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APOTHEOSIS OF THE NOTHING IN ALTIZER'S KENOTIC  
ATHEOLOGY

Even what we have left undone weaves the fabric of the entire future:  
even nothingness itself is a master weaver and a woman spinning  
webs.<sup>1</sup>

The theological ruminations of Thomas J. J. Altizer are saturated with the theme of nothingness.<sup>2</sup> In his inimitable style, Altizer repeatedly attempts to speak the unspeakable by demarcating the contours of the nothing as a central concern for philosophers and theologians.<sup>3</sup> As he remarked in the preface to *Godhead and the Nothing*, "Perhaps the most decisive way to awaken theology in our world is to center upon its deepest 'other,' one which can be understood as the Nothing itself. A Nothing which is surely the opposite of everything which we once knew as God, and a Nothing whose full advent is inseparable from a uniquely modern realization of the death of God."<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I attempt to situate Altizer's musings on this topic within the broader history of Christian and Buddhist apophaticism. The reliance on apophasis has emerged in recent times in the service of articulating a religion without religion in the parlance of some interpreters of Derrida.<sup>5</sup> From Altizer's perspective, the denial of the theological implied in these articulations of the atheological is the "purest illusion."<sup>6</sup> In his judgment, the quintessential theological paradox of atheology – anticipated in Spinoza, Hegel, and Nietzsche – involves an unthinking of God, "and not only an unthinking of every previous thinking about God, but a profound unthinking or reverse

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Summer 1882–Winter 1883/84).

<sup>2</sup> This study is an expansion and revision of the briefer analysis of Altizer's views in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), xxii–xxvii.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of repetition in the writings of Altizer, see Petra Carlsson, "A Deleuzian Analysis of Thomas Altizer's Style," *Literature and Theology* 23 (2009): 207–19.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2002), x.

<sup>5</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Clayton Crockett, "Post-Modernism and Its Secrets: Religion without Religion," *CrossCurrents* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 499–515; Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 59–82.

<sup>6</sup> Altizer, *The New Gospel*, 7.

thinking of the thinking of God itself. While this movement may well be paralleled in the negative theology of an apocalyptic mysticism, Godhead itself never there is actually unthought, or, insofar as it is unthought, this occurs in an iconoclastic movement shattering all images and ideas of God, so as to call forth or give witness to absolute Godhead itself. . . . This is the context in which we can most deeply know ours as a truly theological age, one that for the first time calls forth a truly and fully negative theology, and an absolutely negative theology, and one that is most clearly so in ultimately embodying an absolute abyss."<sup>7</sup>

Altizer's oxymoronic expression *Christian atheism* is predicated on a commitment to a theology of the death of God that is apocalyptic in nature, that is, a disclosure of the absolute nothingness, the nothing to be disclosed absolutely, a nihilism that makes possible the transfiguration of the unfathomable nothingness into an ultimate affirmation and an ultimate joy.<sup>8</sup> When groundlessness becomes truly comprehensive, the ultimate ground is educed in calling forth the name of God as the nameless. To know God as the absolute abyss is a knowing that is an unknowing, since what is known is that there is nothing to be known but the nothingness that can never be known except as unknown. But this unknowing precipitates the paradoxical discernment that informed Altizer's theological orientation: even when we are ensnared in the grip of the most intractable atheism, it is not possible to be liberated totally from God or to extricate oneself wholeheartedly from theological language.<sup>9</sup>

#### NAMING THE NAMELESSNESS AND THE ANNIHILATION OF SELF-ANNIHILATION

Altizer is quick to point out that the naming of the anonymous or nameless God is "manifestly not a mystical naming of God, for this naming precludes every possible mystical communion, or every possible truly mystical transfiguration." And yet, he concedes that what he is articulating "does not preclude something like a mystical union, a union with the depths of the abyss or of nothingness itself. While such a union is surely not a mystical union, it echoes the highest expressions of our mysticism in its call for a total transfiguration, and a transfiguration possible only by way of a full union with the depths of anonymity itself."<sup>10</sup> Despite his preliminary hesitancy, Altizer does avow that the union with the depths of nothingness – the nothing that is<sup>11</sup> – does echo the transfiguration that is the highest expression of mysticism.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 134–35. See *ibid.*, 73–74. For a more extended discussion of Spinoza as the first atheistic thinker to unthink God, see Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Satan and Apocalypse and Other Essays in Political Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 1–34.

<sup>8</sup> Altizer, *The New Gospel*, x.

<sup>9</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> The expression is derived from the concluding stanza of "The Snow Man" in Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 8: "For the listener, who listens in the snow, /

Altizer's initial reluctance to utilize the term *mystical* can be clarified if we consider his description of Meister Eckhart's sense of the breakthrough (*durchbruch*) by which the impoverished soul gives birth to and is thereby united with the God beyond God and assimilated in the being beyond being.

The Eckhartian "I" or *Istigkeit* is an "I" whom God must become, even as "I" must become God. . . . But this occurs only when the creature and the Creator are mutually annihilated, even if it is precisely by that kenotic annihilation that each most truly and most actually becomes itself. Therefore the creature is nothing in itself, and this nothingness or poverty of the creature is that ultimate state in which it is fully united with God. Accordingly, the nothingness of the creature is pure of all being (*puritas essendi*), even if this is a nothingness which is not less than being, but rather beyond being. The beyondness is realized in absolute poverty, a poverty of actual self-annihilation which realizes a birth of God in the soul. . . . That is precisely why the Creator and the creature are finally "nothing," for a divine nothingness or emptiness is the ultimate identity of reality itself, and an identity which becomes actual and present in the movement of self-abandonment or self-annihilation.<sup>12</sup>

The ground of Eckhart's mystical theology, according to Altizer, is the identification of divine humility by the thirteenth-century Franciscan Peter John Olivi as the "central nothing" divulged simultaneously as the Alpha and Omega of reality, that is, the law of creation out of nothing and the law of redemption out of the kenotic-emptying and suffering of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the nothingness of Eckhartian ecstasy,<sup>14</sup> the nothingness of Altizer's atheology does not allow for ontological beyondness. Lissa McCullough well expressed this fundamental point: "With the advent of a uniquely modern nihilism, 'the Nihil as Nihil and Nihil alone fully stands forth'<sup>15</sup> – a pure and absolute negativity that cannot for a moment be confused with the absolute nothingness that mystics such as Eckhart discovered in the primordial Godhead. This is a nothing that negates the Godhead of God in an absolute and final annihilation."<sup>16</sup> As Altizer himself put it, the theological rhetoric he embraces is alienated from the "purely mystical vision" inaugurated by

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And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." The stanza is cited by Lissa McCullough, "Twilight of an Axial God," in *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Peterson, and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, with an afterword by Thomas J. J. Altizer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 180. On the "nothing that is," see Sam Gillespie, *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou's Minimalist Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), 25–42.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 115–17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Many have written on this dimension of Eckhart's mystical thought. For a relatively recent analysis, see Alex Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 23–59.

<sup>15</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 153.

<sup>16</sup> McCullough, "Twilight of an Axial God," 179.

Eckhart, for it revolves “about a uniquely Western self-annihilation, a self-annihilation of a creature who is finally a pure nothingness, and is a pure nothingness by being identical with the divine nothingness, a divine nothingness which is nothing less than the Godhead itself.”<sup>17</sup> The pure nothingness is not identical with divine nothingness as it is the nothingness utterly bereft of nothing including the nothingness of divinity. The abyss of absolute kenosis—the annihilation of self-annihilation—is not a transcendental other but is rather the emptiness that is the innermost core of all that immanently exists. Significantly, Altizer elucidates his position by referring to the “Nothing or pure Emptiness” that is “at the very center of Buddhist language and meditation.”<sup>18</sup> I will return to Altizer’s engagement with Buddhism at a later juncture, but suffice it here to note that the absolute nothingness he sought to affirm is closer in spirit—at least according to his understanding—to the Mahāyāna Buddhist idea of the *dharmadhātu*, the realm of truth, wherein the voidness (*śūnyatā*) of the being of nonbeing is the suchness (*tathātā*) of the nonbeing of being.<sup>19</sup>

The modern subject who has experienced the depth of the abyss of nothingness “can only know an anonymous God, and therefore a totally nameless God. This naming of namelessness is nevertheless a genuine naming, a naming of an ultimate and final anonymity, and thus a naming of the anonymous God.”<sup>20</sup> If the primary calling of the theologian is to name God, as Altizer argued, then in our moment, this can only entail naming the nameless to irradiate the darkness.<sup>21</sup> David E. Klemm succinctly summarized this crucial point, “Such naming of God, for Altizer, requires unflinching honesty and courage, for the God who can actually be named by us in our time of advancing nihilism is only nameable as unnameable—a God who is absent, or nameable as a negative presence, a presence so negative that we

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Numerous scholars have written about the Buddhist idea of *śūnyatā*. For a philosophically nuanced analysis, see Garma C. C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hua Yen Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), 60–120. On the relevance of the doctrine of *śūnyatā* to the comparative study of Buddhist philosophy and Christian theology, see the brief comments in Masao Abe, “The Impact of Dialogue with Christianity on My Self-Understanding as a Buddhist,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 9 (1989): 64–66, and the extended discussion in his “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 3–65. Abe was one of Altizer’s interlocutors. See Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Buddha and God: Nishida’s Contributions to a New Apocalyptic Theology,” in *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, ed. Bret W. Davis, Brian Schroeder, and Jason M. Wirth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 150: “I shall always be grateful for the rich dialogues that I had with Nishitani and Abe Masao, who seemed to be able to enter my thinking spontaneously, and who ever prodded me to prosecute it more radically—a radicalness surely realized in the Kyoto School, and embodied there as it nowhere is in any body of Christian theologians.” See note 66, below.

<sup>20</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir*, with a foreword by Mark C. Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 177.

can speak of the 'apocalypse of God' as the advent of absolute nothingness and darkness."<sup>22</sup>

Absolute negation passes into absolute affirmation, and thus Nietzsche's deification of nothingness<sup>23</sup> in the infamous proclamation about the death of God can be transformed into the hope for resurrection, and the silence of God is broken by a new attempt to speak the divine name.<sup>24</sup> The apocalyptic ending is simultaneously an apocalyptic beginning, "a beginning which is an absolute beginning, and the absolute beginning of absolute apocalypse itself."<sup>25</sup> Already in "America and the Future of Theology," Altizer argued that the Christian faith that accepts the death of God is "called upon to negate all *religious* meaning, but it is the very radical nature of this negative movement which can prepare the way for the deepest epiphany of faith."<sup>26</sup> Reiterating the point in "Theology and the Death of God," Altizer wrote:

Dialectically, the opposites coincide, radical negation has become radical affirmation; but if the negative movement is a denial of God, then the positive movement must finally be an affirmation of God, of the God beyond the Christian God, beyond the God of the historic Church, beyond all which Christendom has known as God. A truly dialectical image of God (or of the Kingdom of God) will appear only after the most radical negation, just as a genuinely eschatological form of faith can now be reborn only upon the grave of the God who is the symbol of the transcendence of Being. . . . The transcendence of Being has been transformed into the radical immanence of Eternal Recurrence: to exist in our time is to exist in a chaos freed of every semblance of cosmological meaning or order. . . . Therefore the dissolution of the "being" of the world has made possible the renewal of the stance of eschatological faith; for an ultimate and final No-saying to the world can dialectically pass into the Yes-saying of eschatological faith.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David E. Klemm, "Foreword," in Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. with an introduction by Lissa McCullough (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), ix.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> For a critical summary and scrutiny of Altizer's death of God theology, see Mark C. Taylor, "Betraying Altizer," 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), 11-28; *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 199-205; "Foreword: The Last Theologian," in Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, xi-xviii. See also Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 65-76; *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), 75-77.

<sup>25</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 176-77.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, "America and the Future of Theology," in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 13 (italics in original).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," in Altizer and Hamilton, *Radical Theology*, 100-103.

The dialectical proclivity to which Altizer was drawn—and I see no evidence that he wavered from this position through the long durée of his career<sup>28</sup>—induces the “scandal” of the *coincidentia oppositorum* such that the Yes can become a No and the No, a Yes, not by way of conflation but by juxtaposition;<sup>29</sup> that is, the disappearance of the possibility of difference in the nonidentity of the identity of opposites is such that opposites are the same in virtue of their opposition.<sup>30</sup>

Altizer's thought pushes at the limits of thinking in an effort to articulate an apocalyptic understanding of the “uniquely modern nihilism” in which the nihil finally stands forth as the nihil of an immanence that affords no resort to transcendence.<sup>31</sup> Only through this absolute self-sacrifice and absolute self-negation “does the purely negative pole or potency of the Godhead become fully actual and real, and actual and real in ultimate disjunction from its own polar contrary. Only now do the negative and the positive poles of the Godhead become actual as true opposites, and opposites in ultimate opposition to each other. Thus, as wholly opposed to what the mystic knows as the absolute nothingness of primordial Godhead, this pure and absolute negativity is an absolutely alien negativity or an absolutely alien absolute nothingness.”<sup>32</sup> The transfiguring power of the absolute negativity “impels a

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<sup>28</sup> Here it is pertinent to recall Altizer's remark in the preface to *The New Gospel*, x: “Almost forty years have elapsed since the original writing of *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, and my theology has evolved considerably since that time. Nevertheless, I think that there is a genuine continuity between my earlier and my later work, and above all so in its centering upon a uniquely Christian atheism.”

<sup>29</sup> Altizer, “Theology and the Death of God,” 109. With respect to the topic of the coincidence of opposites and the dialectic of the sacred and profane, Altizer's thinking betrays the influence of the historian of religions Mircea Eliade. See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 81–104.

<sup>30</sup> Compare the description of Mozart in Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 66, as one who “so immediately and totally embodies a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a new and apocalyptic *coincidentia oppositorum* in which the opposites as opposites disappear. . . . If it is true that there is a true *coincidentia* of opposites in Mozart, then we must realize that such *coincidentia* is impossible apart from the actual and immediate presence of real opposites, a presence which we justifiably recognize as apocalyptic. True, when full *coincidentia* occurs the opposites disappear, but this is at least as true of the parabolic language of Jesus as it is of the purest music of Mozart.”

<sup>31</sup> The point is driven home by the disparity between Altizer and Levinas suggested by D. G. Leahy, “The Diachrony of the Infinite in Altizer and Levinas: Vanishing without a Trace and the Trace without Vanishing,” in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 115: “In Altizer the Infinite vanishes without a trace when life is inverted to nothing prior to thought, the *non sum* prior to the *cogito*, when life is inverted to being in the beginning thinking nothing: the absolute immanence of life: life inverted, in effect, to being the mind of God for which Nothing is thinkable. But, in Levinas, the Infinite, without vanishing, without ever having been present, without having been, for the pure prephenomenal sensibility which grounds essence, an essence, nevertheless, is the trace: the trace in the self of what immemorally overflows the self: the Other in the Same, the uncontainable contained” (italics in original). See my own discussion of transcendence and immanence in Levinas in Wolfson, *Giving*, 106–13, 134, 135–41, 148–52.

<sup>32</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 153.

radical movement away from that very actuality which is a necessary consequence of the absolute sacrifice of the Godhead, or that actuality which in full modernity realizes itself as an absolute immanence . . . that is the necessary consequence of the pure reversal of an absolute transcendence. . . . The very advent of immanence is inseparable from the realization of the full and actual emptiness of absolute transcendence, an emptiness that is a truly alien emptiness, and one which is realized as the Nihil itself."<sup>33</sup> Inasmuch as the dialectical form of faith can never dissociate affirmation and negation—the homologizing of opposites illustrated most dramatically in Altizer's admission that his "deepest theological goal" was to discover the coincidence of Satan and Christ,<sup>34</sup> a quest, no doubt, imbued with a Blakean spirit<sup>35</sup>—the demise of transcendence is as much a source of suffering as it is a source of salvation; the crucifixion is itself the resurrection and not merely its precondition. Altizer thus speaks of the "ultimate breakthrough" based on understanding that the "absolute nothingness" of the Godhead occasions an "absolute transfiguration of itself," but the latter "is only actually possible by way of a transfiguration of absolutely opposite poles or polarities, only when these opposites are fully and actually real could this transfiguration occur. These are the full opposites which pass into each other in an absolute transfiguration, and all deep and genuine dialectical thinking and vision incorporates such a transfiguration."<sup>36</sup>

To the extent that the encounter with the darkness that emerges from the disbanding of transcendence—the nihilism that Altizer identifies with apocalypticism<sup>37</sup>—dialectically yields the resurgence of light, there is the peril of its reification as a mental idol confabulated in the imagination, even if, and perhaps especially so, what is idolized is the darkness itself, personified as Satan. The following depiction of Blake offered by Altizer could easily be applied to himself: "Blake was the first Christian atheist, and his atheism was born out of a hatred of repression and a joyous response to a new and universal epiphany of Jesus. But he was no atheist in the ordinary sense; he knew that the Christian God is every bit as real as the reality of repression, that the sovereignty and transcendence of God is created by the Fall, and that this wholly other God has died to make possible the advent of the Apocalypse."<sup>38</sup> Rather than fleeing from death—a characteristic that Altizer

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 154. On Altizer's death of God and the sacrificial exchange, see Carl Raschke, *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 96–103.

<sup>34</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 4–5. See *ibid.*, 8–9, 35–40, 180. For a fuller discussion of Christ and Satan, see Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 161–73, and the analysis in Alphonso Lingis, "Kenosis," in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 207–10.

<sup>35</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 59–60, 67–68; *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 169–70; *The Contemporary Jesus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 128–37; *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2000), 5–6, 72–74, 122–24; *Godhead and the Nothing*, 71–72. See the review of *The New Apocalypse* in Thomas Merton, "Blake and the New Theology," *The Sewanee Review* 76 (1968): 673–82; and compare Linda Freedman, "Tom Altizer and William Blake: The Apocalypse of Belief," *Literature and Theology* 25 (2011): 20–31.

<sup>36</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> The point is affirmed in many passages. See, for instance, Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 173.

<sup>38</sup> Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*, 122.

associates with Gnosticism<sup>39</sup> – the task of radical theology is to confront the unspeakability of death, the abyss that does not evoke “a proclamation of the name of Christ” but “the absence of the nameability of Christ . . . indeed, the absence of all nameability whatsoever, an absence that is a necessary and inevitable absence for a full and total apocalyptic enactment.”<sup>40</sup> Altizer’s theological voyage and his unique interpretation of the incarnational trope of the kenosis of God that is the self-negation of heavenly transcendence<sup>41</sup> – the naming that is concomitantly an unnamings, the silence that reverberates in the totally present absence of the totally absent presence of speech<sup>42</sup> – has steered him to the place where he can brazenly assert that “the most actual name of God for us is truly the name of Satan. Each of us knows and speaks

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<sup>39</sup> Compare Altizer, “Theology and the Death of God,” 100–101: “Such a radically modern *coincidentia oppositorum* would parallel the highest expressions of mysticism (e.g., the Madhyamika and Zen schools of Mahayana Buddhism) while at the same time offering a non-Gnostic form of faith. Non-Gnostic because a truly modern dialectical form of faith would meet the actual historical destiny of contemporary man while yet transforming his unique *Existenz* into the purity of eschatological faith. In Nietzsche, we have witnessed the deepest willing of the death of God pass into the deepest affirmation of Eternal Recurrence. Dialectically, the opposites coincide, radical negation has become radical affirmation; but of the negative movement is a denial of God, then the positive movement must finally be an affirmation of God, of the God beyond the Christian God, beyond the God of the historic Church, beyond all which Christendom has known as God.” For criticism of Altizer’s alleged anti-Gnostic apocalyptic genealogy, see O’Regan, *Gnostic Return*, 37–38, 65–71, 75. A different perspective on Hegel, which acknowledges the influence of Gnosticism on his ontotheology and even characterizes the latter as a form of Gnostic apocalypse, is offered by Cyril O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, with a foreword by Louis Dupré (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 15–16, 19–20, 24, 307–10.

<sup>40</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 182.

<sup>41</sup> Altizer, *The New Gospel*, 45; see also the extended discussion of the self-annihilation of God, 97–122.

<sup>42</sup> The identity of silence and speech is explored at length in Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). The author’s thesis is summarized on 83: “Silence comes to a final end when its otherness as silence is fully and finally spoken. Then the otherness of silence, that otherness which is the otherness of speech, becomes unspeakable. Yet it becomes unspeakable only by being spoken. . . . Silence ends when it is spoken, and it actually ends only inasmuch as it is spoken, only insofar as it embodies and enacts itself. . . . This occurs when silence itself becomes its own other, when it fully enacts itself as speech.” And *ibid.*, 88–89: “Now speech can speak only when identity is absent, only when it is not itself. And identity is not itself when it is present only on its absence, when its speech can embody only the absence of itself. That absence now lies at the center of speech itself, as the silence of speech is now a self-embodiment of the self-emptying of speech. Such silence speaks, and it speaks insofar as presence is actually absent, or inasmuch as absence is actually present. . . . That silence which is the self-identity of speech is the fullness of speech itself. But speech can be fully realized in silence only when silence is spoken everywhere, and actually spoken everywhere, a speaking in which silence as silence wholly disappears. And it disappears in being spoken, it comes to an end in its embodiment, an embodiment in which the emptiness of silence becomes actually and immediately present.” See Altizer, *Total Presence*, 97, and David Jasper, “In the Wasteland: Apocalypse, Theology, and the Poets,” in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 185–95, esp. 191–92.

that name, and we speak it in truly or actually naming our darkness."<sup>43</sup> Needless to say, by the paradoxical logic that pertains to the absolute transfiguration of the absolute apocalypse, in naming the darkness, one names the light, since darkness is naught but the shadow of a more intense illumination of light.<sup>44</sup>

*NOTHINGNESS OF THE GODHEAD AND BUDDHIST ŚŪNYATĀ*

As I noted above, Altizer clarifies his atheological theology by appeal to the themes of absolute nothingness and the self-emptying emptiness elicited from Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>45</sup> He is to be given credit for embarking on this path out of the conviction that heeding the call of the absolute nothingness is the "critical point at which Eastern and Western thinking coincide."<sup>46</sup> The earnestness of this undertaking notwithstanding, there is a critical difference

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<sup>43</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 180. Perhaps one of the most arresting implications of Altizer's apocalyptic nihilism is the application of his perspective on the nature of evil to explain major historical calamities such as the Holocaust, a topic that is beyond the concerns of this study. See Eugene B. Borowitz, "God-Is-Dead Theology," *Judaism* 15 (1966): 87-88; Thomas J. J. Altizer, "God as Holy Nothingness," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Betty Rogers Rubenstein (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 347-56, and "The Holocaust and the Theology of the Death of God," in *The Death of God Movement and the Holocaust: Radical Theology Encounters the Shoah*, ed. Stephen J. Haynes and John K. Roth (Westport: Greenwood, 1999), 17-23; Richard L. Rubenstein, "Thomas Altizer's Apocalypse," in *The Theology of Thomas Altizer: Critique and Response*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 125-37, and "Radical Theology and the Holocaust," in *The Death of God Movement*, 43-53; Martin Kavka, "Can Jews Be Radical Theologians?" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 95 (2012): 49-53; Richard L. Rubenstein, "On the Limits of Contemporary Jewish Theology: Response to Martin Kavka," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 95 (2012): 85-92. See also David M. Moss III, "Nietzsche's Echo—A Dialogue with Thomas Altizer," *Journal of Religion and Health* (2010): 124. In response to the comment of Moss that Satan is the architect of anti-Semitism, Hitler was the greatest manifestation of the demonic in the twentieth century, and that these beliefs can be found in the Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazi party, and extreme right-wing Christian groups, Altizer commented that the greater danger lies "in the Church and the academic world at large. It is the rebellion against, hatred of, or negation of the original source. It is the deep rebellion against any source, any origin, any history, any tradition. There seems to be a drive in both which wants to obliterate that source, to dissolve it, to make it into nothingness—which the academic world is doing right now. I think the Church is the mirror image of the academic world because I believe that the Church has done an incredible job of obliterating its origins, its roots, its traditions and its history."

<sup>44</sup> With respect to understanding the shadow as the manifestation of a hidden illumination rather than as the absence of light, there is an affinity between Altizer and Heidegger. Regarding the shadow in the thought of the latter, see Mark C. Taylor, *Tears* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 107; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiesis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 169, 321, 334 n. 205.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 113-51, esp. 137-45; "Emptiness and God," in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, ed. Taitetsu Unno (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 70-81; *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 93-106.

<sup>46</sup> Altizer, "Buddha and God," 180.

in the two systems of thought that cannot be ignored. According to the former, no matter how radical or postmodern, the yearning to name the nothingness as God bespeaks the fact that the theologian remains committed to a belief in presence, even if that presence is experienced as absence, whereas according to the latter, there is no such belief, for there is neither a presence that is absent nor an absence that is present.<sup>47</sup> Altizer himself duly notes that the volitional nature of the Godhead of the Christian God, the pure actuality whose center is named as I AM, the self-embodiment of otherness, is antithetical to the idea of emptiness and the dissolution of difference in Buddhism.<sup>48</sup> As he writes in *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, "Ultimately, Buddhism calls upon its disciples to detach themselves from Being itself. This detachment is the highest form of Buddhist compassion. . . . Buddhism apprehends Being—or reality—as the Nothing and therein is able to evolve the ultimate response of compassion."<sup>49</sup> Along similar lines, absolute compassion in Christianity and Buddhism are distinguished in the following passage from *The Contemporary Jesus*:

But Christianity knows that reality as the depths of the Godhead, a Godhead wholly absent in Buddhism, and far more deeply absent in Buddhism than in any other religious way or tradition. Perhaps nothing is so distinctive about Buddhism than is this absence, and an absence that is not simply an absence or an eclipse of God, but far rather an absence precluding the very possibility of the presence of God, and precluding it in its own deepest power and depths. Yet Buddhism is surely not atheistic, and not atheistic because here there is no negation of God, nor even the possibility of the negation of God, for ultimately in Buddhism there is no negation whatsoever. . . . While the Christian might be baffled or offended at the absence of God in Buddhist thinking, an absence fully realized in the deepest and purest expressions of Buddhist thinking, such an absence of even a trace of pure transcendence is surely inseparable from the very purity of Buddhist thinking, which is wholly closed to the very possibility of apprehending an essential and intrinsic "other," and therefore closed to the possibility of being open to the essential and final transcendence of God.<sup>50</sup>

Altizer frequently demonstrates that he is acutely aware of the fact that the Western concept of a theistic God cannot be readily translated into a Buddhist terminological register, which assumes that at "the deepest ground of craving is the belief in the reality not only of selfhood but also of existence, the world, deity, and even Nirvana itself. All things whatsoever become unreal in the highest Mahayana vision. And this is true of the Buddhist life itself."<sup>51</sup> There would appear to be an unbridgeable chiasm separating the Western and Eastern spiritual vectors, as we see, for example, from this observation: "Now,

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<sup>47</sup> The distinction I have made corresponds to the critical examination in Mark C. Taylor, "Altizer's Originality: A Review Essay," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1984): 569–84.

<sup>48</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 101–102.

<sup>49</sup> Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism*, 150.

<sup>50</sup> Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, 164–65.

<sup>51</sup> Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism*, 150.

and for the first time in the West, an absolute Nothing is fully realized in thinking and in the imagination, and unlike every Eastern vision of an absolute nothingness, this is a Nihil which is actually and historically real, manifest and real not only in the depths of interiority but in the depths of history itself, depths calling forth a truly new Godhead, and a Godhead for the first time manifest as absolute evil.<sup>52</sup> Ostensibly, in line with Buddhism, Altizer acknowledges that nothingness is an ontological illusion, but diverging from Buddhism he advocates that the nothingness of evil is ontically real and not simply the privation of good.<sup>53</sup>

In spite of being mindful of the crucial disparity, Altizer is committed to the possibility that precisely because Buddhism lacks a theistic conception, the comparative approach can open a "universal ground" that will reinvigorate Christian theology with a deeper understanding of the kenotic dimensions of the crucifixion.<sup>54</sup> Thus, he writes in *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy*, "While an apocalyptic nothingness may well be the opposite of a Buddhist nothingness, and is so if only because of the actuality of its occurrence, that occurrence does release a pure and total nothingness, and a nothingness which apocalypticism knows as the end of the world."<sup>55</sup> As he put it in his theological memoir, "a Buddhist horizon makes possible this apocalyptic understanding, and above all so a Buddhist understanding of an absolute nothingness or an absolute void, apart from which apocalypse is a meaningless surd."<sup>56</sup> Since from the Buddhist vantage point all difference is obliterated in *śūnyatā*, the chasm separating Buddhism and Christianity can be appreciably narrowed. Elaborating this point, Altizer writes:

Nothing is or could be more distant from Christianity than is Buddhism, and if Buddhism is the most universal way that has evolved in the Orient, it is also the purest and most total way to an absolute reversal of history, an absolute reversal which it can know and realize as an absolute emptiness, and an absolute emptiness that is infinitely and absolutely distant from a Christian celebration of God, or even from a Christian celebration of the crucifixion and resurrection of God. Yet this absolutely pure reversal of history is not an actual reversal at all, but rather a profound nonrealization or ultimate de-actualization of pure actuality itself. Absolute emptiness or sunyata is the primary Mahayana Buddhist symbol of nirvana, and if this is the purest image in the history of religions, it is finally a nonimage, and a nonimage evoking a pure and total silence, an absolutely primordial silence in which no opposition or differentiation is possible. Now, nirvana is identical with samsara, which is to say that it is identical with its own apparent opposite, and that is a *coincidentia oppositorum* which is the purest possible

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<sup>52</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 70. See also *The New Apocalypse*, 122–23; *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 97.

<sup>53</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 67–68.

<sup>54</sup> Altizer, "Emptiness and God," 70–71. See also Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God," in *The Emptying God*, 69–78.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 149.

<sup>56</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 57.

*coincidentia oppositorum*, for it is, indeed, a *coincidentia* which is not a coincidence or identity as such, but rather the absolute disappearance of the very possibility of either difference or opposition. . . . Nothing is or could be further from the horizon of Buddhism than Christianity, and yet from the perspective of Buddhism that very distance is illusory and unreal, and not simply because Buddhism dissolves otherness, since that dissolution is not a dissolution of anything, for in Buddhism there is nothing that is or could be dissolved. . . . If Buddhism knows a hearing of pure silence, it surely can hear Christ as that silence, and hence as a silence that is not different from anything else.<sup>57</sup>

It goes without saying that Altizer's reflections on Buddhism do not arise from a scholar with the philological and textual aptitude to scrutinize the primary sources.<sup>58</sup> Our analysis, accordingly, will not question the technical or linguistic accuracy of his generalizations. What is critical for our purposes is that since he includes speculation on emptiness in Buddhism in his purview to illumine the abysmal nothingness implied by his Christian atheism, it is incumbent on us to evaluate the philosophical merit of his comparative methodology. Insofar as the Mahāyāna nondualism promulgates a coincidence of opposites that necessitates the erasure of opposition — a *coincidentia oppositorum* that provokes the ending of any possible difference or otherness at the center of consciousness<sup>59</sup> — it follows that the rift dividing Buddhism and Christianity is overcome to the point that, just as in Hinduism Christ can be identified as an avatar of Vishnu, so in Buddhism Christ can assume the form of the Buddha.<sup>60</sup> The apposition of Buddhism and Christianity — epitomized in Altizer's locution the *Buddhist Jesus*<sup>61</sup> — is predicated on the identity of opposites wherein there are no opposites to be identified. On this account, the Buddhist emptiness is both "absolutely other than the pure actuality of the Christian God" and "not an otherness at all, but is rather an arising that is not arising, or a pure origination which is not origination at all."<sup>62</sup> Altizer's turn to the comparative is anchored in a paradoxical logic that claims the middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle:

Buddhism today is offering Christianity the apparent possibility of a return to . . . a beginning which cannot be an actual beginning, but far rather a beginning which is no beginning, or a beginning which is unbirth, and the unbirth of the Christ who is all in all in everything and everyone. Buddhism, too, has embodied a kenotic pleroma, but a pleroma which is a full and total pleroma precisely in its emptiness, and in its absolute emptiness, an emptiness which is not "other" than

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<sup>57</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 93–95. On the identification of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* specifically in the thought of Nāgārjuna, see Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism*, 139–40.

<sup>58</sup> For a critical discussion of the role of Buddhism in Altizer's radical theology, see Janet Gyatso, "Compassion at the Millennium: A Buddhist Salvo for the Ethics of the Apocalypse," in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 147–67.

<sup>59</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 99.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 94–95.

<sup>61</sup> Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, 161–83.

<sup>62</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 94.

anything else, for this is an emptiness which is the emptiness of fullness or totality itself. Buddhism knows and realizes that totality as the emptiness of the Buddha . . . an emptiness foreclosing the very possibility of distance, or of otherness, or of isolation.<sup>63</sup>

While I accept that the dialectic affirmed by Altizer intimates that the absolute negation of the absolute transcendence results in the transformation of the latter into absolute immanence—and thus the theological truth he wishes to retrieve is perforce an atheistic denial of the wholly other God<sup>64</sup>—I would counter that the transformation impedes the prospect of the absolute immanence dissolving the absolute transcendence absolutely, since the dictate of the *coincidentia oppositorum* is such that opposites must be in ultimate opposition to each other and hence everything always contains its own other. In his appropriation and recasting of the Buddhist teaching, Altizer was influenced in no small measure by the Japanese philosophers of the Kyoto School, especially Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji:

Certainly I was profoundly affected by these Buddhist thinkers. Here is pure theology, and a pure theology that is a universal theology, even employing the death of God in the Crucifixion as a way to a uniquely Buddhist Emptiness, and this was the very point at which the deepest dialogue occurred between my Buddhist friends and myself. Yes, I have attempted to evolve a Buddhist Christian theology, but this was previously accomplished by Nishida and the Kyoto School, and there are ways in which my theology is a reflection of theirs, just as it is also a reflection, even if a pale one, of our deepest Western visions of an absolute nothingness. Nihilism itself realizes a truly new meaning here, and even a truly holy meaning, and just as an apophatic mysticism can know Godhead itself as an absolute nothingness, and therefore know an absolute nothingness as an absolutely holy nothingness, our deepest modern visionaries have called forth an absolute nothingness which is a holy nothingness, and holy precisely as that nothingness itself.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, *After God*, 200–201: “In Altizer’s dialectical vision, ‘true’ theology is inescapably atheistic. God, however, does not simply disappear; rather, a particular notion of God—more specifically, neoorthodoxy’s wholly other God—dies in an act of self-emptying that issues in a realized eschatology that totally transforms the present.”

<sup>65</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 58. Compare Altizer, “Buddha and God,” 179–89. In the second paragraph of that study, Altizer divulges his intellectual debt: “Speaking as a Christian theologian whose work is grounded in an absolute nothingness, I acknowledge that Nishida and the Kyoto School have been a fundamental ground of my work, but this has entailed an enormous struggle to realize a uniquely Christian absolute nothingness, and uniquely Christian if only because of its apocalyptic actuality. While Nishida and the Kyoto School have been most challenging to me in their correlation of Buddha and God, and of a uniquely Buddhist Buddha and a uniquely Christian Christ, this occurs through a deeply kenotic or self-emptying thinking—one which has no parallel in the history of Christian theology, although it is the center of a uniquely Hegelian thinking. This is the thinking which has been my primary philosophical ground, so that pale as my thinking is in the perspective of Nishida and the Kyoto School, I think that it is

Following the lead of Nishida and Nishitani, Altizer surmises that the transcendence of God is apprehended as the constitutive negativity of an absolute nothingness—rendered symbolically as the death of God—that is the absolute presence and absolute absence at once; the incarnation of the kenotic Christ, therefore, is a self-negation of this original self-negation.<sup>66</sup> The theological challenge of the contemporary power of nihilism in confronting absolute nothingness allocates a timely relevance to the Kyoto School.<sup>67</sup> The

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nevertheless the fullest Christian counterpart to their thinking” (179–80). Compare Steve Odin, “‘Kenōsis’ as a Foundation for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: The Kenotic Buddhology of Nishida and Nishitani of the Kyoto School in relation to the Kenotic Christology of Thomas J. J. Altizer,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 20 (1987): 34–61. For more technical analyses of the concepts of nothingness and emptiness in the Kyoto School, see Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. with an introduction by Jan Van Bragt, foreword by Winston L. King (Berkeley: University of Californian Press, 1982), and *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig, introduction by D. S. Clarke, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 49–55, 166–67, 181–82, 205–11, 219–21; Robert E. Carter, *The Nothingness beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 81–99; James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013), and *Much Ado About Nothingness: Essays on Nishida and Tanabe* (Nagoya: Chisokudō, 2016); Makoto Ozaki, “Tanabe’s Dialectic of Species as Absolute Nothingness,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (New York: Routledge, 2014), 284–99; Yasuo Deguchi, “Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness,” 300–25. For a detailed study of Nishida’s notion of true nothing as the place (*basho*) that encompasses the oppositions between subject and object, being and nonbeing, affirmation and negation, see John W. M. Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, 166.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Abe’s Buddhist Realization of God,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 221–22: “Our greatest modern Western thinkers from Spinoza through Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Whitehead have continually posed the problem as to whether pure thinking is possible apart from the primal presence and realization of God, and this problem is magnified all the more if Eastern thinkers, in absorbing Western thinking, inevitable thereby absorb the category, if not the name of God. Masao Abe would appear to be such a thinker, and perhaps most so in his very understanding of Buddhism, for, if that understanding here occurs in the perspective of Western thinking, it thereby occurs under the shadow of God. Abe knows full well that the deepest manifest difference between Buddhism and Christianity occurs within the arena of time and history, but, in attempting to give witness to a Buddhist understanding of time within that context, he would appear to be giving indirect witness to a specifically and uniquely Western apprehension of God. . . . Although a nonlinguist, I have long been persuaded by arguments that the Western name and category of God cannot possibly be translated into an Eastern language, and this would appear to be above all true of Buddhism. This is certainly a primal reason why Buddhism has exercised such enticing power in the modern Western world, not least so among theologians, who, while acknowledging the power of Nietzsche’s insight that we cannot escape God insofar as we cannot escape grammar, have hoped that this is true only of a Western grammar. Is it possible that, in the cosmopolitan and post-Western world of the twentieth century, it is nevertheless true that even Buddhism must speak of God when speaking in a Western language? Abe bears witness to such a possibility, and perhaps this is true

nihilism cannot be understood without understanding absolute nothingness, “even if a truly nihilistic nothingness is the very opposite of a Buddhist nothingness. Now if Satan is that symbolic figure who most embodies a nihilistic nothingness, it is fascinating that Nishida can affirm that the true absolute must negate itself to the extent of ‘being Satan,’ here employing the Mahāyāna concept of expedient means (Sk. *upāya*), a means whereby the absolute mediates itself into the depths of illusion and evil. Only thereby is a genuine redemption possible for us, and this occurs only by way of an absolute self-negation of the absolute itself, a self-negation that Nishida can name as both God and Buddha.”<sup>68</sup>

The move to construct what Altizer called a “pure theology,” based on the hybrid of Buddhism and Christianity, is culturally significant but it has the potential to efface the deeper contribution of the Buddhist doctrine of nothingness as an anontology<sup>69</sup> that transcends the binaries of transcendence and immanence, being and nonbeing, emptiness and fullness. That Altizer himself grasped this fundamental point is evident from his depiction of Buddhist enlightenment as the awareness of “an absence which is the is-notness of isness, or the pure nothingness of pure isness, a *coincidentia oppositorum* in which no opposites are actually present, for here there is no distance or distinction between is and is not. If that is a pure emptiness which is a pure fullness, it is full precisely by being empty, and hence there can be no actualization of emptiness, and no act which enacts anything whatsoever.”<sup>70</sup> Or, as he put it elsewhere, “Buddhism can only know a primordial origin, an origin which is the very opposite of an actual origin, and thus an origin which voids the very possibility of an actual origin. That is a voiding which is the voiding of the very possibility of an actual nothingness.”<sup>71</sup> The unveiling of the veil of illusion initiated by the Buddha comprehends the dissolution of illusion itself;<sup>72</sup> that is, if there is no reality, there is no illusion. Epistemologically, one is emancipated from illusion when one detects the illusory nature of being emancipated from illusion. Redemption, paraphrasing Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, consists of being redeemed from redeemers.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to the double negation of the

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of the Kyoto School as a whole, who in absorbing Western philosophy have perhaps therein absorbed a uniquely Western identity of God.”

<sup>68</sup> Altizer, “Buddha and God,” 180–81.

<sup>69</sup> The term anontology connotes the place of absolute nothing – the chiasmatic *chōra* – that encompasses both the ontological (being) and the meontological (nonbeing). See John W. M. Krummel, “Anontology and the Issue of Being and Nothing in Kitarō Nishida,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, 263–83, and *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology*, 71, 74, 94, 110, 200, 206–207, 247 n. 114, 261 n. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 97.

<sup>71</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 152.

<sup>72</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 591.

<sup>73</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Adrian del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71: “The spirit of these redeemers consisted of gaps; but into every gap they plugged a delusion, their stopgap, whom they named God. . . . There have been greater ones, to be sure, and higher born than those whom the people call redeemers, these sweeping howling winds! And you must be redeemed even from those greater than all redeemers, my brothers, to find your way to freedom!” Compare Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra (*Summer 1882–Winter 1883/84*), trans. with an afterword by Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 371: “The life spoke to me without language: the hour has come for you to preach redemption from redeemers.” See *ibid.*, 396: “I redeemed them from their redeemers.” The position attributed by Nietzsche to his imaginary prophet resonates with view attributed to Spinoza that “freedom is fundamentally the emergence from the illusion of freedom.” See Moria Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 51. For a different perspective, see Amanda Parris, “The Logic of Imagination: A Spinozan Critique of Imaginative Freedom,” PhD dissertation, DePaul University, 2018, 184–206. I note, finally, that the view expressed by Nietzsche resonates with the Buddhist teaching that the awakening of mind brings about the liberation from the very notion of liberation. On the insubstantiality of the soteriological goal of the Mahāyāna path, see Jan Westerhoff, *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 102–104: “The illusionism propounded by the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* is comprehensive. We are here not faced with a view of the world that relegates our everyday surroundings to the status of mere appearance in order to underline the truly real status of some religiously transcendent world. Rather, the entire round of existence including all being, all *dharma*s, various degrees of realized practitioners, the Buddha, and even nirvāṇa are considered illusory in nature. Even the process of leading beings to liberation is compared to a magician dissolving a previously created illusion. Just as we would not want to say that the magician made an elephant vanish, because there was no elephant present in the first place, in the same way, the Perfection of Wisdom texts argue, there are no beings that are led to liberation. . . . Instead of arguing that the salvific efficacy of specific meditative states and experiences shows that they correspond to the way the world works at the most fundamental level, their very efficacy is sufficient to argue why they, rather than other non-standard phenomenological states, should be cultivated, independent of any claims to ultimate truth. We should therefore be aware that the ‘ontologization’ of meditative phenomenology happens in Buddhist thought, and that it can explain a great deal about the development of Indian Buddhist philosophy, but that Buddhist philosophers themselves (certainly the Mādhyamikas amongst them) finally move beyond it when spelling out the theory of the emptiness of emptiness. . . . If there is no distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa at the ultimate level, there is nothing the bodhisattva needs to escape from in order to obtain liberation.” For a concise articulation of this insight in the Dzogchen tradition of the Great Perfection in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, see *A Lullaby to Awaken the Heart: The Aspiration Prayer of Samantabhadra and Its Tibetan Commentaries*, trans. and introduced by Karl Brunnhölzl (Sommerville: Wisdom, 2018), 3–4: “The lineage of the awakened mind of the victors begins with Samantabhadra, who is nothing other than the instantaneous self-recognition and complete awakening of primordial awareness within the primordial expanse of the *dharmadhātu*, free from any notion of bondage and liberation. The awakened mind of Samantabhadra has never strayed from the inseparable kāyas and wisdoms of perfect buddhahood. Within this dimension of the dharmakāya of inner luminosity, the realm called the Vajra Heart of Luminosity, the three aspects of omniscient wisdom—essence, nature, and compassionate responsiveness—are the naturally present three kāyas of the original, nondual expanse.” For an attempt to interpret the messianic teaching of the seventh master in the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty in this vein, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). My thesis is recapitulated in the concluding sentences on 300: “The ultimate legacy of the seventh Rebbe’s messianic aspiration, the encrypted message he wished to bequeath to future generations, lies in proffering an understanding of salvation as the expanded consciousness of and reabsorption in the inestimable essence, whose essence it is to resist essentialization, the moment of eternity for which we await in its fully temporalized sense, the advent of the absolute (non)event. True liberation, on this score, would consist of being

dialectical negativity espoused by Hegel,<sup>74</sup> and appropriated by Altizer, if one follows the Buddhist path of annihilation, the negation is itself negated in the negation of negation – the void voided in the voiding that is the void – and thus there is no reason to propound a negative that is positive to negate the negation. The emptiness of Buddhism is so consummate that it is empty of its own emptiness,<sup>75</sup> the nothingness so replete that it is deprived of nothing but nothingness. *Śūnyatā* denotes neither a being that is nonbeing nor a nonbeing that is being, an emptiness that is neither thus nor otherwise, neither true nor false, neither one nor many.<sup>76</sup>

APOCALYPTIC DISENACTMENT AND THE TRULY NOTHING

I am in agreement with Mark C. Taylor's contention that the theology of Altizer is haunted by the impossibility of theology; the move beyond darkness should indicate that there is no beyond to which to move, no affirmation that succeeds the negation, no Resurrection consequent to the Crucifixion.<sup>77</sup> The only way to be faithful to Altizer's apocalyptic nihilism,

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liberated from the need to be liberated." Regrettably, but not surprisingly, the subtleties of my argument concerning what I have called – in a Heideggerian manner – the unthought in Schneerson's thought were not understood by a number of scholars. See the lengthy response to my critics in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Revealing and Re/veiling: Menahem Mendel Schneerson's Messianic Secret," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 26 (2012): 25–96, and especially my concluding observation on 95–96: "Messianic hope hinges on the paradox of preparing for the onset of what has transpired, the *purely present future*, the future that is already present as the present that is always future, the *tomorrow that is now precisely because it is now tomorrow*. The futurity of waiting for the Messiah to appear is not a matter of chronoscopic time at all, but a mental state whereby and wherein one realizes that what is to come intermittently is already present perpetually. All one needs to do is to open the door, provided that one has heard the knock, or perhaps even more profoundly, one will hear the knock only when one realizes that there is no door but the one we have built in our minds" (italics in original).

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, *Tears*, 132. See Gregor Moder, *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity*, foreword by Mladen Dolar (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 121–45.

<sup>75</sup> Jay L. Garfield, "Madhyamaka, Nihilism, and the Emptiness of Emptiness," in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, 44–54.

<sup>76</sup> For a survey of Mahāyāna approaches to emptiness, see Brook Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 37–53; and also *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 185–259.

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, "Betraying Altizer," 11. For a different approach and partial critique of Taylor's reading of Altizer, see Lissa McCullough, "Theology as the Thinking of Passion Itself," in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 29–46. See especially 45 n. 2, where in response to Taylor's contention that "the purest implication of Altizer's theology is that we should stop doing theology," McCullough writes, "To the contrary, to accept the death of God, for Altizer, is to accept the responsibility of an absolute gift, the Incarnation, which remains to be thought theologically in its ultimate import, its sacrality as divine gift, as long as that gift inspires gratitude, compassion, forgiveness, hope, joy, and the like." See note 99, below. McCullough's defense of Altizer makes it difficult for me to accept her characterization of his radical theology as post-Christian (see note 104, below). This matter requires a more sustained analysis, but let me briefly clarify that I recognize that the theological reading of Altizer need not necessarily imply a Christian bias, and that it is possible

therefore, would be to betray it, for the death of God reaches fruition when we forget what it is that we have forgotten, a twofold oblivion that betokens the end of theology and not the possibility of its rejuvenation. "As long as the specter of God haunts the world," writes Taylor, "the kenotic process that Altizer, following Hegel, charts remains unfinished. . . . For the 'No' of world negation to be negated and nihilism to be complete, we must say 'Yes' to the nothingness and emptiness hiding in the utter ordinariness and banality of contemporary culture."<sup>78</sup> Nothingness is truly nothing, Altizer writes, when there is a disappearance of otherness that "is not an actual disappearance, for there is nothing that can actually disappear if only because there is no distinction between appearance and disappearance, no real distinction between anything and anything else. That very absence of otherness can be named as compassion, a compassion which is an illusion if anything can be itself and not another, and above all if anything can be an 'I' or center which is wholly and only itself. If that is the illusion which is the deepest obstacle to enlightenment, that is also the illusion that precludes the possibility of compassion, and an illusion that wholly disappears in the enactment of compassion."<sup>79</sup>

Altizer appeals again to Christian mysticism as a historical site within the economy of Christianity to locate both the ubiquity of space wherein the center that is everywhere cannot be differentiated from the circumference that is nowhere and the pure simultaneity of time wherein the moment is concurrently past, present, and future.<sup>80</sup> The crucial difference, however, is not eradicated by this eradication of difference. The *via negativa* of Christian mystics holds on to the "I" of divinity even if the latter is the "not I" of the God beyond God, a fullness of presence that is absent rather than the emptiness wherein the discrepancy between presence and absence is completely obliterated in the absence of otherness that includes the otherness of absence. Altizer's assessment of the current moment is worthy of full citation:

Theologically our situation is virtually the reversal of what it once was; whereas previously we could only apprehend the Trinity theologically, and then only as a sacred or revealed doctrine, now we

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to advocate on behalf of a post-Christian theology. Indeed, insofar as Altizer's thought is distinctly post-Nietzschean, it is informed by the death of God, which signifies the rejection of transcendence traditionally conceived and the consequent affirmation of a God beyond the Christian God (see the passage in Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God," 100–103, cited in note 26 above). The difficulty is, however, that the linguistic, conceptual, and symbolic images used by Altizer to depict his apocalyptic vision are predominantly Christological in nature. In this matter, I assent to the conclusion of Taylor, *Tears*, 59–60: "In *Total Presence* Altizer attempts to render concrete his relentlessly abstract language by suggesting the way in which the Christian Logos is concretely realized in and through the historical process. . . . The movement from abstract speculation to concrete analysis is made possible by an examination of language. . . . The language of Jesus, we discover, is the language of today, and the language of today is the language of the here and now. Today, here and now, presence is total presence" (italics in original).

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, "Betraying Altizer," 27.

<sup>79</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–97.

can apprehend it universally and most decisively through a new epiphany or new realization of absolute nothingness, an absolute nothingness making possible an apocalypse of the Trinity. Thereby we can know that an absolute can only be realized through an absolute nothingness, an absolute ending apart from which an absolute apocalypse cannot occur. But absolute apocalypse is a transfiguration of absolute nothingness, as now that nothingness truly becomes the opposite of itself, and for the first time absolute nothingness *is* its own opposite. That is the only "isness" possible for nothingness itself, and even the only one possible for an absolute nothingness. Already Mahayana Buddhist philosophy fully draws this forth in its dialectical identification of nirvana and *samsara*, an identification truly reborn in Hegel and late modernity but never with the clarity and openness occurring in Buddhism. Unfortunately Hegel and our late modern poets knew little of Buddhism, but they were deeply affected by a radical Christianity that could serve as its counterpart, a radical Christianity knowing a Crucifixion that is the realization of absolute nothingness, and a Crucifixion that is Resurrection itself. That Resurrection is an absolute Yes, and an absolute Yes made possible by the realization of an absolute No, the absolute No of absolute nothingness, yet the absolute transfiguration of that No *is* absolute apocalypse.<sup>81</sup>

The summoning of the Trinity underscores the difficulty with Altizer's attempt to cast Buddhist concepts in a Christological framework. We can appreciate that he believed that the absolute apocalypse of radical Christianity rests on the transfiguration of the absolute nothingness, such that nothing becomes the opposite of itself, the absolute No of the Crucifixion that makes possible the absolute Yes of the Resurrection. From the Buddhist perspective, however, this transfiguration is problematic as there is no opposite to nothingness that is not nothing that is everything. If one were to insist on using this language, then the absolute apocalypse should be delineated as the revelation of the void or the emptiness in which isness is absolutely indistinguishable from is-notness.<sup>82</sup> The epiphany of the end that can never begin to end, which coincides with the beginning that can never end to begin,<sup>83</sup> is the showing of the nonshowing, the apocalyptic dawning

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 116-17. For discussion of Hegel's interpretation of the Buddhist conception of nothingness, see Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*, trans. David Streight and Pamela Vohnson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 59-72.

<sup>82</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 99.

<sup>83</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 11: "So it is that there is a true coincidence between absolute beginning and absolute ending, or a true coincidence between apocalyptic beginning and apocalyptic ending, and just as an eternal movement of eternal return is a dissolution of every possible ending, a full and final apocalyptic movement is an ending of every possible beginning except an apocalyptic beginning. That is a beginning which dawns not only in ancient apocalypticism, but in modern apocalypticism, too, a dawning which is the dawning of a final ending, and a final ending only manifest in the most ultimate darkness." With respect to the coincidence of beginning and end, Altizer remains faithful to the Hegelian dialectic. See Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 13: "At the end of the science of logic, absolute spirit is finally

wherein darkness is manifest not in envisioning the nothing that is, but in seeing that there is nothing to be seen or not to be seen, the darkness of the nihilistic space, the void that dissolves all distinctions.<sup>84</sup>

Altizer struggles to preserve the disclosure of divinity in the form of nothingness—in the formulation of D. G. Leahy's thinking now occurring, invoked by Altizer, the absolute nullification of the Godhead that is the total incarnation of the Godhead revealing itself as the triple nothingness of the Trinity.<sup>85</sup> Expounding the matter further, Altizer adds:

While Leahy eschews every Buddhist evocation of an absolute nothingness, and every Neoplatonic absolute nothingness as well, he seizes on a uniquely modern absolute nothingness as the very opposite of a truly apocalyptic absolute nothingness, and only with the absolute negation of that modern nothingness does an absolute apocalypse truly and finally dawn. This dawning occurs in the very resurrection of the Trinity, a resurrection from that absolute death that is the death of the Godhead, and only that resurrection actualizes the existence of that Godhead which for the first time is the actual universe qua sensible existence. . . . For the first time omnipotence in the simplicity of being itself eliminates the necessity of conceiving the divine movement as divine self-movement. Moreover, this is the beginning of the creation of the finite absolute, the beginning of the divine absolutely finite, or the beginning of the very Godhead which, though it absolutely dies, knows not death. For the resurrection of the Trinity is the beginning now actually occurring of the simplicity of existence itself, for the first time the perfect exteriority of the *inmost* being of divinity. . . . Now we can see for the first time the nothingness of nothing as not the nothingness of the finite but as the nothingness of the infinite, a nothingness that is the finite Trinity, or the triple nothingness of the Trinity itself.<sup>86</sup>

Altizer informs the reader that he parts company with Leahy inasmuch as he maintains that “only with the realization of the final or the apocalyptic Trinity is nothingness itself purely actual, and only then is an absolute nothingness

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known as freely abandoning and externalizing itself, even abandoning itself to sheer immediacy, an abandonment which religious or mythical thinking knows as the creation. Thus the beginning is the pure immediacy of absolute spirit, an immediacy which is not only pure being, but is that pure being which is an immediate form and manifestation of absolute spirit. Therefore the first is the last, even as the last is the first, and this *coincidentia oppositorum* of immediacy and mediation is not simply a coincidence of opposites, for absolute immediacy and absolute mediation are one and the same, an identity which is the nullity of the apparent opposition between them. That nullity is manifest in consciousness, and is pure in pure consciousness, but is realized only in the negative movement of consciousness itself, a movement which is finally the movement of absolute spirit itself. That is the movement which begins with sheer immediacy, and ends with an absolute and total mediation, a mediation which is the absolute *kenosis* or self-emptying of absolute spirit itself.”

<sup>84</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, “An Absolutely New Space,” *Literature and Theology* 21 (2007): 351

<sup>85</sup> Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 98.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99 (italics in original).

purely or truly incarnate in the very body or Body of the Trinity. . . . The deepest mystery of Christianity is not the mystery of the Trinity but rather the mystery of absolute nothingness, a nothingness only fully embodied in the Trinity.<sup>87</sup> By the logic of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the mystery of this nothingness assumes the incarnate form of an "absolute kenosis" or an "absolute self-emptying" of the "actual body of sacrifice," that is, a body whose embodiment comprises the renunciation of its bodiliness.<sup>88</sup>

I well understand that Altizer presumed that self-negation yields an "absolutely new Trinity" and a "truly new universe" that heretofore were not actual or manifest. The apocalyptic Trinity is described, accordingly, as "an absolutely new Godhead, infinitely distant from every previous realization of the Godhead, and so much so that it is wholly unrecognizable as Godhead itself, and therefore for the first time Godhead is actually and absolutely invisible and silent as Godhead itself. Only now is the death of God totally actual as the resurrection of God, but the resurrected God is an absolutely new God, hence infinitely distant from every manifest or nameable God, realizing a wholly new life for all and everyone."<sup>89</sup> By this measure, it would seem that the atheology of Altizer's radical theology is not subject to the same criticism of the apophatic trend of traditional Christology. Hence, he insists that the new nothingness is an actuality masked by its anonymity but, in truth, its potency derives from the fact that it is nothingness; its actuality, in other words, entails that it is not actual at all.<sup>90</sup> The articulation of the nihilistic voyage into nothingness can only be disseminated rhetorically through paradox:

But if an apocalyptic nothingness is a real and actual nothingness, and an actual nothingness which is a total nothingness, not only is it the arena of an interior pathology and guilt, but also the arena of a disenactment of consciousness itself, and a disenactment which is not a dissolution. For it cannot be the dissolution of consciousness if it is the embodiment of an actual nothingness, and precisely because an actual nothingness is not an empty nothingness, not a nothingness which is simply and only nothing. That is all too clear in Eckhart's enactment of the lowest point, just as it is overwhelmingly clear in Nietzsche's calling forth of the Will to Power, for that nothingness which is the Will to Power is a nothingness that is free of everything whatsoever that has ever been known or manifest as "God" or "Being." Only that disenactment releases what Nietzsche knows as absolute will, and that will is the will of nothingness only by being the absolute reversal of every possible will to nothingness. So it is that absolute will is here the absolute reversal of the will of the Christian God, and in being the full inversion of that God it is the full inversion of an absolutely sovereign transcendence, and therefore is that pure immanence which is free of every possible teleological end or goal. Its total voiding of that end is a realization of nothingness,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 101.

but is a realization of that nothingness which is absolute actuality, and therefore is the total reversal of the uniquely Christian God. Just as that nothingness is a new nothingness, and a totally new nothingness, it is thereby an actual nothingness, an actual nothingness which is actuality itself.<sup>91</sup>

The deviation between Altizer's radical theology and Buddhism emerges once more with transparency from the statement that *the embodiment of an actual nothingness is not an empty nothingness*, that is, a nothingness that is simply and only nothing. On the contrary, the apocalyptic nothingness is a real and actual nothingness, an ontological nothingness that is ontically nothing and therefore at the same time itself and not itself, indeed itself by not being itself and not itself by being itself. In Nietzschean terms, the nothingness is the will to power, the absolute *will of nothingness* that is the reversal of the *will to nothingness*, the will that is depleted of all willfulness, the will not to will, or as Leahy verbalized it, "the circle of its own willing not-willing its own other,"<sup>92</sup> the pure immanence unencumbered by teleological constraints.

The nothing revealed in this denial of transcendence "is deeper and more vacuous and abysmal than every previous epiphany of the nothing," and hence "it is also thereby more actually real, and more actually real as that nothing which is our deepest origin and ground."<sup>93</sup> The will to power is the "pure will" that is the "pure nothingness," that is, an actual nothingness, a nihilism of actuality inseparable from the actuality of nihilism. Alternatively expressed, the nothingness of the will, which ensues from the willing of nothingness, is the otherness that is necessary and essential to willing that has no other, for there could be no enactment or realization of the will apart from the willing of self that is a willing of the other. The act of will that wills nothing is an "embodied nothingness precisely because it is a total act of the will, and therefore is a total reversal or inversion of a pure passivity or emptiness of the will. Buddhism can know that emptiness as a total emptiness, but Christianity in knowing God the Creator knows a total inversion and reversal of the emptiness of emptiness, a reversal which is the genesis of the will, and therefore is the genesis of an actual nothingness."<sup>94</sup>

The absolute nothingness assumes far more positivity – albeit a positivity that comports itself as negativity, that is, an actual nothingness, a presence that can be present only by not being present and therefore different from itself<sup>95</sup> – than one could legitimately adduce from the doctrine of the suchness of emptiness endorsed by proponents of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Whereas Buddhism forecloses the possibility of either the apprehension or the realization of "otherness," an otherness

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<sup>91</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 149 (italics in original).

<sup>92</sup> D. G. Leahy, *Foundation: Matter the Body Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 222. On Altizer's appropriation and transformation of the Nietzschean will to power, see Leahy, "The Diachrony," 119–21.

<sup>93</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 150.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>95</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment*, 32.

inseparable from the primordial transcendence of the Christian God, that foreclosure is itself inseparable from the primordial totality of nirvana or sunyata. If Buddhism is our purest and most comprehensive realization of that totality, the Buddhist dhamma or dharma is the most total embodiment of that totality. In this perspective, Christian apocalypticism is the pure opposite of Buddhism, and is so if only because it embodies an apocalyptic and even absolute ending, an ending which is the real and actual opposite of a primordial and absolute "nothingness," and is so if only because of the sheer actuality of its occurrence.<sup>96</sup>

The dissolution of difference suggested by the Buddhist notion of nothingness is from the perspective of Christianity "an absolute deactualization of actuality itself."<sup>97</sup> Granted that for Altizer the new Godhead is absolutely invisible and inaudible as the Godhead, and the only "possible horizon" of the Godhead in the apocalyptic ending is a Godhead "that is now all in all only as an absolute nothingness,"<sup>98</sup> it is nonetheless denominated as the Godhead. What makes the absolute nothingness uniquely Christian and not Buddhist is its apocalyptic actuality.<sup>99</sup> Altizer may not be subject to Taylor's criticism that he is "caught in the web of Western ontotheology"<sup>100</sup> insofar as his apocalyptic nihilism continues to posit a total presence rather than confronting the nonabsent absence of the nondialectical other,<sup>101</sup> but to speak

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<sup>96</sup> Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, 167.

<sup>97</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> Altizer, *Satan and Apocalypse*, 70.

<sup>99</sup> Altizer, "Buddha and God," 180, cited above, n. 63.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, "Altizer's Originality," 583. See the rejoinder of McCullough, "Theology as the Thinking of Passion Itself," 46 n. 6: "My own response to this criticism would be that it is not Altizer's purpose to affirm negation to the point of a purely irreligious atheism or nihilism. His vision is finally a religious one, affirming that a new apprehension of the sacred is revealed in the 'darkness visible,' and therefore one can truly rejoice in the death of God as a sacred occurrence. This is an apprehension committed to the continued possibility of the yes-saying of faith, although now it is a yes-saying tried and purified by an equal and opposite no-saying. For to say 'yes' to this parousia is to affirm universal perishing, consenting to the irreversible finality of death and the apotheosis of the Nothing." For another defense of Altizer against Taylor's critique, see J. Stephen Fountain, "Ashes to Ashes: Kristeva's 'Jouissance,' Altizer's Apocalypse, Byatt's Possession and 'The Dream of the Rod,'" *Literature and Theology* 8 (1994): 195-98. McCullough's theological reading of Altizer's atheology only enhances my point concerning the disjuncture between the apocalyptic abyss of Christian nihilism and the Buddhist conception of nothingness. On the use of the idiom "narrative ontotheology" to characterize Altizer, see Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme's Haunted Narrative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 18; and *Gnostic Return*, 40, 75.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor, *Tears*, 68-69: "The neither/nor of heterogeneity lies between the either/or of nondialectical understanding and the both/and of dialectical thought. The 'domain' of this unknowable other is neither a transcendent beyond nor an immanent here and now. Never present, though not merely absent, the other remains 'inside; as an exteriority interrupting all immediacy and dislocating every identity. The 'nonabsent absence' of the other forever defers apocalyptic presence. When the other is approached in this way, it obviously eludes dialectical comprehension. Altizer cannot admit the possibility of such an other. . . . What Altizer *cannot* think is a nondialectical other. The impossibility of entertaining the

of the void as an absolute nothingness that is “necessary and essential to the very embodiment of the apocalyptic Trinity”<sup>102</sup> is a transfiguration that is surely not acceptable from the anontological vantage point of Buddhism. To be sure, the redemption of the absolute apocalypse is construed by Altizer as the avowal of nothingness that is the liberation from nothingness: “The all pervasiveness of nothingness in our world can certainly be understood as a witness to the advent – even the final advent – of the apocalyptic Trinity, a Trinity whose actuality is inseparable from the self-negation or the self-emptying of an absolute nothingness, and only now is that nothingness fully actual as an absolutely empty nothingness.”<sup>103</sup> Although the apocalyptic transfiguration of the Trinity is designated by Altizer as a “total reversal”<sup>104</sup> of former doctrinal or dogmatic theology – cryptically implied in the philosophy of Hegel – it is still cast in Christocentric terms that would be anathema to the Buddhist sense of enlightenment,<sup>105</sup> which opens the space to discern the void that discloses that there is no divinity to be disclosed as the void.

The theological vision enunciated by Altizer – inspired by the presumption regarding the decidedly kataphatic as opposed to apophatic existence of an “absolutely actual Nothing” attributed to Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, and

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unspeakable other points to the impossibility of Altizer’s theological project as a whole. Though Altizer is our most important death of God theologian, he has not thought the death of God radically enough. To think the death of God in all its radicality is to confront the impossibility of presence and the inescapable absence of absence” (italics in original). On the ontotheological implications of the total presence presumed by Altizer’s apocalyptic thinking, see *ibid.*, 84.

<sup>102</sup> Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 101.

<sup>103</sup> Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 112–13.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>105</sup> The Christocentric nature of Altizer’s radical theology is somewhat obscured in his description of Nietzsche’s thought, which serves as the basis for his own, in Altizer, “Theology and the Death of God,” 98: “However, the proclamation of the death of God – or, more deeply, the *willing* of the death of God – is dialectical: a No-saying to God (the transcendence of *Sein*) makes possible a Yes-saying to human existence (*Dasein*, total existence in the *here and now*). Absolute transcendence is transformed into absolute immanence; being *here and now* (the post-Christian existential ‘now’) draws into itself all those powers which were once bestowed upon the Beyond” (italics in original). See also the passage from the same essay, 100–101, cited in note 38. The post-Christian dimension of Altizer’s atheology and the epiphany of the nothing is emphasized by McCullough, “Twilight of an Axial God,” 179. See also Lissa McCullough, “Interview with Thomas J. J. Altizer,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 12 (2013): 169, “Altizer has ever viewed Christianity from a post-Christian comparative outlook.” I concur with this observation but it is nevertheless the case that there is a privileging of Christianity in the post-Christian theology propagated by Altizer. Consider his comment in this very interview, 179, “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.” See also 181, where Altizer reiterates his contention that the absolute negation or absolute negativity of kenotic thinking is the “very essence of Christianity.” On the use of “post-Christian” in conjunction with Altizer, see Edith Wyschogrod, “Crucifixion and Alterity: Pathways to Glory in the Thought of Altizer and Levinas,” in *Thinking through the Death of God*, 95.

Heidegger<sup>106</sup> — entails a thinking of the nothingness of otherness that is the otherness of nothingness and thus falls short of attaining the state of

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<sup>106</sup> Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 71: "Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger are all apocalyptic thinkers, and indeed revolutionary thinkers: thinkers enacting an absolutely new apocalypse inseparable from an absolute Nothing, and an absolutely actual Nothing. As opposed to every possible apophatic thinking, here an absolute Nothing is a totally actual nothing, as reflected in that nihilism now released in the world. Even if that nihilism is only implicit in Schelling and Hegel, it is fully explicit in Nietzsche and Heidegger, as a new apocalyptic world realizes its own consummation. . . . Nevertheless, our new nihilism is certainly impossible to understand apart from the advent of a fully actual Nihil, and if it is Nietzsche and Heidegger who most deeply understand our nihilism, it is Heidegger and Nietzsche among our philosophers who most deeply call forth that Nihil, yet here that calling forth is inseparable from an apocalyptic or final redemption." Altizer goes on to say that the redemption called forth by Nietzsche and Heidegger is "absolutely dissociated from everything once known or manifest as 'God,' and above all dissociated from the uniquely Christian God." It is noteworthy that Altizer argues that Heidegger's refusal to speak about God is indicative of his deep theological sensibility. "Heidegger's rebellion against theology can be understood as a rebellion against all non-apocalyptic theology, thereby making possible a genuine renewal of apocalyptic theology, one that is realized as a consequence of the death of God. Heidegger knows that death more deeply than any other twentieth-century thinker, a death that is the ultimate source of our nihilism, yet also a death making possible an apocalyptic *Ereignis*, and an *Ereignis* only realized by the full advent of an absolutely actual Nothing" (72). Compare Altizer, "An Absolutely New Space," 352-53: "Heidegger is devoted to employing words that realise a unique meaning through his thinking, and this is above all true of *Ereignis*, one here realising a purely apocalyptic meaning, wherein *Ereignis* evokes an apocalyptic epiphany occurring in the very heart of darkness. Only in the post-humously published *Beitrag* does Heidegger give us a full exposition of *Ereignis*, and here Being itself is known as *Ereignis*, and known as such against the transcendent God of Christianity. . . . An ultimate struggle occurs throughout this work . . . and he can even say that Being has the character of nothing (*nichthafft*), for Being needs the *not* to last for the steadfastness of its truth, and this means that it needs the *opposition* of all that is nothing, the 'not-being'" (italics in original). Altizer's surmise that the deepest secret harbored by Heidegger was that he was a theologian dedicated to illumining the darkness of the apocalyptic *Ereignis*, embodied in the absolute and actual nothingness of the Nihil wherein the deity becomes unspeakable as the last god, merits a separate treatment. Concerning the last god in Heidegger's thought, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Gottwesen and the De-Divinization of the Last God: Heidegger's Meditation on the Strange and Incalculable," in *Heidegger's Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology*, ed. Mårten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 211-55. A distinct but related matter is the comparison of Heidegger's cogitations on the subject of nothingness and Buddhist and Daoist sources. See Nishitani Keiji, "Reflections on Two Addresses by Martin Heidegger," in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987) 145-54; Joan Stambaugh, *The Finitude of Being* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 171-83; Fred Dallmayr, "Nothingness and Śūnyatā: A Comparison of Heidegger and Nishitani," *Philosophy East and West* 42 (1992): 37-48; Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. with a complementary essay by Graham Parkes (London: Routledge, 1996), 21-34; Gail Stenstad, *Transformations: Thinking after Heidegger* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 161-71; Wei Zhang, *Heidegger, Rorty, and the Eastern Thinkers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 54-61; Lin Ma, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 178-85; Eric S. Nelson, "Language and Emptiness in Chan Buddhism and the Early Heidegger,"

nothingness wherein there is no otherness because there is no self-same identity that can be either affirmed in its negation or negated in its affirmation. The advent of a “fully actual Nihil” conflicts with the Mahāyāna paradox that there is no substance of which to speak apart from its nonsubstantiality (*anātmatva*), a paradox predicated on the pairing of being and nonbeing in the disjunction of their conjunction so as to avoid the postulation of the nonsubstantial as a substantial entity of an autonomous nature.<sup>107</sup> According to the tetralemic logic of the middle way (*madhyamaka*),<sup>108</sup> the paradox can be diagrammed as S is P; ~P; both P and ~P; neither P nor ~P. The middle of the four-cornered logic should not be conceived as a meridian point situated equidistantly between extremes – the venerated golden mean between excess and privation in the Western philosophical tradition – but as the indeterminate space that contains both and neither of the extremes, the absent presence that is neither present as absent nor absent as present, the interval vacillating between affirmation and negation, identity and nonidentity. In this middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle – a logic that accedes to an incoherence that is coherent and a coherence that is incoherent<sup>109</sup> – purportedly contradictory properties are attributed and not attributed to the (non)substance at the same time and in the same relation, whence it follows that the propositions  $(A \cdot \sim A)$  and  $\sim(A \cdot \sim A)$  converge in the point of their divergence.<sup>110</sup>

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*Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37 (2010): 472–92; and *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 225–52; David Chai, “Nothingness and the Clearing: Heidegger, Daoism and the Quest for Primal Clarity,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 67 (2014): 583–601; Bret W. Davis, “Heidegger and Asian Philosophy,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, ed. François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 459–71, esp. 463–68; Paola-Ludovica Coriando, “Substance and Emptiness: Preparatory Steps Toward a Translational Dialogue Between Western and Buddhist Philosophy,” in *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking: Essays in Honor of Parvis Emad*, ed. Frank Schalow (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 135–43; Nico Jenkins, *Echoes of No Thing: Thinking between Heidegger and Dōgen* (Goleta: Punctum, 2018). See my own modest contribution to this topic in Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 105–107.

<sup>107</sup> Yakupitiyage Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Somerville: Wisdom, 2018), 187 n. 21. It is possible to align Altizer’s interpretation of the Buddhist nothingness with the kataphatic “other-emptiness” of the Yogācāra tradition, which is contrasted with the apophatic “self-emptiness” of the Madhyamaka school. Regarding this distinction, see Westerhoff, *The Golden Age*, 192.

<sup>108</sup> For a philosophically nuanced account of the middle way, see C. W. Huntington, Jr., with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1989), 25–67. On the Mādhyamika, see also Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, ed. Elizabeth Napper (London: Wisdom, 1983), 402–28. On the logic of the tetralemma, compare Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67–90.

<sup>109</sup> See Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference*, 137–84.

<sup>110</sup> Shōryū Katsura, “Nāgārjuna and the Tetralemma (*Catuṣkoṭi*),” in *Wisdom, Compassion, and the Search for Understanding: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao*, ed. Jonathan A. Silk (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 201–20; Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 99–104.

From the ultimate standpoint, the perspective of the emptiness that is both empty and nonempty because it is neither empty nor nonempty, the everyday world is nonexistent. The enlightened one knows, however, that this nonexistence does not imply a negation of the existence of the phenomenal world but rather a reassessment of its existence, a shift from presuming that there are independent substances to perceiving the relativity and codependency of all that comes to be in the chain of becoming.<sup>111</sup> The gnosis of awakening consists of discerning that the being of things is their lacking the being of thinghood, a truth that is identical to or compatible with the cosmological principle of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).<sup>112</sup> The one who sees with awakened eyes perceives the world as the formless void wherein everything comes to be in the nonbeing of its being and passes away in the being of its nonbeing. The capacity to negate all beings in the emptiness of their being is thus to affirm them in the being of their emptiness. This is not analogous to the absolutely actual nothing posited categorically by Altizer in his charting of nihilism in Western philosophy. As he himself says with respect to the Kyoto School, it “has been criticized by many Buddhist thinkers for its transformation of a genuinely Mādhyamika ground, accused here and elsewhere of importing Western categories into Buddhism, and above all of engrafting a Western understanding of actuality upon Buddhism. Perhaps this is most true of its understanding of self-negation, and just as self-negation is the very center of Nishida’s thinking, its uniquely Buddhist ground may well reside in its understanding of absolute nothingness. A uniquely Western Nihil may be most distant from an Eastern absolute nothingness in terms of its brute actuality, or its actuality in the modern world, and just as that is the actuality which has been the primary mode of a Western opening to Buddhism, this has surely been a decisive source of the power of the Kyoto School’s impact upon the West, one rivaled in late modernity by no other form of Buddhism.”<sup>113</sup>

Availing myself of Altizer’s own terminology, the I AM of the Christian Godhead can be depicted as the “self-emptying of absolute emptiness,” but this kenosis is the “very actualization of itself,”<sup>114</sup> and hence the I AM signifies the “pure inversion of absolute activity and will” and a “reversal of

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<sup>111</sup> Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 94–95, 176–77.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas E. Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations: A Philosophical Journey through an Indian Looking-Glass* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 124–25, 194–99. On the compatibility of emptiness and dependent-arising, see also Elizabeth Napper, *Dependent-Arising: A Tibetan Buddhist Interpretation of Mādhyamika Philosophy Emphasizing the Compatibility of Emptiness and Conventional Phenomena* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 126–33, 149–50.

<sup>113</sup> Altizer, “Buddha and God,” 181. See *ibid.*, 184, where Altizer conjectures that Nishida may have been “simultaneously Buddhist and Christian; Buddhist in knowing and only knowing an absolute emptiness, and Christian in knowing an absolute self-emptying of God. That self-emptying is what the Christian knows as an absolute sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Crucifixion, and it is possible that Nishida knows that sacrifice more purely than any Christian theologian, and even knows it as totality itself, a self-emptying totality that is all in all.”

<sup>114</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 102. See Wyschogrod, “Crucifixion and Alterity,” 89–91.

absolute emptiness or nirvana" in the realization of the center of divine egoity.<sup>115</sup>

Consequently, I AM is the self-emptying of absolute emptiness, a self-emptying which actually realizes its own Godhead or "I," and if that "I" is absolute center, it is that absolute center which is in absolute opposition to itself. That is an internal and even interior opposition which can be known and has been known as absolute will, an absolute will which is absolute sovereignty and transcendence, but a sovereignty and transcendence which is finally and ultimately a kenotic transcendence of itself.<sup>116</sup>

The *coincidentia oppositorum* of Altizer's apocalyptic sensibility is predicated on the appearance of opposites that disappear in their opposition, an absolute otherness that fosters the otherness of itself in its ownmost actuality.<sup>117</sup> In the new consciousness of the universal history, biblical theism is transcended to the extent that it is preserved in its transcendence,<sup>118</sup> and thus the theolatrous impulse persists even in its undoing. The self-emptying emptiness of the eternal act of God is the antithesis of the Buddhist absolute emptiness, the pure embodiment of difference in contradistinction to the obliteration of all difference, a will to unwill whose very activity forecloses the possibility of its deactualization.<sup>119</sup> Instantiating the gnosis that death is the way to life, the collapse of the past of Christianity in modernity provides a template for a path to an apocalyptic and eschatological future.<sup>120</sup> The apocalyptic terminus signals the "advent of a totally alien and totally present objectivity, an objectivity which brings a real and historical end to all actual or individual subjectivity, and does so with a total and irreversible finality."<sup>121</sup> The course of the future is left open for Altizer, but what is most revealing, to his mind, is that "it is not possible for us either to envision or to name a totally present objectivity. Yes, we know it as an anonymous presence, can envision it as a vacuous presence, and perhaps can hear it as a tonally atonal presence. But we cannot truly name or fully envision that presence if only because its actual totality transcends all vision and all naming, and, indeed, as its totality becomes ever more fully manifest its very presence stills and dissolves the possibility of speech and vision, and does so at the very center of vision and speech."<sup>122</sup>

The gesture toward apophasis notwithstanding, Altizer unambiguously affirms that the apocalyptic nothing will reveal a presence, albeit a presence that transcends vision and speech, and hence a presence that can be present to

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<sup>115</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 103.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Compare Taylor, *Tears*, 65: "The 'I' that seemed to disappear before the beginning returns at the end not merely as itself but as the I AM of Being. At the end of history, the speaker who heard the Word discovers that his voice is the voice of God: I am I AM."

<sup>117</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 103.

<sup>118</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 66-67.

<sup>119</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 104.

<sup>120</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 92.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 96.

the extent that it perpetually withdraws from the spectacle of being present. The historical moment of the apocalypse is marked by the passing of the self-emptying center into a full and final actuality that cannot be seen or spoken. The nothingness that captivated Altizer's imagination for so many years can be demarcated as the pure negativity of this actuality, the invisible and inaudible reality of the "absolutely transfigured abyss"<sup>123</sup> that has become "our innermost and our outermost identity, a total identity and a total presence which even now is becoming all in all."<sup>124</sup> Whereas mystical blindness and muteness preempt the possibility of historical enactment and disengage passion and will, the apocalyptic blindness and muteness enact the historical actualization and quietistic embodiment of the will not to will, thereby releasing and effectuating the actuality of a comprehensive negation in the domain of the common and public reality. In this transformation, there is no more incongruity between interior and exterior, and hence every face is but a mask of the face revealing and revealing the face of the mask.<sup>125</sup>

Therein every fixed or given identity perishes within us, but that perishing is realized in act, in an act which is intimately and interiorly our own only by way of being realized beyond us, and wholly beyond us in an actuality which is free of every sign or mark of our individual presence. It is just this process, and the fullness and finality of this process, which negates and reverses every particular face or mask of consciousness, as every unique and individual face now passes into a negative and anonymous mask, and face as face is real only insofar as it is negatively present as mask.<sup>126</sup>

In line with the Buddhist theory of nonself (*anātman*),<sup>127</sup> Altizer maintains that the distinguishing feature of the new humanity is an anonymity from which we can infer the "negation of all integral and intrinsic individuality or particularity. . . . Now the true individual is identical with the concrete or actual universal, but is so only by way of the negation of the particular, and above all the negation of that very particularity which is most interiorly

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<sup>123</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 136: "It is only when we are stripped of every possible 'grace' that we can know the totality of the bad conscience, only then that the world itself becomes a madhouse, straying through an infinite nothing and totally immersed in a truly new and apocalyptic chaos. Now even if that chaos is the very arena of Zarathustra's enactment of Eternal Recurrence, that Eternal Recurrence is most deeply an ultimate transformation of an absolute No-saying into an absolute Yes-saying, and finally an absolute affirmation of that chaos itself. Thereby an absolute abyss truly does become all in all, and even if this is an absolutely transfigured abyss, it is nevertheless abyss itself, and the purest abyss that had thus far been called forth in our naming itself."

<sup>124</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 97.

<sup>125</sup> I have emphasized the phenomenological interchangeability of the face and the mask in several of my studies. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone, 2011), 41, 78, 313 n. 117; *Giving*, 65, 153, 402 n. 520; and *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 68, 305, 358.

<sup>126</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 98.

<sup>127</sup> Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, 213–74; Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings*, 35–51; Miri Albahari, "Nirvana and Ownerless Consciousness," in *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, ed. Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 79–113.

present and near at hand."<sup>128</sup> Despite the affinity with Buddhism, Altizer looks to Christian origins for a precedent of the concrete universal that is the negation of particularity and the externalization of all interiority: "Already in the proclamation of Jesus, a total presence realizes and presents itself only by way of its negative assault upon all given and established identity, and it is the reversal of the center or ground of established identity which actualizes a total and final presence. . . . It is just the disintegration of all unique interior identity which makes possible the actual realization of a concrete universality, a concrete universality which is historically enacted and embodied, and embodied by way of the negation and reversal of all individual interiority."<sup>129</sup> In what might strike the ear as ironic, Altizer proffers that the discarding of the ego of self-consciousness transpires most effectively in solitude; indeed, solitude is what delivers us from what is uniquely our own.<sup>130</sup> A solitary delving into the internal engenders the forfeiture of the internal, which in turn exposes the externality of the absolute presence experienced in the unprecedented immediacy of the world:

Genuine solitude is a voyage into the interior, but it is a voyage which culminates in a loss of our interior, a loss reversing every manifest or established center of our interior so as to make possible the advent of a wholly new but totally immediate world. . . . For that interior is not truly or actually our own, and thus genuine solitude releases us from the power of our own interior, and in such moments we know and fully know that every interior which is our own has actually come to an end. But the real end or reversal of an individual interior makes possible the actual advent of a universal presence, a presence transcending all interior and individual identity, and presenting itself beyond our interior, and beyond every possible interior, as a total and immediate presence.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 98–99. For a Levinasian reading of the anonymous subject in Altizer, see Wyschogrod, "Crucifixion and Alterity," 94–96.

<sup>129</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 99–100. See Leahy, "The Diachrony," 116: "If Altizer's theology is the reversal of all interiority to exteriority, the 'eternal outwardizing of the within,' the convexity of an unenclosed and unconfined center, absolute convexity, the convex without a concave, then Levinas is the inversion of all exteriority to interiority, the enclosed and confined concavity of the center, absolute concavity: *the concave without a convex, the eternal inwardizing of the exterior, the eternal inwardizing of the without*" (italics in original). Regarding the exteriority of the inward in the Levinasian *il y a*, see Wolfson, *Giving*, 111–12.

<sup>130</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 105. Compare the summation of Altizer's perspective in Leahy, "The Diachrony," 111: "The Infinite Self-Consciousness vanishes without a trace – in its (his) *very own* otherness! in the very abyss of owning: in *owning not owning*. . . . This is the absolute identification of the creation with the absolutely determinately existing world: the macrocosm displacing all that was formerly interiority: the nothingness of the particular: absolute determinate universality of consciousness in its own absolute otherness: the immeasurable/ unmeasurable point of time (the absolute singularity) which everyone actually is: the absolute universality of absolute singularity: at the expense of being someone, as if being someone [in particular] should now make any difference. Indeed, the universal anonymity – absolute solitude – now comes to embody itself in every single existing individual" (italics in original).

<sup>131</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 106–107.

Altizer's apocalyptic thinking brings us to the point of discerning that the psychological divestiture of selfhood parallels the theological repudiation of transcendence.<sup>132</sup> In the end, however, he continues to speak of a presence, albeit, as we have seen, a presence that defies the dyadic division of interior and exterior and thus transcends individual identity as distinguished from the communal or social. The next step would be to more emphatically let go of presence and its metaphysical corollary, absence. As I have argued in *Giving beyond the Gift*, the "more radical negation presumes neither a presence that is absent nor an absence that is present; there is simply nothing of which not to speak, and hence it should occasion the end of God-talk, even of an apophatic nature, a mode of speech predicated on the seemingly absurd proposition that what is said is never what one is saying. The exigency of the moment – to subjugate the theistic anthropomorphization of God and the corresponding egoistic theomorphization of self – demands a sweeping and uncompromising purification of the idea of infinity from all predication."<sup>133</sup>

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me state unequivocally that any suggestion of venturing beyond Altizer portends a great indebtedness to him based on the hermeneutical principle that there is no way to overcome except by undergoing. I concur with his appraisal that "our modern theological thinking shatters every possible theological transcendence, dissolving or

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<sup>132</sup> See the relative early formulation of this insight in Thomas J. J. Altizer, "William Blake and the Role of Myth in the Radical Christian Vision," in Altizer and Hamilton, *Radical Theology*, 189: "The specifically apocalyptic or eschatological ground of the Christian faith demands that it be a forward-moving process revolving about the absolute negation of the old cosmos of a totally fallen history. In *Jerusalem*, Blake names this absolute negation a 'Fourfold Annihilation,' a total annihilation that is 'going forward, forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity' (98:27). Indeed, the radical Christian has taken this original ground of the Christian faith to its inevitable fulfillment: if all eternity must pass through 'Self-Annihilation,' then God himself must die to make possible the redemptive triumph of the apocalypse, for his death reverses that 'Self-hood' which is the source of the fall." On the Blakean notion of the self-annihilation of God and the disclosure of the Satanic identity of God, see Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 169. Utilizing language that resonates both with German Idealism and kabbalistic theosophy to describe Blake's vision, Altizer writes that the "totally apocalyptic Satan is inseparable from a totally apocalyptic Christ, for Satan is that Godhead which dies or is 'Self-Annihilated' in Christ. Only that self-negation or self-emptying makes manifest and real the pure negativity of the Godhead, a negativity that is true negativity only as a consequence of the crucifixion. Now this is the very identity of the crucifixion that Hegel conceptually realized at the very time when Blake was creating his mature vision, and for Hegel as for Blake, evil is the withdrawal into self-centeredness, a withdrawal which *from the beginning* occurs in the 'externalization' and 'alienation' of the divine Being, for Absolute Being becomes its own 'other,' and thereby withdraws into itself and becomes self-centered or 'evil'" (italics in original). The language deployed by Altizer is also reminiscent of the self-externalization of the infinite and the dark ground in Schelling's thought, which Rosenzweig already compared to Lurianic kabbalah. See Wolfson, *Giving*, 80, and references cited on 346 nn. 332-33. For a more recent comparison of Schelling and the kabbalistic reflections on the externalization of the infinite and the mystery of the withdrawal of the light into itself to create a space that is devoid of the light, the secret of the contraction (*simsum*), see Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 170-72, 213-17.

<sup>133</sup> Wolfson, *Giving*, 235.

reversing that transcendence so as to call forth a uniquely modern immanence, but an absolute immanence that is fully and finally a theological immanence, and is so if only because it so fully incorporates or embodies everything that once was realized as absolute transcendence itself."<sup>134</sup> The negative thinking promoted here endures as a theological thinking insofar as it is centered on God, albeit a God that is the absolute abyss, the void devoid of godliness. I would suggest, however, that the transcending of transcendence<sup>135</sup> should conjure an apophasis of the apophasis that would beckon a triple negativity, the negation of the negation of the negation<sup>136</sup> – the emptiness of the fullness that is the fullness of the emptiness emptied of the emptiness of its emptiness, the plenitudinal constriction of the constricted plenitude, the compression of the infinite in the infinitesimal point of expansion. The kenosis I am proposing is not simply thinking the self-negation at the deepest level of the absolute, envisaged as the absolutely self-negating being, but it is rather the self-negating negation, the emptying of self-emptying,<sup>137</sup> the self-mirroring of nothingness mirrored in the mirror of nothingness as nothingness,<sup>138</sup> the absolute nothing differentiated in the nondifferentiation of its differentiation as the relative nothing. Being is thus implicated in not being the not being that is being intertwined with nonbeing enfolding in the unfolding of the chiasmatic manifold that is the entanglement of the multiverse. In the following evaluation of Nishida, Altizer seems to come close to the position I am articulating:

Nishida appears to go beyond even Hegel in understanding the true absolute as an absolute self-contradiction, for it is truly absolute by being opposed to nothing, and it is absolute being only if it is opposed to absolutely nothing. Yet nothing at all can objectively or actually oppose the absolute, therefore the true absolute can only be opposed to nothing by being opposed to itself, and this can occur only by way of an absolute self-contradiction. Therefore, the absolute can only truly or actually express itself by negating itself, but by negating itself it is paradoxically at one with itself, so that the absolute being of the absolute is an absolutely self-negating being, and it is that self-negation which *is* the absolute. . . . But if this "is"

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<sup>134</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing*, 135.

<sup>135</sup> See Wolfson, *A Dream*, 38–41; *Giving*, xxii.

<sup>136</sup> Wolfson, *Giving*, xxvii, 228–36. On the gender implication of what I have called *the apophasis of the apophasis*, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Bifurcating the Androgyne and Engendering Sin: A Zoharic Reading of Gen 1–3," in *Hidden Truths From Eden: Esoteric Interpretations of Genesis 1–3*, ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 114: "The delineation of the female as the site of alterity problematizes the hegemony of the masculine, and thus essentializing the feminine as the inessential, the essence that defies essentialization, has been a necessary step along the way of critical thinking. The apophasis of apophasis, however, demands taking the next step toward an unadulterated alterity, which would preclude not only the reduction of the other to the same but also the reduction of the same to the other. This can take root with the borderspace where there is no other, because there is nothing but the other that in the absence of the same is not marked as the presence of an other. In taking that step, perhaps we commence to trespass the sign of both patriarchy and matriarchy."

<sup>137</sup> Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology*, 71.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

truly realizes an “is not,” then it would be actual in a Western sense, and so, too, an absolute nothingness would be a truly actual nothingness, and a truly actual nothingness which could be manifest and real as the Nihil.<sup>139</sup>

Beyond affirmation and negation—and this would include the affirmation in negation that is typical of apophatic mysticism and, in my mind, is discernible in Altizer's recurrent emphasis on the absolute self-negation of the absolute, the Hegelian *das Nichts* generated by a negation of *Sein*—the charge before us is to disavow the theological in the guise of the atheological, to implement the apophasis of apophasis by not speaking about that of which we cannot speak, not even speaking about our inability not to speak.<sup>140</sup> The annulment of negative theology triggered by this kenotic gesticulation is so negative in its confrontation of the nihil that it absolves itself entirely of theological taxonomization. The iconoclasm, on this score, would mandate that the icons of the aniconic be smashed on the altar of an absolute nothingness that is to be contrasted with the residual idolization and veneration of the nothingness of the absolute.

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<sup>139</sup> Altizer, “Buddha and God,” 181, 185 (italics in original). The Hegelian impact on the Kyoto School is documented in great detail in Peter Soares, *The Kyoto School's Takeover of Hegel: Nishida, Nishitani, and Tanabe Remake the Philosophy of Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011). On the Hegelian dialectic and Mahāyāna nondualism in the oeuvre of Nishida, see Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō's Chiasmatic Chorology*, 30–48, 141–64.

<sup>140</sup> Wolfson, *A Dream*, 31–32. It is worth recalling here the observation of Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 85: “This circularity makes itself known now in that we are supposed to speak about keeping silent—and this is highly problematic. For whoever discourses about keeping silent is in danger of proving in the most immediate way that he neither knows nor understands keeping silent.” For citation of this passage and analysis of related texts in the Heideggerian corpus, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 116–17. For a more detailed study of the role accorded apophasis in Heidegger, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Heidegger's Apophaticism: Unsayings the Said and the Silence of the Last God,” in *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Nahum Brown and J. Aaron Simmons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 185–216.