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ALTIZER'S THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

The legacy of Thomas J. J. Altizer in the formation of late twentieth and early twenty-first century religious thought is prodigious. Almost single-handedly and with sheer consistency and determination, Altizer not only turned Nietzsche's slogan "God is dead" into a household phrase, he also converted it into a generational shibboleth. With both the force of his own personality and a genius for strategic marketing in the pre-digital era, Altizer transformed what had been previously dismissed as eccentric hyperbole on the part of Western philosophy's notorious, self-proclaimed "anti-Christ" into a kind of catechistic pronouncement for the entirety of so-called "postmodern" Christianity. The sprawling, more than half-a-century span of what has come to be known as "radical" (or alternately "death-of-God") theology has always been saturated with Altizer's insights, while summarily failing to credit him accordingly. At the same time, the once provocative trope of God's death has weathered down into something of a garden variety placeholder, especially in the discourse of academic religious thought, for a confused riot of vaguely anti-religious intellectual gestures, all the way from the oxymoronic notion of "secular theology" to the knockoff brand of multidisciplinary scientism that has come to be known as "the new materialism."

Altizer, of course, was never one to ape intellectual fashions. His writings, ranging over six decades, evince a persistent general style as well as thematic locus. While his reputation rocketed to international fame from the mid-1960s after *Time* magazine published a cover story with the sensational title "Is God Dead"¹, Altizer often complained in his later years that he was routinely ignored or misread. The complaint was unfortunately accurate. First of all, Altizer made it clear early on that he was not going to genuflect to academic protocols of publishing, including careful argumentation and citation. In his memoir Altizer proudly proclaimed that he had intentionally sought to emulate his literary role model, the eighteenth-century visionary poet William Blake. "I came to rejoice that Blake had not had a single day of formal education," Altizer has written, "and I struggled to find a nonacademic theological style," which "partially occurred in my early decision to renounce documentation," as "was most demanded in theological language itself, which I became ever more fully persuaded had become poisoned by its

¹ *Time* magazine cover, "Is God Dead?" (April 8, 1966); <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19660408,00.html>. Retrieved Sept. 3, 2019.

academic robes."² In his theological memoir Altizer even goes so far as to excoriate the American Academy of Religion, the principal national professional association for the field of religious studies for which he, in light of his close friendship with its founders throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, played a seminal founding role. "I have come to regard the American Academy of Religion as having become a deep enemy not only of theology but of religion itself, for it is now far distant from the intention of its founders, and while this is perhaps an inevitable evolution, it is revealing of our academic world, even if there continues to remain a small body of scholars seeking genuine religious and theological meaning."³

Throughout his writings as well as the memoir Altizer professes to be a "theologian" *par excellence*. In his foreword to the memoir Mark C. Taylor describes him pointedly as "the last theologian." There is no doubt that Altizer's claims and mode of delivery locates him unmistakably in the former category. But when Taylor christens him "the last theologian," there is a kind of insider narrative at play that demands further elaboration.

Taylor is perhaps alluding to what have become long forgotten controversies over the definition of the field of religious studies. Throughout the 1970s there was an ongoing struggle between the framers of the field, who with a few distinguished exceptions happened to be white, male liberal Protestant theologians, and a younger generation of scholars trained in the social sciences bent on redefining it as a descriptive rather than a normative methodology. The younger faction, who sought to package the field as "value-neutral" and hence congenial with legal strictures concerning separate of church and state in order seed departments within public university systems, routinely angled to purge religious studies of any lingering associations with the curriculum of theological seminaries and schools of divinity. Such a scrupulosity, of course, proved to be strategically convenient when it came to establishing or expanding religious studies departments within a purely secular academic setting. But it had the unavoidable effect of vitiating the theoretical heft of the field overall. I myself wrote about this trend in one of the AAR's own publications as early as the late 1980s.⁴ By the start of the ensuing decade the purge was for the most part complete, at least within the leadership of the American Academy of Religion. At the same time, the new descriptivism, which vaunted an entirely new influx of secular "confessionalism" centering on the proliferation of identitarian narratives concerning historical invisibility, exclusion, marginalization, and oppression. Such personal and politicized narratives have become the overwhelming staple of the humanities in the past two decades.

But Altizer has never been one to claim any kind of privilege or priority. Altizer's theology must be considered something far more than merely "confessional." It must be regarded at minimum as prophetic, or testimonial. As Taylor declares, Altizer is "is the most God-obsessed person I have ever

² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir*, foreword by Mark C. Taylor (Albany NY: State University of New York Press), 135.

³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴ See Carl Raschke, "Religious Studies and the Default of Critical Intelligence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (Spring 1986): 131-38.

known."⁵ His identity is unabashedly one of "madness," a kind of "holy madness." Like Blake, he is a prophet-poet with a testimony that any given culture or society might construe as insanity, and as the English scholar Robert Burton quipped as far back as the sixteenth century, "all poets are mad." Altizer attributes this "madness" to his famous forebear, the brilliant and eccentric Civil War general Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson after whom he is named. The "J. J. in Altizer's middle name stands for "Jonathan Jackson." Stonewall Jackson died from wounds following the battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. In his memoir Altizer writes that "Jackson himself can be understood as having been truly mad, and I have often agonized that insanity is inherent in my family."⁶ Altizer adds that "Stonewall Jackson has been a model for my life"⁷ because of his "dark negative idealism."

Most historians, of course, do not go so far as to judge Stonewall Jackson clinically insane, insofar as his sometimes odd behavior can just as easily be explained in terms of his strong Calvinist religious beliefs as well as devotion to the curious kinds of health faddism that were so much part of popular culture in the nineteenth century. But whatever the factual background for the lore surrounding Jackson's supposed mental disorder, Altizer incorporated it straightaway into his own personal narrative.

At the height of the death of God controversy, while I was on a speaking tour of Virginia colleges, I formally addressed the Virginia Military Institute, which continues to regard Stonewall as its true founder. My address was given at a solemn occasion in the institute's chapel, one dominated by an icon of Stonewall. I had been introduced by the Commandant of VMI as the first descendant of Stonewall to speak here, and this occurred only after I had been escorted by VMI's chaplain to the grave of Stonewall, where I had laid myself above his bones and prayed for his spirit to inspire me. Now before this solemn assembly, all in full dress uniform, and accompanied by their military band, I proclaimed the death of God in the name of Stonewall. Not a sound could then be heard, and the program ended as though nothing untoward had occurred. It was followed by a party lasting almost until dawn, and I sensed that this was, indeed, a genuine celebration of Stonewall. For it has been my experience that the death of God resonates far more deeply in the South than elsewhere in the country, perhaps because the South has been so obsessed with God, and unlike New England where Puritanism is little more than a distant memory, an American Calvinism continues to reign in the South, or did throughout my experience of it, and if this is manifest in a uniquely Southern literature, it is no less manifest in a genuinely Southern theology. Here, once again, I accepted my destiny.⁸ What is Altizer's "destiny"? In his memoir Altizer makes it clear that he was somehow providentially selected to proclaim the death of God. Indeed, he constantly refers to himself as a "Southern preacher" with the

⁵ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, xi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

implication, at least in the foregoing citation, that the proclamation itself belongs to the history of the South, what Americans for generations have routinely referred to as the "Bible Belt." In an age when everything Southern and the cultural legacy of the Civil War along with the ante-bellum South has now been more or less consigned to public obloquy, when the "lost cause" of the rebellion of the Southern states to preserve the "peculiar institution" of slavery has become indistinguishable in the progressive mind with the Nazi treatment of Jews. Confederate monuments are now toppled routinely because of their association with the brutalization of black bodies rather than the preservation of a noble heritage, Altizer's account of his own "destiny" strikes us nowadays as somewhat anomalous, one which many who consider themselves "woke" will most likely find repugnant. It is also ironic that Altizer's over the years has overwhelmingly influenced the Protestant liberal theological establishment in the North, while Southern evangelicals have by and large ignored or dismissed him. Altizer, however, contends that the locus for "radical theology" has always been in the South, and that the spiritual and intellectual climate at Emory University in Atlanta during the late 1960s when the death-of-God controversy broke like wind-driven prairie inferno must be viewed as the dry tinder into which the spark of his writings was cast.

It was as though Emory was a truly radical center, or surely it was so theologically. Such an environment would be impossible to imagine today, but that was a time of breakthrough theologically, and above all so in America, that new America which at that very time was becoming the dominant power in the world. If America was now the new Rome, we sensed that a deep destiny had been thrust upon us. Most concretely, theology had to be liberated from its deeply European theological ground, and this surely occurred in a uniquely American Bultmannianism, one dissolving if not reversing the neo-orthodox ground of modern European theology. Emory was the center of this radical Bultmannianism.⁹

What Altizer terms America's "deep destiny" perhaps can be correlated with the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s. The death-of-God brouhaha broke just as the United States was escalating its military involvement in Southeast Asia, which the political leadership justified a fully mobilized effort to "stop the dominos" of world Communism from falling not just in the region, but throughout the world. In the popular literature of the time the sentiment that "God is dead" was closely affiliated with the anxiety and disillusionment precipitated by the Vietnam quagmire as well as with the heady, self-assured secularism of the times that was inspired by a new economic prosperity, the rapid advances in science and technology, and a waning of the widespread apocalyptic anxiety over imminent nuclear holocaust as a result of the de facto agreement between the United States and

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

the Soviet Union no longer to engage in "mutually ensured destruction" following the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

This new secularism was epitomized in the best-selling book of the time entitled *The Secular City* by Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, which appeared around the same time as Altizer's *Gospel of Christian Atheism*. Cox cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer's well-known forecast at the end of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* about "man coming of age" and the advent of a new "religionless Christianity." Bonhoeffer, who had been jailed and executed by the Nazis for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler in 1945, had asked: "How do we speak of God without religion?" and "How do we speak in a secular fashion of God?"¹⁰ Cox's answer is quite nonchalant. Bonhoeffer's question, Cox remarks, "reminds us of two incontrovertible facts." The first "fact" is that "Biblical faith . . . must speak of God," insofar as "a God to whom human words cannot point is not the God of the Bible." Likewise, "Bonhoeffer's question also reminds us . . . that the word God means almost nothing to modern secular man. His mental world and his way of using language is such that he can neither understand nor use the word God meaningfully."¹¹

Altizer did not by any means consider himself a "secular theologian" – a term that gradually became interchangeable with "radical" and "death of God" theologians – in this sense. For Altizer, the death of God has little to do, if anything, with the inability to speak about God. Such an incapacity merely reflects the shallowness and inattention of those modern, self-satisfied representatives of the Western middle class that Nietzsche contemptuously referred to as the "flies of the marketplace." The death of God, as Nietzsche's parable of the madman who announces it, makes clear, is a world-shattering and traumatic "event." It is not a matter of rendering the word "God" trivial and meaningless. It has everything to do with a covert undercurrent of the human present that few barely discern, let alone comprehend.

A THEOLOGY OF THE MADMAN

In order to explicate, or expand on, what is entailed in this observation we must perhaps take a closer look at the very passage in Nietzsche where the event itself is dramatized.

The madman. - Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? – Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him-you and I.* All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 123.

¹¹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 285.

could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward. sideward. forward. in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

“How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then: “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and *yet they have done it themselves*.

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”¹²

The first and most consequential aspect of this celebrated passage, which needs to be noted, is that the “death of God” cannot be construed as simply a smug preface to some magisterial discourse on the virtues of secular culture and progressive politics. Nietzsche was not suggesting in 1882 when he penned these lines, as many of his admirers have done since the 1960s, that the abandonment of traditional religious belief by a new generation opens the sluice gates for a celebration of sexual freedom, gender fluidity, ecological justice, and “woke” politics. Nor is the passage necessarily one of many arch, acidic commentaries, for which Nietzsche was renowned, on the mindlessness of the Wilhelmine middle classes, who substituted moral

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 181–82.

sentimentality for sincere religious conviction. The death of God in Nietzsche's parable is an epochal, if not terrifying, occurrence that goes altogether unnoticed by the purveyors of conventional wisdom, those who crowd about the marketplace. They are the garden variety "believers" who, in truth, are not really believers at all. It is the madman who is perhaps the one true believer, the Diogenes-like figure with a lantern in quest of an honest individual. Perhaps the madman functions in a sense as the alter ego of Altizer himself, the "last theologian" who unabashedly seeks God but cannot find him because he has before him the most appalling vision – the discovery that God is dead. The habitués of the market place, who could just as well be stand-ins for the thousands of members of the American Academy of Religion, proceed to mock and taunt the madman. It is noteworthy that Nietzsche's language here mimics precisely that of Elijah in his confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. The "priests" of the new secularism are making fun of the madman's insanity. But, like Elijah, it is the madman who has before him the most profound insight, which others are incapable of discerning. It is he who genuinely has a grip on things. In addition, the issue at hand has nothing to do with whether God is real, or even whether, as Cox would put it, it is possible to "speak" of God in such a jejune atmosphere.

One of the hallmarks of the narrative is the madman's declaration that it is *we* who have killed God. Even Altizer does not seriously address what this braid in the plotline actually signifies. Moreover, the wording of the text indicates that Nietzsche is employing the imagery of a sacrificial ritual. "What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us?" Standard average Christian atonement theory holds that God the Father "sent" his "only Son" to die a sacrificial death on the cross so that human beings would not have to pay the ultimate "penalty" for their sins. But the language of Nietzsche's madman makes it evident that the standard average doctrinal formula is beside the point. God did not really die for us. We killed him instead. "All of us are his murderers." The madman then goes on to pose the cryptic question whether God's murder is not a deed "too great for us." It apparently is "too great," because no one yet acknowledges what has occurred. The madman compares this lack of recognition to the delay of the sound of thunder following the flash of lightning. News of the event "is still on its way."

There are resonances reminding us of the conclusion of Euripides' play *The Bacchae* where Agave, mother of the Theban king, fails to recognize in her intoxicated frenzy that she has murdered her own son Pentheus, who was spying on her while she participated in ecstatic and sanguinary rites of Dionysus (the so-called *sparagmos*) in the forest. It is not mere coincidence that throughout his career Nietzsche, a Greek philologist as well as philosopher, was preoccupied with the myths and legends surrounding Dionysus. Nietzsche's early book *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) advanced the thesis that Greek poetry emerged from a coalescence of what he dubbed the "Dionysian" and "Apollonian" principles. The work was controversial, then as well as now, because it was misconstrued as a technical analysis of Greek art and religion rather than as a venture in speculative philosophy. Broadly conceived, the death of God in Nietzsche's view amounts to a petrification of the Apollonian or "form-giving" principle. Modern secularism is nothing less than the mummification of God's corpse.

Nietzsche in his imaginative genius detected a profound lie behind the bland, secularist avowal of God's demise. It appears that God merely expired, like the pagan divinities before him, of "natural causes." But God's death was not really inconsiderable. It was, in truth, a well-orchestrated collective murder for which we are all somehow culpable. The semantic distinction between the now all-too-familiar saying "God is dead" and Nietzsche's own text is immense. As René Girard points out, "on 'the death of God' this is only one text among many but it is the most memorable. Unquestionably, the element of novelty in it stems from the replacement of death by murder. And yet, when the admirers of that text refer to it, they always label it as the greatest text on the death of God. They always substitute their own concept of God's death for the more mysterious murder of Nietzsche."¹³

I have written elsewhere about the importance of the sacrificial motif in Nietzsche's parable.¹⁴ Although the importance and deeper meaning of Nietzsche's employment of such a motif is usually ignored by Nietzsche commentators, its larger implications for the body of his work still remain somewhat opaque. Altizer in his memoir remarks on the centrality of the sacrificial theme in attempting any kind of "death of God theology." "If we can only know redemption by knowing the Crucifixion, we thereby know the absolute No of God, and we can truly know that No only in Christ, and only in the Crucifixion itself. Yet can we think the Crucifixion without thinking the death of God?"¹⁵ The Crucifixion, for Altizer, is indeed a sacrificial act, but it is a "deed," as the madman declares, that is so "great" we can barely apprehend it. It is not part of human history but belongs to a "higher history." Altizer writes: "Sacrifice had long been a primal motif of my religious or theological thinking. I had long believed that sacrifice is the deepest and the purest movement of religion, and I had known that there are profound religious traditions which center upon sacrifice as the original moment or movement of creation. And if the sacrifice of God is the center of Christian redemption, could not the sacrifice of the Godhead be the center of the creation or of genesis itself?"¹⁶

Standard average atonement theory is founded on the proposition that God the Father allowed the "sacrifice" of his son in the person of Jesus in order to "compensate" for the incalculable sins of humanity. There are many variations on the theory throughout Christian history with frequently divergent terminologies and symbologies. Many of these variations hinge on shifting notions of retributive justice within the particular social order in which they have been forged. These renderings range from the so-called "satisfaction" theory of atonement developed by Anselm in his twelfth century treatise *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man) to the so-called

¹³ René Girard, "Dionysus versus the Crucified," *MLN*, French Issue 99 (1984), 831.

¹⁴ See Carl Raschke, *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), especially chap. 5; also, "Rending the Veil of the Temple: The Death of God as *Sacrificium Representationis*," in *Thinking Through The Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J. J. Altizer*, ed. Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 1-10.

¹⁵ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

"penal substitution" argument popularized by the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Ultimately, however, they all derive in some measure from the association of Christ's crucifixion with the practice of animal sacrifice in Jewish ritual as well as with the binding of Isaac by Abraham. Hebrews 9 in the New Testament sketches the outline of this sacrificial theology. Jesus is the "high priest" who puts himself on the altar in place of all potential victims because the accumulated past sacrifices have failed to please God or satisfy his wrath. Hence, Jesus is portrayed in Christian thought as the "lamb who was slain."

In Altizer's account, however, there is no "substitutionary" transaction that takes place on the Cross. The crucifixion is the sacrifice of the Godhead. Nietzsche had of course hinted at something along these lines with his oracular expression "God is dead." But if Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche is correct, then Altizer is even more radical in his interpretation than Nietzsche himself. Heidegger regards Nietzsche's saying as the quintessential formulary for pronouncing the closure of the epoch of metaphysics. "'God is dead' means: the supersensory world has no effective power. It does not bestow life."¹⁷ Such a view makes sense with the respect to the entirety of Nietzsche's later writings. It squares with what we know historically was the general mood of philosophy and theology throughout the nineteenth century, characterized by an exhaustion with metaphysical arguments and dogmatic controversies. Yet Nietzsche's comparison of God's death with an actual murder makes him appear like some kind of master detective who at the dramatic climax of his investigation reveals not only who is perpetrator of the dastardly deed, but the details about their most likely motive. It is the human race ("all of us") who are "guilty" the madman proclaims, and we did it not out of resentment or revenge but as an historical necessity in order to usher in a "higher humanity." As Nietzsche's Zarathustra announces: "'Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live."¹⁸

ALTIZER, HEGEL, AND NIETZSCHE

The Nietzschean concept of the "overman" (*Übermensch*) has always sustained curious, "eschatological" overtones. It was this ambiguity in Nietzsche's valorization of this curious, quasi-Darwinian hierarchy of "higher" and "lower" types of humanity that allowed the Nazis to misuse him for their invidious racist purposes. For Nietzsche, the death of God signals the eventual "end" of ordinary humanity with its petty scruples and superstitions, which he believed were politically personified in modern democratic politics. Although Nietzsche does not say it aloud, the implication we can draw from some of his more incisive aphorisms is that the "murder of God" is analogous to the masses' contempt for the "higher types." But the "great deed" of God's murder, perhaps intended as a collective bid to erase the chasm between finite and infinite, has unintended consequences

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 162.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 121.

evidenced in the underlying and unacknowledged "nihilism" of the modern era.

Altizer turns out perhaps to be more radical than Nietzsche because he does not focus his account of God's death on any scrutiny of collective human psychology. Nietzsche cares little, if anything at all, for the complex heritage of Christian doctrine and metaphysical speculation concerning the meaning of the Crucifixion. He is far more interested in what might be termed a "prophetic" or figurative intimation about what is both present and yet to come, about the more far-reaching significance of changes underway in culture and society than any pundit is capable of discerning. In contrast, Altizer dares to envision the death of God at a cosmic level, or perhaps we might say at an *ontological* level. If God is as the tradition says he is, then God *must* die. In a weird way one might encapsulate all of Altizer's work as an ongoing "ontological argument" for the self-annihilation of God.

It is for this very reason that Altizer professes to be not only the "last theologian," but the last Hegelian. "My venture," Altizer contends, "demands a full union of Hegelian and Nietzschean thinking, and while something like this is accomplished by Derrida, and by the Buddhist philosopher Nishitani, as well, mine is a fully theological rather than a philosophical project, even if it demands the incorporation of philosophical thinking."¹⁹ Why Hegel? Hegel's thought "is simultaneously the greatest theological challenge to Christianity and the greatest philosophical expression of Christianity itself. Only Hegel among our philosophers incorporated the whole body of Christian doctrine into his thinking."²⁰ Nietzsche may have put the phrase "God is dead" into general circulation, but Hegel—especially in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*—set up once and for all the theoretical scaffolding for making wider sense out of the expression. According to Altizer, "Hegel is the philosophical discoverer of the death of God."²¹

But Hegel, according to Altizer, has also identified the covert import of the doctrine of the Atonement. The aim of the Atonement was not to rescue humanity from sin and the Devil, but to follow through with a unique "theosophical" reconsideration of the *ontologic* of the Godhead itself. Do we not find, Altizer inquires, in "Hegel and Nietzsche, an atonement that could finally only be the atonement of godhead itself—as first philosophically enacted by Hegel, revolutionizing the whole world of philosophy? For the enactment of the death of god in Hegel means no less than this; it is an enactment only possible when absolute Spirit has become an absolutely dichotomous Spirit, wholly and totally alienated from itself, yet it is that absolute self-alienation that makes possible the absolute self-negation of Spirit, a self-negation that is finally the source of all life and movement."²² This passage has many of the resonances of the concluding paragraphs of

¹⁹ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 19.

²⁰ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

²¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Satan and Apocalypse and Other Essays in Political Theology* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), 11.

²² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. and with an introduction by Lissa McCullough, foreword by David E. Klemm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 116.

Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which proclaims the "Golgotha of Absolute Spirit."²³ The Hegelian "death" of the divine is but the advent of "absolute knowing." Composed in the first decade of the nineteenth century, it is thus a transparent effort to outdo Kant's "Copernican revolution" in epistemology.²⁴ Altizer's Hegel is not doing epistemology but ontology, a view we find also in Heidegger.²⁵ It is at the same time a radical ontology that demonstrates how a previously unthinkable, "eternal" process within the Godhead is mirrored in the reconstitution of the world itself.

Altizer's "speculative" elaboration of how this process unfolds can be found in one of his later works entitled *The Apocalyptic Trinity*. God's self-annihilation, which corresponds historically to his self-embodiment in Christ, clears the way for the revelation of God as "Satan." "Ever increasingly I became convinced that if we cannot actually name Satan then we cannot actually name Christ," Altizer asserts in his memoir. The notion that God and Satan a *coincidentia oppositorum* in the archetypal sense is a theme that runs throughout Altizer. By the same token, this coincidence of opposites is not merely static. It is manifested as an "apocalyptic" history. Altizer draws his peculiar inspiration from William Blake. "Blake's Satan is the absolutely alien or absolutely fallen Creator, that very Creator who is the absolute sovereignty of God, and who is truly the Lord of a totally fallen history."²⁶ Our "secular age," as Charles Taylor calls it, is the visible consummation of such a "fallen history." The importance of "Blake's prophetic poetry" is that it "both transcends and negates its roots in the Christian tradition: it unveils a Jesus who is the totality of both God and man, envisions a cosmic history reflecting a movement from Fall to Apocalypse, and records an ecstatic immersion in the joy and the horror of concrete experience."²⁷

Moreover, the temporal outworking of the timeless *oppositio* between the divine and its absolute contrariety, which assumes a "satanic" posture, becomes the dynamic pattern for history as a whole. It is also the prototype for the doctrine of predestination. Altizer opines that Nietzsche is "the modern name of Augustine" because of his "abysmal thought" of eternal recurrence, where one must affirm even the most terrible things that have happened in the past as something that could be willed over and over again. "For predestination is an absolute and eternal willing of Yes and No simultaneously;" insofar as "the absolute Yes is absolutely unreal apart from the absolute No, so that nothing is a deeper illusion than an absolute Yes which is not an absolute No, or an absolute No which is not an absolute Yes." Altizer concludes with a provocative question: "Is such an absolute No

²³ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 437.

²⁴ In his advertisement of the volume to increase sales, Hegel writes: "This volume is the exposition of the coming to be of knowledge. The phenomenology of spirit is supposed to take the place of psychological explanations and also those of abstract discussions about the grounding of knowledge" (*ibid.*, 468).

²⁵ Heidegger argues that we find in Hegel its own kind of metaphysical eschatology, the "parousia" of Being itself. See Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

²⁶ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 59.

²⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Aurora CO: Davies Group, 2000), xi.

present in the Holocaust itself?"²⁸ He adds later in his memoir that "it is simply impossible to understand our Western history without understanding predestination."²⁹ One might argue that Altizer is actually not defending predestination in the sense that perhaps Paul and Augustine intended but rather variant, developed by Dutch Calvinists in the seventeenth century, of "double predestination."

A NEW THEOLOGICAL MATERIALISM?

We would not be too far afield if we were to argue that Altizer's stress on history as the outcome of some kind of more profound, predestinarian principle also fashions him in a certain way as a theologian of *historical materialism*. For Altizer, what propels human history is not some opaque and transcendental form of intelligence, akin to what Kant termed *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck* or "purposefulness without purpose," but an immanent determinism, a pure, insuperable force. It is not Hegel's *Geist*, but what Engels in his *Dialectics of Nature* described as "the purely quantitative operation of division" that "becomes transformed into a qualitative difference."³⁰ One could perhaps label this "operation" as a "satanic" process along the lines Altizer repeatedly characterizes in his writings, especially in *The Apocalyptic Trinity*. It is this dialectical force that applies not so much to the evolution of consciousness but to the immanent mutation of quantity into quality within the phenomenal substrata of historical transition that is what we really mean when we talk about "the mind of God." "Deity" itself, therefore, is disclosed as a kind of automaton. And this concealed "mechanization" of the process of history, which is ultimately a "revolutionary" history, can be traced to the immanent dialectical makeup of the Holy Trinity. The Trinity then functions as the dialectical "law" of matter itself, encompassing not only nature but history also. Altizer asserts that "as I become ever more open to that revolutionary transformation of consciousness which has occurred in the modern world, I just thereby gradually became open to the possibility that a fully comparable transformation had occurred in the very genesis of Christianity. Christian theology from its beginning in Paul has known Christianity as the most ultimate of all revolutions. Indeed, it is only with the advent of Christianity that revolution itself is called forth in consciousness, for the Christian knows a truly new creation or new world which is possible only as the consequence of an apocalyptic ending of an old world."³¹ Apocalypse reveals itself to be the grand transformation of quantity into quality in accordance with the theory of dialectical materialism.

Contra Hegel, history is not necessarily the progressive realization of the "idea of freedom." The Apocalyptic Trinity, which governs history, corresponds to the ongoing materialization of the death of God, a death that cannot be separated from the birth of Christianity itself. "The advent of Christendom and the advent of the doctrine of the Trinity fully coincide, and not only historically coincide, but coincide in the birth of an absolute *imperium*, one going far beyond a pagan *imperium*, and beyond it as an

²⁸ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 67–68.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁰ Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (New York: International, 1963), 29.

³¹ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 99.

imperium that is exterior and interior simultaneously. Nothing more truly symbolizes that absolutely new simultaneity than does the dogma of the Trinity, a dogma not only sanctioning an absolute *imperium*, but one calling forth that absolute mystery and that absolute authority apart from which such an *imperium* is impossible.³² In short, the "materialization" of Christianity as the revelation of God's death manifests itself as a "totality," one which Altizer earlier in his career depicts as a "total presence," a *negative incarnation* where the "I" of the "I AM" reveals itself as "the realization of self-negation or self-emptying," the apocalyptic "fullness of time" that negates all time as well as all opposites, where the voice that speaks the world into being now returns to the pure self-alienation of total silence.³³ It is this imperium of silence that remains in the plenitude of the apocalyptic finale.

Altizer asks:

Is it no longer possible to be offended by the doctrine of the Trinity, no longer possible to know the Trinity as a *horror religiosus*, and a *horror religiosus* as the absolute mystery that is absolute authority, an authority and a mystery before which and through which we become absolutely groundless? Dostoevsky could know the pure and total conjunction of authority and mystery to be the very voice of Satan, one commanding that Grand Inquisitor who is the persona of an imperialistic Church dissolving all freedom, and reducing all humanity to a pure passivity, a passivity that would appear to be all in all in our new world. Is an absolute authority now at hand eroding all possible resistance, one embodying a mystery so pure as to be impenetrable and yet so comprehensive as to be truly inescapable, so that for the first time in modern history all ultimate opposition has withered away, and opposition itself can be no more than fantasy or play, as clearly manifest in our cultural, educational, social, political, and religious worlds?"³⁴

Here we envision the apocalyptic landscape of the "total presence" of the fully secular present. It becomes an "apocalyptic understanding of the Trinity is the consequence of the final advent of an essentially new universe in which existence itself is body itself." Altizer remarks that "if this finally ends everything we have previously known as nothingness, it precisely thereby calls forth the absolutely unique trinitarian Godhead. This is a Godhead released only by the Crucifixion, the death of God, for only after that apocalyptic death does the Resurrection of the triune Godhead of God occur through the Incarnation of the Body of God, a Body which is an actual "flesh" or material body."³⁵

³² Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 33.

³³ See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 71ff.

³⁴ *The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 37-38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

THE AMERICAN APOCALYPSE

That “embodied” *imperium*, according to Altizer, is what we mean by the neoliberal America we now see *materializing* before our eyes. “In many respects America has been a nation of prophets, and often of once-born or healthy-minded prophets, but far more deeply of dark prophets, as in most of its greater literature and art, dark prophets enacting a demonic or Satanic America,” that is, “one calling forth a uniquely American destiny?”³⁶ America as the “new Rome” becomes the corporealization of a “revolutionary atonement.” It is one “in continuity with the Book of Revelation, a book profoundly naming an old Rome, and a book perhaps harboring an apocalyptic naming of America? When one reflects on the role that America has played in realizing a contemporary world of universal economic exploitation and a universal mass society and culture, it would not be odd to give America such a purely demonic identity.”³⁷

It is at this point, however, that Altizer turns rhetorically on a dime — *dialectically*. “Yet apocalyptically a demonic identity is inseparable from a salvific identity, the kingdom of darkness is inseparable from the kingdom of light, and absolute darkness only fully dawns in the wake of the advent of absolute light.”³⁸ “Paradise Lost” comes to be compensated in the revolutionary transmutation of the historical *scene* that happens to be America through such a climactic *coniunctio oppositorum* in the form of an apocalypse that can only be contemplated as a “radically new Satanic majesty and energy” that “is an inversion of the self-emptying and humiliation of the Son.”³⁹ The antinomies or “opposites” themselves morph into a kind of cosmic “helter-skelter.” “No problem is more overwhelming in our situation,” Altizer proposes, “than that of the relation between Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, and most forcefully so insofar as their respective and contrary identities now appear to be passing into each other, thereby dissolving and erasing the integral and individual identities of both beginning and end.”⁴⁰ Nonetheless, it is not the case that the “kingdom of God” passes over into some restoration of the powers of the “prince of this world.” From an “apocalyptic” standpoint, it is finally revealed that the Self-Annihilation of God in Christ is the Self-Annihilation of Satan, the sacrifice of the fallen and empty body of the Godhead, the very Godhead that is the repressive ruler of a wholly fallen world, and this is the final sacrifice that is apocalypse itself.⁴¹ Satan persists following the crucifixion “only after God has died as God,” i.e., as Jesus, “thereby annihilating His own selfhood, which now passes into the Spectre, the Shadow, and the Selfhood of Satan.” Thus Satan persists as a “reality” on as the spectral afterglow of the self-

³⁶ *Satan and Apocalypse*, 15.

³⁷ Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Silence Must Now Speak: Letters of Thomas J.J. Altizer 1995-2015*, edited by Mike Grimshaw (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 238.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 162.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹ Altizer, *Satan and Apocalypse*, 65.

embodiment of the Apocalyptic Trinity. Satan is, in fact, merely “a consequence of the self-negation or the ‘Self-Annihilation’ of God.”⁴²

Altizer’s own specter hangs heavily over our era. While he has been feted in the last half century as the tutelary spirit for a variety of faddish theological movements that go by such monikers as “a-theology,” “deconstructive theology,” “materialist theology,” “secular theology,” and so forth, Altizer throughout all the tireless attempts to assimilate or appropriate him for separate agendas might be chronicled as the founder not simply of death of God theology, but of a theology that can only arise at *the end of theology*. Just as Hegel’s philosophy, according to Heidegger, was one who brought to full flower “the end of philosophy,” so Altizer’s truly offers us a theology of the end of theology.

In his book *Godhead and the Nothing* Altizer observes that “the absence of theology from our world could be a deeply positive sign, or a positive sign to theology itself, just as it could be that nothing could more subvert our world than a genuine theological thinking, and a theological thinking calling forth that which is most ‘other’ than our world.”⁴³ What would such a “theological thinking” look like? As the “last theologian” Altizer seems to view all the so-called “theological” fashions that have paraded down the runway since the Sixties as sheer twaddle and vanity. It has been the fate of contemporary theologians to bow down with a repertoire of fulsome gestures before the monstrous effigy of a triumphalist *saeculum*. But such a triumphalism, so far as Altizer is concerned, does not in any sense amount to what the death of God in the final analysis signifies. For God’s death, imbricated within the divine essence itself, cannot be reduced to a darkly perceived atemporal twinkling captured in a celebration of the *saeculum* itself. It certainly cannot be reduced to any sort of “secular theology.” Such a secularism, as we are witnessing today, is but the cynical take of the Grand Inquisitor. True affirmation, or yay-saying, what in Nietzsche’s mind as well as Altizer’s “theopoetic” vision of what the death of God unfurls as the vast tapestry of time, amounts to the “dreadful freedom,” as Sartre put it, of speaking into the void when the original voice that called the world into being has fallen silent. “Consequently,” Altizer proclaims. “our new and seemingly powerful contemporary expressions of religion are not only innocent of guilt but innocent of freedom as well, for never since the ending of the medieval world has a religious world been so closed to freedom, and not only closed to the freedom of thinking and of speech, but closed to that freedom which is a reflection of a full responsibility, or a freedom that is responsibility itself.”⁴⁴ This freedom is what Altizer’s theology is really all about.

In one of his famous aphorisms Nietzsche quipped that “after Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries—a colossal, gruesome shadow.” Similarly, “God is dead, but given the way people are, there may still be caves for millennia in which his shadow is displayed. —

⁴² Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*, 201.

⁴³ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 13.

⁴⁴ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 112.

And we – we must still defeat his shadow as well!"⁴⁵ The shadow of the dead God will perhaps for just as long be marked by the spectral presence of Altizer's thought, which will continue to overshadow even the most preposterous posturings of present day theologians in the ghostly twilight of an already spectral Christianity.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109.