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ALTIZER, MY THEOLOGICAL CONTEMPORARY

Tom Altizer was the most brilliant and original theologian of my generation and—in my view—of the twentieth century. That for a decade we were personally close is something of which I am very proud. Yet our approaches to theology remained profoundly different. My deep admiration never tempted me to attempt to do theology as he understood it. We were fellow students at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and even then I was fascinated by him. He studied there in spite of the fact that he did not take what the faculty was doing seriously—with the exception of his advisor Joachim Wach (1898–1955), the German-born sociologist of religion. But in Chicago our relations were only occasional. Our friendship truly began at Emory University. He was on the faculty in the Department of Religion there when I arrived in 1953.

I began to understand that Altizer had redefined theology. It turned out that theologians played a quite minor role, at least in modernity. Real theology was done at the cutting edge of sensibility and thought; it was written more by philosophers and poets—and of course only by a few of these with genius. Altizer's theology was a deeply Hegelian project, the study of the history of Spirit. The history of theology was not, therefore, the history of the teachings of the church or of its well-recognized historians. It was the history of the insights and creative thinking of the greatest and most creative intellectuals. These were often little-appreciated in their own day but they shaped the future. This is the work of the Spirit. We do not ask whether their doctrines were “correct”; their doctrines were the truth for their time. When Altizer announced the death of God, he was not describing a metaphysical change. There was for him no meaning of “truth” beyond truly authentic human sensibility and thought.

Though I had studied Hegel a little in the history of philosophy, his work had been so marginalized by my teachers that I had not paid attention. My life experience had nonetheless prepared me to understand and appreciate the importance of Spirit. I grew up in one culture—that of liberal Southern piety—and had experienced a very different one while working on the Japanese language in the US Army. My fellow students were mainly academically oriented New Yorkers. They found me an interesting specimen of an earlier culture. Whereas in the culture of my youth the reality of God was unquestioned, I learned that in this different New York culture it was highly problematic. Because this issue was so important to me, when I got out of the army I used my GI-Bill funding to study at the University of Chicago, at first in the humanities division in the program on “Analysis of Ideas and

the Study of Method," a topic of study that I came to dub "reasons for not believing in God."

The University of Chicago was again a very different culture from that of New York and of course, a fortiori, from that of the Southern piety of my youth. Straightaway I began to study with the philosopher of religion Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), who offered very strong arguments for the existence of a God much like that of my youth. Hartshorne showed me that highly intelligent people who know the history of thought well can affirm God confidently. But after just a few months I found that I no longer believed existentially. It did not seem that there was anything to which I could direct my prayers. This was not because of arguments. The arguments that had convinced me were in favor of belief. It was rather, I think, because the culture of the modern university has no place for God. Everything can be and must be explained without reference to God.

Soon after, unwilling to yield to the atheistic culture of the university while still thinking that the arguments for God were strong, I moved from the humanities division to the divinity school. There I found a still different culture: radically empirical, open to all possibilities, and pragmatic. The God of my childhood was not there, but there was a strong sense that there was something divine in both nature and human experience. With this background, I could understand that the atheistic spirit of the university was more powerful existentially than are rational arguments. I also understood that universities had not always been that way: one might trace the changing Spirit from a theocentric stage to the present atheistic one. One could see that although the current Spirit and the further direction is more strongly present in some places than in others, it has become the norm for higher education even in institutions that do not embody it.

My experience led me toward thinking of a variety of spirits. Having grown up in a very different culture in Japan amplified that tendency to pluralism. But Altizer made real to me a more coherent history of Spirit. I concluded that knowledge of this history is of great importance to the theologian. My interactions with Altizer led me to become clear that I was very ignorant, and also that I was not a Hegelian idealist. I was a Whiteheadian realist. For me, God always existed or never existed. That God had disappeared from the best of contemporary thinking was an exceedingly important fact, a fact that a theologian must understand in order to play her or his role. But the question of whether moderns were right in adopting atheism was for me always a separate question. It was the question with which I had struggled as a graduate student at the University of Chicago.

I recognized the power of the contemporary Spirit in my own life. Although I did not take that as normative, I certainly regarded it as important; thus, Altizer influenced my understanding of the theological task profoundly. The theologian's task, I thought, is to find ways to influence the Spirit or at least to help individuals free themselves from what I regarded as the worst features of the contemporary Spirit, especially nihilism and individualistic egoism. When one understands that rational arguments are themselves inappropriate to the Spirit today, some of what I had thought was my theological task became less important. I looked for ways in which we could hope for a

recovery of central beliefs through a further development of the Spirit. I thought that carrying the modern Spirit through to its nihilistic conclusions opens the door to radical questioning of the assumptions that have directed it.

If the notion of omnipotence is part of this, with the death of God we may be free to ask whether we must switch to the omnipotence of matter, or whether we can really give up the notion that there is one element of the whole that controls everything. Perhaps everything has some power. Every human being has some power. Matter has some power. Perhaps God has some power. Some phenomena seem to suggest that. If we could get past the prejudice against "God" that currently dominates the Spirit, perhaps we could be open to the evidence. Perhaps a healthier understanding of ourselves and our world would be possible. In this regard I was impressed by Malraux's history of Western art. When the supernatural Christ-image was finally destroyed, the very human Jesus could reappear. It is that very human Jesus whose person and message seems to me of crucial importance. That message includes an affirmation of God as Abba, a caring father.

Altizer was persuaded that the death of God meant human liberation. For him this was not to be affirmed lightly. He was himself a God-obsessed atheist. I am not sure that he ever really felt the liberation that he affirmed was achieved through the death of God. Through him I came to appreciate how oppressive "God" can be, and has often been. I also came to understand that the focus on God had often led to depreciation of historical events and of giving one's life in service of other people. Indeed, it has been used to justify slavery, cruelty, genocide, and war. I appreciated all the more the form of theism with which I had grown up: a pietistic social-gospel God who loved, understood, and forgave everyone and called us to work with him for the common good. My theology, both as a Wesleyan and as a Whiteheadian, rejected any idea of divine omnipotence. My hostility to this doctrine was strengthened by the understanding of how, in the history of Spirit, it had turned God into Satan. But because I had never thought that followers of Jesus or Paul should understand God in that way, I felt no need to be liberated through God's death. To me it seemed that identifying with the Spirit's affirmation and actualization of the death of God could easily mean acquiescence to the omnipotence of matter in motion, a terrible slavery.

In my language—not in his—Altizer deified the Spirit. It seemed that for him the Spirit is one everywhere and at all times, although its expression is always diverse and moving forward. He persuaded me of its great importance, of his true genius in identifying its bearers, of my great ignorance, and of my undue focus on science and philosophy. I am profoundly in his debt. But even though independent testing and evaluating the Spirit of the time is far less powerful than the Spirit, it is not powerless. And I considered that to be my role rather than describing and advancing the Spirit. One difficulty I had at times with Altizer, but much more with certain existentialists, was that they seemed to take the present condition of post-Christian sophisticated Westerners as the human condition generally. Altizer's understanding of Spirit derived from Christianity and tended to dominate and overpower the Spirit that worked in Confucius and Gotama—but Altizer recognized the problem. Even within the West I suspected that the history of Spirit is different for different communities. It seemed to me that despite some

common elements the Spirit in the Divinity School was different from what I experienced in the humanities division. I liked to think it was a more advanced expression, but I would not likely get support from Altizer.

I felt more confidence in my critique of existentialists such as Heidegger. Altizer recognized that human experience or existence reflected in the Spirit at any given time had been different and would change again. Heidegger, on the other hand, seemed to think he was analyzing human existence as such. I thought this was a highly parochial view, and wrote a book entitled *The Structure of Christian Existence* (1967) to describe alternative modes of existence historically. I thought of it as my way of entering into the discussion with Altizer and existentialists. It expressed the extent to which the encounter with Altizer had shifted me away from the idea that propositional beliefs are the basic way to study theology. On the other hand, I continued to think propositional beliefs are important, such as the belief that cultural differences shape and are shaped by differences that were being ignored by existentialists.

I have indicated that my own “death of God” experience helped me to understand Altizer. For me this had quite practical implications, especially with regard to higher education. Chicago was in the center of a struggle that it lost. Altizer might say that Chicago was working against the Spirit and had no chance. I thought of it more as competition between Spirits. For many centuries higher education was dominated by the liberal arts. During the twentieth century this changed. Beginning with graduate education, universities in the United States took their cue from German universities that had already adopted a research orientation. The *Wissenschaften* had replaced the liberal arts. In the United States we called them academic disciplines. Rather than focusing on the development of students or preparing them for citizenship, the academic disciplines prepared them to do research on clearly bounded topics. Whereas the liberal arts were focused on values and taught the facts people needed to know in order to realize these values, the academic disciplines seek to be “value-free.” They are concerned only with facts. The university now teaches that values are relative and arbitrary and should be marginalized.

In the 1940s and early 1950s the University of Chicago was a holdout for something different. It did not promote the liberal arts, and it taught people to do research. But the research was in the service of wisdom rather than value-free facts. Wisdom encourages and requires accurate information obviously, but the focus is on what is done with accurate information. The undergraduate college at Chicago adopted the Great Books curriculum. The selection of books is based on the judgment that these books are creative and imaginative treatments of important issues. The implications of Altizer’s thought would support this approach, although he might not have always agreed about which books are really great. Altizer could work in the divinity school, even if he thought the faculty was on the wrong track, because the faculty felt its job was to help students come to clarity about what they believed and were prepared to defend, whatever that might be. In short, for some decades Chicago held to the idea that universities should be centers of intellectual inquiry, encouraging research that supported that inquiry and

adjusting beliefs and questions to what that research taught. Both Altizer and I benefited from this climate.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, the university president, was committed to the life of the mind. Ernest Cadman Colwell as head of the Federated Theological Faculty supported Hutchins's goals, and when Hutchins became chancellor he appointed Colwell as president. When Hutchins gave in to the academic disciplines and left, Colwell also left and went to Emory. His major project was to develop a graduate program that would prepare students to teach the liberal arts. He reasoned that universities organized around academic disciplines would not prepare graduates to teach liberal arts, even though most colleges continued to offer programs of this kind. Colwell brought me to Emory to help in that program. I could hardly avoid having some interest in higher education.

I saw a good illustration of the working of the Spirit in the recent history of higher education. In my view the victory of academic disciplines over liberal arts in higher education is a clear case of the change in the dominant Spirit. The liberal arts assumed the value of values. These values for a thousand years had been associated with belief in God. The new Spirit assumes that God is dead. It depreciates and relativizes values. The academic disciplines aim to be value-free. These days, in higher education, there may in fact be promotion of certain values, but being value-free is what is most valued. Above all one must be free of any belief in God. All teaching should be "objective." Religions are, of course, not value free, hence they are excluded and devalued. One may teach about them, as about anything else, as long as one does not evaluate. Theology as I understand it, or as Altizer understood it, cannot be taught.

My view is that the exclusion of values is truly an outcome of the Spirit, but that it may encourage us to question the Spirit. Teaching without values and encouraging students to think that values don't matter is nihilism. When other values are not promoted, money and sexual enjoyment, perhaps accompanied by power and fame, become dominant. But a culture or community cannot sustain itself for long where these are the only values. There is a chance that there could be serious discussion in our society and even in our universities about what values our children and youth need to learn. Perhaps the Spirit would guide the discussion.

Altizer did Emory University a great favor. His sudden fame—his notoriety as an atheist in the late 1960s—cost Emory, it is estimated, a couple million dollars in donations. Altizer assured me that despite this cost, no official at Emory had asked him to tone down his message or to find another position. His academic freedom was fully respected. In the eyes of major national foundations this raised the status of Emory from that of a good Southern denominational school to a major national university. Now it is regularly ranked in the top twenty. Even so, Altizer did look for another place of employment. Although he was for some years the best-known theologian in the United States—or perhaps because of this—there was little chance of employment in a religion department or school of theology. Fortunately the English Department of SUNY at Stony Brook hired him on the basis of a 1967 book he had published on William Blake. Since in Altizer's view the Spirit

appeared more often in secular literature than in writings of the church, this move was not for him a separation from theology.

At the height of our friendship I left Emory University for Claremont, California. For months, perhaps a couple of years, we corresponded intensively. This was important for me because I had no one in Claremont with whom to discuss my most deeply held convictions. Still, the correspondence tapered off. Our work took us in different directions. It was I who changed the most. At the end of the 1960s I learned that human behavior on this planet was unsustainable, that collectively we were destroying what we depend on for life itself. Since then, although I have done diverse things and written on various topics, my fundamental commitment has been to do what I can to prevent or – since that is no longer possible – to limit the catastrophes that we continue to bring upon ourselves.

This shift directed me to different topics from those that Altizer had made important to me. I was still interested in the Spirit of Western civilization, but now my concern was chiefly to overcome the assumptions of that Spirit that blocked consideration of the radical changes needed for survival. The admiration that Altizer had inspired in me never changed, but other opportunities, other topics, other challenges have been dominant for me for fifty years. As Altizer's work was less relevant to these, we communicated less and less. Altizer occasionally read Whitehead to fit him into his history of Spirit. His reading was, as always, original and insightful, but his interest in Whitehead was marginal. I sometimes wonder whether I should have pushed him toward relativizing Spirit and considering science and cosmology as being normative in a different way. I say that because the global shift to ecological concerns left him and his work somewhat isolated. A Whiteheadian could be vastly enriched by his contributions, but given his Hegelian commitment it would be hard for him to move toward practical thinking about how to save the biosphere. Perhaps a better friend would have tried to draw him into the new cutting edge brought to the fore by the threat of physical collapse.

When Altizer and I first conversed at Emory, I knew that I was in the presence of a genius. I was grateful that he took me seriously and shared with me. I saw him as my teacher, and was proud – and somewhat surprised – that he accepted me also as a friend and discussant. Even though I appropriated what he taught in the Whiteheadian context that I embraced, I never tried to persuade him to accept that context. What he was doing seemed so profound that I could only hope his work would continue to flourish. Perhaps at Emory I set him too much on a pedestal, wanting him always to be what I then perceived him to be. But he is still there on that pedestal for me. And I believe that if, in later life, he had wanted to take on new challenges in new ways, he would have done so. I needed his help, which he generously provided. As long as he continued on the path that his genius marked out for him, he did not need my help, and indeed I had none to offer. Whether a shift of direction to take account of the physical world would have kept him more centrally in the theological conversation I do not know. Perhaps it does not matter.