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## Thomas J.J. Altizer: On the Death of God Theology

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## THOMAS J.J. ALTIZER: ON THE DEATH OF GOD THEOLOGY

José L. Gutierrez, O.S.B. (1970)

*Note bene*—This paper was submitted to the faculty of graduate studies at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theology, in 1970. *Obsculta* is proud to present archived scholarship in the spirit of tracing the historical continuum of Saint John's commitment both to *ressourcement* and to the equally arduous task of being attentive to the signs of the times.

*Introduction—Radical theology*

Radical theology or “death of God” theology is a development within Protestantism, which is carrying the careful openness of the older theologies toward atheism a step further. The aim of this theology is not only to seek relevance for its own sake but to attempt for a whole new way of theological understanding as well.

In order to understand this new theology, it is necessary to comprehend the character of the secular spirit in the American cultural and religious development and to see this new theology as an effort to interpret Christianity in modern terms. In a few words, the death of God theology is an attempt to understand Christianity from a secular point of view, and within concepts of the world view of modern men.

In the present situation, religious existence and theological discourse are in part immobilized and in part energized by the secular in all its aspects.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase "death of God" generally means that the God who has been the center of faith for the Christian tradition is now seen to be nonexistent; and that Christianity must henceforth understand itself without him. So, the position of the death of God theology is that there was a God to whom praise and trust were due, but now there is no such God.

It is an atheistic position, but with a difference. If there was a God, and if there now is not, it should be possible to indicate why this change took place, when it took place, and who was responsible for it.<sup>2</sup>

Radical theology in response to these questions is drawn into history and literary criticism to answer the "when" question, and into the so-called behavioral sciences to answer the "why" question.

Also, the death of God theology does not only say that the traditional Christian image of the Creator is obsolete. It says that it is no longer possible to believe in a transcendent God, who acts in human history, and that Christianity will have to survive, if at all, without him.

Radical theology is a very peculiar product of the mid-twentieth century. It is important because it expresses the secular mentality of modern religious and Christian man, and because it forces theological attention on the primary rather than on the secondary theological problems of our time. This movement has given rise to a reconsideration of the task of the church—its relationship to the modern world and the role of its ministry. The result has been

twofold; on the one hand, Christians are more aware of their responsibility to and for the world; on the other hand, the Christian way of life is considered from a new point of view whose special particularity is secular action instead of simple faith and obedience.

*Introduction—Thomas J.J. Altizer*

We must recognize that the death of God is an historical event: God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence.<sup>3</sup>

It was a *Time* magazine article which introduced the death of God theology to the general public attention. It featured four men: Thomas J.J. Altizer of Emory University, Paul M. van Buren of Temple University, William Hamilton of Colgate Rochester Theological Seminary, and Gabriel Vahanian of Syracuse University.<sup>4</sup>

There are certain points of contact and similarities in the thought of these men; however, Vahanian's point of view with regard to the reality of God differs notably from the others. When Vahanian talks about the death of God he is referring to some sort of cultural fact.<sup>5</sup>

Altizer says that only contemporary theology can be a Christian theology and that any other kind of theology is but a flight from our present time into the security of a past which is already gone.

A contemporary theology at the present time is one which must begin with the acknowledgement of the death of God, for our age can be characterized only as one from which God is absent.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Altizer is perhaps the most consistent in

proclaiming the death of God, he does not say that the divine is nonexistent. He seems to be inspired by a mystical awareness of the divine power that manifests itself in everyday life and history. His theology is impregnated with a consciousness of the dynamic and redemptive power of the sacred. This gives one the feeling that for Altizer the divine is something real and alive. Altizer's concept of the living Christian Word is very important in his thought. It is in terms of this Word that Altizer tries to interpret other Christian symbols such as the Kingdom of God, the Incarnation, etc.

This Word is for Altizer now radically immanent, in process, forward moving and dynamic; implicitly it is the source of life, of meaning; and so of all cultural creativity.<sup>7</sup>

I said before that there are some similarities and points of contact in the work of the death of God theologians. In the case of Hamilton and van Buren the centrality of Christ means the man Jesus as his life can be known by historical investigations. In contrast to them, Altizer is not so interested in the historical Jesus. He is more concerned with the meaning and significance of the Incarnate Word as a theological issue which points to the presence of the Word in the midst of secular existence and in union with that existence.

### *The Incarnate Word*

In his book *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Altizer says that "it is in the purer forms of Oriental mysticism that the Christian theologian must seek out the deepest challenge of the non-Christian religious world."<sup>8</sup> He points to the meaning of Oriental mysticism as a radical

form of world negation in which all the world's given actualities are identified as merely illusions. This negation has a dialectical character, he says, because it means rather an affirmation of the world through a process of transformation:

It remains true that the Oriental mystic can only reach his goal of total redemption by means of a radical negation of all that reality which is present to an individual and isolated human consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Once the given form is nullified and its distinctiveness is overcome, it too is manifest as the sacred. Then, the meaning of the world negation is finally positive since it points to the exposure of the identity of the profane with the sacred by overcoming its profanity.

If by one means or another all forms of Oriental mysticism culminate in an identification of Nirvana or Sansara [*sic*], then this is an identity in which the opposition between the sacred and the profane has wholly disappeared. No longer does either the sacred or the profane bear a polar or dialectical meaning, for with the abolition of the profane consciousness all human or worldly meaning has vanished.<sup>10</sup>

Altizer uses the non-Christian religions as a preamble in order to develop an important issue of his theology, namely, the Incarnate Word. He claims that by looking at the Incarnate Word as a central theme of Christian faith we are driven in a direction opposite to that of Oriental mysticism. Instead of promoting the disclosure of the sacred in the negation of the profane, it makes dramatic the movement of the sacred towards the profane; instead of orienting us to the recovery of the eternal, it directs us more deeply into

process and change. Altizer thinks that these emphases result because of the conviction that the Word has become flesh.

Christian theology has never thought through the full meaning of the Incarnation if only because it has remained bound to an eternal and primordial form of spirit. When spirit is apprehended in this religious form, it obviously can never be known as becoming fully incarnate, and thus the doctrine of the Incarnation has thus far only been able to posit a Word that is partially flesh and partially spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Altizer tells us that the Word has become flesh; however, it can in no manner be assumed that it is affected by that flesh. But, later on, Altizer somehow nullifies the power of the Incarnation with the celebration of the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ which are a kind of a return to the sacred or transcendent. In a few words, Altizer's point is that if more attention is given to the thrust of the Christian confession of the Incarnation, it would eliminate religious tendencies and it would foster a form of faith which is more suitable to the secular time in which we live.

When Altizer is analyzing the relation of Christianity and non-Christian religions, he makes use of the "coincidence of opposites." This coincidence of opposites means that the sacred and the profane oppose and displace each other in the consciousness of man. At the same time these experiences require each other because each one—to a certain extent—receives its character by its opposition to the other. At the end of this process, the profane is transformed. It loses its peculiarity and manifests its identity with the sacred.

Thus the *coincidentia oppositorum* in Oriental mysticism is an identity of the opposites. The profane reality ceases to move or disappears, thereby

becoming identical with the sacred, and the sacred now ceases to exist in opposition to the profane.<sup>12</sup>

Altizer thinks that Christianity also has the coincidence of the sacred and the profane, but in a form which is different from Oriental mysticism or rather an inversion of Oriental mysticism. Instead of transforming the profane into the sacred, the final coincidence is accomplished through a movement of the sacred into the profanity of the world. While in Oriental mysticism the sacred is reached through a negation of the profane, in Christianity the profane is confirmed through a negation of a previous form of the sacred; in relation to the Incarnation, when the Word becomes flesh, its previous (pre-incarnate) form is negated: it no longer has its fundamental reality in terms of a transcendent form which is unaffected by the world process. Considering that flesh means change, then Incarnation is an ever recurring reality. In Christianity there is a mutual movement of flesh and spirit into each other. In the same manner that the sacred must descend and become flesh, the flesh must ascend and become spirit. In this mutual movement of the one into the other neither flesh nor spirit can remain unchanged: rather there is a transformation of both.

Apart from a dual and dialectical movement of flesh and spirit into each other, there can be no actual process of incarnation; here, an original sacred must 'descend' and become flesh, just as a fallen flesh must 'ascend' and become spirit. Yet this process cannot be real apart from an actual transfiguration of flesh and spirit: flesh must cease to exist as flesh in becoming spirit, even as spirit must wholly perish as spirit in fully becoming flesh. Thereby the given and intrinsic forms of flesh and spirit are totally reversed so as to make possible a final movement of each into its respective other.<sup>13</sup>



The contrast between Christianity and Oriental mysticism in terms of the coincidence of opposites leads Altizer toward the theological affirmation of the death of God. Altizer interprets the death of God as God's act of self-negation. It means that God stops having reality as the primary being, eternal and completely isolated from the processes of time. In Christ, God has emptied himself into the transitory form of flesh with all its defects, and now his being is engaged to the forward movement of process. However, Altizer says that God remains God, but his presence—which is in process—becomes a kind of self-estrangement within his own being because in the Incarnation God isolates himself from the transcendence of his pre-incarnate form.

The God who acts in the world and history is a God who negates himself, gradually but decisively annihilating his original totality. God is that Totality which 'falls' or 'descends,' thereby moving ever more fully into the opposite of its original identity.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, because of this argument, Altizer insists upon the fact of the death of God, surpassed, as the empty God who in celestial alienation stays unaffected by the world process. God's movement into world processes has fostered a radical transformation of his own self. In other words, transcendence has been totally transformed into immanence.

God or the Godhead becomes the God who is manifest in Christ by passing through a reversal of his original form: thus transcendence becomes immanence just as spirit becomes flesh.<sup>15</sup>

For Altizer, this is the meaning of the Christian acceptance of the death of God. He says that the time—our time—is ready for a genuinely kenotic Christology. According to him this will be one commemorating the significance of Christ as God’s act of stripping himself of his transcendence in order that he might place himself into an incarnate form of existence. This self-negation of God is considered by Altizer as an act of grace. God pours himself into fleshly existence in such a way that he no longer has independent life of his own: his whole being is in the flesh of the world movement. Then, the more we consider God’s involvement in the world’s process, and the more we try to grasp his reality in human terms, the less we constrain to a notion of God as the transcendent Lord.

But the Jesus who is present in the midst of life is the Word made flesh, the Word which has finally and totally descended from the transcendent realm of the spirit.<sup>16</sup>

In a few words, for Altizer the concept of Incarnation must be understood as a movement in which God—the transcendent God—pours himself completely into the movement of history (the argument has been mentioned before). Therefore, any God who is far distant from, and alien to, the world process falls under the indictment of Altizer.

### *Contemporary Form of Christ’s Presence in the World*

We already saw that the Incarnation must be understood not only in terms of the death of God’s transcendent reality, but as the negation of pre-incarnate forms of the Word in support of its new manifestations in the continuous processes of the world. This support of new

manifestations reflects Altizer's concern to elude linking faith to events of the past and to make sure its movement toward the future. This also means openness to the presence of Christ in the world, in a form which is not exclusive of the life of the Church or which is expressed in terms of traditional Christianity, but which springs out of the secular world in which we live.

By opening ourselves to the immediate actuality of the moment before us, we can know the Jesus who is present in the fullness of time itself, even if that time should prove to be a negation or reversal of the past event of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>17</sup>

When Altizer attempts to speak about the presence of Christ in the world, he borrows Nietzsche's idea of "Eternal Recurrence."<sup>18</sup> Generally speaking, this idea means that all things will always recur in an unending cycle of existence which has neither direction nor meaning. In this way everything is reduced to an unending flux in which it cannot keep its identity nor protect its difference from anything else, and obviously the world's process becomes worthless. In the presence of this fruitless process Nietzsche develops the concept of "yes-saying" to life. This means to will the "Eternal Recurrence," to want all things back. In other words, it means to deal with what is past not merely saying "Thus it was," but "Thus I willed."<sup>19</sup> It basically means to will the actual moment in front of us in all its reality, because if we cannot will the happening of such a moment, the meaning of life affirmation is still unknown to us.

Altizer says that the phrase "Being begins in every Now" is an important statement for the understanding of Nietzsche's "Eternal Recurrence." It is important because it is telling us that we do not need a determined place or a determined time in order to affirm life. To look for the center of life somewhere

else is a kind of insult to life; rather the center is everywhere and eternity is in every “now.” Consequently, it is essential to be open to every moment before us, because it is by means of this openness that we can reach the completeness of life.

When the path of eternity is bent or curved, then the way down is the way up, and the final or eschatological epiphany of Christ will occur kenotically in the immediate moment: ‘Being begins in every Now.’<sup>20</sup>

Altizer is pretty categorical in expressing the actual presence of Christ in the world by means of Nietzsche’s assumption that “Being begins in every Now.” He says that the confession of Christ drives us to the center of the profane proclaiming that Christ is present here and nowhere else.

According to Altizer, once we grasp the meaning of “Being begins in every Now” we will not easily fall into temptation to flee from the present by sticking to past forms of Christ’s presence in the world. We must rather accept the Incarnation as a reality which begins anew in every moment—the Word always becomes flesh in our own times and existence.

Therefore, for Altizer the Christian confession of the Incarnate Word means that God has died as the transcendent Being who remains totally aside from the world’s process, and that God has poured out himself into flesh to affirm his creatures. Because of this assumption we must not look for a form of the sacred in a primitive Totality which nullifies the profane world<sup>21</sup>—as in Oriental mysticism. Rather, we should look for the sacred in the world movement. In the world and in every moment the sacred becomes coincident with the profane, not by eliminating it, but by converting it and becoming one with it. Then we can speak

of the Word which becomes incarnate in every present.

*Conclusion*

We must recognize that Altizer's argument in radical theology is worthy of admiration both in its originality and in its coherence, in spite of the variety of materials which he puts together.

Certain parts of his theology must be given special attention, such as: the call for a contemporary form of faith; the acceptance of the manner our culture conditions our perception of the gospel; the idea that the Incarnation should rule our perception of the presence of the sacred in the world; the rejection of a distant God whom the world process does not affect; and the assurance that the yes-saying to life—which is made possible by faith—does not ask for special settings and motives but is open every moment.

Obviously there are also some difficulties which must be considered. I think Altizer must give more attention to the relationship between his thought and the Christian tradition. If his work is as completely discontinuous with the development of Christian thought as some of his concepts imply, there will be no reason in talking about Christian theology; his work must rather be considered as an attempt to found a new form of faith. Altizer is right in his denial to limit the actuality of the Incarnation to a past event, and also in rejecting any tendency to impoverish the meaning of our actual participation in the Incarnation by merely pointing to a representation of a concluded past episode in a priestly act. I said before that for Altizer the confession of the Incarnate Word leads us to what he names the horizon of faith, for the Word who has come is always the coming Word as well.

When Altizer mentions how each new epiphany of the Word annuls all of its previous forms in human history, he is somehow lacking depth in his thought. A more serious consideration must be given to this statement. His point of view somehow implies that the most important role of the past is to keep us outside of the present. It neglects the fact that the past can furnish us to enter more responsibly into the ongoing process of history. So, in general I think that Altizer is a little too biased in judging the past's role. For him the past seems to be merely a temptation to flee the actual moment and consequently the Word who is with us now.

It seems that Altizer does not deal properly with the notion of grace. The death of God is not something which we can effect through our own selves; it is God's self-sacrifice through which he enters more deeply into creaturely processes. In the same way, when Altizer speaks of the nature of Christ's presence in every moment, he does not mention how we should "will" that things be the way they are, but rather he speaks about how we should respond to the epiphany of Christ. It seems to me that this type of talk implies that the affirmation of life is not a pure act of will but a gift of grace. If this is Altizer's thought he needs to express it more clearly. On the other hand, if he means to understand man's freedom to affirm life as a gift of grace, then he must stay away from Nietzsche's ideas; or if he is interpreting the so-called life affirmation as a pure act of will, then it is almost meaningless to call his attempt Christian.

Altizer almost leaves ethical issues out of his thought. This is necessary because some of his assertions seem to imply that faith means totally accepting things the way they are. He is somehow upset by the fact that Christians have sanctified some aversions and injustices by reference to the

name of God.

Through the nineteenth century, radical Christians such as Dostoevsky violently protested against a theodicy that would sanction every horror and injustice in the name of the absolute sovereignty of God.<sup>22</sup>

However, Altizer's use of the idea of Eternal Recurrence—borrowed from Nietzsche—leads us in the same direction, because the fact of transforming the “it was” into a “thus I willed” is almost the same as saying “It was the will of God.”

Hence, I think Altizer needs to show his concern for ethical issues in his thought. An important point is that a true affirmation of life does not lean upon a preceding modification of the events of life. It must be the other way around: an adequate ethical concern for modifying these events must itself lean upon openness to the presence of Christ in the moment which is before us. It is because of the total affirmation to life that we are free for responsible participation in the ethical issues which confront us in the modern world.

There are some kind of methodological problems when Altizer deals with the meaning of divine transcendence. First, he gets his understanding of transcendence from the contrast which he makes between Oriental religions and Christianity. The purpose of the comparison is to let Oriental mysticism give the model for his analysis of transcendence. And after this analysis we found out that for Altizer, transcendence means that which is motionless and far distant from the world process. This seems to be precisely the root of the problem, because I think not every notion of transcendence has to have the same characteristics in all theological perspectives.

When Altizer is talking about the coincidence of

the profane and the sacred, he must express clearly that the moments of time should be transformed justly before we speak of a manifestation of the sacred in the profane. This manifestation means that the sacred cannot be merely the same as the profane despite the fact that it is not known separately from its embodiment in the profane. So, to speak of the sacred in this way already implies an idea of transcendence. Then, Altizer's dealings with the presence of the sacred in the world asks not only for a notion of immanence but for a notion of transcendence as well. The essential role of this notion of transcendence is to manifest God's freedom to be present with his creatures without being bound in the process in which they find themselves. If Altizer were to consider this more seriously, he would not assume that references to Christ's Resurrection and Ascension nullify the magnitude of the Incarnation by driving the Word into a distant realm. This may in any case mean the opposite, calling attention to the fact that the Word which became flesh in Christ is not limited to the material earthly existence of Jesus, but because of these events—Resurrection and Ascension—the Word can penetrate with all plenitude into every moment.

In a few words, despite the problems and perhaps confused or controversial ideas which Altizer's work involves—some of them just mentioned—a certain merit for his creativity should be recognized. Altizer's theological reflection can pass away soon, but it has had some significance and has offered interesting insights to be discussed and considered in contemporary and future theological reflection as well.



*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup>Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), 107.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer and Willam Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966), x.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>4</sup>"The God is Dead Movement," *Time* (October 22, 1965): 61.

<sup>5</sup>Gilkey, *Naming*, 27.

<sup>6</sup>Altizer, *Radical Theology*, 11.

<sup>7</sup>Gilkey, *Naming*, 133.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 32.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>12</sup>Altizer, *Radical Theology*, 146.

<sup>13</sup>Altizer, *Christian Atheism*, 47.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 80.

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