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ON BECOMING A RADICAL THEOLOGIAN

It all started in the spring of 1960 when Ellen van der Veen, my first wife and the mother of our children, and I decided to visit Europe. It was twenty years after the German invasion of Holland that began on May 10, 1940. When the Germans came Ellen was twelve years old. Anne Frank was also twelve. Anne perished at Auschwitz. Ellen survived because of Max van der Veen, her father and my children's grandfather. In the early morning of May 11, 1940, Max took his family from their home in Aerdenhout to IJmuiden, the port of Amsterdam, where he succeeded in getting his family on a British minesweeper and on their way to safety in England.

The van der Veens—Max, his wife Lucy, two daughters and one son—continued on to the United States where they settled in Cincinnati. Max has always been one of my heroes. He understood immediately that the Nazis aimed to kill his family. Most Dutch Jewish fathers had neither his ability to understand their family's peril nor the resources that enabled Max to get his family to America in wartime. On a number of occasions, I have told my children, "*You are alive today because of your grandfather, Max van der Veen.*"

I was born in the United States, as were my parents. My father served in World War I in the US Navy and was a civilian employee of the Navy in World War II. I was ordained a rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in 1952. I received the degree of Master of Theology (STM) from Harvard Divinity School in 1955 and the PhD from Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences on June 16, 1960. I met Ellen van der Veen when we were students at the University of Cincinnati; we were married in 1946 and had four children, Aaron, who died several years ago, Nathaniel, who died as an infant, Hannah Rubenstein Feibel, who lives with her husband Dr. Frederick Feibel, a veterinarian, in West Simsbury, Connecticut, and Jeremy, who is married to Linda Tang and lives in Los Angeles.

In the summer of 1960, Ellen and I rented a house in Wijk aan Zee, a Dutch seaside resort on the North Sea coast. There were many German families vacationing there. They were courteous and wanted to put the war behind them. I have often written that the best lecture course I took at Harvard was Paul Tillich's course Classical German Philosophy. Tillich was enormously influential in the development of my theological and philosophical views.

While we were in Holland that summer, I decided that I wanted to visit Germany. The nearest important German city was Düsseldorf, two hours away from Amsterdam by fast train. I decided to take my oldest son, Aaron, who was then eleven and is now deceased. When Aaron and I arrived in Düsseldorf, I reserved a room at the *Verkehrsverein* (travel agency) in the railroad station. I knew nobody. I had no plans. I had no idea of what we would do. Having found lodging, Aaron and I started walking on what was apparently one of the main thoroughfares.

After a while, we came upon a synagogue that was of medium size and looked brand new. Apparently, the old synagogue had been destroyed by post-war Nazi thugs and the West German government caused the new one to be built. As we approached the synagogue I noticed a sign next to a side door that read: *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland* (Nondenominational weekly newspaper of Jews in Germany). I entered and introduced myself as one of the junior editors of *The Reconstructionist*, an American-Jewish periodical. After some conversation, they told me of a conference about to begin consisting of American-Jewish leaders and members of the diplomatic staff of the *Bundespresseamt*, the press and information office of the West German government at the Rheinhôtel Dreesen in nearby Bad Godesberg. If interested, they told me, they could get me invited.

Of course, I was interested. Instead of being an aimless wanderer in a strange German city, I had made contact with members of the local Jewish community and some members of the West German diplomatic staff. At the Bad Godesberg conference, I got along well with the German diplomats, especially the leader Graf (Count) Heinz von Schweinitz. In the course of one conversation I told him that I expected to return to Europe the following summer. We agreed to keep in touch.

The following summer, I was back in Europe, once again residing in Holland. I had been scheduled to return to Germany on August 13, 1961, but when I got up that morning I learned that the East Germans had closed their borders. By August 15, however, it was clear that the crisis was manageable and I notified the *Bundespresseamt* that I would be coming to Berlin from Amsterdam that evening.

On August 17, 1961, the *Bundespresseamt* arranged an interview for me with Dean Heinrich Grüber in which he declared that *the Holocaust was God's punishment of the Jews for their sins*. The Dean's words were my death-of-God experience. Even today, sixty-four years later, I regard that interview, with a man whom I knew was not an anti-Semite, to be one of the most important of my career. Before meeting Dean Grüber, I had given little thought to the theological problem of God and the Holocaust. The very title of my first book, *After Auschwitz*, implies the question, "What kind of God, if any, can we believe in After Auschwitz?" I could ignore that problem no longer.

While in Germany, I wrote an article on the situation there that appeared in the Pittsburgh Press. The article was read by Professor Herbert Mainusch, a German scholar from the University of Muenster who at the time was a visiting professor at University of Pittsburg. I met Mainusch after returning home from Germany. At his suggestion, I was invited to lecture at Mainusch's home university. I was told, however, that the lecture would have to be in German. I agreed. When I came to Muenster, I was welcomed by the city fathers in the *Friedensaal*, the historic Peace Hall in Muenster's gothic town hall where on May 15, 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia was signed by Spain and the Netherlands, ending the Thirty Years War.

Thereafter, I received other invitations to lecture in Germany. Undoubtedly, from the perspective of my career, the most important was an invitation to lecture at the Fifteenth Annual Conference on Church and Judaism held in Recklinghausen, Germany. My lecture had the title, "Person and Myth in the Jewish-Christian Encounter." Although the lecture was not published in Germany, the English version appeared in *The Christian Scholar*, an American quarterly, in the winter 1963 issue. There seemed to be little notice of the essay, but in the spring issue 1965 of the same journal, Professor William Hamilton of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School contributed an essay, "The Death of God Theologies Today." In a rather long bibliographic footnote, Hamilton listed a number of what he considered to be important expressions of death-of-God theology, one of which was my "Person and Myth in the Judaeo-Christian Encounter."

As is well known, Hamilton was coauthor with Thomas J. J. Altizer of the best-selling book on death-of-God theology, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Hamilton, and most especially, Altizer, were the intellectual leaders of the death-of-God theology movement. Shortly after the publication of Hamilton's essay on "The Death of God Theologies Today," I received a letter from the organizing committee of a conference to be held at Emory University – at the time Altizer's home university – on "America and the Future of Theology" scheduled for November 1965, inviting me to be one of two respondents to Altizer's lecture at the conference.¹ I was puzzled when I received the invitation. I did not yet know who Altizer was or why I was invited to respond to him. Nevertheless, after some hesitation, I accepted.

Although I was unaware of the actual number of those attending the Emory conference, the number seemed large for a conference on a theological subject. Nor did I understand that by inviting me to respond, however briefly, to Altizer, a theological superstar at the time, so to speak, I had been given incredible media exposure. To my

¹ The full text of the papers and responses presented at the Emory conference can be found in William A. Beardslee, ed., *America and the Future of Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

surprise, my response to Altizer at Emory was well received. As a result there were network-television appearances and many college lectureships. Of greatest importance was the fact that faculty members of the department of religion at Florida State University (FSU) were present. After they heard my response to Altizer, they inquired whether I might be interested in teaching at Florida State University as a full professor!

My first response to FSU's query was negative. At the time, I was the Hillel rabbi (chaplain) at Carnegie-Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh. Fortunately, FSU did not take my "no" as final. Not long after FSU's first inquiry, FSU invited me to come as a visiting professor for a single semester. This time, I accepted. Both Betty and I liked what we found. In 1970, I accepted FSU's invitation to serve as a full professor and I remained a member of the faculty for twenty-five years.

Both Pittsburgh and later Florida State also proved good for Betty. When we were first married, I was somewhat apprehensive that Betty might find faculty life wanting after her life in upper-middle class Winnetka, Illinois. Fortunately, that wasn't the case. One of our neighbors was in charge of the docent program at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum. Both she and Betty were graduates of Smith College and she invited Betty to become a docent at the museum. Betty accepted and began the work that culminated in her earning her PhD in the History and Criticism of Art at FSU.

Nor did I want for academic recognition in spite of my radical theology. My doctoral dissertation was published as *The Religious Imagination* and was translated and published in France, Italy, and Japan. In the spring of 1977, the Italian translation was awarded the Portico d'Ottavia Literary Prize at Rome's Palazzo Braschi. Both Betty and I flew over to attend the ceremony.

During the academic year 1976-1977, Betty and I were living in New Haven where I was one of twenty-five scholars who had been elected as fellows for the academic year at Yale's National Humanities Institute. In May 1977, I received an unexpected call from the late Dean Robert O. Lawton, then Vice President for Academic Affairs at Florida State, inquiring whether I planned to attend commencement ceremonies in June 1977. I answered affirmatively. My son Jeremy was scheduled to graduate from FSU on that occasion and I expected to be there. Dean Lawton then informed me that I had been named Distinguished Professor of the Year, FSU's highest faculty recognition.

On September 14, 1987, I received yet another recognition. I was one of twenty-five alumni of the Jewish Theological Seminary who received the degree of Doctor of Hebrew Letters, *honoris causa*, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Seminary's founding. I was especially gratified that the accompanying citation

contained words of praise for *After Auschwitz*, my first book, that had received a measure of faculty criticism when first published in 1966.

There was of course a price to be paid for becoming known, especially in the Jewish community, as a “death-of-God” theologian. I had become largely unemployable as a congregational rabbi, a position I no longer sought in any event. Fortunately, save for my earliest years after ordination, my academic credentials were such that I did not want for appropriate employment at a secular university.

Before receiving the invitation to respond to Thomas Altizer at Emory, I had read very little that either he or William Hamilton had written. Upon receiving the invitation, I immediately purchased and read their book *Radical Theology and the Death of God* and a few articles by and about the two theologians.

After Dean Grüber told me that the Holocaust was God’s punishment of Israel for their sins, I noticed almost immediately press reports in which the Dean vehemently denied that he had said anything of the sort. He also declared that he would never again give me an interview for having so misrepresented him. Today I may perhaps better understand the difference between the Dean and myself. I was initially puzzled by the Dean’s attitude. My original interview with the Dean had lasted two hours. I had carefully taken notes of what he had said and I had no reason to misrepresent him.

Today I think I understand something of the difference between Dean Grüber and Dr. Altizer, on the one hand, and my understanding of divinity on the other. Simply stated, there is nothing comparable to the Second Person of the Trinity in the Jewish understanding of divinity. Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity may die on the Cross, but crucifixion is not the last word. Resurrection is.

I want to express my gratitude for Thomas Altizer, who perhaps unknowingly moved me to formulate my own view of God after the “death of God,” so to speak, an idea that is perhaps understandably absent from Jewish thought. In my very first response to Altizer at Emory I wrote that I had come to prefer the term *the Holy Nothingness* or *das heilige Nichts* as an appropriate term for God. I have explained my preference for the term *Holy Nothingness* in several places, perhaps the most important and succinct was in the August 1996 *Commentary* symposium on “What Do American Jews Believe?” I was one of thirty-six scholars invited to contribute and one of the few with a good word for radical theology.

As I indicated in the 1966 symposium, I believe in God as the Holy Nothingness, the Ground of all existence, the Source out of which we come and to which we ultimately return. This is a very old conception of God with deep roots in Western and Oriental mysticism and some affinity to certain forms of Buddhism. To speak

of God as the Holy Nothingness, *das heilige Nichts*, the *En Sof* of Kabbalah, is to assert that God is beyond all limitation and finite “thinghood.” Such imperfect language is not meant to suggest that God is a void. On the contrary, Holy Nothingness is a *plenum* so rich that all existence derives therefrom. Perhaps the best available metaphor for this concept is to liken God to the ocean and all discrete existing beings to the waves. Each wave has its moment of partially identifiable existence, but there is ultimately no separation between the waves and their oceanic substratum. Hence, each wave is destined to return to and be wholly absorbed by its oceanic ground.

When *Time* magazine did a profile on my theological views in its February 16, 1968 issue it used as the title “Holy Nothingness.” And in 2007 Patmos Verlag of Düsseldorf published a book, *Das Heilige Nichts: Gott nach dem Holocaust (The Holy Nothingness: God After the Holocaust)*, edited by Tobias Daniel Wabbel, which contains several sections dealing with questions of God and the Holocaust. About twenty scholars, primarily from the United States and Germany, including Pope Benedict XVI, contributed essays. Although in his introduction the editor questioned the validity of identifying God as Holy Nothingness, he nevertheless clearly regarded the theological issue as worthy of discussion in book form.

The conservative southern Protestants at the Emory conference did not share my views, but they did understand my theological pessimism. I had the distinct feeling that many of those present recognized my position as one to which they might be drawn were they ever to lose their Christian faith. I certainly did not have an unfriendly audience. There was also an unspoken element in my response that was apparently intuited by those present. I had visited Poland shortly before the Atlanta conference, including the Auschwitz and Majdanek death camps, which were very much on my mind.

When the Russians entered Majdanek they claimed they found 600,000 pairs of ownerless shoes. In my earlier writings I accepted that figure. Today I rely on the much lower estimate of 50,000 suggested by Raul Hilberg, a major authority on the Holocaust.² When we learned of Majdanek, many of us finally understood that the Nazi policy was genocide rather than harsh, punitive incarceration. I also especially remember learning of the death of Paul Tillich while I was in Warsaw, the very day *Time* published its first major article on death-of-God theology, October 22, 1965. It is my conviction that no theologian was more influential for those of us involved in radical theology in mid-century America than Tillich.

When I completed my response to Altizer at Emory, I understood immediately that, although I had not found agreement, I had been

² See “Majdanek Death Statistics,”
[http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Poland/Majdanek/DeathStatistics.htm](http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Poland/Majdanek/DeathStatistics.html)
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taken seriously. Dean Roger Shinn of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City described the confrontation in his book, *Man: The New Humanism*:

At Emory University's convocation on "America and the Future of Theology" in November of 1965, a dramatic confrontation . . . took place. Thomas Altizer expressed his jubilation in American messianism and the coming of the new age. Then Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein, replying, said that he missed the needed note of anguish. He agreed with Altizer about "the death of God as a cultural event." But he rejected "too quick a dance of joy at the great funeral." Then the rabbi reminded the Christians of "the old Augustinian-Calvinist notion of original sin," describing it as a theological insight "on target." Throughout two days Rabbi Rubenstein impressed the predominantly Christian gathering with the facts of the concentration camps of the twentieth century and the vicious nature of the human sin that is sometimes subdued but never eliminated from life.³

When the session was over, a small group gathered around me to ask further questions. A young man introduced himself as Edward Fiske of the *New York Times*. He asked me to discuss some of my ideas with him at lunch. Fiske was theologically trained and, at the time, reported on religion for the *Times*. The next day, the *Times* carried a story with a four-column headline on my talk and Fiske's subsequent interview. I had irrevocably crossed a point of no return. Henceforth, my theological views, which received wide publicity would, at least for a time, be unacceptable to many of my fellow Jewish thinkers and rabbinic colleagues, as well as their congregants although that changed With the passing of time.

Shortly after the Atlanta conference, I also received a letter from Lawrence Grow, then an editor at Bobbs-Merrill, expressing interest in publishing a book on my theological views. I had been approached by several publishers in previous years about doing a book but I had not felt ready. When Grow wrote to me, I did feel ready to offer a serious statement of my views. Grow was already editing *Radical Theology and the Death of God* by Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton. *After Auschwitz* was published in late 1966, as was Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. It was a banner year for books on radical theology.

As a result of the Atlanta conference, I had not only achieved instantaneous recognition in both the media and theological circles, but I was also able to find the academic position that enabled me to work effectively for twenty-five years. Having come to FSU as

³ See Roger L. Shinn, "What About Sin?" in Shinn, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 6: *Man: The New Humanism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 157f.

professor of religion, I later became the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor and at FSU's commencement in June 1977, I was named the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of the Year, the university's highest faculty recognition. In 1995, at the age of 71, I retired from FSU to become president of the University of Bridgeport, a position I held for five years. Thereafter, I served as president emeritus, Distinguished Research Professor of Religion, and life member of the Board of Trustees.

At age 94, I remained active at University of Bridgeport. Thus, from 1970 to 2018, a period of forty-eight years, I served two academic institutions. This is in contrast with my early years as a congregational rabbi and subsequently as a Hillel rabbi and university chaplain. Both Betty and I came to understand that my place was in the university and not as a congregational rabbi or university chaplain, in spite of finding my work as a chaplain rewarding.

As a rabbi and also as a university chaplain, my position was dependent on charitable resources within the local Jewish community. As both a radical theologian and a moderate political conservative, my views were at odds with those of the Jewish mainstream. This was bound to become a source of tension both for me and for the people who were providing the resources that made my work possible. I must, however, stress that to this day I attend synagogue services every week. The problem was not theirs; it was mine. Happily, it was solved when I found full-time work as a professor in a secular university.

I believe that Altizer was responsible for the decision to invite me to respond to him at the Emory conference in 1965. I also believe that neither he nor I had any idea of the extent to which that one invitation would change my life or that of my family, but it did, and for that I shall forever be grateful!