

# THINKING THROUGH THE DEATH OF GOD

A CRITICAL COMPANION TO THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER

*Edited by*

LISSA McCULLOUGH

*and*

BRIAN SCHROEDER

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

# Contents

Preface	vii
BRIAN SCHROEDER	
Acknowledgments	xiii
Historical Introduction	xv
LISSA McCULLOUGH	
List of Abbreviations	xxix
1 Rending the Veil of the Temple: The Death of God as <i>Sacrificium Representationis</i>	1
CARL A. RASCHKE	
2 Betraying Altizer	11
MARK C. TAYLOR	
3 Theology as the Thinking of Passion Itself	29
LISSA McCULLOUGH	
4 Godhead and God	47
RAY L. HART	
5 Absolute Atonement	65
BRIAN SCHROEDER	
6 Crucifixion and Alterity: Pathways to Glory in the Thought of Altizer and Levinas	89
EDITH WYSCHOGROD	

7	The Diachrony of the Infinite in Altizer and Levinas: Vanishing without a Trace and the Trace without Vanishing	105
	D. G. LEAHY	
8	Abyssal Absences: Body and Place in Altizer's Atheology	125
	EDWARD S. CASEY	
9	Compassion at the Millennium: A Buddhist Salvo for the Ethics of the Apocalypse	147
	JANET GYATSO	
10	The Negative Task of Parable: Reading Kafka through the Prism of Altizer's Thought	169
	WALTER A. STRAUSS	
11	In the Wasteland: Apocalypse, Theology, and the Poets	185
	DAVID JASPER	
12	Kenosis	197
	ALPHONSO LINGIS	
	A Response	213
	THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER	
	Comprehensive Bibliography of Thomas J. J. Altizer	231
	List of Contributors	245
	Index	249

# Preface

## *Forward to a Future Thinking*

BRIAN SCHROEDER

In the present age, marked by an unprecedented conservatism on multiple registers, it is increasingly rare to find any truly radical thinking occurring, especially in the area of theological reflection. And even if the phrase has grown cliché in certain circles, surely there is no more radical idea than the death of God. Heralded by Nietzsche and others after him as the “greatest event of the age,” recognized and even celebrated periodically in late modern and postmodern thinking, the death of God has nonetheless remained largely unthought in its full signification. This death implies not only that the transcendental ground of truth, value, and meaning is called into question (the more radical forms of twentieth-century thought have indeed done this), but so too is the *future* of thinking itself, having now exposed itself to what is arguably the gravest threat of the age—nihilism. Yet, as Nietzsche reminds us, only in such exposure is a “consummate” or “ecstatic” nihilism finally revealed as a genuine possibility, a creative and resourceful nihilism that overcomes its previous “passive” and “active” forms and does not subsume and neutralize pure thinking under the shadow of impossibility, but rather dissipates that shade by transfiguring it into the high noon of *new* horizons.

It is surely ironic that any present thinking about God should assume the form of the impossibility of such thinking. Nowhere is this more manifest than in contemporary philosophical discourse, which has become the

new voice of what remains of theology, even if it is largely unaware of this. Ironically still, much contemporary philosophy continues to be a reaction to dialectical thinking, the language of our most progressive theologies, and in particular to the philosophy of German idealism. Two centuries ago, Hegel could announce the death of God at the end of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* by declaring historical time the “Golgotha of Spirit.” The transcendent deity, having emptied itself (*kenosis*) of its being as the purely abstract idea (*Idea*), is now actualized as historical spirit (*Geist*), and fully realized and known as such in and through the concept (*Begriff*). Given that, as Hegel famously notes in the *Phenomenology*, “the real is the actual and the actual is the real,” whatever is must be, and indeed is able to be, articulated in language—in other words, *named*. Thus one finds in Hegel the last fully systematic philosophical attempt to generate a rational theology, and according to his interpretation, Christianity alone is able to do this, hence it is the absolute religion.

If the traditional task of theology has been the naming of God, however, this naming has been reduced to a virtual silence in our day. Assuming the charge relinquished by theology, it is philosophy, for the most part, that now names this silence, doing so as the “death of God.” Responding to Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, foremost among other philosophical thinkers, disclose or name the “ground” of all God-thinking as groundless, thereby calling forth the absolute darkness left by the deity’s demise as the horizon for future thinking. Borrowing the term from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Heidegger identifies such naming as ontotheology and further identifies the flight or abandonment of God as the withdrawal of being (*Sein*) from beings, from the horizon of the world. But in this retreat, being itself is made manifest, such that now it is possible not only to fully name the impossibility, that is, being as objective presence, but also to name the appropriating event, or “enowning” (*Ereignis*), of “be-ing” (*Seyn*), that is, being (*Sein*) no longer thought metaphysically. This is the move that Heidegger makes in his posthumously published and recently translated *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, undoubtedly his most theological venture, even if it advances his most theologically critical thinking, the genesis of which occurs as he is most under Nietzsche’s influence, whose thought courses throughout the work, albeit largely unacknowledged. The actual historical enactment of being’s withdrawal occurs, to use Heidegger’s language in the *Contributions*, in the “going under” of the “ones to come,” those who “constantly question” and through this questioning are oriented toward the future, belonging therein to the “last god.”

The dark void or emptiness of nihilism is henceforth revealed as chaos itself, as both the impossibility of possibility and the possibility of impossibility. That is to say, the groundless ground of chaos, the actual body of the now ghostly God, is the standpoint of nihilism's refutation through the will's affirmation of its necessity, though conversely, it is also the moment wherein the negativity of the abyssal nothing threatens to swallow not only all existing meaning and value but the possibility of its being created anew. This dilemma is the challenge for humanity posed by the death of God, the meaning of which event must be thought through in order to overcome and transfigure the threatening paralysis of No-saying into a liberating Yes-saying to our actual historical future.

Now it is also ironic that the theological depths in which the above-mentioned philosophers are immersed, and out of which they formulate their respective philosophies, is, with few exceptions, all but absent from the philosophical thinking occurring today. This is truly a recent phenomenon, and one that testifies to the impossibility of naming God, and perhaps even of naming the death of God. Even so, the death of God, on the one hand, is now often assumed as a general starting point for other reflections, seemingly embraced by a whole generation of "continental" thinkers who largely interpret its meaning in a decidedly *nonthological* manner as the simple thesis of God's nonexistence. Construed thus, the death of God loses all power as an absolute naming, and the correlated themes of the death of the subject and of Yes-saying to the earth are likewise rendered impotent. Indeed, this is arguably the crux of the so-called postmodern dilemma, namely, how to confront the problem of nihilism. Yet, on the other hand, this recent theological naiveté indicates the emergence or birth of a new consciousness, one perhaps untainted by the stigma of previous metaphysics, and so open to the future in a way never before possible. Here the imagination now holds full sway, enabling not only the revitalization of philosophy and theology but opening wholly new paths of thinking, conjoining these disciplines with literary traditions, where perhaps the most radical expressions of Western consciousness have emerged and flowered.

This conjoining is the great legacy bequeathed to thinking by Thomas J. J. Altizer, arguably the most visionary contemporary thinker of the death of God, whose thought the essays of this volume engage critically. This collective critical response, drawn from a number of leading voices in theology, philosophy, and literary studies, not only acknowledges the enormous debt that thinking owes to Altizer, but also, true to the spirit of his lifelong project, advances the task of thinking through the

death of God by pressing beyond the framework of his radical theological vision. As these essays testify, just when theology has seemingly given up the proverbial ghost, when philosophy seems increasingly to embody the endless play of hermeneutical games, and literary studies are often construed as floundering in the sea of deconstruction, the advance of thinking continues, charting new seas, mapping future possibilities. Like Nietzsche, who declared his vision of the eternal recurrence “a prophecy,” Altizer too is prophetic. And if it is the case that a prophet is commonly not recognized among his or her own, and is “untimely” in this sense, then surely this is true of Altizer.

Well over a century has passed since the proclamation of Nietzsche’s “madman,” and the shock of the death of God movement of the 1960s has long since worn off, virtually forgotten by the general populace and most academics. Yet all things, all events, have a beginning, whether timely or untimely. If the contemporary state of theology demands an awakening, even a “rude awakening” (a phrase associated with the Kyoto school of comparative religious philosophy, recognized by Altizer years ago as identifying the perilous condition of our present nihilism) from our current cultural slumber, induced by an uncritical conservatism, then the present work is truly timely. Yet it is also untimely in being both too late and too early. That radical theology has been all but completely marginalized in mainstream academic discourse (one need not even consider the churches at this point) only indicates that the level and range of critical reflection found in these pages ought to have been more sustained over the years. Thus is this work too late in its arrival. Still, if one holds to the principle of Eleatic metaphysics, made familiar in its medieval rendering as *ex nihilo nihil fit*, then any truly new parturition must emerge out of what has come before, oftentimes only after an extended gestation. Certainly the essays presented herein by such distinguished scholars as Edward Casey, Janet Gyatso, Ray Hart, David Jasper, D. G. Leahy, Alphonso Lingis, Carl Raschke, Walter Strauss, Mark C. Taylor, and Edith Wyschogrod are the fruit of many years of sustained engagement with the themes and questions raised by the death of God, including Altizer’s pioneering theological interpretation of it. It may well be, though, however cliché the phrase “God is dead,” that this event is *still* years away from being recognized as such. In this sense, this work perhaps arrives too soon.

Nietzsche wrote that it would take possibly a hundred years before his readers would understand him. Altizer is one of those few readers. Hopefully such a length of time need not pass before we are able to understand

Altizer's apocalyptic vision. This collection not only pays tribute to the theological originality with which Altizer interprets the prophetic pronouncement of the death of God but advances its promise as well by thinking it through more fully, thus embodying the impossible possibility of a joyous affirmative future *willing*, now needed more than ever given the dark times that confront us all.



# Historical Introduction

LISSA McCULLOUGH

From the beginning, and throughout its course, Thomas J. J. Altizer's theological stance set him apart from the other figures associated with the so-called death of God movement, which achieved its peak from 1965 through 1967, then subsided in the late sixties and early seventies. In truth, it was not organically a movement at all, but was generated as such by the media treatment. William Hamilton and Paul van Buren were the fellow travelers most often cited, while mention was made here and there of Richard Rubenstein, Gabriel Vahanian, Harvey Cox, and Langdon Gilkey.<sup>1</sup> In the media coverage, which often failed to make finer distinctions among their disparate positions, a number of outlooks were corralled together that did not have much in common. Some were using the phrase as a cipher for the secularization of society (Cox, Vahanian), others were concerned to examine the vacuity and impossibility of God language (van Buren) or the impossibility of believing in God in the wake of the Holocaust (Rubenstein), while others wanted to develop Bonhoeffer's notion of a "religionless Christianity" focused on ethics and Jesus as the man for others, pulling the mind of the age away from the God question as moot metaphysics (Hamilton).

Only Altizer among them was intent to focus on God and nothing but God. His concern lay not primarily with human existential need or the condition of society, but with *what God has done in history*. Beginning with his earliest writings, Altizer's position was theocentric and metaphysical. Far from intending, along with the secularists, to resolve all divine values

into a human ground, Altizer sought as a pure theologian to resolve all human values into a divine ground. In a sense, this gets to the heart of Altizer's project: unthinking the "God" of Christian history as a way of releasing Godhead qua actual reality from the "dead body of God" remaining to a collapsed Christendom. And this "releasement" of Godhead qua actual reality from Christendom's God would constitute, as Altizer understands it, a renewal of Christianity in its original form.

For as Altizer analyzes the early history of Christianity, the Christian church radically reversed the prophetic ground of original Christianity, giving it a wholly new identity, one radically discontinuous with its earliest manifestation. Christianity was born as an apocalyptic movement grounded in the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions of ancient Judaism; its leading figure envisioned an imminent transformation of the world by God, a transformation that would draw forth the full power of Satan in the process of realizing the Kingdom of God. The early church rapidly reversed this original manifestation of Christianity, essentially converting a radical prophetic faith into a neopagan mystery religion, a priestly religion focused on otherworldly salvation and sacerdotal participation, rather than on this-worldly apocalyptic transformation. In its most primitive form, original Christianity conceived salvation in an entirely different sense than did the mystery religion generated by the church, for this is a salvation event wholly committed to enacting the divine kingdom *here*, transforming this actual world, rather than one anticipating the transport of the "soul" into a "spiritual body" in a heavenly realm. For prophetic faith, salvation or salvific wholeness is achieved partly by present participation, which is actual, and partly by pure faith, which is eschatological and future-oriented. But both elements of faith—present participation and future expectation—are forward movements toward the divine transformation of history and world. Rather than transporting elements of earthly existence (the "soul") toward the divine (in "heaven"), this is a vision of the divine breaking in and enacting itself on earth, effecting an apocalyptic transformation of the earthly realm itself into a kingdom of God.

As European Christendom has collapsed in the modern period, so has the transcendent and otherworldly God of that collapsed Christendom 'died'—that is, become no longer real as a center of value and generative source of life and light. Precisely by virtue of this collapse, Altizer posits, the post-Christian reality of God, qua *actual* and *present* reality, is being released from the "heaven" generated by the Christian mystery religion to become all in all in the world through an eschatological process of *kenosis*.

The death of God is “good news” because God is no longer regarded from the point of view of a sacerdotal faith as the transcendent Other, alienated from the world, an object of religious worship, a Father and Judge infinitely distant from the world, but through the kenotic realization of death is experienced now by a prophetic faith as increasingly incarnate in our very midst as the “flesh,” or active embodiment, or actual eventfulness of the world. Altizer is not a simple atheist, then, but a post-theist—one for whom the metaphysical reality of God (theism) is dialectically and historically indispensable—for it is truly *God* who is overcome and transfigured by death, which is to say, by absolute self-sacrifice.

In his historic debate with Rev. Dr. John Warwick Montgomery in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago on the evening of February 24, 1967, speaking *ex tempore* to an audience of thousands (the chapel was so crowded to overflowing that loudspeakers were arranged for the throngs on the lawn), Altizer affirmed:

‘God is dead’ are words recording a confession of faith. Let me be clear in emphasizing that as far as our intention is concerned, we intend to be speaking in faith. We do not intend to be speaking as unbelievers . . . I think that, if any attention at all is given to these words, it will be seen that they do not represent ordinary atheism. The ordinary atheist, of course, does not believe in God, does not believe that there is now or ever has been a God. But we are attempting to say that God Himself is God, and yet has died as God in Jesus Christ in order to embody himself redemptively in the world. In saying that God is dead we are attempting to say that the transcendent Ground, the ultimate final Ground of the world, life, and existence has died . . . to make possible final reconciliation of Himself with the world.<sup>2</sup>

To his credit, in confronting Altizer on this occasion, Montgomery, who was then professor of church history and history of Christian thought at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, recognized more clearly than did the general public of the period that he was debating not a “secularist” or “atheist,” but a passionately convinced *heretic*—someone laying claim to the title of “Christian” and advocating publicly a highly unorthodox reconception of the Christian faith. Montgomery therefore fought Altizer’s heterodoxy with all the power of orthodoxy he could muster, and perceptions of who “won” the debate depended entirely on which side you were on.

While Montgomery took Altizer seriously as an enemy of the faith, at least a handful of others were taking him seriously as a major religious thinker of our time. In 1970, as the death of God media blitz ebbed into yesterday's news, a book emerged entitled *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response*, edited by the prominent process theologian John B. Cobb Jr. of the School of Theology at Claremont, which acknowledged the abiding importance and influence of Altizer as a systematic theologian. The volume dubbed Altizer "the most original and creative American theologian of this period," whose writings offer "a coherent vision of great power." Of all American theological writing of the period, it went on to assert, "it is Altizer's that embodies the most vigorous and passionate faith," making him the "boldest evangelical theologian of our time." The volume also acknowledged Altizer as the "most influential" theologian of the day, although unfortunately that influence was almost solely a response to Altizer's negations, not to his affirmations, for his influence encouraged the emergence of "an ethical Christian humanism" that is far removed from his own theological project.<sup>3</sup> This well-executed volume sought to address critically the significance of Altizer's affirmations, and as such it remains to this day an excellent and valuable resource for understanding the early phase of Altizer's career.

Another who took Altizer's affirmations seriously was Mircea Eliade, the distinguished historian of religions at the University of Chicago. In 1967, at the height of the media furor, the subject surfaced in Eliade's journal. Eliade comments on the death of God theme as it appears in Heidegger's work: "Have I noted these lines from Heidegger's *Holzwege* [Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950, p. 186] that Tom Altizer should meditate on? In any case I'm recopying them here: 'Hier stirbt das Absolute. Gott ist tot. Das sagt andere, nur nicht: es gibt keinen Gott.' (This is where the Absolute meets death. God is dead. And this means everything except 'There is no God.')"<sup>4</sup> As noted by Eliade, Heidegger's reflection is crucial: "God is dead. And this means everything except [*andere, nur nicht*] 'there is no God.' If Heidegger is right in this claim, then the death of God does not mean the end of theological inquiry, but rather a new beginning in earnest, for there is still "everything" to be comprehended as a consequence of this absolute death. What is this "everything" (*andere*), positively analyzed? For Altizer this question was to become his vocation, and he went on to write a dozen theological books making his case for an answer: "God is dead" acknowledges a historical transformation of consciousness marking the

end of Christendom and Christendom's God, not the end of Godhead apprehended qua ultimate reality. The theologian's task is to speak of the ultimate reality now dawning in and through the death of God.

Eliade explores the subject more closely in a conversation with his colleague Claude-Henri Rocquet. In their exchange, Rocquet infers that atheism, just as much as theism, constitutes a part of the history of religions, and Eliade replies: "The theology of 'the death of God' is extremely important, because it is the sole religious creation of the modern Western world. What it presents us with is the final step in the process of desacralization. For the historian of religions its interest is considerable, since this ultimate phase shows the 'sacred' reaching a perfect state of camouflage or, more accurately, becoming wholly identified with the 'profane.'"<sup>5</sup> Is the death of God theology truly the *sole* religious creation of the modern Western world? Is it the dark and restless heart of modern religious creativity? What does it mean to take what Eliade called "the final step in the process of desacralization"? Eliade goes on to point out that theologians of the death of God—and here he has Altizer primarily in mind—still hope, thanks to a dialectical *coincidentia oppositorum*, that this new awareness of the radically profane nature of the world and human existence can become the foundation for a new mode of religious experience; that the death of "religion" is not the death of faith, but its purification and revitalization. Some years later Altizer, responding to Eliade's work, construes this point explicitly: "What could be a greater camouflage for the incarnation than the death of God? Remembering that for Eliade the sacred hides itself in showing itself, we can only conclude that in the supreme theophany God is totally hidden, and totally hidden precisely in that theophany itself."<sup>6</sup>

It is significant that Altizer's own academic training was in the history of religions at the University of Chicago, where he later befriended Eliade, for his lifelong development as a theologian has shown the distinct impact of this formation. His outlook on Christianity—and on the death of God as a culminating event in the history of that religion—has always been fundamentally informed by a comparative perspective on religions, Eastern and Western; see *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (1961) and *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (1963). This comparative perspective emboldened him to explore Christianity's enormous cultural power and impact outside the bounds of traditional Christian institutions and teachings, which is to say, in disregard of the purview of the church. Taking a long and broad history-of-religions view of Christianity, Altizer grasped that no ecclesiastical theology would

ever be capable of recognizing the death of God as an event intrinsic to Christian history, whereas a radical theology taking its stand in the secular world—not constrained by the conservative and sectarian God traditions of the church—would be able to appropriate the death of God so widely attested in modern culture after 1789 (by Blake, Hegel, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Sartre, Joyce, Beckett, etc.) as the embodiment of a revolutionary new theological meaning and motive in Christian history, a meaning inescapably manifest in the most creative cultural developments of late modernity. It was his study of William Blake's prophetic vision, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (1967), that set Altizer decisively on this path. Judging by the gauge of cultural creativity, the "dead God" demonstrated as much power to inspire creative vision as "God alive," for negative experience of the sacred is nonetheless real and often overwhelming experience.

Assimilation of a highly creative secular theology was to become the heart of Altizer's systematic project. In the crisis of modern theology brought on by the critical dissolution of "God," Altizer discerned an either/or emerging, a decisive fork in the road that demanded radical decision: Either theology would make a forward movement into uncharted regions of heterodoxy, and in so doing embrace *becoming* as an act of God that transforms the Godhead itself, or theology would entrench itself in a conservative orthodox reaction, clinging to the God traditions of absolute transcendence, immutability, and impassibility, presumed secure on the basis of the two millennia (Kierkegaard's "1800 years"), thus preserving the transcendent God of Christendom. This fork in the road was articulated by Altizer as "A Wager" in the final chapter of *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), which he hoped would communicate this either/or challenge to a popular audience.

What even now distinguishes Altizer's voice among late modern theologians is his appropriation of the death of God theme in modern culture to effect a radical renewal of systematic theology, producing a fully systematic theology entirely liberated from allegiance to God traditions of the church, and above all the church's essentially conservative claims to special authority in the knowledge of God. With the decisive fall of Christendom (occurring roughly from the early sixteenth century through the French Revolution, when the church was violently ejected from the political establishment), the question of who has the "authority" to speak of God becomes entirely open. Altizer's theological stance presses the Protestant Reformation to its radical conclusion and emancipates theology from the

domain and authority of the church once and for all. Technically, this is how Altizer defines the term “radical theology”; it is a theology whose “authority” stems from visionary witness alone, and not at all from validation by institutional authority or the established mandate of tradition. Radical theology is a totally free witness in living apprehension of the sacred, self-authorizing; it is a witness that unthinks every established theological ground in order to rethink the fundamental ground of theology anew.<sup>7</sup> Not only does it unthink every established ground, but by its radical nature it resists being established as a ground. It speaks its affirmations with an intrinsic authority, and by its essence as free witness, this “authority” cannot be captured in transferable forms or sealed in dogmatic propositions. The apocalyptic Jesus provides a prime model of this radical witness, for when the spirit speaks in him it speaks with power, and its intrinsic “authority” can be heard (Mark 1:22, 27), but efforts to establish that authority transform it into something alien to its original form.

Altizer has always been serious about the implications of *death* in the phrase “the death of God,” and what this death does to transfigure the gospel or “good news” as a Word of life and light. His own criteria for recognizing the kenotic Word focus on the crucifixion to the virtual exclusion of resurrection. To know the death of God is to know crucifixion and the descent into hell. It is to encounter the consuming nothingness that is so acutely manifest in the full reality of our world—in its darkness and evil, its ungodly holocausts, its all too brutal and unaccountable forms of sacrifice. If theology does not have the power to illuminate and redeem *this* world’s evil, Altizer believes, it is not genuine theology but a form of escapism or wishful illusion, an evasion of reality.

This is above all so in the shadow of the Holocaust, where theology has no shelter from darkness. Altizer’s death of God theology has always been implicitly a Holocaust theology in its open-eyed witness to the inescapable reality of evil and horror in our world and the relationship of this evil to an ultimate divine responsibility. In a thirty-year retrospective article of 1996, Altizer reflects on the influence of human mass extermination on the genesis of the death of God theology: “History now first appears to the modern theologian as an arena of darkness and horror, and of ultimate and final horror and darkness. Although this may not be due to the Holocaust alone, it is the Holocaust alone that openly embodies such horror, and we may presume that the Holocaust was a generating cause of the death of God theologies, as it certainly was for this theologian.”<sup>8</sup>

Whereas earlier Christian theology could affirm a providential God, a God who acts providentially and even redemptively in history, the Holocaust blows the doctrine of providence out of the water. After the Holocaust, it is no longer possible to affirm providence, Altizer maintains, unless one affirms that God wills or effects ultimate evil; that is, unless evil itself is providential. "How can one accept the reality of the Holocaust and not accept the reality of an ultimate evil? And how can the Christian accept the reality of an ultimate evil and wholly divorce it from reality or God? . . . If the Christian knows that God is the ultimate origin of every event, then God is the ultimate origin of the Holocaust, even if we follow Augustine and orthodox Western theology and speak of God's 'permission of evil.'" The omnipotence and omniscience of God do not permit us to imagine that God is not ultimately responsible for the Holocaust, even if human evil is accepted as the proximate cause. For if the traditional attributes of omnipotence and omniscience are granted, then God knew it would happen and "permitted" it, and the Holocaust is of a piece with God's providence. "Certainly the God of Christendom died in the Holocaust," Altizer concludes, "or became theologically unthinkable and unimaginable," and this means that "the God of every church dogmatics is now unthinkable."<sup>10</sup> So, as Altizer articulates it, the unprecedented theological challenge of our time becomes: Is a theology possible today that is not at bottom an erasure of the Holocaust?<sup>11</sup>

Opposing the established religion of his day, Luther advocated a "theology of the cross" in opposition to any and every "theology of glory"; for similar reasons, Altizer has advocated in our age what we might call a "theology of darkness" in opposition to every "theology of light." Virtually all Christian theologies, by Altizer's rigorous standard, have to some degree or other given in to the temptation of light; that is, they deny the full reality of evil and embrace a "salvation" or "heaven" that is essentially an escape from suffering and darkness into a transcendent "happy" realm. Whereas the death on the cross, for Altizer, is the unique formula for taking the sacrifice of God with absolute and final seriousness. All that our natural being says "no" to is symbolized in the cross as that which we must pass into with Christ in the flesh, for this enacts the divine "yes" to incarnation, and this "yes" itself is crucifying.

This journey into flesh is what Altizer means by the "descent into hell" in his book by that title, *The Descent into Hell* (1970); it is a divine movement into a real earthly body, which in this theology of darkness displaces the offensive "ascent into heaven" of the quasi-Gnostic "spiri-



tual body.” This descent implies a total compassionate solidarity with the suffering body of the victim, who often cannot actually experience a light in the darkness but can believe in faith that it exists in the mercy of God (Job 19:25–26) or Christ (Mark 15:34) and can therein embody the light by faith alone. This theology refuses to abandon the suffering body in a quest for “heaven” and “light” but stands by the body in crucifixion, abiding with the crucified flesh as a flesh willed by God, a flesh actually loved by God into a condition of crucifixion.

This correlation of incarnation and crucifixion brings us to the core of Altizer’s mature understanding of God as an apocalyptic dichotomy: God as at one and the same time self-incarnating and self-annihilating. His fully apocalyptic understanding of God comes to birth in a highly compressed form in *The Self-Embodiment of God* of 1977, published when Altizer was fifty years old. Only with this work does Altizer break through to the pure dialectical ground of his theological vision and press it into a tight, terse, powerful, self-contained, seemingly airless capsule of a book—a book that acts as a primal seed for his later thinking, germinating many times over to express new dimensions of the same fundamental idea; each of his works thereafter systematically expands one aspect or another of the synthesis compressed in this book. By analogy, this was Altizer’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and indeed the spirit giving it birth was now far more Hegelian than Blakean. It remains the purest expression of Altizer’s vision, and truly to read this book is to read Altizer straight up, but for that very reason it is perhaps the least accessible of his works. Here a biblically grounded apocalyptic voice enacts the movement of spirit into flesh as a kenotic self-emptying of the primordial God into the full actuality of the body of the world; in so doing, it enacts genesis, exodus, judgment, incarnation, and apocalypse as an integral series of self-embodying transfigurations of the Godhead itself. The whole traces out a revelation history.

Just as a jazz musician may play for years before finding his signature “voice,” a voice that is purely his own because it speaks directly, one might say “bodily,” out of the inspirational source of originality and authenticity, so Altizer finds his theological voice in *The Self-Embodiment of God*, and suddenly in retrospect all his earlier books, however creative and thoughtful they may be, sound juvenile. Whereas all his published writings from 1958 forward set out to prosecute the same fundamental theological project with a truly remarkable consistency and tenacity, the earlier books are written in a talky, external, academic tone that simply disappears after 1977. One hears in the early Altizer certain phrasings and cadences of the

voice to come, but only in midcareer does the voice become whole and pure, no longer speaking *about* what it means to say, as if from outside, but now *enacting* what it means to say as it says it, unfolding a current event.

In this newfound oracular voice, the medium is the message, for voice is the medium of apocalypse. Now speech is event, uniting interiority and exteriority. And precisely as event, speech is shattering: an apocalyptic breaking in upon silence. The act of creation is this breaking in upon the silence of God. God before creation cannot be heard, for the primordial God constitutes a silence so pure, so total and quiescent that it has no voice. Creation shatters the primordial silence, annihilating it as silence so that for the first time it can be heard. Thus the “speech” of God in genesis is the genesis of a self-revealing God, a God revealing Godhead by embodying Godhead in actual event. The body of the world is “spoken” by God as the only way possible for the original silence of God to be heard, for “it is silence itself that passes into speech” (*The Self-Embodiment of God* 5). To be heard, the primordial reality of God must be sacrificed, must be shattered by the “speech” of creation. So it is that in every moment of actuality God is both embodied (posited in incarnation) and annihilated (negated in crucifixion) simultaneously; God *is* this dichotomy. God *is* this inbreaking occurrence, this apocalyptic shattering of quiescence, this ongoing transformative eventfulness of the world, in which Godhead continually negates Godhead in order to enact and embody Godhead.

Envisioning this negativity in the Godhead means that the absolute positivity of Godhead, or the plenitude of Being, is self-consumed in the act of creation; in turn, this self-consuming negativity releases God to every freedom of becoming. God is not constrained to an original or primordial form but is freed to change revelatory forms or epiphanies, and here again it seems likely that Altizer’s history of religions background influences his theological reading of Christian revelation history. Why should not ultimate reality reveal itself historically and progressively by means of changing epiphanic forms, forms distantly analogous to the *avatars* of the Hindu gods—but radically more comprehensive and absolute because they are identified with the ground of reality or actuality *per se*?

Altizer’s later works meditate on this dialectical ground of actuality—that is, the apocalyptic ground of eventfulness or actuality as the revelatory manifestation of the will of God—both historically and constructively. *Total Presence* (1980) examines the apocalyptic speech of Jesus in the para-

bles of the New Testament as an enactment of the Kingdom of God. *History as Apocalypse* (1985) explores the Christian epic tradition, from its historical and biblical origins through its ending in *Finnegans Wake*, as an apocalyptic revelation history. *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1990) articulates Altizer's most comprehensive systematic theology (making it *my* personal favorite), while *The Genesis of God* (1993) focuses more intently on the historical-dialectical logic of the relationship between apocalypse and genesis, a logic according to which only the genesis of God can make possible the death of God. *Godhead and the Nothing* (2003) ventures further into the eye of genesis as the sacrificial origin and primordial ground of creation. Finally, "Altizer on Altizer" should be mentioned here as a valuable reflection by the author in retrospect upon his own intentions in writing each of his major books up through *The Contemporary Jesus* (1997).<sup>12</sup>

Looking back on his own theological voyage as reflected in these writings, Altizer encapsulates his overall project thus:

The intention throughout this voyage is to seek a truly radical and yet nevertheless fully Christian theology, a theology with a genuinely Biblical ground but one nonetheless fully open to our world, a world here understood as embodying what Blake envisioned as the "Self-Annihilation of God." Moreover, and perhaps most deeply, there is the intention of renewing an original apocalyptic Christianity, and doing so with the recognition that Christian theology itself has truly reversed that origin, and only the most radical transformation of our theology can recover it.<sup>13</sup>

For all his controversial radicalism and heterodoxy, Altizer is a systematic and biblical theologian of an utterly classic type: one committed to systematically rethinking the core visionary truths of the Christian faith—creation, fall, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection—as these are historically transformed and radically reinterpreted from the point of view of late modern consciousness in a thoroughly "revolutionized" and "holocausted" world, an apocalyptic world of unprecedented beginnings and endings. The Christian vision is revealed as bearing a wholly new meaning that is actively generated by the death of Christendom's God and the savage extermination—forevermore—of human innocence. In our time, as we move out of the twentieth century toward who knows what kind of unprecedented global world order or world chaos, we have a pervasive new knowledge of Death and an unshirkable

new acquaintance with the Nothing, hence our theology of the future, if there is to be one, and if it is to be genuine, must contend with a dark exterior history and a dark interior history in terms that speak the whole truth of our devastation, including the new light that shines on that devastation.

This is what makes Altizer's "theology of darkness" one of the few live options, in my own view, for a reflective contemporary person of faith. It is a theology that fully engages the world we actually inhabit, the world to and for which we are called 'bodily' to be responsible. In repudiating false light, in boldly forswearing every extrinsic or established "ground" validating theology—objective, rational, historical, institutional, scientific, scriptural, or otherwise—and in theologizing passionately and creatively on the basis of a groundless but deeply erudite and reflective Christian vision, Altizer has ushered theology out of the age of Newton and into the age of Einstein and beyond. Here theology realizes a new freedom from the "law" or *nomos* of extrinsic authority and a new liberty to respond spontaneously to intrinsic authority. If incarnation is the actualization of energy, and energy is eternal delight, it is at least possible we have a new and unfamiliar epiphany of Godhead emerging in our midst.

## NOTES

1. No history of the death of God controversy has yet been published that would put the movement in critical perspective. The existing resources are relics from the period, many of which contain bibliographies: Charles N. Bent, S.J., *The Death of God Movement* (New York: Paulist Press, 1967); André Gounelle, *Foi vivante et mort de Dieu* (Tournon: Cahiers de Réveil, 1969); Lonnie D. Kliever and John H. Hayes, *Radical Christianity* (Anderson, SC: Droke House, 1968); William Robert Miller, *The New Christianity* (New York: Delacourte, 1967); Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Death of God Controversy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966); *The Death of God Debate*, ed. Jackson Lee Ice and John J. Carey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967); *Radical Theology: Phase Two*, ed. C. W. Christian and Glenn R. Wittig (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967); *The Meaning of the Death of God*, ed. Bernard Murchland (New York: Random House, 1967); *The Death of God Debate*, ed. Gabriel Vahanian (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); see also, Deborah Scerbicke, "A History of the 'Death of God' Theology in America, 1955–1969" (doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State University, Department of History, 1994).

2. *The Altizer-Montgomery Dialogue: A Chapter in the God Is Dead Controversy* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 7–8. For those seeking an accessible introduction to Altizer’s theology as a radical expression of faith, this spontaneous statement made in Rockefeller Chapel is as helpful as any. Audiotapes and transcripts of the dialogue are available from the Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, [ciltpp@cs.com](mailto:ciltpp@cs.com) (which, for the record, supports Montgomery’s stance against Altizer’s). I wish to thank Will Moore, president of CILTTP, for generously donating copies for my use.

3. *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response*, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); quotations are from the introduction by John B. Cobb and Nicholas Gier, 13–16.

4. Mircea Eliade, *Journal II: 1957–1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), entry of April 4, 1967, 297–98.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 151.

6. Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Mircea Eliade and the Death of God,” *Cross Currents* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 267.

7. Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Doing Radical Theology,” unpublished manuscript, 1.

8. Thomas J. J. Altizer, “The Holocaust and the Theology of the Death of God,” in *The Death of God Movement and the Holocaust*, ed. Stephen R. Haynes and John K. Roth (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 19. The editors of this volume are mistaken in asserting (p. xiv) that the *Time* cover story, “Toward a Hidden God,” in the Easter issue of April 8, 1966, which is reprinted in their volume, was the first major stir of the controversy; rather, the matter surfaced five and a half months earlier in an article in the *New York Times* on October 17, 1965, and it was the October 22, 1965 issue of *Time* magazine, containing the article “Christian Atheism: The ‘God Is Dead’ Movement,” that set off the flurry.

9. *Ibid.*, 21.

10. *Ibid.*, 20.

11. *Ibid.*, 22.

12. Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Altizer on Altizer,” *Literature and Theology* 15, no. 2 (June 2001): 187–94.

13. *Ibid.*, 187.

## CHAPTER 1



# Rending the Veil of the Temple

*The Death of God as Sacrificium Representationis*

CARL A. RASCHKE

If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century, it is a passage through the death of God, the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.

—Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Thomas J. J. Altizer has been called the “prophet of postmodern theology.” As the gray eminence and source of intellectual luminescence for various postmodern theologians, particularly Mark C. Taylor, Altizer stands at the threshold between modern religious thinking and the kind of writing that has surpassed it. The debate in contemporary

circles over what constitutes “modernist” and “postmodernist” styles of religious reflection has not been adequately resolved. One of the reasons may be that discussants have rarely had a genealogy, or a historical reference frame, for settling much of the argument. The postmodernist turn has its origins in death of God theology. It is “the death of God put into writing.” As the prime force in the death of God movement, Altizer gave impetus to this set of trends. Over a generation later it is perhaps time to decipher more of what has been meant by the “death of God” from the theological standpoint. The death of God, as Altizer himself has insisted, signifies the culmination of the apocalyptic vision of the West. Apocalypticism is the eschatology of the modern, insofar as it is imaginative apprehension of “total presence,” the parousia of what has not yet been realized in the thought of Calvary.

What do we mean by such a parousia? The death of God, according to Altizer, is something far more momentous than the fatality of the West’s premier theologoumenon. For Nietzsche, who first proclaimed *mors Dei*, it is a moment of deicide, the most capital of all capital crimes. In contrast to the two-millennium-old canard, it is not a *gens*, a people, or as the anti-Semitic vitriol runs, the “Jews,” who have killed God in Nietzsche’s picture of things. Deicide is an act of “mass slaughter.” So long as we heed the proviso that it is the masses who have perpetrated the slaughter, the “we” does not seem at all problematic; we have, as the Christian confessional goes, all in some manner of speaking cried, “Crucify him.” One can imagine the historical episode, the curious *mise-en-scène*, when the even stranger prophecy of the dying and rising “Son of man” becomes instantiated in the passion narrative. Stranger still remains Pilate’s quandary concerning the justice of exchanging Jesus for Barrabas. The regulative metonymy in what René Girard calls the “surrogate victim” of the blood sacrifice is at a stroke dissolved. The crucified Messiah no longer “signifies” by the thaumaturgy of symbolic exchange those who are destined to be redeemed from the violence of that historical site and figuration. The savage act of torture and execution can no longer redistribute the elements of cultural economy that invariably align the “sacred” with death, the “sacrificial” or “sacred-making” with crime. Pilate’s protestation of the man’s innocence bespeaks this terrible realization. *Ecce homo*, “behold the man.” It is a homicide that conceals the apophatic expanse of deity!

The founding event of “Christian theology” resides in this very enigma. Catholic tradition has called it the “mystery of the Incarnation.”

But the mystery reaches far deeper than the logical paradox that befuddled the early church councils. How does the death of a man, the Son of man, manifest the eternal nature of God? The first-generation Christian community resolved the issue by the testament of the Risen One. God died, but he rose again. Yet it was God's death that fascinated the Conciliar movement and compelled resistance to such heresies as Docetism, Patripassionism, Montanism, and even Arianism. The affirmation that God had died, and not merely taken on the "appearance" of mortality, penetrated to the marrow of both pagan and Hebraic thinking. And it served as the setting for a convulsion in Western thought that would be felt as late as the dialectical philosophies of the nineteenth century—the transformation of the classical theory of representation into the idea of "sacred history," of ontology into narratology, of metaphysics into soteriology, of the doctrine of essence into the romance of existence. Nietzsche's "murderers of God" are all of us, precisely because by embracing dialectical thought we have acceded to the abolition of the boundary between the two signs of thinking itself: presentation and representation, immediacy and mediacy, intimation and articulation, *ousia* (in the Heideggerian sense of that which simultaneously shows and hides itself) and *parousia*, temporality, and eschatology.

Apocalypticism is impossible within the limits of a metaphysical ideology. The signifying dyad of metaphysics, which enables the novelty of dialectics, is that of permanence and change, stasis and kinesis, time and eternity. The linguistic sign is schizoid, as is the case with Derrida's grammatology; it emerges out of the incision of the text. The sign of the "eschaton," however, is plenipotentiary; it gathers and fuses all forms of signifying praxis into itself; it draws them all in itself at the same time it shatters them and breaks them down into what they "are" before the judgment throne of deity. Apocalypticism means the effacement of all double sentences, the unmasking of every duplicitous system of representation. It is "allness" and "nothingness" in the same instant.

It is to Altizer's credit to have used dialectics to turn eschatology on its very cranium. The apocalyptic reversal of eschatology for modern thought is far more significant than the Marxist upending of reason, of bringing "heaven down to earth." Hegel's "Golgotha of Absolute Spirit," an eventuality that can only be described as a genuine philosophical apocalypse, the great speculative moment of silence in heaven, is the precondition for the movement from divine transcendence to radical immanence, to the event of "total presence" that is at the same time



God's self-presence as complete divine self-reference, secular theology that has become secular eschatology, the eschaton that is once and for all *saeculum*. As Altizer has written, "Despite the Nicene formula, the Word cannot be fully God and fully man, if, on the one hand, it continues to exist in an eternal form and, on the other, it is unable to move into the present and the full reality of history" (*GCA* 41).

In this peculiar *volte-face*, this transposition of millennial revelation, in this strangest of "scenes" where mythic construct of "the end of time" signifies time itself as end, the dialectical drama of history, which Hegel envisioned as culminating in the abolition of limited consciousness, can no longer come to fruition. The death of God intimates something far more epochal than any triumphal "humanism," as theologians a generation ago suggested.<sup>1</sup> The orthodox formula for "incarnation"—that curious, doxological compromise of the church fathers between the Hebraic reverence for the unspeakably "beyond" and the pagan valorization of the senses—is also upended in the Altizerian world of metadoctrine, transforming itself into a rhapsody of pure immanence, a Dionysian *sparagmos* of theological limbs and entrails where hitherto there had been some kind of coherence in the ecclesiological idea of the *corpus Christi*.

We must begin to understand the death of God, as perhaps even Altizer himself has not understood it, as the disclosure of the end times, as a time of dismemberment and sacrifice. So much of the so-called death of God theology derives from the glory, as well as the bathos, of Hegel's phenomenology. The Hegelian stamp is evident as well in Altizer, not to mention the influence of Eliade and Nietzsche's notion of "eternal recurrence." But the thought of Altizer carries us beyond the now obsolete "modernist" controversy between theism and pantheism into the more complex, and fateful, biblical problem of Jesus' death as divine sacrifice. The work of Girard, of course, has alerted us to the intimate correlation between the semiotics of the sacred and ritual sacrifice. What Altizer seems to suggest, perhaps without a recognition of the dramatic implications of his own thought, is that the Nietzschean metaphor of the "murder of God" points to the profound analogy of the death of God as sacrificial slaying. What could such a metaphor mean in terms of the secular theology Altizer's work has spawned?

The relationship between Christology and the cult of sacrifice is evident in the Letter to the Hebrews—a segment of Scripture that is usually ignored, or overlooked, by modern theological authors. Hebrews is a strange document; it is attributed to Paul but most likely composed by

the Levite Barnabas. It is a treatise on soteriology that deconstructs by a miscellany of metonymical transpositions the rhetoric of the already defunct sacrificial system of the Jewish temple priesthood. More than any other “work” in the New Testament, Hebrews follows through with the theo-logic of “God’s death,” but it does so in a way that is bereft of the cant of theological modernism.

The Letter to the Hebrews begins with the assertion that God’s “speech” in these “last days” is no longer direct, but “by his Son.” The Son is the “radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being (*character tes hypostaseos*), sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:1–3). On the face of it, there is nothing remarkable about this statement insofar as it prefigures the kind of orthodoxy that for two millennia would be the ideological staple of Western Christendom. But the subsequent unfolding of its soteriological implications in Hebrews is indeed remarkable. Although Hebrews affirms the Pauline as well as Johannine proposition that Jesus through his death “shared in [our humanity]” (Heb. 2:14), he transports it to a more radical site of interpretation; the “humanity of Jesus” is revealed in his concurrent role as hierophant, or sacrificial priest, and sacrificial victim. The Son that is the hypostasis, the full but particularized signification of God’s Being, sacrifices himself in order to leap the chasm between Being and representation itself.

The theological framework for this move is found in the ninth chapter of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews employs the symbology of the Hebrew tent of meeting. The presence of God dwells in the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place, the location of the ark of the covenant. The presence is mediated only dimly through animal sacrifice. “But now Christ has come, high priest of good things already in being. The tent of his priesthood is a greater and more perfect one, not made by men’s hands . . . the blood of his sacrifice is his own blood, not the blood of goats and calves; and thus he has entered the sanctuary once and for all and secured an eternal deliverance” (Heb. 9:11–12). Christ, the writer of Hebrews argues, is a “spiritual and eternal [*pneumatos aioniou*] sacrifice.”

Christ’s self-sacrifice elsewhere in the New Testament characterized as God’s self-emptying, or *kenosis*, is something far more profound than what is suggested in the Chalcedonian formula of God becoming “man.” It points to what in Hegelian terms is the abrogation, the *Aufhebung*, of God’s eternal self-diremption, the negation of the divine self-negation, which in turn fulfills the concept of the Son as hypostasis. The metaphysical conundrum of co-eternality of Father and Son now becomes explicable in terms

of what the author of Hebrews calls “a new and loving way opened for us through the curtain [of the Holy of Holies] that is his body” (Heb. 10:20). The evangelical shibboleth of “blood redemption” entails an astounding form of theological semiotics—namely, that the unity of divine essence and simulacrum, of presence and re-presentation, is not achieved by any kind of transcendent synthesis of the religious imagination. Rather, it manifests itself in the movement when God’s own “blood” is shed, when the sacrifice from below to above is transferred into the literal “dying of the Lamb” on the cross of Calvary. Incarnation only makes sense at the site of pure divine carnality, the irruption of flesh and blood. Any “death of God theology” must take into account the butchery and grandeur of the sacrificial moment, the resolution of holy as profane, the “carnavalesque” character of Christian experience in its sheer primality.

The connection between Dionysian symbolism and christological speculation, therefore, is not accidental. Hegel’s phenomenology of “Spirit” mirrors a more primitive phenomenology of religion that is pretheological, pre-Chalcedonian, prespeculative. Again, it can be found in Hebrews. “This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep” (Heb. 9: 20). If the death of God is grounded in such a blood covenant, the suggestion is staggering. Anthropological theories of blood sacrifice rest on the premise that the “life” of the victim is in the blood and that the spilling of blood conjoins the sacrifice with the ontological source from which all emanates. Ancient theology, of course, was confounded by the paradoxical quality of this relationship. The gradual elimination of the practice of human sacrifice in the archaic world underscored the perception that the shedding of human blood in the sacrificial ceremony was not an act of consecration but a incidence of “barbarism” that mistakes the sanguinary for the liturgical. The movement from human to animal sacrifice, particularly as manifest in the evolution of Hebrew ritual, however, resulted only in a heightening of the paradox and the incapability of the archaic complex of religious signification and representation to encompass it.

The difficulty of making intelligible the notion within ethical monotheism of an all-loving, entirely holy, and merciful God whose worship must still be based on ritual slaughter must have seemed to ancient devotees to have been weighted quite precariously. The theology of Hebrews, which some scholars believe was composed after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem as a means of explaining to early Jewish Christians how the act of “making sacred” could be accomplished with-

out sacrifice, attests to the final resolution of this quandary. It is not the transfiguration of the dead victim into a form of divine life that matters. It is the dying of God himself on the “altar,” the redemption of all things through the eschatological shedding of blood, “God’s blood.”

But the issue of the semiotics of blood sacrifice, which remains ultimately an anthropological question, must not obscure the basic and most original problem of God’s death as the “end” of representation itself. The end of representation, the overcoming of the inherent ontological dualism of the West, is what the death of God is truly all about. The key to this intricate hermeneutic of divine semblance can be found in the opening verse of Hebrews, which we have already referenced. The realization of the nature of the Son as the “exact representation” of God through death on the cross bespeaks a type of radical theology—or “fundamental ontology”—that the formalism of Greco-Roman thought could never articulate. The orthodox conception that God “sacrificed” his Son to redeem fallen humanity transfers into the ontological insight that the infinite divine presence, and its reproduction in the sacrificial victim, is overcome once and for all in the moment of crucifixion. The victim as representation, or surrogate, is abolished—not momentarily as in the sacrificial system—but decisively and irrevocably. Presence and representation are no longer terms of difference but of identity within difference. Heaven and earth, word and flesh, are equalized.

The “blood covenant” between God and humanity in Christ’s death becomes a root metaphor for the erasure of the boundary between God and the *imago Dei*. The boundary, metaphysically expressed as “sin,” is washed away in the blood. There is but a temporal, not a logical, gap between God’s presence (*ousia*) in Christ and parousia. For parousia itself can be deciphered as the full, postrepresentational expression of what the troped concept of ‘God’s son’ truly entails, namely, as philosophical idealism understood, the “taking up” of finitude as speculative infinity, of the concretization of “Absolute Spirit.” Such a vision is already labored in the main writings of Altizer. We must therefore pose the question if the death of God in all truth signifies the sacrifice of God. The analogy of sacrifice, of course, was prominent in Nietzsche. The cry of the madman that the divine murder is bleeding “under our knives,” a translation to a “higher history than all history hitherto,” betokens the phenomenology of the ritual sacrifice.

But the theory of sacrifice as applied to any theological dialectics must first take into account Georges Bataille’s economics of expenditure

and excess. As Bataille observes, a theory of religion cannot in any way be derived from a doctrine of utility. Indeed, the opposite is true. The experience of the sacred arises out of what Nietzsche described as the joy of self-expenditure, the “overflowing” of power, an economy that like a swollen watercourse overruns its banks. Only economies of consumption and excess are capable of sacrifice. Sacrality requires death, a “creative destruction” in Schumpeter’s terms. The element consumed, the victim, the ensign of excess, is Bataille’s “accursed share,” and it is in this accounting “accursed” that the production of the sacred becomes possible.

The centrality of the sacrificial motif in the Christian doctrine of atonement underscores the importance of Bataille’s hermeneutics of excess. We can begin to understand the Nietzschean parable of the murder of God and the classical dogmatic formula of God’s sacrifice of himself as a kind of obversity within a theological double sentence, a semiotic divide for all forms of religious discursivity. Here theology truly becomes anthropology, because the theological and anthropological are envisioned as commensurate. The death of God therefore can be comprehended as a kind of controlling catachresis, as the distension of the dialectics of sacrifice to the point where the “paradox of incarnation” is no longer a linguistic stumbling block. But the structure of the catachresis, wherein the expenditure of what is “all too human” logically communicates at the same time the idea of divine self-exteriorization, cannot be resolved by any Hegelian juggernaut of the negative. The catachresis remains an impenetrable membrane through which yet sift hints of divine presence.

Theological dialectic must become the “deconstruction” of the cross in the most radical sense. Here we surpass all forms of “secular” as well as “negative” theologies—the metonymy of the divine *ousia* expressed in the horror and mystery of sacrifice, both anthropologically and theologically. In Hebrews, and then overtly in Altizer, we cross over the semiotic threshold into the postmodern. Postmodernism is frequently, but wrongly, understood as an exergue, as a discursive “supplement” to the textuality of the modern. If we systematically reread Altizer’s writings, we discern the way in which his visionary statement of God’s death, and its cultural apocalypse, offers a profound, and previously unthought, relationship between variant epochs, divergent semiologies. There can only be “writing” in a theological sense after the death of God, because the commencement of the grammatological era and the apocalypse are one and the same. As Altizer says, “the real ending of speech is the dawn-

ing of resurrection, and the final ending of speech is the dawning of a totally present actuality. That actuality is immediately at hand when it is heard, and it is heard when it is enacted. And it is enacted in the dawning of the actuality of silence, an actuality ending all disembodied and unspoken presence" (*SEG* 96).

Taylor picks up on this theme more explicitly in his seminal essay of religious postmodernism entitled "Text as Victim." "If sacrifice and sacrificer are one, then victimizer is also victim. A death of God (a)theology, which is really a radical Christology, finds its completion in the crucifixion of the individual self and the resurrection of universal humanity. This end (or beginning) is realized through the dissemination of the Word."<sup>2</sup> And such a motif is "resurrection is not a movement from flesh to Spirit, but is rather in some sense a movement from Spirit to flesh" (*DH* 116). Divine totality and text/flesh are symmetrical with each other. As in the Flemish masterpieces of the late Middle Ages, the roseate, unspeakably wounded flesh of the sacrificed God serves as its own hieratic wonder. It is a hierophany of the modern, theologically speaking, inasmuch as it manifests what in the argot of an older, pious religious liberalism we would call the "humanity of God." But this humanity—Taylor's "universal humanity"—constitutes an apocalypse of representation as sheer surface, as an iconography that has shifted from vertical to horizontal, as the dissolution of the logical space between immanence and transcendence. Total presence becomes the utter finality of the text. The veil that is rent in the tent of meeting with the murder of God is not so much between this world and "the other world"; it is between subject and alterity, between the phenomenal and the "intelligible," between the Sinailike presence of God and the myriad representations of theological discourse through the ages. The death of God as total presence means the "taking up" of all forms of representation into the singularity of the Word itself, the Word made flesh, the Word qua flesh. That is perhaps Joachim's "third age," the age of fire that consumes the interpreter, as Derrida would have it, the age of the Spirit.

The blood was spilled long ago. The shedding of the blood is now spoken over all of us. The universal murder is a universal redemption, for the sacrifice is of that which was always incomplete, inessential, idolatrous, "representational." The text discloses that speech. It reveals the concealed absence, which is at the same time parousia, the fullness of presence.

After Altizer, nothing can remain hidden.

## NOTES

1. See for example the following statement: "History is moving toward the ultimate dissolution of the distinction between God and man and a merging of the two in the new godmanhood of the eschatological age" (Theodore Runyan Jr., "Thomas Altizer and the Future of Theology," in *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response*, ed. John Cobb Jr. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], 49).

2. Mark C. Taylor, "Text as Victim," in *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Carl Raschke (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 73.