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APOCALYPTICISM AS POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Thomas J. J. Altizer was a late twentieth-century apocalyptic theologian. It is a challenge to spell out what this really means because apocalypticism is so little understood even within those historical traditions that spawned it as their distinctive *genius loci* and, one should add, their recurrent occupational hazard. This is a minority tradition generating a massive, outsized, supermagnified historical impact. The present essay traces out how comprehensively political the implications of apocalypticism are—well beyond the narrow bounds of the *merely* political. Apocalypticism is a meta-political stance that abolishes the human political realm. That is to say, its stance is not only *politically* revolutionary but *absolutely* revolutionary.

APOCALYPTICISM

When in the late 1970s Altizer took up apocalypticism as the explicit leitmotif of his systematic theology, he did not pause to expound its implications for less informed readers. This created something of a stumbling block, preventing his mature work from being more widely read, understood, and embraced. Still today many scholars and readers focus exclusively on his early, less sophisticated writings—relics of the 1960s—giving a pass to his substantially stronger work produced over the next five decades. Having pored through a vast library of scholarly literature on the subject of apocalypticism, including deep forays into its explosive birth in the ancient Near East, Altizer tended to assume the reader’s familiarity with its implications in ancient biblical history, the history of religions, and world history. Not a safe assumption, for this is a voluminous, intricate scholarship spanning multiple language worlds and cultural divides and rife with ongoing debates and controversies.

Moreover—and here we broach the core matter—apocalypticism is a *sui generis* phenomenon not only *occurring* uniquely in Western history but also, as Jacob Taubes has argued, *spawning* the very notion of history as such: “Apocalypticism is the foundation which makes universal history possible. . . . The eschatological chronology assumes that the time in which everything takes place is not a mere sequence but moves toward an end.”¹ This monumental fact duly noted, it is critical to grasp that superadded on top of this overwhelming temporal universality is the universality of the call; for as Oswald Spengler remarked, “the apocalyptic literature was written so that it

¹ Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. with preface by David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 33. All further quotations of Taubes are from this work.

could reach all the souls to be wakened, and interpreted so that it might strike home in everyone.”² This is elaborated by Taubes, a Spengler admirer, in the following terms: “Apocalypticism is a phenomenon of the people and becomes in many of its features the common spiritual heritage of the whole Aramaic Orient. Apocalyptic literature is written to awaken mind and spirit, regardless of divisions. While the canonical scriptures of individual church-nations are national, the apocalyptic writings are literally international. They encapsulate everything that makes feelings run high.”³ Max Weber noted along the same lines that “later Jewry felt it to be specific of their prophets that their oracles, in contrast to gnostic esoterics, could be understood by everybody.”⁴

A universal history, advancing to imminent end, in view of which the divine call is to *all*, to *every single one* regardless of nation, caste or class, gender, free or bond status, apocalypticism carries the overwhelming potency of divinely sponsored revolution.

As he became fully cognizant of the power of this phenomenon in history, Altizer aspired to create a systematic historical-critical biblical theology that captures this revolutionary power (its exterior manifestation) and this acute transformative praxis (its interior manifestation). His core inspiration as a systematic theologian did not derive from the classical Christian fathers or thinkers—Augustine, Aquinas, Eckhart—or even from his favorite modern philosophical lights such as Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard. Rather, he attended to the historical *doers of faith* as militant practitioners: the castigating voices in the wilderness, the prophetic firebrands and apocalypticists, the radical catalysts of modern reformations and revolutions.⁵ These include the array of Hebrew prophets, major and minor, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul the Apostle, Mohammed, Saint Francis, Joachim of Fiore, Peter of John Olivi and the Spiritual Franciscans, Wycliffe and the Lollards, Savonarola, Tyndale and his revolutionary supporters, the rebelling peasants of central Europe and the array of Radical Reformers, the modern prophets and visionaries of revolution spanning from the Levellers and the Diggers to the French revolutionaries to the Paris Communards to the Russian revolutionaries to the Spanish Republicans and the Civil Rights protesters—though this list is cursory, far from exhaustive.

As a consequence of this accent on historical *enactment* of prophetic faith or vision, Altizer’s estimation of modern theologians and philosophers held solely the *early* ones in a favorable light: only the early Luther (Calvin as theologian did not exist for him), the early Hegel, the early Schelling, the early Barth, the early Tillich—as later in life all turned conservative or reactionary, burned out or sold out. Kierkegaard is the singular counter-example as he radicalized and railed against the state church of Denmark in

² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. 2: *Perspectives of World History*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1928), 220.

³ Ibid., 25–26.

⁴ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1952), 314.

⁵ See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), especially its pivotal chapter 3 on the ancient prophetic revolution, entitled “Israel and the Birth of Scripture.”

his final years. The firebrands of revelatory-revolutionary vision in poetry and imaginative literature were the “glorious” ones: Dante, Milton, Blake, Joyce, Kafka, Rilke, Mallarme, Stevens. Radical philosophical novelty always impressed him, yet he expressed profound ambivalence toward Heidegger, early and late, and by contrast maintained a virtually unwavering acclaim for Spinoza, Nietzsche, Whitehead, and D. G. Leahy.

PROPHETIC RADICES

An article that Altizer published in *Criterion* in 1968—a decade into his sixty-year publishing career—stood apart from his previous work in taking up an explicitly political theme: the relationship between radical theology and political revolution.⁶ The essay is focused on theology’s prophetic roots as that which makes theology radical. He argues that precisely insofar as theology exercises a confrontational prophetic vocation, it cannot take up specific political stances in the world:

The political role of theology is by necessity extremely limited: it is not capable of formulating concrete programs or goals, nor is it able to mediate between conflicting groups or forces, or even to establish political policy for ecclesiastical bodies. . . . To the extent that theology assumes an institutional function it will forfeit that fulcrum or standpoint which alone makes possible a prophetic confrontation with society. . . . The one decisive sign of a false prophet is that he speaks a word of affirmation or hope that can easily be accepted by his contemporaries. Genuine prophets play an anarchistic or utopian social role rather than concrete political roles; they inspire but do not formulate social and political programs. When a prophet passes from a utopian to an institutional role—as can be seen in Muhammed, Savonarola, and Luther—the figure progressively moves into a priestly as opposed to a prophetic function.⁷

Nonetheless, if political revolutions are finally grounded in and are even expressions of revolutions of consciousness and sensibility, he continues, then revolutions “are impossible apart from the social impact of prophetic revolutions,” for prophecy is the initial and immediate expression of new forms of the deepest energy and life: “True prophecy is revolutionary, even if it does not succeed in having immediate political effects, and theologies are prophetic precisely to the extent that they succeed in inducing or embodying a revolutionary transformation of faith.”⁸ One of the most decisive passages in the article reads:

The image of God lies at the foundation of everything which we have known as law and authority. . . . [Radical] theology is an open and conscious confrontation with that image of God which lies deeply buried within us all, and it performs its therapy by freeing us to speak of many of the hidden sources of our obedience to law and

⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Radical Theology and Political Revolution,” *Criterion* 7 (Spring 1968): 5–10.

⁷ Ibid., 5; my italics.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

authority and our bondage to the power of a given social reality. . . . To the extent that faith can truly know pure power as the opposite of its [faith's] ground, it can give itself to the negation of an inhuman and oppressive ground of power, and liberate itself from all attachment to the sacrality of sovereign power.⁹

The intrinsic dialecticism that is Altizer's trademark was already fully formed: "Where there is no No, there is no Yes; in prophecy the Yes and the No are inseparable, and every prophetic no is the reverse side of the Yes that it embodies."¹⁰ Indeed, this dialecticism predominates in his very first published article, "Religion and Reality" (1958), a decade earlier, so this is not surprising.¹¹

But very striking from a later perspective is the fact that this article is sprinkled with dozens of references to "Christ" but only two mentions of "Jesus," both of which appear as alternative namings of Christ in the phrase "a Jesus or a Christ."¹² Even as Altizer points to the prophetic principle as the radical root of Western religion, he shows no awareness of the primal figure who would become the principal exemplar of his apocalyptic-theological paradigm. Just over forty years old, newly infamous as a controversial theologian traveling around the country proclaiming the death of God, Altizer had yet to find Jesus.

The Descent into Hell (1970) published a couple years later places a new focus on eschatology – though eschatology does not hit the *mot just* as it does not suffice to characterize what Altizer would soon identify as the here-and-now inbreaking invocation effected in Jesus's speech.¹³ Eschatology is concerned with things to come, potentially things to come in a decade or a millennium, whereas apocalypticism accents the imminent transformation *now agential* in the present. For it, judgment and redemption are occurring not in sequence but simultaneously. The dialectic of No to the world that says Yes to God's arriving Kingdom, the Yes that embodies a world-terminating No, form a coincidence of opposites that is actual this moment, not deferred to the future. Certain passages of *The Descent into Hell* evoke this catalytic intensity of Jesus's apocalyptic call,¹⁴ whereas long stretches of the book – like his earlier writings – invoke "Christ" rather than Jesus and an eschatological *chronos* rather than an apocalyptic *kairos*.

Altizer treats the biblical Jesus more decisively in his compressed and seminal *Total Presence* (1980), focusing on the parabolic language of Jesus as revolutionary praxis. Here Jesus and Christ have parted company: Christ, theological figure and symbol, the Son of God, gives way to the primacy of Jesus as apocalyptic prophet, the son of man proclaiming the Kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*). This clarification of the Christ-Jesus distinction no

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Religion and Reality," *Journal of Religion* 38, no. 4 (October 1958): 251–62.

¹² Altizer, "Radical Theology and Political Revolution," 10.

¹³ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970).

¹⁴ For example, see Ibid., 73–75, 84–86.

doubt resulted from Altizer's immersion in the scholarship of Rudolf Bultmann and his school—the biblical theologian who would win out over Karl Barth and Paul Tillich as his favorite twentieth-century theological thinker.¹⁵ This biblical immersion continued throughout the 1970s as Altizer proceeded from *The Descent into Hell* to *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977), a "deeply abstract theology" that he considered "an endeavor to rethink the whole movement of biblical revelation."¹⁶ Here Altizer dramatically relocated his attention, distancing himself from previous theological influences including Barth and Tillich, and even letting recede the immediate influence of the prophetic poetry of Blake; he was now attending primarily to the biblical-historical voices of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. Though there is no explicit naming of Jesus in this densely abstract work, the speaking of "I AM" and "I am" personify the apocalyptic voices of Yahweh and Jesus, respectively, in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. Altizer conceived "I am" as the voice of a universal humanity in Jesus, an androgynous voice of every person.¹⁷

It was in writing *The Self-Embodiment of God* that Altizer hit his stride and his language becomes honed and sure of itself, abandoning the discursive academic tone. In its wake *Total Presence* (1980) emerged, then five years later *History as Apocalypse* (1985), perhaps Altizer's magnum opus. These breakthrough works were followed by his two most systematic theological books, *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1990) and *The Genesis of God* (1993), and he then proceeded to work out his full-length exploration of Jesus, *The Contemporary Jesus* (1997). This succession of mature writings issued as a steady stream witnesses to his having arrived at his own essential ground. This was the trajectory through which Altizer qua theologian "became who he was" in the sense Nietzsche uses that phrase. The death of God theologian of the 1960s morphed into an apocalyptic theologian by the late 1970s as an unfolding development of obsessive, relentless consistency. Finding the apocalyptic Jesus, he recognized his core theological task and began formulating a distinctive apocalyptic paradigm to be worked out systematically. Most crucially, he had struck upon the vital principle that apocalyptic faith embodies the *quick of life itself* as a current-historical bifurcation; it constitutes the dialectical praxis, the splitting of the "mustard seed" of immediate explosive becoming: it refuses and negates the present aeon of darkness,

¹⁵ See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, with a foreword by Mark C. Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 9–10, 31. Too often Paul Tillich is overstated to be the singular "grandfather" of radical theology. But as a dialectical theologian Altizer thought of himself as "remaining loyal to the early [Kierkegaardian] Barth, for it was Barth and not Tillich who was my modern theological model" (92, 74)—yet this model ultimately gave way to Rudolf Bultmann due to the latter's biblical-historical grounding, a critical grounding that Barth refused in almost gnostic fashion (*Living the Death of God*, 31, see also 9–10, 17, 53).

¹⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Altizer on Altizer: A Self-Critique," in *The Call to Radical Theology*, ed. Lissa McCullough, with a foreword by David E. Klemm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 151–61, quote on 155.

¹⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 92–93. Altizer spoke of his aspiration to conceive Jesus as an androgynous "every person" in private conversation, and he implies it in his memoir when he affirms that "both the prophets and Jesus are presented as being genderless" (*Living the Death of God*, 33).

casting it into hellfire by virtue of the power of the divine aeon on its way, and in absolute obedience to the call it gets on board with the imminent transformation that is God's *new creation* now dawning.

THEIOPRAXIS

Especially to be remarked in view of the present essay's political focus is that this apocalyptic dialectic is a praxis that leaves nothing whatsoever untouched, nothing untransfigured, and this fact begins to adumbrate why "political" thinking, precisely qua explicitly political, is too narrowly conceived to be adequate for *thinking the political*. As Altizer comments, "genuine apocalypticism is inevitably revolutionary, and is so even when it is seemingly nonpolitical"; "nothing whatsoever is unaffected by its actualization."¹⁸

The historian of ideas Remi Brague thinks along closely similar lines when he sets up the terms of discourse for his study *The Law of God* (2005). First Brague enlarges the scope of *theopolitical* domain by coining the neologism *theiopolitical* to indicate that we are speaking of the divine, not of one or several gods, out of concern that "a highly revolutionary event not be turned into something banal: the divine emerged from its neutrality (*as to theion*) to present itself as God (*ho theos*), thus taking on a personal [or suprapersonal] figuration." As I make use of his point (for my purposes here), this is to take stock of the far broader scope of *the divine* as contrasted with *a God*: a God may die or recede from view even as the divine manifests itself in fullness, in a *theiophanic* all in all.¹⁹

Second, Brague asserts that the *theiopolitical* is the articulation onto the divine not only of the political but of the *entire genre of the practical* as this genre is classically divided into three parts: self-government (ethics), government of the household (economics), and government of the city (politics). As the divine asserts its strenuous claim on all three domains, the *theopolitical* is too narrow in scope to cover the divine sway over the practical dimension of all social existence, which Brague dubs the *theiopractical*—comprising the political-economic-ethical in their integration. And he warns that "insufficient consideration has been given up to now to placing the political within the context of the practical genus *of which it is but a species*."²⁰

Brague further cautions that theology as a rational elucidation of divinity—the *fides-quaerens-intellectum* program spanning from Anselm to Hegel—is specific to Christianity; it is neither to be taken for granted as such, nor forced on Judaism, Islam, or other religions as a problematic that is foreign to them. If *theo-logy* is already a way for the divine to pass through the prism of discourse (*logos*), much more risky by far in Brague's view is "the divine's claim to strike the field of the political with full force and no rational

¹⁸ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 37; *The Descent into Hell*, 83.

¹⁹ E.g. Isaiah 11:1-10.

²⁰ Remi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 6-7; my italics.

mediation.”²¹ This caution hints at the dangerous ambiguity of the *theiopractical* as it embodies and unleashes its social-political power.

Thoughtfully confronting these problems of discourse, Brague lets go the term “political theology” and the adjective “theopolitical” in favor of a more comprehensive and protean term: the *theiopractical*. In his study of divine law he seeks to inquire: How does the divine come into practice in the human domain, including in political practice? It is of ultimate significance, he affirms, that “the idea of divine law implies that *human action, in its full breadth, receives its norm from the divine.*”²²

Within this comprehensive practical scope—a scope far more encompassing than “political theology” per se—the admonitions of the reform prophet must be understood to be pervasive and fundamental in a way that engulfs and overruns the strictly political because a foundational *theiopractical* vision is fully implicit in the prophet’s total religious vision. Prophetic faith rallies its hearers toward a new syncretic-synthetic sacred existence—a dawning redemption and salvation—that at once catalyzes toward action and remains largely preconceptual. It commands obedience in *all the practical spheres* (in praxis) “before” critical reflection, before specific ideational content. This might seem paradoxical because the unthought, the implicit, the invisible not-yet demands action before it is seen or known. It *believes*, and *obeys* the signs.

As Altizer did not read German, he cannot have read Taubes’s stunning work *Occidental Eschatology* (1947) until 2009, when the English translation appeared—at which time he read it with immense enthusiasm. Taubes’s extraordinary scholarship spells out with great power what is at stake in apocalypticism, beginning with his simple but important observation: “The historical place of revolutionary apocalypticism is Israel.”²³

Let us paraphrase Taubes’s key theses on the nature of apocalyptic eschatology that are pertinent to our quest: Israel is the relentless element in world history, he writes, the leavening that first actually produces history. Life in Egypt and Mesopotamia—despite its eventfulness—is caught up in the eternal recurrence of the same, whereas Israel breaks through this cycle of endless repetition, opening up the world as history for the first time. In apocalypticism, the aeons of astral mythology are transformed into stages in the drama of history which lead up to the end. All mythological motifs are absorbed into the one purposeful path of history, encompassing all: God, mankind, and world. The revelation of God takes place in the wilderness; it wrenches the race of Abraham from its homeland, its birthplace and ancestral home, and promises a land “which I shall show you.”²⁴ Exile then repeats the wilderness state. While paganism is identified with nationhood (*Völkertum*), Israel retains the nomadic ideal of a promised land, a realm of *divine* rather than *human* rule: theocracy. The political concept of the nation, inevitably geared to life *in* the world, is adamantly rejected by Israel. Israel chose God not only as the singular universal deity, but as their king. With respect to

²¹ Ibid., 6.

²² Ibid., 7-8; italics in original.

²³ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 15.

²⁴ Gen 12:1.

theocracy, Israel shares with Arabia — with the Bedouins, the desert nobles — the conviction that God alone is worthy of having dominion over mankind; a monarchy would be anti-God. “The Bedouin characteristics of the seminomadic tribes of Israel which migrated from Egypt explain why they did not elect a human leader as king. Theocracy is built on the anarchical [anarchistic] elements in Israel’s soul. It expresses the human desire to be free from all human, earthly ties and to be in covenant with God.”²⁵

Bultmann, confirming this viewpoint, observes that being a chosen people means “this people is a holy people; it is lifted out of the world, out of the world’s interests and ideals, and has its center of gravity in the beyond. . . . Israel hoped not for an ideal world order, . . . but for the end of earthly things and for the glory of God and his people.”²⁶

Continuing with Taubes: The apocalyptic attitude to the world burst into the wide sphere of Aramaic languages at one and the same time with enormous force. But this new apocalyptic principle struggled for new expression, and to a large extent this *new way of experiencing the world* (my italics) was not formulated independently through its own symbols, but through an “already sterile bank of concepts available within Hellenism.” The Greco-Roman veneer over the Aramaic world threatened the development of the apocalyptic logos, which thus took a long time to become aware of itself. In its eastward spread into hermeticism and Neoplatonism, Jews and Persians played the same role as Greeks and Romans. It was through the Jews and the Persians that the spirit of apocalypticism was revealed, a spirit that interprets the world as history.²⁷

In sum, then, Israel had the religious resources needed for the passion of revolution: “The concept of theocracy can stir up passionate action” in that it catalyzes for supreme righteousness’s sake in the name of God. It induces a state of constant forward-looking expectation. This is the spur of apocalyptic movements in history, Taubes notes, associated with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jesus, Paul, Bar Kochba, Sabbatai Zvi, and the modern revolutionaries. The first tremors of eschatology can be traced to this dispute over divine or earthly rule: “The contradiction between the reality of the godless world and the idea of the Kingdom of God in the world brings forth apocalyptic eschatology.” Though here I would interject that “idea” is not the best word to evoke the motive power of the Kingdom of God; this passionate enjoinder is nothing other than *theiopraxis*. Indeed, Taubes articulates this in his own way as the “definite imminence” of prophetic eschatology for which “all these present things are inconsequential because the end is imminent.”²⁸

With this Aramaic apocalyptic background keenly in mind, Altizer’s study *The Contemporary Jesus* underscores Weber’s observation in *Ancient Judaism* (1917) that all the energy of the reform prophet is directed to a demand for action rather than toward mystical experience or noetic understanding. The

²⁵ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 19.

²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (1934; New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 18.

²⁷ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 22-23.

²⁸ Ibid., 19-21.

prophet channels his hearers toward total obedience to Yahweh, according to Weber, and that obedience is occasioned by the imminence of final judgment that will destroy imperial and monarchic Israel. Civilization itself is the object of the prophets' "anticultural" assault.²⁹ Weber attests how service to Yahweh entails a total *theiopractical* campaign in which there is no refuge, no neutrality, no succor or quiescence:

Yahweh had been the God of a political association, namely, the old confederacy, and retained this role in the puritanical conception. This made him preserve one indelible characteristic throughout the adopted cosmic and historical universalism, namely, he was a *God of action* not of eternal order. . . . The [prophetic] imagination centered always around the image of a heavenly *king* of frightful majesty. . . . The God of the prophets lived, ruled, spoke, acted in a pitiless world of war and the prophets knew themselves placed in the midst of a tragic age. . . . [Yahweh] was a *ruler* of whom one desired to know how to obtain his grace. . . . Likewise his personal majesty as a ruler precluded all thought of mystic communion with God as a quality of man's relation to him. . . . Thus mystic possession of otherworldly godliness was rejected in favor of *active service* to the supernatural but in principle understandable God.³⁰

Subtending this apocalyptic intensity, we must note, is the axial tenet that Jan Assmann defined as the "Mosaic distinction"—a distinction that draws an absolute critical line between true and false religion. The historical novelty of this distinction introduced by the ancient Israelites to the historical stage (bracketing the earlier Amarna religion of Akhenaten) generates a new type of religion: a "counter-religion" that rejects and repudiates everything that went before and everything outside itself. There is only one true God, and axiomatically it follows that all other gods are false. The "wrath" and "jealousy" of the God of Exodus, per Assmann, are political affects befitting a king who has entered into treaty with a vassal.³¹ Monotheistic religions, by virtue of this novel truth criterion, structure the relationship between the old and the new in terms not of evolution but of *revolution*.³² The false must perish so that the singular truth prevails. When the one true God of the universe elects to intervene, he will obliterate every merely human political order along with all idolatrous worship of false gods.

So it is that the meta-political rallying power of the one true Lord—qua singular legitimate sovereign—turned the Occident explosively, if episodically, revolutionary. The validity of earthly, human political power is annulled in principle. This sensibility instills an absolute refusal of and intolerance for the political domain. But to acknowledge this is the merely

²⁹ Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, 44, citing the argument of Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, 313–14, 278–80.

³⁰ Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, 311–15 (my italics). I have adjusted capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

³¹ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 211.

³² Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 1, 3, 7. See also Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 9–10, 97–100.

negative stroke in a dialectic that originates in the absolutely positive prospect of a reign of divine holiness. A divinely-inaugurated “end of politics,” a total neutralization of political power, is to be effected by the justice and righteousness of the Lord—the political consequences of which are, needless to say, absolute and comprehensive.³³ When the Kingdom arrives, God’s own forces will purge the corruption, unrighteousness, and sin and will restore, purify, rectify, and make new. Per Bultmann, it is a miraculous event that will be brought about by God alone without the help of human beings: the kingdom of God “will destroy the present course of the world, wipe out all the contra-divine, Satanic power under which the present world groans—and thereby, terminating all pain and sorrow, bring salvation for the People of God.”³⁴ This is the cosmic-scale equivalent of Jesus flipping the gaming tables, thrashing the money lenders, and tossing back to Cesar whatever belongs to Cesar.

JESUS

Altizer insists that the expectation aroused by the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus loses its tension when it is understood as *either* already fully present *or* only to come in the messianic future. The parabolic tension lies precisely in the now-impending temporality already breaking, commanding obedience, but not yet fully realized or unfurled.³⁵ Gerhard Ebeling articulates this as a paradoxical *eschatological perfect*, the power of which radically qualifies both past and future: “All statements of faith about Jesus . . . have this character of an eschatological perfect. That means that the turn from the old aeon to the new which is expected at the end of this time, from the time of sin to the time of salvation, already exists. . . . The new time as freedom for the future grows out of the freedom from the past.”³⁶

Like Weber, Bultmann spells out the apocalyptic domain as one in which there is no neutrality: Jesus calls to decision, readiness to act on a new basis, not to inner life.³⁷ As Bultmann characterizes the prophesy of Jesus:

The crisis of decision is the situation in which all observation is excluded, for which *Now* alone has meaning, which is absorbed wholly in the present moment. *Now* must man know what to do and leave undone, and no standard whatsoever from the past or from the universal is available. . . . The decisive requirement is the same: the

³³ According to Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, Taubes as a political thinker himself is seeking a “theological delegitimation of political power” as a whole. See Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, “No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is’: Jacob Taubes’s Negative Political Theology,” in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 321. This is quoted by David Ratmoko in his introduction to Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, xxii n. 21.

³⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 4.

³⁵ Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, 39.

³⁶ Gerhard Ebeling, “Time and Word,” chapter 10 in *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honor of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 247–66, quote on 258.

³⁷ Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 47, 77–78.

good which is to be done is to be done *completely*; the one who does it partially—with reservations, just enough to fulfill an outward regulation—has not done it at all.³⁸

Original Christianity is the religion of revolution par excellence—that is, of *divinely sponsored transformation*—but here the term “revolution” must not be understood in a narrow political sense. Far rather, it must be understood as a total, passionate, militant *theiopraxis* of a certain Christian community, sect, subculture, underclass, minority, or majority. Because apocalyptic faith implies a total praxis, a praxis of aborning divine righteousness, in radical or disestablished Christianity *it is always time for the revolution* because not to be embodying the revolution in one’s every waking hour is to be the sort of lukewarm that God spits out in Revelations 3:16. Nietzsche, the abominator of Christianity, pointedly gives voice to Jesus’s *theiopraxis*: “Neither does this faith formulate itself—it *lives*, it resists formulas. . . . It is not a ‘belief’ that distinguishes the Christian: the Christian acts, he is distinguished by a different mode of acting. . . . *Evangelic practice alone* leads to God, it is God!”³⁹

Legend has it that the Buddha expired peacefully lying on his side under a rain of shala blossoms. Christianity, by extreme contrast (and here the extremes do not touch), was wrenched into the world through the violent, unexpected, horrific event that became its forbidding *tremendum*, a real and ghastly death, supremely *visible* yet *unspeakable*, no less forbidding and forbidden for having been raised up for all to see. This Death—let us capitalize it as we do religious proper names—is more impossible to bear than the end of the world. It calls for an end of the world to resolve it. Its brutal obscenity funds a taboo power with all the associated qualities—shame, dread, shock, immense sacred energy—an utterly strange nonmythic origin for a religion adhered to by one-third of the world today. The violent execution of the radically nonviolent apocalypticist Jesus effected a theophany almost unfathomable in its religious power.⁴⁰

As the shock of Jesus’s death—the stroke of apocalypse—receded, new foci of faith came to predominate. In due course the legacy of the man Jesus—the one who lived out his faith and was quashed—subsided into an interpretation game with the highest stakes in play, characterized by violent contestations

³⁸ Ibid., 88, 90–91.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. with introduction and notes by R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1968), 144–45; italics in original.

⁴⁰ I accept Oscar Cullmann’s textual-critical assessment that although Jesus was likely executed as a Zealot or a Zealot supporter by the Roman authorities, nuanced examination of the evidence in the New Testament indicates that he was certainly not a Zealot, and indeed considered the Zealot temptation to be the one most acutely to be resisted. See Oscar Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, trans. Gareth Putnam (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), esp. 36–50. Bultmann’s stance appears fully to concur: Jesus is not announcing a change in national or historical (political-social) conditions but “a cosmic catastrophe which will do away with all conditions of the present world as it is” (*Theology of the New Testament*, 1:4). Cullmann’s intricate argument would have spared Reza Aslan the embarrassment of having published *Jesus the Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013) had he been aware of it.

and a wild profusion forms. As Spengler comments, “there was hardly a Late Classical or Aramaean religion or philosophy which did not give rise to some sort of Jesus-sect.”⁴¹ While the first-generation Christian communities bore Jesus’s death traumatically as a wound, theology—a Greek affair—was consumed with something else. Theology is a *logos* concerning divine things, or as Hamlet puts it: *words, words, words*. When theology took up and handled this Death, rationalization displaced what originated as an experiential *horror religiosis*. Theology masked over the taboo quality, deflecting attention toward its *doctrine* of crucifixion—yet without being able to remove the taboo’s recessive, indelible power of curse and blessing.

The church historian Franz Overbeck, Nietzsche’s lifelong friend, understood perhaps earlier than anyone that the impassioned apocalyptic faith that was sparked by Jesus’s death could not persist in time except through its ready willingness to convert into something wildly different. “Original Christianity no more expected to have a theology than it expected to have any kind of history on this earth”—and yet it did produce a theology more quickly than any other religion.⁴² Overbeck observed that as apocalyptic faith petered out, theology stepped in to save the day, and in this transformation Jesus-faith was overwritten by theology’s Christ, and apocalypticism by eremitic and monastic asceticism: in the ascetic conduct of life Christianity “managed to find a more abstract form to take refuge in.” By finding a substitute for martyrdom in the *martyrium quotidianum* of monasticism, the church managed to ensure its survival.⁴³ Thus the acuity of apocalyptic tension reverted to a more worldly messianic hope.

Altizer notes how the dominant expressions of Christianity succeeded in repressing their own original ground and “forgetting” Jesus.⁴⁴ But to recede or be “forgotten” is not to disappear. Altizer posits that the Christian can still know an *apocalypse of God* as having occurred in the crucifixion, and if the crucifixion of Jesus—a real and actual death—is ultimately the crucifixion of God, then it unquestioningly embodies an absolutely new realization of the Godhead. “Christianity has most deeply resisted Jesus by refusing new epiphanies of God. . . . If the Christ of glory is inseparable from an absolutely transcendent and majestic Godhead, the apocalyptic and crucified Jesus is inseparable from a kenotic or self-emptying Godhead.” For how could a full apocalypse not be the apocalypse of God?⁴⁵

⁴¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2:220 n. 4.

⁴² Franz Overbeck, *How Christian Is Our Present-Day Theology?* trans. Martin Henry, foreword by David Tracy (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 34, see also 32.

⁴³ Ibid., 83–87, quotes on 86, 84. Stroumsa argues along parallel lines, tracing how the Jewish ideal of the prophet, still central during the Second Temple period, was fully absorbed into early Christianity, but then around the turn of the third century was transformed into the ascetic-ethical ideal of the saint, which became emblematic in Christian late antiquity (*The End of Sacrifice*, 18–20).

⁴⁴ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 101. Pages later Altizer suggests that this “forgetting of Jesus” is itself a profoundly ironic inverse expression of apocalyptic, posing the provocative question: “Is it possible that a deep subversion of apocalypticism could be a genuine expression of apocalypticism? And could this be said of historical Christianity itself?” (115).

⁴⁵ Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, xxv, xxvi, 87.

Only the crucifixion could be a total symbol in authentic Christianity, one apart from which the love of God can only be known as absolute judgment, and the creation only finally manifest as an abysmal nothingness. The Christian knows the crucifixion alone as embodying an absolute compassion, a compassion that Jesus could name and enact as the dawning of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶

In Altizer's language, this was a matter of Christianity's *reversal* of itself: a stealth transplantation—an absolute inversion—of the message and the goal.⁴⁷ The crucified prophet and teacher of apocalyptic humility gave way to the symbology of Christ Pantocrator, glorified and reigning as the emperor's emperor.

Nietzsche, inspired precisely by Overbeck, notes that Jesus "died as he lived, as he *taught—not* to 'redeem mankind' but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to mankind is his *practice*." He sets forth the well-known quip that "the word 'Christianity' is already a misunderstanding—in reality there has been only one Christian and he died on cross."⁴⁸ What does this mean? That only Jesus directly lived the gospel of the Kingdom of God as a prophetic faith, whereas in the aftermath of his death his disciples and followers—Paul first and foremost—would seek the Kingdom via a Christ-cult dimension. The cultic-mediator became the message, the unique pathway to salvation, displacing the Jesus-faith tradition, burying it completely.

PAUL

Thus the first revolution within apocalyptic Christianity was Pauline. Nietzsche, grasping this, identified Paul as the "inventor" of Christianity. For our purposes in exploring apocalypticism as *theiopraxis*, what must be held in the spotlight is the Pauline understanding of Christ's body as a vehicle of resurrection and salvation. It is not just that every slave, every woman, every Greek and Jew alike is worthy of redemption, but that the mass of uncounted and excluded is composed of unique physical individualities, each one invited into incorporation in the redemption offered by Christ through his body. Exactly here, as an actor in this Body of sudden absolute significance, commences a catalog of Christian revolutions to come.

In his classic study of Paul, John A. T. Robinson argued that the very keystone of Paul's theology—its most striking mark of distinctiveness—is his concept of the body (*soma*). For no other New Testament writer does the word *soma* have any doctrinal significance, he notes, but for Paul this notion is foundational.⁴⁹ Pauline salvation occurs through an incorporation into Christ's body, not through the virtues or achievements of the atomistic or docetic "soul":

⁴⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁷ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 91.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, sec. 39, 147. Apropos of Nietzsche's reading of Jesus, Altizer asserts: "The truth is that Nietzsche revered Jesus as he did no other historical figure, perhaps because he all too gradually came to know him as the very opposite of Christianity" (*The Contemporary Jesus*, 153).

⁴⁹ John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), 9–10, 55.

Christians should be the last people to be found clinging to the wrecks of an atomistic individualism, which has no foundation in the Bible. For their hope does not lie in escape from collectivism: it lies in the resurrection of the body—that is to say, in the redemption, transfiguration, and ultimate supersession of one solidarity by another. This is Paul’s gospel of the new corporeity of the Body of Christ, which itself depends on the redemptive act wrought by Jesus in the body of His flesh through death.⁵⁰

The Father elected that the divine plenum should become flesh in one man, Jesus Christ; and now for Paul, Robinson argues, that fullness is to be extended to incorporate every individual until all are brought within the one spiritual body.⁵¹ The letter to the Ephesians makes this clear: “There is one body and one Spirit. . . . We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.”⁵² Paul’s job, his mission, according to Robinson, is to fill in and fill out the circle of Christ’s somatic kinship as rapidly as possible in order to support the Lord’s purposes. For it is almost impossible to exaggerate, Robinson insists, the “materialism and crudity” of Paul’s doctrine of the church as “literally now the resurrection body of Christ.”⁵³

Further key theses of Robinson are: By participation in the body of Christ the redemptive powers of the age to come are released into the bodies of those who make it up. There is now a contrastive disjuncture between the old body (*sarx*) and the new body (*soma*). Even if in fact the fleshly body belongs to sin, Paul beseeches his flock: “Reckon yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁴ It is only in the “likeness of his death” that we are present united with him.⁵⁵ The bodies of the faithful are the collectivity through which the glory of God is to become manifest, “reflecting as in a mirror the glory of the Lord;”⁵⁶ therefore, “the body is for the Lord.”⁵⁷ In the new body, “you are not your own, but your bodies are members of Christ.”⁵⁸ For Paul, the Lord’s resurrection body can be articulated in wide diversity without ceasing to be a unity. Indeed, the corporeal unity of the glorified Lord is *axiomatic*; the diversity derives from the preexisting nature of the unity as organic, it is not a diversity that has to be made into a unity.⁵⁹

A study by J. R. Harrison articulates in parallel how Paul’s own day-to-day existence embodies this dialectic between the sinful body and the glorified

⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² Eph 4:4, 4:15–16.

⁵³ Robinson, *The Body*, 51.

⁵⁴ Rom 6:11–13.

⁵⁵ Rom 6:5.

⁵⁶ 2 Cor 3:18.

⁵⁷ 1 Cor 6:13.

⁵⁸ 1 Cor 6:19, 15.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *The Body*, 60.

body, between *sarx* and *soma*: "The clue to Paul's paradoxical bearing and radical status reversal lies in the career of Christ. As Christ was crucified in weakness, but was eschatologically vindicated by God's power,⁶⁰ so likewise Paul dies and rises in Christ each day,⁶¹ simultaneously experiencing cruciform weakness and resurrection power as he selflessly serves and disciplines the Corinthians."⁶²

Sarx comprehends the whole person, and in that sense cannot be reduced to a merely literal "flesh." Both *sarx* and *soma* alike indicate the external person, the "body" as commonly understood; both denote the external presence of the *whole* person. So how are they related for Paul? Robinson answers as follows: "While *sarx* stands for man, in the solidarity of creation, in his distance from God, *soma* stands for man, in the solidarity of creation, as made for God."⁶³ It is essential, per Robinson, to begin by consolidating *sarx* and *soma* to see how the human being as *soma* goes right down to the depths of the human being as *sarx*, sharing in all its distance and death. *Soma* repeats all the emphases of *sarx* before it diverges from it. Robinson underscores that *soma* can be raised only if first it dies. But *soma* is that which is raised as a spiritual body, a new corporeity that supersedes the old corporeity subject to the power of Sin in a fallen creation. Crucially, Robinson affirms, "the fact that it is a spiritual body does not mean that it is not physical."⁶⁴ The *soma* of Christ is a physical body not a docetic "spiritual" form. In fact, Robinson insists, it is to be noted how uncompromisingly physical is the language in which Paul depicts Christians as joining to compose the resurrection body of Christ – using metaphors of sexual union⁶⁵ – for this union is as exclusive as that of husband and wife. Christians in their bodies have been bought with a price.⁶⁶

Being redeemed and incorporated into the diverse unity of Christ's *soma* to undergo the imminent apocalypse – when the divine will shall be ultimately fulfilled – is in effect to will: Let my body (*sarx*) die, let your body become my body (*soma*), and let me consecrate my resurrection body as a member of your risen body to be employed by you as you begin to unleash the End Times. This is the Pauline DNA. The somatic metanoia preached by Paul means that the prophetic roots of the Kingdom of God are not pointing upward, into the sky, as they were for his apocalyptic forerunners, but are grounded in and bursting out of the *present* risen body of Christ, which in itself consolidates Incarnation, Resurrection, and Eucharist at once. To wit: "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."⁶⁷

Let us be mindful, as Taubes insists, the impending end is not a subjective longing for the apocalypticist; it is *known* to be objectively imminent: "One characteristic shared by all writers of apocalypse is that they are certain that

⁶⁰ 2 Cor 13:3b–4a.

⁶¹ 2 Cor 13:4b.

⁶² J. R. Harrison, "In Quest of the Third Heaven: Paul and His Apocalyptic Imitators," *Vigiliae Christianae* 58, no. 1 (Feb 2004), 24–55, quote on 49.

⁶³ Robinson, *The Body*, 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁵ Rom 7:4, Eph 5:28–32.

⁶⁶ Robinson, *The Body*, 52–53.

⁶⁷ 1 Cor 10:17.

they are about to experience the end.”⁶⁸ Paul’s unearthly zeal in his Mediterranean missions is driven by this absolute apocalyptic certainty. Spengler, confirming this in his inimitable way, comments on the Archimedean quality of Paul’s self-certainty:

Paul drew together the whole fulness of Apocalypse and salvation-yearning then circulating in these fields into a salvation-*certainty*, the certainty immediately revealed to him and to him *alone* near Damascus. “Jesus is the Redeemer and Paul is his Prophet” – this is the whole content of his message. The analogy with Mohammed [the founder of Islam] could scarcely be closer. They differed neither in the nature of the awakening, nor in prophetic self-assuredness, nor in the consequent assertion of sole authority and unconditional truth for their respective expositions.⁶⁹

Paul’s *soma* christology not only delegitimizes and neutralizes the established political realm, it annihilates it in principle more comprehensively than any political program could; and likewise annihilated are the established ethical and religious realms. Christ is creating a new form of existence beyond mere human decision and control, beyond all necessity for law and politics or retribution and punishment: this fulfills the fellowship always intended for Israel under God’s holy governance, and never again will she be subject to the ungodly rule of idolatrous usurpers. Precisely now the body of Christ eagerly receives *each and every one* with ears to hear, not only the sons of Israel; *none* are excluded except the stiff-necked who elect to exclude themselves. Thus the ambiguous militancy of the Christian saints is born.

In this context occur some of the most jaw-dropping words of the New Testament: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ Surely these words in themselves constitute a social-political-somatic revolution, with the one true God in Christ offering promise and succor in his body without a shadow of discrimination. There is only one decision pressing each and every human being: to incorporate herself into Christ while there is time.

In sum, this is not only a contest of earthly rule by divine rule but the expectation of a holy and incorruptible communal body displacing this earthly body of sin: a new creation. The Pauline apocalyptic ardor longs for a communitarian *soma* that is *absolutely beyond politics – in this world*. He fervently expected to witness this transformation of groaning creation in his lifetime, not after his death. Not a kingdom to come, then, but a kingdom breaking in our very members as we join together one by one, and the proof of this is that the first fruits are already visible in the very midst of the present persecutions and turmoil. Our bodies united in Christ await transfiguration: take your rightful place and help others to find theirs. Though we are not able to predict the Lord’s timing, we are called to bind ourselves physically within the new order that is Christ’s body as it takes form even now, limb by limb.

⁶⁸ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 32.

⁶⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2:221.

⁷⁰ Gal 3:28.

GODLY BODY

This activation of the godly body—the crucified and resurrected body—is a direct contribution to Christianity of its deeply Jewish heritage. Historian of religions Guy G. Stroumsa notes that Greco-Roman intellectuals were particularly repelled by the Hebrew idea of resurrection of the body, and a fortiori by the crucifixion of the uniquely divine incarnate body. This is part of the reason Stroumsa asserts: “The victory of Christianity in the Roman Empire cannot be truly understood as an *internal* transformation of Greco-Roman culture. It is with Jewish weapons that Christianity conquered the Roman Empire.”⁷¹ If sin occupies a central place in Christianity, provoking ethical anxiety and the demand for self-reform, this is thanks to the traditional Jewish idea that the body is expressly created by God, *ex nihilo*, in his image: the body is an essential and fully integral part of the person. “The flesh is the axis of salvation,” Stroumsa writes, and salvation rescues the body as much as the soul or intellect.⁷²

Working with a distinction drawn by André-Jean Festugière in 1974, Stroumsa observes furthermore that the biblical idea of *creatio ex nihilo* diminishes any continuity or kinship between the soul and the divine and instead posits a radical disjunction and insurmountable distance between. This eliminates the possibility of *theosis* or divinization of the human subject. Christianity posits a strong alternative to *theosis*—as Oscar Cullmann has definitively argued—that accents a bodily re-creation, a resurrection, that is wholly dependent on the will of God.⁷³ Given the ontological abyss between the creaturely soul and God, sanctity cannot be achieved through gnosis, a noetic likeness to God. A pathway more appropriate to feeble creatureliness is sanctity arrived at through *praxis*—powered by passionate faith and reverence—rather than through *theoria*. Salvation is won not by *knowing* but by constant, unwavering faith and self-transformative ethical *striving*, “a constant, almost superhuman effort” on the part of the martyr or saint in spiritual exercises and *askesis*.⁷⁴ Progress toward salvation is achieved through a predominantly moral rather than intellectual metanoia, through purity of desire in the form of faith (crossing the distance without eliminating it) rather than through attainment of likeness to divinity (eliminating the distance).

Although ethical-ascetic striving, focused on the inner experience of the individual, displaced the public exigence of the prophet and the communal-political revolutionary drive of apocalypticism, revolutionary movements in Western history have repeatedly reawakened the communal-somatic apocalyptic call—the call to the body of the people, to those among the disestablished who have ears to hear and have little to lose but their lives. The dispossessed of many eras, medieval and modern, have rallied to the eschatological promise and have welcomed the antinomian lawlessness, the

⁷¹ Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 16–17, 11, see also 12.

⁷² Ibid., 23–24.

⁷³ Oscar Cullmann, “Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament,” in *Death in the Western World: Two Conflicting Currents of Thought*, ed. Krister Stendahl (New York: Macmillan, 1965). See also Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 17.

⁷⁴ Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 13–14, 16.

political crisis and disorder, the outbreaking of anarchism as the inaugural sign of an imminent judgment and restitution by God. As Taubes attests, with Weber in the background, “whoever announces that the end is coming shares the same passionate faith as the others who have done so—from Daniel to Jesus and from Bar Kochba to Sabbatai Zvi. . . . These passionate people, whom Israel produced, live in a state of constant expectation.”⁷⁵

The prophet proclaims a transformation that is *unfurling now*: a truth, a conviction, a commitment that is already now anticipating and in some sense *pre-incarnating* the Kingdom. For the apocalyptic Christian, this is Christ activating his flock spiritually-somatically. The traumatic death of Jesus is taken up by the radical doers of faith as the *death of our sinful selves in Jesus* and the *birth of Jesus in our glorified selves*, a traumatic-yet-redemptive rebirth. Christ is already *whole* in the communal body acting as this transforming edge, the prophetic edge by which the present form of existence is being sheared away—judged, condemned—and is being superseded by the intervention of God’s righteousness. Prophecy spurs moral-ethical-spiritual praxis as an exigence *now* under the Damoclean sword of a divine ultimatum. This keeps it on the repentant-creative edge between old and new—a place of danger because a place of spontaneous decision and absolute judgment functioning in tandem. Prophetic faith calls forth the cutting edge of God’s righteousness, generating an absolute rift or fissure between an established world of sin and fallenness that is being struck down and the new aeon breaking in. If God’s justice is seen to be occluded and eclipsed in the darkness of the present age, precisely the severity of that witness per se testifies to a justice becoming present proleptically.

The oppressed and powerless, the “insignificant” and “invisible” bereft of any claim—virtually nine-tenths of any human population in almost any age—is called into the body of Christ, taking new form in accord with the will of God, unfazed by the contempt of established powers and the *superbia* of cultural elites. Created and called by God, theurgically resurrected in Christ’s body, the downtrodden, the slaves, the women, the excluded and outsiders, the untouchables, the harmless and the relentlessly harmed rise up to partake in the Lord’s new creation beyond sin and corruption in the Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem.⁷⁶ In facing down the powers that be, the body-of-Christ radicals are not looking to establish or reestablish a human political order. They are building the Kingdom of God on earth. This is a spiritual matter—which is to say, it is a somatic matter—undoing the fallenness of all flesh. It is the antinomian project of living exclusively funded by the Holy Spirit, and it must fail and fall immediately when the manna of faith gives way to a hieratic-hierarchical program, to tax structures and laws, to calendars and regulae, to priests and gatekeepers—as that is where the cloven foot of the

⁷⁵ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 21. He notes that the part played by Jews in post-emancipation revolutionary movements has been decisive, citing Moses Hess, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, Rosa Luxemburg, Max Adler, Otto Bauer, Eduard Bernstein, and Leo Trotsky—a list that surely can be multiplied many times over.

⁷⁶ Stroumsa delineates how in Christianity the “heavenly” or “new Jerusalem” achieved an autonomous status vis-à-vis the earthly Jerusalem, a phenomenon has no parallel in Jewish thought (Guy G. Stroumsa, “Mystical Jerusalems,” in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Lee I. Levine [New York: Continuum, 1999], 349–70, esp. 349).

Evil One finds secure foothold once again. The purity of prophetic faith abolishes the world, its kings and nobles and priests, its moneylenders and rentiers, its laws and henchmen. Apocalyptic righteousness annihilates all that is not perfect in God. As Taubes noted, apocalypticism implies a lack of faith in humankind in view of the extreme depths of sin and fallenness, hence it revels in a joy that the new aeon is God's doing and does not depend on human will.⁷⁷

ALTIZER'S RADICAL THEOLOGY

Altizer aspired to create a systematic historical-critical biblical theology that captures the revolutionary power of apocalypticism in its exterior manifestation as a historical phenomenon, and its transformative praxis qua interior manifestation, the active experience of apocalyptic faith; or rather, a theology that unveils the latter feeding into, enacting, the former. Radical theology is conceived by him as a middle ground between the immediate *theiopraxis* of prophecy, on the one hand, and intellectual reflection, on the other hand, mediating charismatic faith to a larger hermeneutic world: it is an unpacking of prophetic faith that is critical, reflective, but still infused with the electric charge of praxis. Because what is actual and vital in prophetic Christianity is always *new*, always *now*, radical theology cannot be an institutional or established undertaking.

In a personal letter of June 2003, Altizer reflected on his theological identity and role:

Upon reflection, I am willing to make the claim that in our present situation mine is virtually the only non-conservative theology, and I mean this in a specific sense, namely in the sense of systematic or dogmatic theology. Even Tillich's systematic theology is a church theology, and at bottom a largely conservative one, or is so in the context of our world. And with the exception of process theology, which seems to be ever receding, we now have no theological understanding of God which is a non-traditional one, and this is all the more important because in the twentieth century Whitehead is the only major philosopher who actually thinks about God, and this occurs only very late in his thinking, and has had virtually no impact upon the philosophical world. So if someone is now interested in a non-traditional or radical theology where else to turn but to my work? . . . Apparently virtually everyone believes that theology or Christian theology can only be a church theology. Moreover, this is a theology that systematically and comprehensively refuses every historical, imaginative, and philosophical ground. One consequence of this is the contempt which theology encounters in non-church worlds, and the deep indifference to theology in our overwhelmingly secular world, and at bottom the indifference to theology even in our ecclesiastical worlds, as witness the grave weakness of theology in our seminaries. Now the truth is, or perhaps to you I should say that the truth was, that there is a deep interest in theology in a few secular or non-ecclesiastical circles, as manifest in the rich theological

⁷⁷ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 34.

thinking of many secular scholars. But now such people seemingly have nowhere to turn, there is no guidance anywhere to critical theological thinking today, and not even real guidance in our theological world. So if nothing else, mine is a contemporary radical theology, and perhaps unique as such. Now I can accept it if few are now interested in my theology, but is it true that now the only theological interest whatsoever is an interest in a church or conservative or traditional theology? Does it follow from this that now there is no real possibility of theological thinking within the domains of history, philosophy, and the imagination?⁷⁸

This passage depicts the distinctiveness of his radical theology in the negative, remarking on the paucity of anything like it. But when recast in the positive what is truly distinctive is his insistence that radical or “non-conservative” theology should fathom visionary faith as a live *theiopraxis*—always new, always now, no fixed program, meta-political—letting the living Spirit invoke a molten divine image or norm, through membership in an *all-welcoming, all-inclusive* corporate body,⁷⁹ not receiving divine norms from the past as preconceived or prescribed by a sacred tradition, a holy scripture or priestly caste, a moral code or existing human conventions.

Radical theology has a *theiopractical* pulse and metabolism; it lives and acts in situ, responding with ultimate judgments of Yes and No. It does not dream of restoring a golden past or hope for a heavenly or messianic future in a transcendent realm, but brings the cutting edge of its truth to bear *wholly* in the present with *all* sacredness at risk in this temporal balance. Received traditions and established hierarchies are melted down in the forge of this living praxis. Radical theology refuses to become established because that were to freeze and bind the spiritual liberty, the actual freedom of Christ in the faithful. Radical theology invests itself in the *new creation* here and now, hewing away from the past in its urgent, imminent concern with the novel epiphany of Godhead that is arriving. Its temporality, its *kairos*, is the wedge of *this moment* with concatenated consequences to become manifest in due time. The *eschatological perfect*—Ebeling’s ingenious term—is paradoxically the unfinished business, the urgent business of the believer now, with no time to waste.

Thematizing this divine *kairos* in his theology, Altizer intends to assert that Jesus and Paul were so radical, so annihilating of the social-political-religious status quo, that their symbolic operations—their Kingdom of God—had to be shut down by a self-defensive, self-protecting young Christianity qua rising institutional and political power. He denotes this as Christianity’s reversal of itself. Only the death of God in modernity commences to reverse the reversal.

Apocalyptic theology harbors the *political* in its bosom as a major strand of the revolutionary *theiopractical*, a state of affairs that Altizer affirms again and again: “For ultimately the authority that must be most challenged theologically is the authority of God. In a real sense, every deep prophet has done this, certainly challenging everything that can be known in his or her

⁷⁸ Letter of Thomas J. J. Altizer to Lissa McCullough, June 13, 2003, unpublished.

⁷⁹ Gal 3:28.

world as the authority of God, and even when the prophet claims a higher authority of God, that is inevitably a profound challenge to every manifest authority of God.” This spurs him to pose the deeper question whether radical faith is itself *nihilistic* in its negation of God’s authority. He ponders whether it is possible to think an absolute transfiguration (of God) without thinking nihilistically, without wholly transforming or shattering all the deepest theological categories, given that a deeper nihilism is not simply a negation of thinking but an absolute transformation of thinking: “[Radical faith] is certainly deeply antinomian, profoundly opposed to all law and authority in its own world, and this occurs in Christianity as early as Paul if not in Jesus himself, and if historical Christianity has truly and comprehensively reversed its original ground, is it possible that only the deepest nihilism could recover this ground?”⁸⁰

Though often viewed as an elite or esoteric theological voice, Altizer strongly desired that his theology be accessible to all and understood by as many as possible. His commitment to apocalypticism implied a radical religious solidarity with the disenfranchised and silent masses, the powerless and anonymous whose voices are not heard except when they storm the ramparts of power asserting their demand for a countervailing justice not *yet* of this world. “It is a matter of overwhelming significance that the insulted and the oppressed were not discovered in the ancient world,” he notes, but only begin to be visible and audible in the modern revolutions and in Marxism.⁸¹ The apocalyptic call is universal because it is ethical-spiritual, not intellectual or elite. Altizer maintained that “a truly common language can be a truly ultimate language, and when ultimate language is actually or fully spoken it has a truly universal impact.” In a final moment of reflection in his memoir he confessed: “I deeply believe that each and every one of us is called to a theological voyage, and that it inevitably occurs whether or not we are aware of it, so that in this sense theology is our most universal way, and even if theology has never been so invisible as it is today, that invisibility could be a necessary mask for its contemporary actuality.”⁸²

AND NOW?

Can we become innocent of God *after* God, untouched by that omnipotent, omniscient omnisource and omnidestiny that was our absolute and intimate *sine qua non*? Can we “return” to a pagan ground or go forward to a truly post-theistic sensibility that has forgotten God? Can we resolve willfully to “forget God” and “say goodbye to God”—or is this far rather to remember God? Altizer asks, is a final atheism an actual possibility?—and muses that “perhaps theology is that one curse that can never finally disappear.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 163, 166, 165; see also 173. He points to the example of Kierkegaard, for whom authentic faith negates historical Christianity as an impostor, a false imitation of authentic New Testament Christianity (165–66, see also 91).

⁸¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 103. For a recent sociological study of notable scope and sophistication, see Said Amir Arjomand, *Revolution: Structure and Meaning in World History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁸² Ibid., 175, 168–69.

⁸³ Ibid., 92–93.

Comprehensively entwined with this question is the crucial *theiopractical* corollary: Is a politics possible after the death of God untouched by the death of God? As liberalism and neoliberalism visibly founder today – these stopgap death-of-God political formulations, never legitimate, losing their hold – the jury is out.⁸⁴ Certainly we cannot think politically with any depth without thinking the death of God.

Is a meta-politics beyond politics, a new *theiopraxis* possible after the end of the theopolitical? Praxis *creates* in faith what it does not yet see. Who is to say what is possible?

Altizer understood atheism as an inevitable expression of faith itself, and affirmed that late modernity is a “truly theological age” when its atheism is understood dialectically.⁸⁵ His wager was always to insist that the destining of God qua intimate correlate of our human destining must be transformatively undergone and suffered through, precisely because it cannot be evaded by an end-run. So perhaps we can interpret the bland, numb, jaded *neither/nor* of mainstream religiosity in our time as the bellwether (from *Middle English*: the leading sheep with a bell on its neck) that guides us through this valley of death that we have no choice but to cross beyond the End, if only because – for the moment at least – we are still here. Believers who “believe in God” without having to think through or specify what that means walk side by side with “atheists” (including the “new atheists”) who despite themselves cannot finally be rid of the all-pervasive defunct absolute. Where atheism pervades it bespeaks an abiding presence and even *parousia* of God, and where faith pervades it embodies the kenotic dissolution of a God now fully incarnate, hence no longer God.

⁸⁴ For my take on the political implications of the death of God in generating classical liberalism, see Lissa McCullough, “The Death of God,” in *Edinburgh Critical History of Nineteenth-Century Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel Whistler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 11–12, and “Interrogating John Locke and the Propriety of Appropriation with Blumenberg and Voegelin,” chapter 2 in *Interrogating Modernity: Debates with Hans Blumenberg*, ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel Whistler (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

⁸⁵ Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 93.