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AFTERTHINKING ALTIZER: REDEMPTION AND THE DIVINE
RECUSAL

In June 2019 a group of old-timers and younger friends met in a small European-style hotel on Washington Square in Manhattan for an old fashioned Irish Wake in celebration of and mourning for Tom Altizer. Quite a few were in their eighties and nineties, united in “the unbroken circle” of those early radical theologians of the death of God of which Tom was the center in the 1960s. With the recognition that this might be the last time we would see each other alive, a certain penumbral liminality of melancholia marked the circumference. The occasion, emotionally utterly memorable, had marks of the apocalyptic, an end-time suffused with both destruction and construction, the necessary conditions of divine creativity.

The event, sober yet gay, was appropriate: a feast, drinks, speeches—lacking only Tom’s beloved music: opera, of course, high-church requiem (“When all the saints shall from their labors rest...”), New Orleans jazz, Satchmo playing “When the saints go marching in...,” which for a certain period years ago Tom played every night before he knelt for his prayers at bedside.

Tom was my most intimate friend and severest critic over nearly seventy years, including three spent living with him in his haunted three-story Victorian on a city block in Port Jefferson, Long Island, in the decade of the 1970s. Leaving off nostalgic remembrances of *le temps perdu*, I turn abruptly to the subject of my subtitle: redemption and the divine recusal. This subject is addressed in the round in my most recent book *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). The book identifies the theological issues that the subject involves but does not “solve” them; rather it “dis-solves” them so as to make imperative the reader’s obligation to *after-think* them.

At the apogee of his powers Altizer invariably identified himself as a radical “death of God,” apocalyptic, kenotic theologian and a preacher of the gospel of Christian atheism. He also self-identified as a biblical theologian, a term in little use in recent decades. At simultaneous annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR), Tom regularly attended more SBL sessions than AAR session, as in the AAR theology and philosophy of religion waned in the 1980s and now have almost totally disappeared. In technical biblical scholarship he attended seriously to hermeneutics and parable studies—especially the works of Robert W. Funk and John Dominic Crossan, and in particular he supported Funk’s Jesus

Seminar from its beginning, especially when the seminar gave up its academic support and became directed toward the liberal pastorate.

Most important to note, however, is Tom's lifelong claim that the content of the Bible has been more effectively and truly delivered by cultural-literary forms, specifically by the epic poets. Some of his most sensitive writings on biblical content, updated for their times, were on Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, Blake, Joyce.

Having identified some of the themes in Altizer's self-identification, I want to initiate—or rather, renew—the theological afterthinking of two of them in particular. The two Altizerian themes I have in mind are “apocalypse,” and the doctrine or theory of God commensurate with apocalypse. My greater purpose is, in effect, to challenge philosophical theology to enter again the speculative metaphysical horizons that obtained for the German post-Kantian “Idealists” (better denoted as identity-difference philosophers)—Hegel, Schelling, Fichte—who framed the death of God in the nineteenth century.

But first, a remembrance: all afterthinking must hold in account fore-thinking and interim-thinking. My earliest book, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward a Rhetoric and an Ontology of Revelation*, was published in 1968 at the time of the Paris uprisings and the era of “death of God” in the US popular press: it was concerned with the saying of the ineffable, the rhetorically imaginative forms of divine dis-closure. In the nearly fifty-year interim that separates that first book from *God Being Nothing*—in the interim-thinking it provoked—I found myself unthinking the Hegel of Altizer's construction and afterthinking Schelling's public silence for his last thirty years, issuing in two posthumously published books that broke entirely with Hegel's (and his own prior) conception of philosophy as exhaustively and without remainder negative.

Schelling's thinking is unfinished because revelation is unfinished, because both God and humanity are unfinished in their emergent novelties, occasioned by both the freedom of God and the freedom of the human person. Ontological and meontological process that is affirmative (precisely through negation) is accessible only through theology, as philosophy as such is only and exhaustively negative. Schelling well knew that theology's content cannot be dogmatic but must rely on the insights of his last works, *The Philosophy of Revelation* and *Mythology and the History of Religions*. It must be a philosophical theology committed to afterthinking the modes of time and the ontology-meontology of *God/Godhead* in a speculative-contemplative-visionary metaphysic of emergent process: in short, it must be veritable *theogony, cosmogony, anthropogony*.

Two things are clear to my mind: that “apocalypse, apocalyptic” are central to Altizer's theology, and that he nowhere explains what these two central words mean. Given their centrality to Altizer and to the very rise of Christianity itself, this is astounding. Apocalypse must entail the notion of end-time in both a literal and a metaphorical sense—hence the late Schelling's notion of revelation and of mythologies and the history of religions, answering the questions of “when,” “where,” “what”? From the history of

Christianity it is clear that the very emergence of the religion rooted in the conviction of the early Jesus movement that in Jesus's life and teachings there was present the actualization of a new era, long anticipated in biblical time, the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of God, the end of the old aeon and the beginning of the new, the very hinge of history, the inaugural of the Common Era. The actualization of the Jesus event was the inauguration of the *ousia*, the real disclosure of the really real. The great crisis in the early Jesus movement was the crucifixion, the execution of Jesus by the Roman authorities, killing the messenger.

In Nietzsche's construal of the death of God, it was not the Romans or the multitudes who killed Jesus (God) but we ourselves who have not attained the status of transcending men, *Übermenschen* (per *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). According to some of the gospel and apostolic accounts, Jesus cried from the cross near his approaching death "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken (forgotten) me?" – divine abandonment. For Altizer, this death was the holiest moment in cosmic history, equal in gravity to the creation itself, superior to the Annunciation/birth (marked by Christmas) and also to the emergence of Christ from the tomb (marked by Easter). For Altizer the death on the cross was not so much a slaying of Jesus as it was, in effect, the suicide of the severely Transcendent Deity, the God utterly transcendent to world and creature. This is the "good" of Good Friday – for Altizer the holiest day in the Christian calendar – because it presents a crisis not only in the life of Jesus but in the life of God (per Jack Miles). The revolutionary late Schelling said that in the crucifixion of Jesus "God himself changed his mind" about the presentation of his ownmost nature represented in the death of his son Jesus. In the language of the kenosis passage of Philippians 2:5–8 ("the self-emptying of God"): Not accounting humankind capable of grasping the infinite, perfect form of divinity (as thitherto claimed in Christianity and Judaism), by self-sacrifice (suicide) God emptied himself of deity and became man.

No religion known to me is more committed to—as it is now called—the Anthropocene as Christianity. That commitment is premised on the actualization of *freedom*—both human and divine—as the later Heidegger, reading Schelling and Meister Eckhart, seems to have concluded. In doctrine or theory of God, one is now free to think *creatio* (creativity) *ex nihilo* (from the infinite indeterminacy of Godhead), and the human imaging of that. Warning: this will be revolutionary thinking of such stripe as to be heterodox at best—as are those who most richly reward afterthinking: John of the Cross, Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhart, William Blake, the late Schelling, John Milton, and others.

Buona fortuna!