

MICHAEL JAMES DISE

Free University of Amsterdam

ALTIZER AND INCARNATION

Nothing whatsoever finally distinguishes death and life or crucifixion and resurrection, for crucifixion and resurrection are one event, and are that one event which is the full and final incarnation of I AM. Now I AM perishes as absolute otherness, and perishes as such in that final and total act which is the ultimate actualization of the eternal act of God, an actualization which is the ultimate actualization of life and death, and thus an eschatological actualization of the life and death of God. Now the life of God is the death of God, for resurrection is crucifixion, just as crucifixion is resurrection . . . resurrection is apocalypse, and is the apocalypse of the eternal act of God, an apocalypse which is the apocalypse of God, but nevertheless and even thereby the apocalypse of act or actuality, and thus an apocalypse which is all in all.¹

In Altizer the central doctrinal events of Christianity constitute a coherent and dialectically related series of movements in the incarnational life of God. For just as creation dialectically passes over into incarnation, so incarnation dialectically passes over into crucifixion, and crucifixion into resurrection; yet every event along this divine journey into an absolute realization of an absolutely transfigured Godhead is a further consummation of the irreversible act of incarnation itself. This once and for all divine act in its progressive unfolding through the totality of temporal acts is a continual negative movement of spirit into flesh: here the spirit made flesh, the hallmark of the incarnation, is the historical transfiguration of a primordial totality into an apocalyptic totality. This radical transfiguration of Godhead itself is an absolute perishing at once the dawning of a new reality for God shattered into multiplicity, a new broken totality at the start of an unprecedently new creation.

In this essay I attempt to trace this irreversible history of incarnation through three dialectically related acts of spirit in the temporal history of God, having passed from Joachim of Fiore's Trinitarian modalism through a Hegelian prism to Altizer. These three acts are here construed as kenosis, history, and apocalypse. Of course, given the nature of the dialectical movement itself in the history of incarnation, these acts coinhere with one another: kenosis, history, and apocalypse are interpenetrating dimensions of the dynamic life of Godhead.

¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage toward Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 85.

Hegel appropriated Joachim's medieval mystical interpretation of the Trinitarian Godhead – the three ages of the life of Spirit – whether knowingly or unknowingly through the mediation of Jacob Boehme, in his modern rational interpretation of that Godhead qua three moments of the infinite dialectic of spirit. These moments comprise for Hegel not so much an essentially temporal sequence as a logical sequence deployed in myriad constituent forms of one Spirit. For the evental structure of that dialectical sequence of three moments is, for Hegel, a series to be played out in temporality in unlimited variations of the Absolute Idea. But as Hegel's thinking distills Joachism into a modern essence, Altizer's thinking distills that modern Hegelian essence into its empty and inverted form:² the hollowed-out Idea as the spiration of pure negativity qua pure dialectical movement, except as the perpetual realization of an absolute Self eternally dying into an infinity of lives whose endings begin other lives, enacting death as an absolute principle of existence. Here the ages of the Spirit are finally dialectical movements of Spirit in its endless individuation qua pure negativity, but expanding historically as revelatory epochs of Spirit. These epochs are thus distilled in Altizer as kenosis, history, and apocalypse – epochs of the infinite incarnational movement, and revelatory acts exhibiting what Altizer takes to be the negative structure of divine existence.

The ages of Joachim are demythologized by Hegel as the logical sequence of a dialectical movement. For both Joachim and Hegel it is the history of humanity that is the focal point. But in Altizer the pre-human beginning interrupts this anthropocentric dialectic. Here the first dialectical act – correlating with the big bang of modern cosmology – is the kenosis of the Origin, the self-emptying of a primordial All into an evolutionary cosmos. The second dialectical act, correlating with the evolution of the cosmos toward the human consciousness of God, is the age of the Son as the history of a progressive individuation of a shattered and emptied primordial All. The third dialectical act, correlating with the final emergence of a new humanity, dawns now in the age of the Spirit as the explosion of an apocalyptic totality that is the advent of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of apocalyptic nothingness displacing every origin and ground.³

Altizer eschews dualistic oppositions through his application of the Hegelian dialectic, under the impact of William Blake's integral notion of the Contraries. He especially exemplifies this in collapsing the modern dualism between metaphysics and epistemology: the integral history of God is ontological and revelatory at once. The movements of kenosis, evolution, and apocalypse all coincide in the absolute rupture of *ipsum esse*, the apocalyptic incarnation of the original creative act. Altizer identifies incarnation with kenosis: what he calls "history as apocalypse" names apocalypse itself as the

² See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–7.

³ Ibid., 108: "If absolute apocalypse is absolute ending, it is the ending of every foundation and ground of our given worlds, and thus truly is the end of the world. That is an ending that Jesus already enacted, and did so in his enactment of the advent of the Kingdom of God – a kingdom that is the opposite of every worldly kingdom . . . an ending paralleling the primordial ending of the One or the All. . . . The primordial ending of the All is the actualization of absolute nothingness."

incarnation of the irreversible kenosis of God. All these movements—creation/kenosis, evolution/history, incarnation/apocalypse—coincide with one another as the temporal irruption of the incarnational act of God in our apocalyptic history.

ACT 1. INCARNATION AS THE KENOSIS OF GOD: GENESIS AND ACT

If Christianity knows the acts of God as historical acts, and thus as ultimate and irreversible acts, it therein and thereby knows the acts of God as acts of self-negation, and as acts of self-negation if only because they can never be undone. Hence the acts of God are kenotic acts, or acts of self-emptying, and real and actual acts of self-emptying, for they not only occur in the actuality of history, but they occur in and as irreversible acts. Yet irreversible acts are acts which annul or negate an eternal now, and do so in their very occurrence, an occurrence which itself is a self-emptying or a self-negation of an eternity which is eternally the same, and therefore the self-emptying of an eternity which is finally and only itself.⁴

For Altizer the primordial God—at once a primordial All or Totality—is infinitely shattered and poured out by a once and for all act of self-negation, and an act of self-negation that is the act of existence (*ipsum esse*), at once the “act of beginning” and “act of creation,” pure act itself (*purus actus*).⁵ This kenotic act-of-being is infinitely reenacted throughout history, an infinite sacrifice that comes to be realized in the very structure of self-consciousness, a self-consciousness that is ultimately the negative mode of the Selfhood of God that has perished into and as the universe itself. Indeed, the universe itself that is the chaotic manifestation of the death of the primordial God is the progressive and evolutionary self-embodiment of God, but only as an absolute death that can only be a wholly negative presence and world. Now self-consciousness is the self-realization of the death of God, or the self-realization of the kenotic God in the finite human creature whose life is death. *By contrast to every orthodox theological understanding of the incarnation, here Altizer knows a wholly negative and kenotic incarnation, and an incarnation inseparable from an eternal death.* But this death is life and consciousness and world, and thereby calls for an ecstatic celebration of the life and consciousness and world that would not be possible without that death.

For Altizer the genesis of the universe is both the annihilation of the primordial Godhead and the beginning of the apocalyptic Godhead, an apocalyptic Godhead that becomes ever more incarnate and actual throughout history. In *The Genesis of God* (1993), Altizer writes of a “vanishing [that] is the vanishing of a primordial emptiness or an original and undifferentiated totality, a vanishing of an eternal now which is a wholly and finally transcendent now. That vanishing is the ‘death of God,’ but a death of God which is now pure act or pure and absolute actuality, as the eternal act or *actus* of God is now wholly immanent and therefore a totally present

⁴ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 62.

⁵ Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 29–31.

actuality.”⁶ But one must take caution not to confuse this present actuality of Godhead with a positive plenitude or presence. For this is a paradoxical and inverted presence, indeed, a dialectical presence that is the total presence of the negativity of divine death embodied in a universal and apocalyptic history. In *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1990), Altizer clarifies that this “total presence is the actual reversal of every other presence” whereby the absolute ending of primordial presence constitutes an absolute futurity that is “finally and fully actual in resurrection, and it is actual as a kenotic pleroma, a pleroma which is the very opposite of a primordial or original totality, for it is itself the final negation or emptying of that totality, an emptying which is the advent of the totality of history.”⁷ And so history is a dialectical movement in the direction of an apocalyptic future by the irreversible ending of an absolute past, making possible and real the total incarnation of Godhead itself. Here the Thomistic divine essence, *ipsum esse*, becomes—in a wholly negative mode—an act eternally reversing an eternal now. This is the irreversible incarnation of God in Altizer that leaves behind no remnant of a transcendent and sovereign God, an ending of sovereignty that irreversibly sets into play a historical trajectory toward a wholly apocalyptic and revolutionary incarnation of the divine I AM in the universal body of humanity, the latter being Altizer’s adaptation of William Blake’s “Eternal Great Humanity Divine.”⁸

It is clear here that for Altizer incarnation is not a special case exclusive to Jesus. The Christ who was Jesus is now and always will be this “Eternal Great Humanity Divine,” within which whatever new form the “human” manifests itself. Whatever form this is, the “human” is that incarnate divinity of the Godhead of God through which the divine life fully realizes and embodies itself, even if in a wholly negative and emptied way. Indeed, the incarnation is a wholly dialectical event and phenomenon: it is the life that is predicated of death, indeed, “the negation of negation, or the death of death,”⁹ a reversal of an original Fall that is not however a return to the pre-fallen God, and paradoxically a death of death that is “the resurrection of death itself.”¹⁰ *Here Altizer’s kenotic conception of incarnation insinuates that the creature is a living death in the chaordic horizon of an essentially kenotic universe.* This is the dialectical coinherence that makes Altizer’s incarnation infinitely dichotomous. The antinomy of life and death has no resolution but consists in a *coincidentia oppositorum* in which oppositions continually pass over into one another in endless variant forms. Hence a Nietzschean eternal recurrence or infinite temporal repetition is manifest in its restlessness as the infinite and irreversible reenactment of the divine self-contradiction and self-negation that continually turns on itself,¹¹ and this “itself” of abyssal dialectic takes the

⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 21.

⁷ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 91.

⁸ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2000), 122.

⁹ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹¹ In this dialectic of the abyss, the Shell of Hegelian *Geist* breaks open from the uncontrollable force of infinite negativity. *Geist* spills out into the abyss, is emptied out in and as abyss, and the dialectic—ontologically equivalent to Derridean dissemination—constitutes the perpetual dissemblance of identity through an

form in late modernity of an anonymous selfhood apart from every particular selfhood or individual identity.¹² Insofar as this dialectical process is embodied as an anonymous selfhood, a selfhood which is “unenclosed and unconfined,”¹³ it is the dialectical embodiment of the other, or the self-embodiment of the other, or the dialectical embodiment of both self and other together. The restlessness of this dialectical embodiment is the incarnation of selfhood together with otherness in will (*Trieb*). Even so, this finite creaturely *Trieb* incarnates and embodies the divine *Trieb*, the absolute Will of God. That *Trieb* which incarnates and embodies itself in the creature and which was “the innermost center of absolute spirit” has been eternally decentered and outwardized to become “explicitly *kenosis*, a kenosis or self-emptying which is an ‘externalization’ of spirit itself.”¹⁴ Desire outwardized as relation toward the other, negating self in the kenotic act of self-negation, is *agape* itself.

ACT II. INCARNATION AS THE HISTORY OF GOD: REVELATION AND REVOLUTION

Thus the death of God is the center of history, and the center of that total history which is the evolution of freedom and of life.¹⁵

For Altizer, Jesus the Nazarene—apocalyptic prophet of the Kingdom of God—called forth a new historical intensification of the revelatory self-embodiment of the incarnate God. The event of Jesus’s life and death set into motion a revolutionary history leading to the revolutions of the modern world, and revolutions that set in motion the end of history, an end that is the apocalypse of a new post-historical world. Modern humanity enacted, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the incarnation of an apocalyptic God whereby the old world came to an end in a final loss of innocence. This modern humanity, indelibly marked by the existential impact of the incarnation of the creative act-of-existence, has been and is driven to de-create every former historical world. This unexpectedly repeats Jesus’s vision of the Kingdom of God anew: a novel world displacing every old world, reversing and dissolving all previous forms of authority, whether monarchic or religious, here and now resurrects a new reality beyond the transcendent lordship of all previous worlds. And so incarnation as apocalypse is repeated in the midst of our history as the apocalypse of history, or the apocalypse of everything past as its outpouring toward an absolute future. Here late modernity is revealed to be what some sociologists call “liquid modernity,”¹⁶

infinite series of inversions of the abyss, whereby the absolute inversion of the abyss is the unconfined embodiment of the dialectic in the anonymous self-consciousness of the modern human. For Altizer’s “absolute inversion of the abyss,” see D. G. Leahy, *Foundation: Matter the Body Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 222, 250, 420.

¹² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 159–60.

¹³ Ibid., 159.

¹⁴ Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 27.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ See for example Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000). Bauman, a sociologist and philosopher under the impact of Derrida, coined the term “liquid modernity” to describe the fluid nature of late modernity in a new global horizon of the increasingly rapid and immediate transmission of information, the

which in Altizer is the ontological conversion of Derridean dissemination. And so the revelation that gave birth to revolution is repeated as a new and more deeply revolutionary revelation: this is revelation of the an-archic foundation of history as its kenotic projection from a chaordic genesis, repeating in the form of new political, ideological, philosophical, scientific, cultural, and theological revolutionary occurrences.

Altizer's *History as Apocalypse* (1985) thinks this modern revolutionary aftermath of incarnation as its progressive sociocultural consequence in Western history, which included a new identification of divinity with human consciousness. With the collapse of monarchic and religious forms of government and authority, humanity further asserted a new individual authority through the propagation of scientific rationality. But this ostensibly progressive disenchantment became, paradoxically, the reenchantment of the world qua a more total realization of incarnation in the anarchic effects that have been and are now occurring. Hence the apocalyptic world now occurring is both the culmination *and* end of a history transformed and transfigured by the impact of the incarnation, where the notion of the "Word made flesh" enters thinking itself, and enters thinking only by way of an absolute disruption. In this absolute disruption the Word—that dialectical *esse* of I AM—incarnates the negativity of Godhead itself in the humanly embodied *Trieb*, inaugurating a radical *metanoia* so that mind itself changes in its vision of the world qua created. This divine disruption incarnate is the revolutionary manifestation of the divine will in human history.

There is no doubt that for Altizer incarnation precludes a merely positive embodiment of life, consciousness, and activity, instead envisioning their deeply negative embodiment. Hence the inseparability of history and incarnation evoke a dialectical negativity apart from which life and consciousness could never be real and actual, through which history has tended toward an apocalyptic consummation—now occurring through the human species (at least on planet Earth)—embodying and repeating the original negation that made history possible in the first place. In other words: the original negation which initiates the evolution of the universe—an absolute disruption of an original totality—is repeated *within* the history of creation as a negation of an old world at once the invocation of a new world. Here and now this is the beginning of a more essentially revolutionary enactment of the *metanoia* evoked by a Jesus who calls upon a new *basileia* transcending the old orders of hierarchy and lordship through the universal practice of *agape*. Of course, one could say that the failures of modern revolutions are a function of the fact that the *agape* of Jesus came too soon in its incarnational development, but then again, all revolutionary occurrences come too soon and constitute rude interruptions.

For Altizer, history is revelation and, thereby, revolution: "the advent of history is the advent of death, and not simply the beginning of a real consciousness of death, but rather the beginning of a consciousness that is inseparable from the full actuality of death, and that not in its periphery but

ever-encroaching nature of new medical technologies, the increasing primacy of software and digital technology, the progressive disappearance of privacy and individual autonomy, and so on.

in its center and core. . . . History is that presence.”¹⁷ History continually repeats an original death and an original ending, and this dialectical repetition now takes the form of a new apocalypse occurring, for better or worse. Such a negation of the structures of the old world is now inaugurating not simply the end of history but a new embodiment of history in thought, anticipating a new world beyond every previous historical world. Hence history itself is the progressive incarnation of a dawning apocalyptic actuality, and an apocalyptic actuality that, although first dawning with and through creation itself, began to consummate its appearance in history through Jesus and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The implicit potentiality of this apocalyptic reality was born with the dawning of creation itself but its explicit actuality was born in the dawning of the Kingdom of God through Jesus’s proclamation.

In the preface to *History as Apocalypse* (1985) Altizer conjoins Western historical memory and apocalyptic faith in order to envision a new emerging global chaorder:

Even if this original apocalyptic ground was eroded and reversed by the evolution of the Christian Church, it returned again and again at crucial moments in Western history, moments which were commonly experienced by their participants as being revolutionary breakthroughs to new worlds. For revolution and apocalypse have been twins in Western history; each when it fully appears has been accompanied by the other, and so much so that it is impossible to dissociate apocalyptic and revolutionary thinking and vision. Such vision and thinking have revolved about the ending of an old world and the beginning of a new.¹⁸

What we see here is the infinite temporal repetition of an original apocalyptic ground: that original shattering of a primordial quiescence at the beginning of the universe repeats indefinitely, qua pure negativity, as that irresolvable *Trieb* that drives Hegel’s system and that Nietzsche knows to be the will-to-power, a will to create new life and vitality, and a will to consciousness and activity over and against passivity and nullity. This cruciform will, embodied in a new humanity striving against its own origin toward a new beginning, is the historical incarnation of divine *Trieb* in revolutionary movements toward human freedom and responsibility. For the end of the sovereign God qua kenotic incarnation is the nonsovereign life of God in those human societies endeavoring to realize and embody that Blakean “Eternal Great Humanity Divine”—societies incarnating a divine power and energy that has passed from a primordial totality into boundless historical worlds, although a divine power and energy manifest in a wholly negative and kenotic mode.

For Altizer, revelation and revolution are inseparable: in a *coincidentia oppositorum* life and death revolve about an in-tensional relation, each one passing over into the other without resolution, as a perpetual and open revelation and enactment of the pure negativity of the kenotic movement of

¹⁷ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 32.

¹⁸ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 1.

Spirit itself. This antinomic movement is the kenotic engine of a history perpetually disclosing the incarnational essence of existence, an incarnational essence that is a kenotic essence, never realizing and actualizing life apart from death, or fullness apart from emptiness, or light apart from darkness. Here history is not the unfolding of a positive and planned out plenitude but a negative activity realizing and actualizing the purely negative enunciation of the divine I AM, an I AM echoing forth the negative emptiness of its own abyss, apocalyptically actualized in total presence. This incarnational existence is a sacrificial existence that eternally sacrifices itself in order to incarnate and realize itself within all created bodies. This wholly negative and shattered Spirit divests all things of any independent identity. And so the essentially sacrificial movement of the divine *ipsum esse* in history is a kenotic movement emptying every form or appearance of individual self-same identity, incarnating that universal I AM as the anonymous identity of every existing thing. So it is that all identity is cruciform identity, or identity not-itself, or self-effacing identity, that incarnates history and time as movements of pure negativity within which others perpetually pass over into each other sacrificially and kenotically. This incarnational crossover is an infinite intersection of others, an infinitely anterior incarnation, or an infinite incarnation of otherness across the horizon of restless self-effacing bodies dialectically embodying otherness.

This condition necessitates that time has a chaordic trajectory, or a trajectory of a *coincidentia oppositorum* of chaos and order (or entropy and emergence), such that increase of order is directly proportional to an increase of chaos, or that increase of emergence is directly proportional to an increase of entropy, and thereby history itself is apocalypse, or an apocalyptic trajectory both revelatory and revolutionary at once: revelatory in its assault upon thought, revolutionary in its assault upon being. Hence all contemporary dichotomies of history and faith collapse in that faith which is assaulted and transformed by historicity, just as history itself is assaulted and transformed by faith. Incarnationally, this indicates that the Word made flesh coincides the ontological historicity of flesh apart from which there is neither revelation nor faith, for as Hegel himself understood, pure dialectical thinking is not revelatory in a mystical or transcendent sense but *immanently* in the logical labor of the negative. Such revolutionary thinking gave birth to Marx and, more paradoxically, Kierkegaard. Hence in the course of historical unfolding, it comes to be that there is no modern thinking that is not revelatory and revolutionary at once. For in the context of an original apocalyptic Christianity, to think revelation, or ultimate truth, one must think revolution, or the absolute transformation of the current world order.

Likewise to think revolution is to think revelatory events that only reveal by destroying the old and creating the new, for what is revealed is a new world that has never before existed, and a brave new world unfolding in consciousness as the fruit of what Heidegger called *Ereignis*, although in Altizer *Ereignis* is a wholly kenotic event that only knows enowning as abyss. And so the realization of property is assaulted by a greater realization of abyss, or by property-as-abyss, where appropriation is assaulted by an extrinsic temporality whose flow cannot be stopped or possessed as it continually dissembles all transient frames. History itself is inseparable from historicity, or inseparable from the kenotic nature of a perpetually

disseminative Spirit that only *is* by *self-emptying*. And just as apart from that emptiness there can be no fullness, and just as apart from that darkness or negativity there can be no light or positivity, there can be no existence or life apart from kenosis and death. There has never in history been an incarnational movement that is not a kenotic movement, or a movement of life that is not always already a movement of death. For to reveal God is to reveal the God who has died and been absolutely transfigured in history, an apocalyptic history that is a progressively revolutionary movement of Spirit into flesh.

"History" is created by the appearance of the apocalyptic origin of the world within the world, a kenotic origin dissolving every stable origin so as to reveal its kenotic will. This dissolution enacts the vision of an existential abyss, an existential abyss releasing the liquidated divinity of the kenotic Godhead into an entropic universe. All things come to an end, including this universe. But given the dialectical engine of history, there is hope in the infinite temporal repetition of dialectical negativity. For even in the event of the collapse of a wholly entropic universe, there is good reason to think that an opposite reaction would follow: the explosion of a new universe. Pure negativity, the divine *Trieb*, is a relentless movement that cannot be stopped. This is what, in Altizer, history reveals: *the history of being is the dialectical historicity of divine self-emptying*. This is the abyssal apocalypse of being, or the apocalypse of the abyss of being.

The revolutionary abyss/the abyss of revolution manifests itself through various historical epochs.¹⁹ The irreversible linear structure of such a revolutionary movement generates an accumulation of historical memory, but all such memory remains vulnerable to the abyss. History itself is apocalypse: revolutionary movements of the iconoclastic abyss destabilize all cultures, languages, tribes, civilizations, empires, systems, etc., as an apocalyptic iconoclasm dialectically repeating a primordial iconoclasm: here and now we encounter an apocalyptic abyss shaking up every dimension of our lifeworld. The revolutionary movement of Altizerian thinking constitutes an ontological dissemination of every identity but the kenotic identity of I AM, manifest in the anonymous self-consciousness of the late modern subject emptied of every particularity:

A hearing of I AM is a hearing of pure actuality, and that hearing itself embodies that actuality, and therefore embodies the full and final presence of perishing and death. History is that presence, a presence which is the consequence of the revelation of I AM, a revelation apart from which neither history nor death would be fully manifest and real . . . the beginning of history is the beginning of the fall.²⁰

The anonymous self that says "I am" in reciprocation of the divine I AM is inaugurated by an internal encounter with the exteriority of the other and an

¹⁹ See Leahy, *Foundation*, 210–11: Altizer's "dissembled proportion is the specific history of thought constituting, in its backwards moving forward movement, in its severe dialectic without matter . . . the circle of oblivion, the oblivion of the circle: the dissembled absolutely specific historicity of the absolute inversion of the abyss."

²⁰ Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 32.

exteriorization of interiority, and likewise by a “fall” from an original innocence, or by a distancing between the origin and the progeny. Existence in history is Luciferian and Satanic, indelibly marked by the fallenness of being a creature free from the Creator. Yet more radically still, history is not the story of the creature merely rebelling against a sovereign Creator but—perhaps more severely—of the Creator’s self-emptying into the creature so that no sovereign source of salvation remains. History is the story of the Fall, not of the creature from the Creator, but of the Creator into creatures, i.e. of evolutionary incarnation. This revolutionary movement of negativity effects a *metanoia* in human consciousness, a change in the mind’s approach to the world. Mind perceiving the abyssal fragility of world, together with its own fragility, perceives the fragility of history and future. It seeks to incarnate a divine power that it knows to be both itself and not itself, a selfless power that seems to be beginning to release itself in our time. This divine power of the dialectical abyss now liquidates the house of being with an apocalyptic *Ereignis*, opening the imagination to the possibility of a new beginning. But this cannot be known apart from the apocalypse of death born in modern historical consciousness. As Lissa McCullough writes, for Altizer, “history is the apocalyptic ‘embodiment of death,’ for the birth of history is the birth of a time-consciousness of exile and perishing.”²¹

ACT III. INCARNATION AS THE APOCALYPSE OF GOD: TOTAL PRESENCE AND A NEW CREATION

A real and actual future is born only by way of the ending of the cycle of eternal return; that ending is the actual death of the reversibility of eternal recurrence, and only that death makes possible the realization of the actuality of the future. . . . History is our name for a forward movement into the future, and even if we are living at the end of history, we are thereby living in the wake of history, and therefore in the wake of an irreversible and forward movement, a movement foreclosing the actual possibility of return. I AM is the name of the impossibility of return.²²

It is now clear that in Altizer’s view of incarnation, kenosis, history, and apocalypse are inseparable from the infinite and irreversible dialectical act of creation as self-negation. As McCullough writes: “The theological history of creation, fall, incarnation, and crucifixion are acts not subject to *reditus* or eternal return; they are not subject to resolution back into an immutable Godhead. . . . The Godhead is impassioned and transfigured by its own acts in revelation history, making history the real story of Godhead’s ‘death’ for another.”²³ Here and now at the apocalyptic consummation of history the incarnation is complete. McCullough continues: “The final phase of the incarnation is the death of God, wherein the full and final incarnation of the

²¹ Lissa McCullough, “Theology as the Thinking of Passion Itself,” in *Thinking Through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J. J. Altizer*, ed. Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 38.

²² Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 43.

²³ McCullough, “Theology as the Thinking of Passion Itself,” 39.

will of God effects the Kingdom of God, even as it achieves the full and final dissolution of God as ‘God.’”²⁴

For Altizer the new beginning now known to be a *possibility* is not yet known to be *actual*: not the new beginning but the abyss of a new beginning—the abyss of its possibility—appears in a burgeoning apocalyptic consciousness. Just here it can be seen that the incarnation, in not being known apart from a resurrection that is still death, and a double negation of death, the fallen Godhead remains waiting in the long dark night of the death of God, not knowing an incarnate actuality apart from its abyssal dissemination. In other words, the full and final death of God is itself the fullness of incarnation, even if as a total presence of pure negativity. We are here on the cusp of a new world, in the first breaking of apocalyptic dawn, experiencing the beginning of the apocalypse as the all-comprehensive death of God. This new beginning is the dawn of total death, a dawning of darkness, the dawning of a dark sun: the dark sun of the self-annihilation of God. It is an infinite dawn inseparable from an infinite twilight, where life and death perpetually pass over into one another in a total and all-comprehensive abyss. This is William Blake’s apocalyptic Eden, not the Eden of primordial innocence but the Eden of apocalyptic fallenness—the paradise of the fallen—a broken Eden only possible in and as a broken Godhead, and a self-sacrificing Godhead broken up for the life of the other.

This is the world we now know and experience in the context of late modernity: it is a tragic world hurling away from all suns, a universe of entropy in which incarnation only realizes “life” through death and passing, a world in which all that glimmers and is sacred is so only as a result of death and perishing. For here death is that creator of life which necessarily brings it to an end. That end is final, making possible all new beginnings in the abyss of an absolute futurity, and such a finality is now being realized in this dark apocalypse of the absolutely emptied body of the Godhead. This dead body of God now appears as the palace of death and life, a palace in which the Monarch is dead and the ruins are inhabited by incarnations of divine energy. The throne is empty but humanity now shares in the divine life and energy without the old boundary between a sovereign celestial Lord and mortal creatures of dirt. This “Eternal Great Humanity Divine” now knows the full incarnation of divine passion and freedom in itself without fear. This incarnate passion is the *pathos* of the self-sacrificial love of the Godhead: McCullough writes, “So God is revealed as love through the passion of self-negation, which is also a self-embodiment, a movement of incarnation.”²⁵ And so humanity in the apocalyptic Eden enacts the divine passion as *agape* toward the other, and only here is the self-embodiment of God fully enacted.

Here in the total presence of the death of God now at hand, an absolute novum is an incarnational totality manifest in and through the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom without either sovereignty or transcendent Lord, and a Kingdom only realizing transcendence as a transcendence-in-immanence.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. and with an introduction by Lissa McCullough, foreword by David E. Klemm (Albany: State University of

That is to say, if “transcendence” remains intelligible, it is only a wholly kenotic and emptied transcendence, and a transcendence only actual as incarnate in the divine energy negatively permeating immanence. This Kingdom of divine kenosis and *agape* threatens every worldly power and institution with the promise of its death: only by participating in that death can one fully enact the incarnation, whereas all enactments of sovereignty become futile. Yet questions remain: Can there be an ultimate end of sovereign forms of power? Can the Kingdom ever be fully actual and real apart from the threats of evil that seem inseparable from the abyss of the dead God? Can a new creation ever really get on its feet or is it doomed to an endless repetition of abyss? Or does the finality of incarnation as death entail that every new beginning is an insubstantial movement doomed to another death?

The philosophical theologian D. G. Leahy would argue that Altizer’s new beginning only has the *form* of a new beginning but does not realize it *essentially*, for what remains in essence is the abyss that refuses actual novelty. Hence there is no *essential* elimination of the abyss of the Godhead but its double negation whereby an original and interior Nothing transfigures into an exterior nothingness. In contrast to Leahy’s new beginning as the elimination of the abyss, Altizer’s apocalyptic new beginning is essentially the beginning of a total and exterior nothingness. Leahy writes of Altizer: “This is the beginning of the eternal death of God. This is the first day of the eternal damnation of the Godhead. . . . This is the abyss of the Godhead of Christ, the beginning of the death of the Godhead, the beginning of the Godhead of Satan. This is the beginning of the pure Nothing.”²⁷ This is incarnation as the exteriority of the abyss of the Godhead, the inversion of a primordial Nothing into an apocalyptic nothingness.

Leahy knows Altizer’s incarnation to be the *kenotic* Word becoming flesh:

So (in Altizer) the whole reality of Spirit, outside itself/within the abyss of itself, empties itself in the totally kenotic movement of God (is left behind empty, outwardized, by the eternal movement of absolute self-negation), a proportion of which the proof is: *Spirit within itself outwardized by the totality of the divine incarnation identically Spirit within the abyss of itself outwardized by the Self Itself* (or, the proof reads, *the within eternally outwardized by the totality of the kenotic movement of God identically the within eternally outwardized by the death of Self*).²⁸

The incarnation of the death of the divine Self is the kenotic movement of the abyss of Self, outwardizing the abyss of every person, divesting every person

New York Press, 2012). McCullough writes in the introduction: “We voyage toward an ultimate encounter and a truly new domain that dissolves the dichotomy between secular and religious, transcendence and immanence” (xvii); and further on she writes: “God is no longer in ‘heaven’ or anywhere transcendent or apart but is—if anywhere—*here*, caught up in this transfigured ‘chaosmos’ of a neither-immanent-nor-transcendent reality. . . . When transcendence is emptied, immanence loses its dichotomous other, hence its otherness, and the demand for a categorically new thinking is upon us” (xxi).

²⁷ Leahy, *Foundation*, 599.

²⁸ Ibid., 215–16.

of particular selfhood. But such an exteriority is not a disembodiment of God but rather, through the dialectical process of double negation, the self-embodiment of God in perpetual re-embodiments of the divine life as inversions of an absolute abyss: otherwise, no incarnate actuality would be possible, and thereby no atonement.

In *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977) Altizer knows the incarnation of the kenotic Word, the self-emptying I AM, in its embodiment in speech: "A final actualization of speech is an incarnation of speech, and an incarnation of speech in act. Above all it is the incarnation of speech in the ultimacy and finality of act."²⁹ The voice of I AM, the speech of *ipsum esse*, passes endlessly between human persons as the dialectical motion of the self-embodying Spirit of the emptied God whose universal embodiment is the new creation. This is the absolute futurity we now inhabit and embody within ourselves. As pointed out by the philosopher Edward S. Casey, for Altizer the self-embodiment of God is not only registered in speech-act (*The Self-Embodiment of God*) but in vision and touch (*History as Apocalypse*), and thereby in the whole organic body expanding into the world. Casey writes:

If body is first and finally incarnate, it is so only as body-all. . . This expanded body is all the body in the world; not just *in* but *as*: it is the body altogether as altogether the world. The primordial/apocalyptic body is the body as the world of which it is once the beginning and the end. It incarnates not just itself but the world of which it is both progenitor and witness. Indeed, to attain total presence demands the whole body as its incarnate carrier as well as the whole world with which the body is indissolubly bound up.³⁰

This body in its embodying the world incarnates the universal, but this is an incarnation of universal otherness and universal negativity, indeed, the embodiment of a universal abyss displacing every body's self-particularity or individual identity. What is then rendered is an abyssal body, or a generic body always ontologically disseminating but always embodying otherness, however transiently.³¹ Here I have a first-person experience of the incarnate

²⁹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 77.

³⁰ Edward S. Casey, "Abyssal Absences: Body and Place in Altizer's Atheology," in *Thinking Through the Death of God*, 136–37.

³¹ In contrast with Altizer's abyssal generic body, Leahy envisions an absolutely particular absolutely specific body, *this* body embodied in universal meta-identity/Body itself without "self" but not without essential individuality. See Leahy, *Foundation*, 189: "The revolution now for the first time embodying absolute identification itself separates itself not only from the abysmal conception of the body, but also from the latter's counterpart, the abysmal practice of the body/the practice of the Body Abysmal [Altizer], irreducible to the abyss of thought." And on 184: "(any) thing or (any) person which, insofar as it is being itself, is a person, is, *this* thing, *this* word, *this* page, *this* person, possessed of a specificity neither its own nor that of another, but of an absolute specificity, and is absolutely the property of existence." For Altizer's abyssal generic body, by contrast, the person is not clothed in specificity but stripped of individual identity: see Altizer, *The Descent into Hell*, 158: "Selfhood has increasingly and ever more pervasively become anonymous. It has lost or is losing everything which sets it apart and within; as the mysterious interior depths of selfhood have been emptied into the immediacy of concrete points

God in embodying the second person, the other, as what *there* is embodying *this here*, and in this dialectical transaction there is embodied the negativity of the third Person—the God who has died once and for all. *For incarnation, far from enabling a gnostic return of the self to God, precludes this possibility: the incarnation assaults particular selfhood with the emptying out and saturation of all existing persons by means of a universal divine energy displacing all static grounds and structures.* Here the revelation of incarnation in the apocalypse of new creation is the appearance of a new chaorder in the aftermath of disintegrating orders, a dialectical totality that is an absolute novum and a kenotic pleroma.

In the abyss of energy is the energy of the abyss enacting an infinite series of inversions, but these inversions that manifest eternal death also manifest life: the infinite act of incarnation and crucifixion is the negative movement of an energy that is both life and death, both becoming and perishing. Altizer writes: “If that death is life, it is life inseparable from death; indeed, it is a life identical with death, and identical with that death which is absolute death, and therefore that death which is absolute life and death at once.”³² But perishing and death are chief and primary: the ever-perishing God is incarnate in that God’s very own perishing; hence all of us in enacting the self-embodiment of God realize our own ever-perishing existence and its ontological nothingness. The body is nothingness incarnate, the incarnational movement of abyss amidst naked points in time and space, and yet that negative energy is itself life and consciousness. The self-preservation that we so desire would seemingly require return, yet returning would in fact negate the finite spirit in its return to its a priori origin: just as a backward movement into an absolute past would undo the spirit, so does a forward movement into an absolute futurity. Self-continuity is an impossible dream, for the actuality of life and consciousness necessitate its continual perishing; perpetual individual selfhood is an unsustainable hallucination, as witness these polar extremes of late modernity—Levinas’s absolute past and Altizer’s absolute future, both hollowing out the ego.³³

In this apocalyptic abyss of flesh is the flesh of the apocalyptic abyss, an apocalyptic flesh incarnating the opening toward absolute beginning, and an apocalyptic flesh knowing itself only as an irreversible actuality, or a creative body that is the *ipsum esse* of the liquid abyss. Altizer writes:

Here, incarnation is a once and for all act; therefore it is a repetition of the creation, and a repetition of the creation in the full actuality of history, an actuality that is not only the arena of incarnation, but is the very body of incarnation, for history is that body in which the Word became “flesh.” But if incarnation is a once and for all and irreversible act, it proceeds out of a once and for all and irreversible beginning, just as it is consummated in a once and for all irreversible

in time and space . . . that self which has become real to us is a naked point in time and space, a point released from a transcendent ground.”

³² Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 86.

³³ D. G. Leahy, “The Diachrony of the Infinite in Altizer and Levinas: Vanishing without a Trace and the Trace without Vanishing,” in *Thinking Through the Death of God*, 121–22. See also D. G. Leahy, *Beyond Sovereignty: A New Global Ethics and Morality* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2010), 135.

apocalypse. Apocalypse is not simply the destiny of incarnation; it is far rather the full and final realization of incarnation itself, for incarnation is not simply the Word becoming "flesh," it is the Word or Godhead realizing itself.³⁴

And so Altizer's vision of incarnation is concluded: all incarnational movement of the Godhead consummates in an apocalyptic flesh that is life and perishing at once, enacting the self-embodiment of God through the self-embodiment of the death of God, thereby enacting new creation or the Kingdom of God through cruciform act, or act that is self-negating and creative at once, or that is crucifixion and incarnation at once. And what hope remains? Only the *possibility* of a new beginning that cannot now be an *essentially* new actuality. He writes in the conclusion to *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1990):

That we do name our abyss, and name it in a uniquely contemporary silence, is itself an act of transfiguration, and a transfiguration occurring in our dark emptiness, for if that is an actual emptiness, it is an emptiness that is actually at hand, and that is a fullness of time for us, and not a fullness that is simply emptiness, but far rather a fullness that is actually present. Therein lies what little is present of hope for us, but it is a real hope just because that is a real presence, and not only a real presence but a total presence, and only thereby is apocalypse possible. Here lies our true hope, and not a hope in a future apocalypse, for if apocalypse is truly future it cannot be present in our dark abyss, and certainly cannot be present as our dark abyss. A present apocalypse could only be an apocalypse of our actual emptiness, and therefore an apocalypse which is being enacted even now. When we recall that it was an original apocalypticism that called forth the dark emptiness of the impotent will, we can be prepared for a darkness that is inseparable from light, and a light that can only appear in the heart of darkness, for only the transfiguration of that darkness is an apocalyptic transfiguration. Then even if we cannot say Yes and only Yes, we can say a No that is inseparable from Yes, and while that No for us can never be a pure No-saying, it is precisely that absence which evokes a Yes, and evokes a Yes in the very center of darkness.³⁵

And in *The Call to Radical Theology* (2012):

As we descend into that darkness which is now engulfing us, do we therein encounter that ground which is our ultimate source, a ground disappearing into silence and invisibility with the full realization of our destiny? Epic voyages into darkness as enacted in the Christian epic tradition . . . are voyages at once realizing a cosmic and an interior destiny, a destiny that becomes ever more comprehensive and universal as it evolves. Yet truly epic descents into darkness are simultaneously or inevitably ascents into light, a light whose splendor and glory is a full reversal of the depths and abyss of

³⁴ Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 111.

³⁵ Ibid., 186–87.

darkness. Therefore a Christian epic movement into darkness is finally and necessarily a movement into light, as the depths of darkness are here a darkness fully visible, and a darkness truly opening the actual possibility of an apocalyptic day. The glorious light of that day realizes a resurrection which is not only the culmination of a descent into Hell, but a fulfillment of a cosmic and interior abyss and chaos, one only realized through this voyage. Hence the Christian epic voyage is a fully dialectical one, a voyage in which the realization of darkness is finally the realization of light, and in which the realization of chaos and abyss is inseparable from the realization of an ultimate and final glory.³⁶

So it is that the task is upon *us*, and *not* upon *God*, to create a new world after the death of God, continuing a labor inaugurated by the consummation of incarnation in our apocalyptic time. Here and now we—as that new humanity incarnating divine creative energy—must take full responsibility in our engagement with an absolute novum, a new world and totality that was unprecedented prior to the revolutionary embodiments stemming from the appearance of Christ, the crucified Godhead, in history. Now it is we who are Christ, and it is we who are the crucified Godhead, not the historical Jesus who perished long ago, and it is only we who incarnate Christ in actively transfiguring our new world into a kingdom of *agape*: there is no resurrection or new creation otherwise.

³⁶ Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology*, 121.