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ALTIZER'S APOCALYPTIC JESUS

When Altizer's "death of God" theology first came to public attention I was a student at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. At that time there was a circle of faculty in the seminary as well as the University who gathered around Altizer to explore radical theology. Those in the seminary were my teachers. There was increasing pressure for Emory – a Methodist University in the South – to expel Altizer from the faculty, pressure that the University resisted to its credit. Since I was then president of the Candler student body, I was able to arrange a public debate between a rather more traditional philosophical theologian and Tom. It was a grand occasion and persuaded me that Altizer was not only a radical theologian, but quite insistently a Christian theologian, a Christian theologian with an evangelical zeal for the gospel, but a gospel outside and over against the confines of what had heretofore been known as Christianity. Like Kierkegaard and the early Barth, he recognized that an authentic Christian theology could only be a repudiation of what had been Christendom. In his own context this also meant a repudiation of a sort of Southern evangelicalism which combined a certain romantic piety, stifling moralism, and collaboration with racism and militarism.

When I entered the PhD program I took a seminar with him (on dialectical theology) which introduced me to the rigor of his exploration into the theological vocation and I had hoped he would eventually become my advisor. I began work on a dissertation that would prominently feature his thought but he strongly objected, maintaining I should explore my own path. In any case, he left Emory while I was away studying in Tübingen, and thus my doctoral committee was composed of the remnant of the Altizer circle at Emory. While I never became an "Altizerian," we became allies with our own distinctive paths in theological labor. Years later, with considerable trepidation, I accepted the invitation to write the article on Altizer in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*.<sup>1</sup> I was greatly relieved when he approved of what I had written in spite of his earlier injunction not to write about him.

#### THE FRAMEWORK

*Theocentric.* From the very beginning and even today the "atheism" of Altizer has been commonly misconstrued as a rejection of or simple denial of God. But Altizer's theology is from beginning to end a theocentrism. God is the

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore W. Jennings Jr., "Thomas J. J. Altizer," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 15–21.

central, the persistent and in some ways the only theme of Altizer's theology. To be a theologian, as the term implies, is to be concerned with thinking and speaking rigorously about God. Thus, atheism in this context is not a turning away from God but rather a turning toward God. But the God thus brought into focus is by no means the God who is regularly thematized in traditional theism or even in traditional Christian theology. Indeed, these ways of thinking and speaking about God must be understood as betrayals of God, refusals of the reality or actuality of God. Like a modern Meister Eckhart his intoxication with God is a yearning to be delivered from God. In Altizer's case this means above all to be delivered from the God of an absolute transcendence, and this in the name of God, for the sake of the actuality and reality of God. In a certain way this sounds like the rallying cry of early dialectical theologians, "Let God be God," but with a fundamental difference: It is not the utter transcendence of God but rather the becoming immanent of God that is at stake here. This will have to do with Altizer's radical christocentrism—but first something about Altizer's method.

*Biblical theology.* When I confessed to Altizer that I had begun teaching the required New Testament courses at CTS he surprised me by saying, of course: to be a theologian, especially a Christian theologian, one must be in constant engagement with the Bible. It turned out he had taught a course on the Bible every year at Stony Brook University. In the *Self-Embodiment of God* he maintains that it is his goal to discover a language about God that is fully biblical and fully contemporary at once and altogether.<sup>2</sup> While Altizer demonstrates a close acquaintance with at least some biblical scholarship, his approach is by no means a standard exegetical approach. Rather, he seeks to distill fundamental themes or paradigms of biblical literature as the touchstones of his own radical theology. Thus themes of Creation, Exodus, Prophecy, Incarnation, Cross and Apocalypse become the organizing principles of his theological reflection in *The Self-Embodiment of God*. This is the procedure of his meditation on speaking in that book, surely the most demanding of his books, the most rigorous example of an attempt at pure thinking as a thinking about the one who speaks. This is then elaborated in the rather more accessible but still demanding *Genesis and Apocalypse*.<sup>3</sup> He maintains that the modern recognition of the crucifixion as the death of God "is inseparable from a recovery of the Bible."<sup>4</sup> But what is called biblical scholarship typically refuses to rethink God on the basis of its understanding of the Bible.

*Hegelian structure.* But Altizer is not only a biblical theologian, he is also in a certain sense a philosophical theologian. The philosophical thinking which forms much of the structure of Altizer's thinking about God—and also about Jesus, as we shall see—is the philosophy of Hegel, most especially the Hegel of the phenomenology of Spirit (or Mind) and of the science of logic. This is the Hegel of rigorous dialectic which is however a sort of evolutionary or forward moving dialectic. It is a movement of the divine and of history, the

<sup>2</sup> Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 103.

two together, which proceeds by way of negation, and above all by self-negation. It is only by going out of itself by self-negation that mind, or Spirit, or God becomes actual. Thus, negation is by no means simply something that befalls Spirit but rather Spirit's own act by which it becomes actual and this becoming actual is the driving motor of history itself as a history of spirit, or consciousness, or God.

Altizer will claim that the philosophy of Hegel is the first attempt to rigorously think a specifically Christian understanding of God.<sup>5</sup> And it is this above all in the thinking of the central or basic theme of an authentic Christian perspective that centers itself on the incarnation and cross of God as the center of the gospel. A center that is both obvious and consigned to oblivion in what has called itself Christian theology.

#### *PART ONE: THE CHRIST OF FAITH*

In many ways Altizer's theology is a radical christocentrism. Although Barthian theology was an attempt to think christocentrically and was even accused of being christomonism, these terms apply with even more force to Altizer's theology. One might say that for Altizer the problem with Barth was not that he was too Christocentric but that he wasn't Christocentric enough. That is, the theology of Barth did not think through with sufficient radicality what it might actually mean for theology to make what was then called the Christ-event as also and at the same time a "God-event." This resulted in a separation between Christology and theology as such in that God remains in fundamental respects, outside of and untouched by that event. The result is a Christian orthodoxy that ultimately thinks God and world without Christ. Instead Altizer will try to think Christ, or rather Jesus, as the truth both of God and the world.

*Incarnation.* The early Christian claim that God is incarnate in Christ or that the divine becomes human so that the human may become divine was the basic scandal of early Christian theology. We can see the great difficulty that this central claim caused theology in the labors of Irenaeus, Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa among others. Their central claim was that it was not unseemly for the God who had created humanity to become human for the sake of rescuing God's own creation.

Here the basic text was from the prologue of John's Gospel that asserted that the Word (by whom all was created) became flesh and dwelt among us, precisely as the man Jesus. Altizer's favored rendition of this is that Jesus/Christ is the self-embodiment of God. What makes Altizer's view of the incarnation or self-embodiment of God distinctive is that this is to be thought of as embodiment without reserve or remainder. It is in this event that God becomes what God really and henceforth is: incarnate, embodied; and thus no longer a God who can be thought of as transcendent of human history and world.

*Kenosis.* In order to think this through, a decisive clue is to be found in the Philippians hymn in which Paul speaks of the kenosis of God, the emptying

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<sup>5</sup> See Altizer, *The Genesis of God*.

himself of all that heretofore counted as being God.<sup>6</sup> This notion of kenosis or self-emptying becomes the decisive way of speaking of what happens to God, or what God does in the incarnation. And ready to hand to think this is the Hegelian thinking of negation and indeed self-negation of spirit (mind/ God). Thought in this way God renounces God or all that it meant hitherto to be God and of course in this way actually or really becomes God. It is self-realization through self-negation.

Of course, one might respond that the Philippians hymn speaks of Christ or the Son rather than of God as such, as well as the way that hymn ends not with descent but with the becoming fully divine of that Son or Christ in glorification. But for Altizer that is simply a refusal of the key insight of Paul and indeed of any theology that is Christology alone, namely that this is what God does, really does and that this, as act, is irreversible, non-retractable, irrevocable, simply as act, as fully and completely act. It is not something to which it is proper to say "just kidding"; which of course is what orthodox Christianity will do.

*Theology of the cross.* Altizer's Christocentrism is not only a theorizing of incarnation and so of kenosis or self-emptying as the means of self-embodiment. It is also and therefore profoundly a theology of the cross. Indeed, in this way it is essentially a Pauline theology that takes with seriousness Paul's assertion "I resolved to know nothing among you except Christ, the crucified."<sup>7</sup> The patristic theologians who emphasized a theology of incarnation also knew that this must be an explication of the crucifixion. Athanasius begins his treatise *Contra Gentes* by saying that it is the cross that is the true scandal of Christianity which the theologian must render intelligible. But when it comes to it, Athanasius is unable to speak openly or frankly about the cross as humiliation, torture and death. Instead Athanasius, and Gregory after him, turn the cross into an edifying symbol: stretched from earth toward heaven to mediate between them, arms extended to include all humanity.

Now even if this has some vague relation to the way the Gospel of John had dealt with the cross it has nothing whatever to do with the passion narratives of the synoptic gospels, still less with Paul's emphasis on the cross as humiliation and death. Christianity as it emerges has turned its back on the cross and thus a theology of the cross, as Luther would maintain at the end of the middle ages and the beginning of the modern era. Christianity has preferred a theology of glory in which it also glorifies itself. But what could a theology of the cross mean if it is indeed a theology, that is, a thinking of God?

This is precisely what Altizer finds occurring in the philosophy of Hegel. What Hegel enables one to think is an act of negation which propels a forward movement that is ever more concrete as the actualization of Spirit or God. As act this is not something that can be taken back or reversed. It has consequences that are real which can only be appropriated in terms of intensifications of negation as Spirit becomes ever more actual, ever more

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:5–8.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2.

absorbed in and by the concrete and actual. Moreover, this is a negation that proceeds from an inner necessity for without this act Spirit remains abstract without consciousness of itself (it is in itself but not for itself and thus unconscious). Thus, there is an inner drive (*Trieb*) proper to Spirit itself as Spirit that necessitates this movement forward through self-negation.<sup>8</sup> It is finally the Christ event as kenosis culminating in the cross that enables Hegel to think through this as a Christian philosopher or philosopher of Christianity. In Altizer's view the first (and perhaps last) such philosopher.<sup>9</sup>

*Chalcedon*. Thus, the Christ event entails the becoming human, indeed fully and finally human, of God. Early Christianity may be understood as the attempt both to think and to hide from itself, the radicality of this *coincidencia oppositorum*. This reaches a sort of paradoxical climax in the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon which insists upon the two "natures" of Christ: fully God, fully human. On the one hand this formulation insisted on the full divinity of Christ, as human, the full humanity of Christ as divine. Thus it bears within itself the recollection of the utter scandal of incarnation, kenosis and cross. Yet at the same time the formula provided a way to escape the full force of this scandal and even to hide it from itself. For it offers a way to insist that the divine remains divine (impassible, eternal, transcendent) without being mixed or confused with that which is finite, historical, immanent (the human). This latter move enables an orthodoxy with its reversal of the kenotic movement while carrying a sort of conceptual thorn in the side that can burst forth as a radical Christianity, indeed a heretical Christianity, that recalls the primitive scandal of the theology of the cross.

A *Sabellian Trinity*. Since Barth, the attempt to think a properly Christian doctrine of God has taken the form of an attempted recovery of trinitarian language in which to speak appropriately of God, a trinitarian language lost from theology, if not liturgy, since the end of the patristic period. Thus Barth, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, and Catherine Mowry Lacugna among many others have pursued this path, so that it is quite common today for the most diverse theological perspectives to shape themselves as trinitarian (rather than monotheistic) engagements with God. In his final years Altizer joined this theological chorus—but by blazing his own unique approach in *The Apocalyptic Trinity*.<sup>10</sup> In his view traditional trinitarian thinking is incorrigibly rooted in the refusal to let go of the transcendence of God (figured as the Father), and in this sense it is rooted in a refusal to take with radical seriousness the incarnation and above all the cross and thus the death of God.<sup>11</sup> This refusal goes back to the second century theological refusal of the Sabellian heresy, which was called *patripassian* since it is God (the Father in trinitarian language) who suffered and died on the cross.

To be sure, much late-modern theology has sought to overcome the thinking of a passionless God, of a God who cannot suffer and thus a God who is utterly or absolutely transcendent. This is one of the attractions for many of

<sup>8</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>10</sup> Altizer, *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 107.

process theology, but is also present in Moltmann's *The Crucified God* as well as in a number of contemporary Asian theologies. But from Altizer's perspective this is simply insufficiently rigorous and thoroughgoing; it remains theoretical rather than actual, eternal rather than historical.<sup>12</sup> It does not see the passion of God as something that has an absolute beginning in the movement of the self-actualization of God as self-negation. Hence Altizer's frequent invocation of the "apocalypse of God," which he attempts to work out in a fully trinitarian form for the first time in *The Apocalyptic Trinity*. The actualization or self-actualization of the passion or dying of God actually occurs in history, specifically in the Christ-event.

#### PART TWO: JESUS OF HISTORY

But what does the Christ of faith have to do with the Jesus of history? This is a conundrum as old as modern theology. How does christocentrism come to terms with Jesus, the Jesus who is encountered in the gospels or whose actuality is narrated in the gospels? We have already seen that the passion narratives, particularly of Mark, Matthew, and Luke—perhaps especially of Mark—play a role in the emphasis on a theology of the cross or a cruciform theology. These passion narratives, as opposed to the relatively passionless passion narrative of John, are critical in that they enter into a narration of actual suffering and death. Altizer does not at all shy away from this question and so takes seriously the critical New Testament scholarship that scrutinizes the gospels, especially the synoptic or first three gospels for clues as to the origins of the Christian proclamation concerning Jesus. Thus, much of what Altizer does here is engage with critical biblical scholarship, something he faults Barth for not doing. But Altizer is also critical of some aspects of modern biblical scholarship.

He is especially critical of the results of the Jesus seminar which attempted to reach scholarly consensus about the sayings attributed to Jesus in the four canonical gospels plus the gospel of Thomas discovered among the texts of the Nag Hamadi library which is also the source for much new knowledge about early Christian Gnosticism. These scholars also place considerable weight on the reconstruction of what is called "Source Q," allegedly the source of sayings of Jesus subsequently appropriated by the first three gospels and so an earlier version of those sayings.<sup>13</sup> The original idea behind the construction of Source Q was to examine sayings common to Matthew and Luke. But only about half the material in this hypothetical source as commonly discussed by scholars meets the original definition. Presumably the original definition of Q produced results too meager for meaningful analysis. In any case a significant minority of New Testament scholars regard this hypothetical Q with considerable suspicion.

Altizer's suspicion of the new quest of the original sayings of Jesus has more to do with the result than with the methodology. For what has disappeared from Jesus is not only anything remotely related to the cross but any trace of the apocalyptic Jesus that had rocked the theological and New Testament

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>13</sup> The Q stands for Quelle, which is German for "source," so the name is source "squared," we might say.

scholarly world in the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. Thus the Jesus that results is little more than a middle class guru, incapable of giving offense to anyone. There is nothing left that would offend the sensibilities of middle-class secular or pious reader.<sup>14</sup> In short it is a return to the liberal protestant Jesus that had been demolished by Weiss and Schweitzer a century before and which had produced the fruitful theological work of Bultmann and Barth. It echoes the 1933 work of C. H. Dodd on the parables which found a completely realized eschatology in Jesus and hence an erasure not only of apocalyptic but also of the eschatological tension so important to Bultmann.<sup>15</sup>

Although he was one of the co-chairs of the Jesus Seminar Altizer finds much more credible the reconstruction of a Jesus in the work of John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, to whose work he devotes an entire chapter in *The Contemporary Jesus*.<sup>16</sup> Altizer is most attracted to Crossan's attempt to bring together a reflection on Jesus's words with a reflection upon his deeds or comportment. Thus deeds of "magic" as well as the open commensality or unrestricted sharing of food and drink especially among the nobodies points toward a brokerless Kingdom of God in which nothing stands between or needs to mediate between God and humanity, or between human beings.

In common with New Testament scholarship generally Crossan is not prepared to draw theological consequences from this radical Jesus, consequences for the thinking of God in particular. But it is precisely this which Altizer is concerned to do, as we have already seen in the discussion of the Christ of faith. Nevertheless, Altizer will maintain that in important respects his understanding of the Jesus traditions, in so far as they reflect or point to the Jesus of history, is in continuity with New Testament scholarship – thus the focus on the kingdom of God as central to Jesus's proclamation, and a focus on parabolic speech as characteristic of Jesus. Negatively, he will agree (perhaps too hastily) with the notion that son of man sayings as well as messianic assertions are not attributable to Jesus as such or originally. To these themes he will side with those scholars who point to the apocalyptic character of Jesus's message and acts and in this connection will underscore the engagement with Satan as well as what he calls the apocalyptic joy of Jesus. Let us take these themes in turn.

*Kingdom of God.* According to Altizer, nothing is more clear than that Jesus proclaimed and enacted the Kingdom of God. Accordingly, this name or theme of the Kingdom of God plays a major role in his thinking. The term is used insistently as a sort of proper name (hence capitalized) and alternative formulations or translations of this term are avoided, indeed rejected. Altizer insists that this term does not designate something like a return to the direct rule of God, even if it is a sort of replacement for the term or name of God. What is at stake here is certainly not the kingship of God. Instead this term designates the reversal of the transcendence and mystery of God, God is not something distant but at hand, even now entering fully and irreversibly into

<sup>14</sup> Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 19–32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., chapter 3, 33–44.

our reality.<sup>17</sup> It is thus already an offense, indeed an offense that already anticipates the offense of the cross itself. Thus, it indicates that what was formerly named as God is now coming to an end by coming as the Kingdom of God.

Here Altizer maintains that while the Kingdom of God indicates the immanence of God or the becoming immanent of God it still must be understood in terms of the "already but not yet" formula of Bultmann. That is, it does not designate a realized eschatology as in C. H. Dodd, but an absolutely imminent coming or arrival of immanence. It would be the Gnostics, already resisted by Paul in 1 Corinthians, who eliminated the eschatological tension in this impending immanence to imagine the resurrection had already occurred, that they were already living the resurrection or, in these terms, the Kingdom of God. Thus Altizer understands the proclamation to be one of the advent, the even now arriving of the Kingdom of God. In this he follows the view of Johannes Weiss concerning the proclamation of Jesus of the Kingdom of God and of Rudolf Otto on the dawning of the Kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup>

*Parables.* This proclamation of the Kingdom of God is primarily enacted or spoken in parables. And it is this parabolic speech which is absolutely determinative of Jesus's speech. He accepts the scholarly view that we do not find here the very words (*ipsimma verbi*) of Jesus—as Bultmann had shown—but insists that here we may hear the Voice of Jesus, what we might call the character of Jesus's speaking if not the very words themselves.<sup>19</sup> Voice is another term to which Altizer gives a particular meaning. It stands between an anterior silence, which it negates and a speaking in which it is both actualized and into which it is transformed.<sup>20</sup>

He agrees that parables are not to be understood as allegories or as moralizing admonitions. Rather they are the eruption into speech of an end to all previous ways in which God and world had been construed. The offense is found in the juxtaposition of the Kingdom of God with entirely mundane or secular realities: sowing seed, workers in a field, yeast and bread, a fishing net, landlords and servants, and so on. It is above all the very juxtaposition of Kingdom of God with utterly secular, mundane and nonreligious contexts and situations which signals the basic offense of the proclamation. Thus, parabolic speech signals the end of any religious sensibility or reality, and any separation of God from the utterly mundane. That the parables are not simply the very words of Jesus points to their character as anonymous speech. That is, the speaker disappears behind the speaking. The parables could be spoken by anyone or no one. Indeed, here the name Jesus serves to designate a certain anonymity, the anonymity of one who simply speaks, not of himself but of a new, indeed utterly new, reality.

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<sup>17</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Altizer, *Contemporary Jesus*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 40.

<sup>20</sup> See Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*.

*Apocalyptic*. Throughout his discussion of Jesus, Altizer identifies himself with the view articulated by Albert Schweitzer who—like Johannes Weiss before him—recognized the utter distance between the apocalyptic Jesus and all attempts to appropriate Jesus for religious purposes. Jesus, Schweitzer said, “comes to us as one unknown” and in a very real sense as one who is unknowable within existing doctrinal or religious or even moralizing categories and discourses. Although Weiss and Schweitzer arise within the world of a liberal Protestantism, it is in that world that their discoveries are most unwelcome. Of course, this would be even more true within more orthodox versions of Christianity.

The work of Schweitzer triggered a new appreciation for the world of apocalyptic, a recognition that this was the linguistic and cultural world within which Christianity was born (a view subsequently strengthened by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls), and a worldview that was quickly excluded from emerging orthodox and catholic Christianity. Apocalypticism was an inheritor, and transformation, of Israelite prophetic speech. The prophets announced the end of anything corresponding to a given or established identity for Israel. They reject the cult, the social, political institutions, even the survival of temple and nation. All the ways that Israel had assured an identity for itself were abolished in prophetic speech. Their eschatological speech is the speech of cataclysm, of annihilation.<sup>21</sup> Within the wreckage of this catastrophe they may hold out something like hope but if so it is for something completely new: no Torah save the heart, no cult save the care for widows and orphans, no king, no master (to refer to part of a slogan of the modern anarchist movement) only a remnant may remain. It is therefore significant that Jesus can be said to bring forward aspects of prophetic oracle.

But the words and deeds of Jesus take this beyond the horizon of the people of Israel and point to a universal world, a “cosmic” transformation. Moreover, one in which the separation of God and world and thus the separate or transcendent reality of God comes to an end (thereby completing the anarchist creed). It seems to me that this is brought most dramatically to expression in Mark’s account of the passion. For following immediately upon the cry of dereliction from the cross of Jesus there is the vision of the ripping asunder of the veil of the temple; that which had designated the utter separation of the divine from the profane or mundane. If God is the name of that which is separate and transcendent then that God is dead, and is so precisely in the death of Jesus.

*Satan*. One feature of the apocalyptic situation of Jesus to which Altizer draws attention, as many NT scholars do not, is the fierce engagement with Satan. In *Total Presence* Altizer points to the contest with Satan that is found in Jesus’s exorcisms in which the demons know him and in which he overcomes them. In *The Genesis of God* Altizer also points to the saying from Luke, “I saw Satan fall from the skies.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, one may wonder whether this is good news

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<sup>21</sup> Altizer, *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 62–70.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 10:18.

or bad news; Satan is dethroned but also falls; but where? Into our world? We shall return to this later.

Altizer does not seem to make explicit reference to this but the Gospel of Matthew clearly emphasizes the contest with Satan in the wilderness. This is a Satan who offers worldly success, political domination, economic prosperity, miraculous intervention; and does so under the guise of a certain religiousness. Jesus will reject that offer; Christianity will not. That Jesus's deeds and words entail a complete rejection of religious tradition and institution is moreover clear in Matthew's representation of Jesus as Satan. For this at least, is the view of religious authorities who three times associate Jesus with the prince of darkness. That is, in their view, the utter destruction entailed in Jesus's proclamation and comportment can be best understood as an alliance with absolute evil.

Telling in this regard is a certain nonchalance of Jesus when this view is reported to him. If by Satan I cast out Satan, then Satan is divided and cannot stand or survive. That is, whether or not Jesus is in league with Satan, the Kingdom of God is arriving.<sup>23</sup> While Altizer's claim that Jesus's apocalypticism is always an engagement with or combat with Satan may be somewhat exaggerated, in part because of the role that Satan will come to play in his own theological vision, it is nevertheless an important theme and one too often overlooked. And this is no less true of the Gospel of John in which the Prince of Darkness, the Father of lies and so on always lurks about the edges of even this presumably nonapocalyptic gospel.<sup>24</sup>

*Joy.* Another theme of the apocalypticism of Jesus comes to expression, at least in Altizer's view is the joy of Jesus. While Altizer does not seem to indicate how this is expressed in the gospels, one could reference the assertion, accepted by Jesus, that he is a wine-bibber and a glutton, a reference to the role that parties and feasts play both in parables attributed to him as well as accounts of his behavior. This too was regarded as shocking by his contemporaries as depicted in the gospels and Jesus is even said to oppose his behavior to a religious practice of fasting.<sup>25</sup> The sign in the Gospel of John of turning water into celebratory wine may also be cited here. Altizer will include this joy in his own creed at the end of *The Genesis of God*.<sup>26</sup>

Now to be sure this joy does not as such become a major theme in the apocalyptic proclamation and enactment of Jesus. This is because the joy of the inbreaking of the new is indissociably related to the horror of ending, indeed the ending that comes to fullest expression in the passion narratives. On one level the cross is the consequence of the announcement and enactment of the ending of all forms of institutional authority, whether specifically religious or not. This strikes at the root of all given forms of tradition, whether the domination of imperial power or the piety of religious orthodoxy. This does not mean that Jesus was simply a zealot with a political program. It is rather the rejection of anything that counts as a political

<sup>23</sup> Mark 3:21-27.

<sup>24</sup> John 8:42-45.

<sup>25</sup> Mark 2:18-22.

<sup>26</sup> Altizer, *The Genesis of God*, 185.

program. Nor is it a question of the reform of religion but rather its abolition. Thus all subsequent revivals or renewals of apocalyptic vision bring the visionaries into implacable opposition to all constituted authorities, as the Spiritual Franciscans discovered, and no less the Cathars and Albigensians.

Yet as we have seen the cross of Jesus is the culmination of his comportment in an even more fundamental sense. For the execution "of the Lord of Glory" as Paul will say<sup>27</sup> is the end not only of the principalities and powers, but also and thereby the end of every God which is the transcendent authorization for these powers. Altizer, as we have seen, regards the death of Jesus as the event par excellence of the death of God. That is, the kenosis of God, the self-emptying of God announced in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God reaches its climax in humiliation and death, the humiliation and death of God as such. This interpretation will mean that traditional or orthodox Christianity, whether Catholic or protestant must be regarded as opposed to that which occurs in Jesus. Nevertheless, that which happened in Jesus really happened. It is therefore impossible for this to be hidden forever. It has real effects in history and in consciousness. Even in the reign of Christendom consciousness of this event and its effects breaks through the conspiracy of denial. This most commonly happens in heretical and revolutionary movements. But it also happens in art and in various strands of mysticism.

As Christendom begins to lose its grip on the imagination attestations to the death of God become more noticeable. The fatal opposition between Christ and Christianity is narrated in Dostoyevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor. The cross becomes the structure of philosophy of history in Hegel. Kierkegaard underlines the opposition between faith and even the protestant consensus. William Blake with growing apocalyptic clarity envisions the contest between Jesus and Satan, and Joyce brings forward the vision of "here comes everybody" as an intramundane transformation of resurrection. Nietzsche's Zarathustra openly proclaims the death of God. These are only some of the witnesses to the great transformation wrought in the event that we may name "Christ" or "Jesus."

### PART THREE: THE ANONYMOUS (CONTEMPORARY) JESUS

The order of our presentation not only corresponds to the way Altizer began his theological project with a theology of the cross and then subsequently explored the traditions concerning Jesus; this also corresponds to the order in which early Christian discourse appeared, first with Paul's letters and their emphasis on "Christ and him Crucified" and then the gospels that purport to narrate the message and mission of the one who was crucified. In both Paul and the gospels the cross or passion is related to a subsequent resurrection. What will take the place of the resurrection or ascension narratives for Altizer is the theme of the descent into hell. Therefore, not a reversal of the cross via heavenly ascent but an ever deepening descent into the reality of humanity and world, and thus *The Descent into Hell* (1970).

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<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:8.

This may seem to be a basic departure from the biblical texts so important to Altizer but there is something to be said in its favor. The earliest gospel (Mark) has no resurrection appearance but simply the reported message that Jesus will meet the followers when they return to the Galilee where it all began, a message that strikes terror in the ears of its hearers. And even where we do have resurrection narratives they seem impossible to be squared with one another. One way of dealing with this odd situation is provided by Bultmann who will suggest that Jesus is raised into the proclamation or kerygma of his disciples.

Altizer will offer a more "historical" interpretation using the symbol of the descent into hell. In general what this means is the growing actualization in history and world of the kenosis or self-emptying of God which has actually and irrevocably occurred in the historical death of Jesus the Christ. Thus, the Kingdom of God announced and enacted by Jesus may also be said to become increasingly "already" and thus decreasingly "not yet." Thus, we live now in the time of ending. Accordingly Jesus our contemporary also becomes anonymous in our time, passing from a particular to a general or universal identity.<sup>28</sup>

It is crucial to Altizer's theological vision that the effects or consequences of the death of God be in some sense public, manifest in our time and history. (This was of course also true for Hegel as can be seen in his lectures on the Philosophy of History.) Thus Altizer reads the history of the West as the history of the evolution or unfolding of the death of God in spite of Christianity's attempt to retard and repress consciousness of the radicality of this event. Hence his close reading of not only the history of theology and but also of the Christian Epic from Dante to Milton, from Blake to Joyce.

But what is also clear to Altizer is that modernity itself should be understood as the actualization of the death of God in Christ and thus as the manifestation of a total immanence. He can 'hear' this immanence in the music of Mozart,<sup>29</sup> and see it in the paintings of Monet and Van Gogh.<sup>30</sup> But it is all the more evident in what is self-evident about modernity: the secularization of the world, a secularization in which not only God disappears from view but in important respects the human as well. While Augustine may have bequeathed to the West a consciousness of the inner self and one whose inwardness was exacerbated by an interior division, it is precisely this interiority and this anthropocentrism which is now disappearing. What characterized humanism at the dawn of modernity disappears in art with the advent of abstraction in art and the reduction of the salience of plot and character in the modern novel, the triumph of atonality in music, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

But in the place of an older humanism of individuality and interiority perhaps a different humanity is struggling to be born. Here Altizer takes Blake to be an especially important visionary with the apocalyptic vision of

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<sup>28</sup> Altizer, *Contemporary Jesus*, 185-204.

<sup>29</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 83.

the appearing of a true humanity, a humanity for which an alien and alienating law has disappeared, in which there is the advent of a universal love or compassion in which all are linked to all in bonds of pure fraternity. Thus Blake anticipates or envisions an "absolutely common or absolutely universal humanity which is Here Comes Everybody."<sup>32</sup> Here we may also recall Crossan's attribution to Jesus of the advent of a brokerless humanity, in which there is unmediated access of each and all to what is common. A related vision might be that of Marx in anticipating the end of the State, of classes and thus a humanity of shared freedom, of life in common, of equality. We might also think of the vision of the French revolution of freedom, equality and fraternity. Or Beethoven's final symphonic rendition of Schiller's ode to joy. Or, in another key Nietzsche's anticipation of a humanity without resentment, without guilt, without regret.

These visions anticipate a positive outcome of the advent of a new humanity, a new humanity invoked by the words and comportment of Jesus, perhaps even in the mission of Paul. The form of life envisaged here is one in which the self-emptying of God in the advent of the Kingdom of God is echoed in the kenosis of the human, the self-emptying that leads to an ethos of total or unrestricted compassion.<sup>33</sup> This unrestricted compassion takes the form of a radical forgiveness of sins that dissolves both resentment and guilt thereby reversing the bad conscience of an individual interiority and thus opening the way to a total affirmation or yes-saying.<sup>34</sup>

We might also note here—although Altizer does not—the various determinations to question the fixed barriers between human and animal so crucial to human self-definition in the enlightenment. We might think of a growing ecological consciousness in which the human is a part of a field of the living with a vocation of compassion and care. Perhaps this may also mean the troubling of the distinction between human and machine as we interact more and more with artificial intelligence. Older ways of establishing the identity of the human by radically separating it from animal and machine are becoming increasingly precarious. Is this a good thing? A bad thing? Or both at once and altogether?

*Buddhist Jesus.* From the beginning of his academic career Altizer has been engaged with an attempt to understand the relation between Christianity and Asian religion, most especially Buddhism. At first there seemed to be an absolute distinction to be drawn between biblical eschatology and the religions of Asia or as he then called it "oriental mysticism." But in his later work there has been a return to an attempt to think through the possible relation between his own version of Christianity and the insights of Buddhism. Perhaps the most thorough such engagement is in *Godhead and the Nothing*.<sup>35</sup> For are not the ideas of a primal nothingness out of which God speaks and so begins to be actual, or an apocalyptic nothingness in which

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 41.

<sup>33</sup> Altizer, *The Descent into Hell*, 201-211 and *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 146.

<sup>35</sup> Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

God finally disappears as an identity, not strongly correlated with a Buddhist understanding of nothingness? Of course for Altizer *nothing* indicates a beginning and an end rather than a Buddhist recognition of what is always truly the case. Yet there is no simple opposition here or at least not one that does not potentially lend itself to a coincidence of opposites.

This may be even more evident in Jesus precisely at the point of the movement of self-emptying and the promoting of an ethos of kenosis which is realized as total compassion. Here at least Jesus and the Buddha coincide even as the respective views of the world seem utterly distinct. For the Christian the world is real and for the radical Christian it is even more fully real as the arena of the Kingdom of God whereas for the Buddhist the way toward Buddhahood is the recognition of the ultimate unreality of the world. And yet the passing away of this world in apocalyptic vision is itself a negation of the world in the name of the advent of a novum that is the annihilation of that world. Here too there is a coincidence of seeming opposites.

*Satan*. The dream of a new humanity has as its counterpart a nightmare of a descent into darkness and death. In the twentieth century this is actualized in many horrifying ways. We may recall the senseless death spiral of the first world war which shattered confidence in humanistic progress. Even more horrifying in the descent into madness of the third Reich and the abolition of humanity itself in the Shoah. Or we may think of the almost unimaginable massacres perpetrated by those who had heralded a new humanity in the Soviet Union or Maoist China. The sheer brutality and madness of wars of extinction, of genocide, have continued into the twenty-first century with who knows what horrors to come. Moreover, just as we recognize our connectedness to all the living, we seem helpless to stop ourselves from careening toward the ecological nightmare of climate catastrophe even as we witness the extinction of thousands of species of living beings.

Here we may recall Jesus's vision of the fall of Satan from the heavens, a fall which increasingly now seems to betoken the growing rule of Satan on earth. The descent into hell, a hell of death and violation, seems every day our more plausible fate. One of the striking features of Altizer's later theology is the growing prominence of Satan. He had long recognized the importance of Satan in the epic traditions most especially in Milton and in Blake. And we have seen that for him the appearance of Satan and his counterparts is regarded as an essential aspect of the apocalyptic ambience of the gospels. But increasingly Satan appears as the contemporary counterpart of God in Christ, as the ruler of this world. Indeed, in *Living the Death of God* Altizer recounts his own struggles with the manifestation of an actual Satan.<sup>36</sup> Not a figure of speech, or figment of (literary) imagination but an actual force or power of evil and death. He even supposes that theology cannot be serious if it is incapable of naming Satan not only as a character of the past but as the name of our present reality and experience. Indeed, he points out that Christian theology as an apocalyptic theology knows the inseparability of damnation and hell for any hope of redemption. But there is even more.

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<sup>36</sup> Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, 4.

Perhaps the most disturbing suggestion of Altizer is that of a *coincidencia oppositorum* of Christ and Satan. To be sure, the idea that Jesus is in some sense Satan is as old as the mission of Jesus. For as we saw in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is recognized as "of Satan" since his words and deeds regarding the dawning of the Kingdom of God intensifies the prophetic demolition of religious institutions and practices. Put another way those who are themselves in some ways the mediators or brokers between humanity and God must find the end of that brokerage to be sheer death and destruction, blasphemy and rebellion. From this perspective Jesus can only appear as Satan, and the kingdom of God as hell itself.

And it is indeed difficult not to name our own time as the hell in which Satan rules. For Altizer the Holocaust or Shoah is the paradigm of evil's dominion.<sup>37</sup> Altizer's view is not alone in this, for Giorgio Agamben has taken the death camps of Nazi Germany as the paradigm of a reigning and all pervasive biopolitics from which we seem helpless to escape. For Christian theology there is an all too real convergence of Satan and Christ. For Satan rules in the name of Christ, indeed the cross of Christ. From Constantine's "in this sign conquer" through crusades and inquisitions, in the invasion of the Americas by the conquistadores, even in the emblem of the Ku Klux Klan, have not Christ and Satan become virtually synonymous? Perhaps this is why Jesus must finally become anonymous.

*Resurrection.* Despite the coincidence in our experience of Jesus and Satan, of the Kingdom of God and Hell, Altizer does not let death and darkness have the last word. For Resurrection finally means for him the release of the divine energy, love, spirit into the world. To be sure our time is all the more a time of death and darkness. But the cross of God, the cross of humanity, the cross of the world, is also and at the same time the resurrection of the dead; the coming to life of all that is under the rule of death. Here we see for Altizer the importance of a Joycean celebration of *Here Comes Everybody*, of a Nietzschean and Joycean Yes-saying that beckons to or points to a reversal of death and darkness. Upon this thread hangs the possibility of regarding the death of God, the cross, the apocalypse, as gospel, as good news. This does not mean the triumph of anything identifiable as Christianity but rather the becoming universal and hence utterly anonymous of Jesus.

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<sup>37</sup> Altizer, *Total Presence*, 82.