the activity of a holy spirit that itself is in constant transformation—a continual new birth or “resurrection” that is always also a perishing of every previous identity of God?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Nothing has transcended our Western theology so decisively as has the Holy Spirit, for even if it is affirmed in our creeds and dogmas—above all in the dogma of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit always eludes such formulations and does so precisely as Holy Spirit. As the doctrine of the Trinity develops in Christianity, it ever more comprehensively veils the Holy Spirit, a Holy Spirit that here remains truly subordinate or secondary to the Father and the Son. Not even the Christian imagination can envision the Holy Spirit, despite

its full envisionments of the Father and the Son. Inevitably such subordination led to a calling forth of an ecstatic Pentecostal Christianity, the most rapidly growing Christianity today, one witnessing to the primacy of the Holy Spirit and thereby witnessing to a resurrection occurring even now.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit is most integrally related to resurrection—a resurrection of the dead—yet this resurrection is subordinated by the proliferation of a pagan immortality in Christendom, disguising or eclipsing resurrection itself. Despite the fact that it is resurrection, not immortality, that is affirmed in Christian creeds, Christianity can be said to have forgotten resurrection or so merged it with immortality as to lose it altogether. Hence nothing is more difficult theologically than a recovery of resurrection, and this is inseparable from an opening to the Holy Spirit, for Holy Spirit is an eschatological Spirit, a Spirit only wholly released by apocalypse itself. This is the Spirit that dominates New Testament language of the Spirit, yet it soon becomes peripheral in Christianity, a process inseparable from a radical Hellenization. Now a truly pagan “Spirit” comes to dominate Christianity, one that can be understood to have actually reversed biblical Christianity, so that Spirit itself becomes an absolute challenge to everything that is simply given or manifest as Christianity.

Hence it is virtually impossible to serve or give witness to the Spirit apart from an ultimate rebellion against Christianity; this rebellion occurs throughout all the truly major imaginative and intellectual expressions of Christianity, or at least it does so after the closure of the Middle Ages. One can be nostalgic about an Aquinas or a Dante, but one knows that such orthodoxy can never occur again, just as we have forever lost a Luther or a Calvin, for nothing is deader than Christendom—as Kierkegaard was the first to know—and once this is known there can never be a recovery or renewal of Christendom. But that is just the condition making possible a renewal of the Spirit, a renewal of the eschatological Spirit that was eclipsed by the advent of Christendom and buried in the triumph of Christendom, a triumph whose ending makes possible a genuine renewal of the Spirit.

### Trinity

**Lissa McCullough:** In this context, can you explain why you decided to write a book on the Trinity? What did you seek to achieve in *The Apocalyptic Trinity*?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Having spent my theological life largely evading or escaping the dogma or doctrine of the Trinity, being persuaded that it is an inherently reactionary doctrine, I was finally virtually summoned to the Trinity by a realization that the death of God is impossible apart from the Trinity. The death of God is clearly impossible in Judaism and Islam, just as it is in Hinduism and Buddhism, and I had long affirmed that the death of God is only possible or real in Christianity, and is indeed the deepest ground of Christianity. The Crucifixion is ultimately primal in Christianity—in radical as opposed to orthodox Christianity—for the Crucifixion is the death of the divinity as well as the humanity of Christ, as affirmed by radical Christianity beginning with Milton himself. In the perspective

of the history of religions, nothing is more distinctive of the gospels than their enactment of the passion, and nothing more unites the gospels than does the passion. If the celebration of the passion is unique to Christianity, it is so as a celebration of the death of God; here Christianity is truly unique, just as it is universal in its celebration of the resurrection.

The challenge in understanding the death of God is to understand how this could be the death of *God*; such a death could not simply be a dissolution of God, a dissolution that does not affect what we know as God. Only a self-emptying of God could effect an actual death of God. Such a self-emptying or kenosis is not realized in thinking until Hegel, and then kenosis is inseparable from Hegelian trinitarian thinking, the most radical trinitarian thinking in history. Hegel's trinitarian thinking is modalistic, knowing each of the persons or modes of the Godhead not only as the fullness of God but as the fullness of Godhead itself. Then the presence of one mode or person of God is necessarily the absence of the others, for the presence or actuality of the Son is necessarily the absence or death of the Father, and the actuality of the Spirit is necessarily the inactuality of the Father and the Son.

Hegel is primarily a philosopher of Spirit, and not only of Spirit but of *the* Spirit—the Holy Spirit—and he is the first philosopher of the Holy Spirit, or at least the first Western one. Yet Hegel is a genuine thinker of the Trinity only by being an absolutely heterodox thinker, not only in his modalism but throughout his thinking of God, a God who is a triune God only in his absolute alienation and estrangement from himself. This estrangement and alienation make possible the genesis of God from primordial Godhead, which is the genesis of the Trinity. At this point Hegel is under the overwhelming impact of Böhme, that Böhme who not only made possible German idealism but who envisioned the genesis of God as it had never been envisioned before: a genesis of God that is the fall of God or the Godhead. Nonetheless, this fall is a *felix culpa* or fortunate fall, making possible an absolute redemption that is celebrated not only throughout German idealism but in all the apocalyptic expressions of our imagination. Here the Trinity itself is the apocalyptic Trinity, a Trinity that is not only destined for absolute apocalypse, but whose very generation makes possible that apocalypse, and does so by its ending of a primordial One or All, allowing the advent of an absolute body or life.

#### **"Essence" of Christianity**

**Lissa McCullough:** In response to modern thinking's wholesale assault on the very identity of Christianity, nineteenth-century German thinkers like Adolf von Harnack felt impelled to define the "essence" [*das Wesen*] of Christianity. Even if Christianity has proved to have a multiplicity of essences through its history, from place to place, and from one era to another, it may be that every coherent theologian has a singular intuition. What is the "essence of Christianity" in your view, assuming you do not object to the question?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Despite the virtually innumerable expressions of Christianity, there is nonetheless a fundamental or essential Christianity, even if it has never been decisively

captured or understood theologically. Certainly Christianity is centered in Christ as witness its very name, and centered in the sacrifice of Christ which it knows as the one source of redemption, and a sacrifice that is thereby a uniquely Christian redemption. An overwhelming challenge to Christianity is to call forth that Jesus who is the Christ, a Jesus inevitably transcending all understanding, but who has been profoundly expressed in the Christian imagination. Jesus taught primarily by way of parables, parables not critically understood until the twentieth century, and then not understood theologically. A fundamental problem here is the relation between these parables and that Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed, for although the Kingdom of God is enacted in the parables, this enactment is beyond our understanding, and above all so when we understand the Kingdom of God as the “reign” or “rule” of God.

Nothing has so blocked our understanding of Jesus as has a literal understanding of the Bible, and this is most decisively illustrated by a literal understanding of Kingdom of God; everything that Jesus enacted is truly inverted and reversed, a reversal that can be detected throughout the history of Christianity. The crucifixion or passion of Christ can most clearly be understood as the very opposite of a literal kingdom or reign of God, and this passion is the very center of all four canonical gospels, just as it is the center of a uniquely Christian life and worship. The *anamnesis* of the Eucharist is a renewal of the crucifixion; a renewal of the Christ of Passion—as opposed to the Christ of Glory—who can be understood as enacting himself in the parables, enacting himself as an absolute self-emptying. This is the kenotic Christ who is the true center of Christianity, the very essence of Christianity, an essence betrayed by all exaltation or glorification, by every evocation of absolute power or absolute sovereignty.

Accordingly, our common or established understanding of God is the very opposite of the uniquely Christian God, the very opposite of an absolute passion or an absolute sacrifice; hence Blake could name this common or manifest God as Satan. Blake called forth the “Self-Annihilation of God” as the true naming of God, or the true naming of Christ, a Christ who *is* absolute sacrifice or absolute self-annihilation, and as such is the very opposite of Satan, the opposite of absolute sovereignty. Perhaps more than any other poet or visionary, Blake continually and profoundly evokes the name of Jesus as an absolute sacrifice that is an absolute transfiguration, and thus is apocalypse itself. There is a decisive parallel between Blake and Hegel, our greatest apocalyptic thinker, whose absolute self-negation or self-emptying can even be understood as a philosophical enactment of Jesus, and is so precisely as our greatest kenotic thinking. Is not such thinking a profoundly Christian thinking, one embodying the very essence of Christianity, even if that essence is an absolute negation or an absolute negativity?

### **Nihilism–globalization**

**Lissa McCullough:** If we look for the deepest origins of nihilism, the potency of *nihil* in the monotheistic West derives from the absolute dependence of the creation on God: *creatio ex*

*nihilo*. *Nihil* is visible in Augustine's thinking, for example, where "*nihil* signifies the absence of everything but God" (Marcia Colish). In the trajectory of the death of God in modernity, the *nihil* becomes universal and consumes or usurps God – or at least God's pre-apocalyptic or nonapocalyptic form. Do you think that with the globalization of invasive Western concepts over the past several centuries (Western "objectivity" as embodied in technoscience, Western "secularity," Western "free market" neoliberalism, and similar) each culture that absorbs these concepts absorbs the impact of absolute negation – the death of God – in some degree? What are the implications of this complex eventuality? What is the role of theology here?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Do you mean, does the globalization or universalization of Western culture now entail the universalization of that absolute negation which is the death of God?

**Lissa McCullough:** Take the question as you like.

TJJA: A full nihilism is only realized in late modernity, then it becomes all pervasive or universal; even if it is not open as such, it is nonetheless actual and real, as fully foreseen and enacted in the deeper expressions of the imagination of late modernity. Perhaps nihilism is most universal in America, an America whose primal epic *Moby-Dick* (1851) is an enactment of the Nothing – the first such epic enactment – and one foreseen in Blake's first epic *America a Prophecy* (1793). Melville's *White Whale* remains our clearest symbol of the Nothing, and it can be known as evoking a distinctively American Nothing, one embodied in a new mass culture and society and truly universal today in the most universal empire in history. Originally America could envision itself as a rebirth or renewal of ancient Rome; even if this was grounded in a love of the Roman republic, it was accompanied by a deep sense of a destiny paralleling the Roman republic's evolution into the Roman empire. America was the first founded nation, just as it created the first secular republic, and thereby it decisively realized a new secular world and even inaugurated a universal secularity.

America advanced itself not only or primarily by an exterior violence but by a new internal and pragmatic discipline, one truly unique to America, inevitably desanctioning or demythologizing all established worlds. Only the void created by that desanctioning made possible a new and universal nihilism. This gets expressed in a new American literature and a new American drama, as most forcefully embodied in Eugene O'Neill, but is given universal expression in the world of the movies created in America. American entertainment and advertising created a new and all pervasive passivity, as now a new empire is established by way of an interior violence, a truly new violence creating the largest and most pervasive empire in the history of the world.

When America became a full empire in the wake of the Second World War, its very victory ironically issued in a series of military defeats, as the greatest military power in history was again and again defeated by minor powers and was seemingly incapable of a genuine military victory. No doubt inept military leadership played a role in this, just as did a weak

political leadership—the weakest of any empire in history—but the seemingly weakest American presidents were at bottom the strongest, as for example Truman and Carter, thus pointing to a genuine irony of American political power: an irony wherein an absolute strength is inseparable from an absolute weakness. Nothing like this is present in previous empires, for the American empire is understandable as such only if it is understood as a nihilistic empire. The Roman empire has also been understood as a nihilistic empire, and there are clear parallels between the two; each indeed inaugurates a new and absolute emptiness, and an emptiness that is a universal emptiness.

Perhaps this parallel is most clearly reflected in a uniquely Roman and a uniquely American religion; in each, mind itself is deeply suspended or bracketed as it is nowhere else in the worlds of religion. With that suspension, a religious passion is made possible that is a pure passion, and if this created a Roman Catholic church that is the most powerful religious body in history, it created an American piety or an American religion that is far and away the strongest one in the developed or industrial world. The Roman church has masked itself by creating a comprehensive philosophical theology, but its dogmatic power is wholly independent of theology and unchallengeable by any outside source, just as a uniquely American religion is independent of other powers and is unchallengeable in itself. Never before has American religion been so isolated from theology, or from real thinking and the imagination, a condition that can be known as an empty or nihilistic condition.

**Lissa McCullough:** Is the purported “strength” of American religion just phony, an illusion?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** It is impossible to dissociate the strength or apparent strength of contemporary American religion from the weakness of its ground—its theological ground. Never before has American religion been so devoid of intellectual and imaginative expressions, which, when they exist, are truly banal or hollow. Yet this is a condition fully continuous with American nihilism and can even be known as an expression of that nihilism, as it surely is in its emptiness. Even if that is a banal emptiness, it is nevertheless actual and real. Although this is a situation in which the meaning and identity of religion are deeply in question, and open to the expression of a wide variety of subterranean religion, it is not wholly discontinuous with the traditions of American religion, and above all not in its immersion in a secular world. The secularity of American religion can be understood as its most characteristic quality, one that the papacy itself could once condemn, and if that secularity is writ large in the imaginative expressions of American religion, these can be understood as sanctioning a uniquely American nihilism.

### **Faith—theology**

**Lissa McCullough:** In your memoir *Living the Death of God* you wrote: “Is theology itself by an innermost necessity unable to reach that faith which it claims as its ultimate ground, and therefore finally a betrayal of that ground?” (97). Personally, I feel a kind of relief in this distinction between theology and faith: that faith has no essential dependence on theology,

that theology may even be a betrayal of faith. (Incidentally, it seems to me that Derrida makes a parallel claim for justice: as theology is to faith, so the law is to justice.) Is there a domain where faith is perfectly itself even when one cannot say what it is, where it is, or why it is the thing that matters, as it redeems everything? Hence there is no need to believe in faith to have faith? Care to comment on the enigma of faith in relation to theology?

**Thomas J.J. Altizer:** Faith is both our deepest and our most questionable ground, we both affirm it absolutely and question or deny it absolutely, and the one cannot occur apart from the other. Hence there is a genuine dialectic of faith, and one that is real to us even in our denial of it, for despite those forms of Protestantism and Bhaktism that embrace it, faith is simply impossible as an unloseable faith, as every historian knows. Nonetheless, Bhaktism is fascinating; even Barth could know Bhakti Hinduism as a genuine expression of faith, though Protestant Pietism is alien to Barth, and indeed alien to every major thinker apart from Kant. Yet as William James makes clear in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), the purer Protestant conversion experiences bring an overwhelming conviction that the salvation realized here can never be lost, and never lost no matter what subsequently occurs. This conversion experience led James to a new understanding of immediacy and immediate experience, an immediacy so overwhelming that it transcends everything else and can truly be known as an absolute experience.

This is the only absolute that James will allow, and it does parallel that new faith known by Protestant neo-orthodoxy, a faith that is absolutely unchallengeable no matter how profound its conflict with everything else. A genuine Protestantism does not know a faith that transcends reason; it is far rather absolutely beyond reason, therefore there can be no theology of faith, or no understanding of faith whatsoever. Such conviction can bring with it a remarkable serenity, for when it is impossible to know anything about faith it is impossible to doubt it, and with that exclusion all deeper doubt is excluded, and a deep peace is realized. But can that peace be actually real or actually realized? "Yes," say the evangelically converted, "no" says virtually everyone else, and if this is a profound gulf in our world, it is apparently an unbridgeable gulf.

Yet ours is the first truly and comprehensively secular age, the first age of the death of God. Only now can an absence of faith be a common condition, and only now does faith itself become an ultimate challenge. In Kierkegaard we can encounter such a challenge realizing a truly new faith, a faith only possible in a godless world, but a faith all the deeper just because of that. This new faith is only possible through an absolutely new subjectivity, a subjectivity that is the very opposite of a uniquely modern and universal objectivity, and therefore one demanding an absolute leap. So it is that Kierkegaard created our greatest dialectic of faith, one that can be understood as underlying every genuinely modern expression of Christianity, and can be observed in the sort of evangelical conversion that can only occur in a godless world. Once that conversion has occurred, a total distance is established between the converted and the "world"—far more so than in any presecular world—for the death of God makes possible an absolutely new faith. Then faith itself

becomes not only a mystery but an absolute mystery, an absolute mystery that is only possible as a consequence of the death of God.

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