The Curious Theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer

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THE DEVELOPMENT of Thomas J. J. Altizer's thought, as seen in his three books (*Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, 1961; *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, 1963; *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, 1966) and in his articles collected in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (published in 1966), is mysterious and perplexing. It is commendable, and necessary for growth, to change one's mind; it is perhaps not so commendable, and clearly not necessary, to celebrate each change with a book. At any rate, Altizer does appear to have changed his mind, and by tracing, even sketchily, the development of his thought we may throw some light on what must be one of the most puzzling theological works of a decade of puzzling theological works, his *Gospel of Christian Atheism*.

I. HEAVEN EMBRACED: *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*

The purpose of Altizer's first book is "to discover a meaning of religion that will be relevant to our time."[1] The particular nature of Western history and thought has alienated man from religion, and Altizer seeks a way through this alienation to bring modern man back to an apprehension and experience of religious Reality. It all began with the Greeks. They were the first to create the conditions from which complete alienation of man from religious Reality would result. It is apparent even in Homer. The Olympian gods are tamed, humanized, and rationalized. Olympian religion was cheerful and life-affirming.[2] Plato attempted a regressive religious programme but his successor, Aristotle, the true interpreter of Socrates, philosophically baptized the world-affirming Apollonian Spirit. For with Aristotle "being possesses no other reality than the sum total of the things in which it realizes itself;"[3] that is: "Being has no reality apart from Becoming."[4] It is, ultimately, the reality of becoming which necessitates the withdrawal of God from our world.[5] The true spirit of paganism is the affirmation of the wordly, the present, and the immanent. With the Greeks the cosmos comes of age. The chthonic spirits continue to nag at the back door, but they are successfully kept out. They even, dramatically, become *Eumenides*—good things.

1. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 10. (This book will be cited below as *Oriental Mysticism*.)
2. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 43.

What the Greeks had to work for, the Israelites had at the earliest time: a strong world-affirming outlook. The religious vision of the prophets, however, precipitated a revolution within Judaism. It called Israel out of her world-affirmation and into a new world-denying attitude. The intense apprehension of the one final reality of God made the present world appear as nothing.[6] Although their proclamation was not, properly, eschatological it was, nevertheless, the first stage in the development of eschatological religion. Ultimately, "in Israel the realization of the reality of the deity demanded the rejection of the reality of the world."[7]

Jesus of Nazareth stands squarely within the prophetic world-denying tradition, according to Altizer, although the fact that it take him thirty-three pages to establish this position witnesses both to the recalcitrance of the evidence and to his determination to establish his interpretation. He attempts to demonstrate three essential points: (1) that Jesus did not teach belief in his person; (2) that his teaching was eschatological and ethical; (3) that, as eschatological and ethico-spiritual, Jesus' teaching was world-denying. He must defeat a good many modern interpretations of Jesus and his gospel and the not-so-modern interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in order to establish his three points, but he is up to it, and before the chapter is over the interpretations of Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, the Fourth Gospel, Kümmel, and (by implication) C. H. Dodd fall, and only that of Nietzsche emerges as correct, although wrong-headed. "Jesus pointed to the Kingdom and not to himself,"[8] and the Kingdom was to put an end to the present as men knew it, the world as men knew it. Nietzsche saw clearly that the message of Jesus was a radical denial of the world and that the Christian conception of God was "the will to nothingness pronounced holy."[9] Nietzsche saw this and rebelled against it, and yet he saw "that it was just this rebellion against reality which made love possible."[10]

The holy war against reality, against the world, which the eschatological proclamation inaugurated was betrayed almost as soon as it was begun. The author of the Fourth Gospel, Ignatius, the second-century Fathers, all Hellenized and spiritualized this radically world-denying gospel into its opposite. They turned from Jesus the eschatological prophet to Jesus the Incarnate Lord. Jesus' gospel was more than confused, it was reversed. The reality which he came to end now took on sacred meaning. The values of the world which he came to overturn were declared divine. "Christianity succumbed to a this-worldly and ultimately irreligious paganism in its positive evaluation of life in the world."[11] The true, authentic, unhellenized "disciple of Jesus looks forward to a dissolution of 'reality' that will make possible the authentic realization of faith and love."[12]

6. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 65.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 107, quoting from Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, XXXIV; cf. *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 607.
10. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism*, p. 107.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

It turns out that the higher forms of Buddhism partake of the same religious motifs as eschatological religion. Both are world-denying, but Buddhism carries this denial through to being itself, and it is here that Altizer finds the clue to his religious reconstruction in his last chapter, "Faith and Being." The Buddha "was concerned with destroying the theoretical foundations of religion in so far as he apprehended these as being a barrier to the actual realization of Salvation."[13] In Buddhism the successful cultivation of ethical religion is related to its abandonment of the cultic and mythical foundations of religion.[14] The Buddhist strives to negate reality, self and being, and finally even this act of negating of the will, in order to let all unreality slip away in an apprehension of the Void. But finally, to the Buddhist, this "voidness of 'reality' is simply the hither side of Reality itself."[15] "To grasp all things as Void is finally to know them as Nirvana."[16] The basis for the developed sense of compassion in Mahayana Buddhism is its "intuitive experience of the ultimate identity of all reality."[17] Because all things are identical, "compassion is the most authentic response to the true nature of reality."[18] And finally, for an ironical, paradoxical wind-up: "On one side of the Void lies flux, meaninglessness, and vacuity; on the other side lies Reality itself. And nothing separates them whatsoever!"[19]

In his last chapter, "Faith and Being," Altizer attempts "to construct a preliminary form of a religious ontology."[20] Buddhism and authentic eschatological Christianity are parallel and not contrary,[21] and they point the way to the full return to the religious. Just as the Gnostics attempted in the early history of Christianity to call the church back to a real religious vision from a comfortable world-affirmation, so the task for theology today "is to liberate Christianity from its non-religious garb."[22] The theologian of true religion is even, paradoxically, aided in this task by our contemporary historical and cultural situation. Here Altizer follows a fairly typical "I-told-you-so" existential analysis of contemporary life. The conviction of the radical autonomy and immanence of existence originally made it necessary to deny all transcendental reality in the quest for the full meaning of autonomous existence. In our time man has fully embraced autonomous, relative, historical, existence and it has turned out to be fickle, haggard, and meaningless. Man is becoming alienated from the very autonomous existence which he alienated himself from God to embrace. Our autonomy is being dissolved in meaninglessness and dread. The chthonic spirits have returned as chthonic spirits. In this dissolution of autonomy, in this existential backlash, lies the path of the return to a truly religious Christianity. In the dissolution of our autonomy we can "be open to a deeper understanding of the highest expressions of religious experience."[23]

13. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
14. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 121.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
21. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 178.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

In fact, Altizer's last chapter is more an attempt to shatter all religious ontologies than to construct one. It is fundamentally man's understanding of being itself which stands in the way of a truly religious existence. It was not biblical eschatology but Greek ontology that triumphed in the church and in Christendom. The church was not the body of the eschatological Christ, but the body of ontological being. The house that being built is now crumbling all around us; true religion is now again possible. For "the high moments of religion are those in which there is no awareness of being."[24] The dissolution of being is the true condition of love. The death of God was the inevitable result of the compromise of Christianity with Greek ontology. But now the rational, comfortable world of western man is becoming hostile, and in the dissolution of being and meaning the way back is signalled: "the profane rebellion of modern man coincides with the religious rebellion against being."[25] Like his Buddhist counterpart, the Christian must come to know the nothing of existence as the hither side of God.[26]

II. Hogtown Revisited: *The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Metaphysics of Illusion*

An interesting question poses itself after a reading of *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*: what is William Hamilton to Thomas Altizer? At first we had a horrifying thought that Hamilton was Altizer's clinical case, his representative autonomous man. And we thought that Altizer might be waiting for the inevitable crack-up, waiting for Hamilton to discover, in his radical affirmation of the world, the brokenness of being. Then Altizer would become Hamilton's Buddha, enigmatically leading him to the blinding transcendental light of true Religion. But the thought was too horrible and we put it aside. We decided to accept the possibility that Altizer really and undialectically means what he says, and that William Hamilton is for him a comrade and not a case. The development of Altizer's thought in his second book, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialetic of the Sacred*, and in his shorter works as represented in *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, appears to treat Hamilton in this manner, but at the same time these writings raise the question of whether Altizer really does mean what he says. That is to say, the justification of William Hamilton raises, among others, a serious hermeneutical problem in Altizer himself.

What was only hinted at in his first book now becomes the key concept of his interpretation: dialectic. This is his most dialectical period, and therefore the period in which it is most difficult to extract a systematic statement of his position. Everything he says is ultimately qualified by its opposite. Altizer becomes western theology's Buddha.

We left Altizer, in *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, in a

24. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
26. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 199.

position of radical world negation, qualified only by the hint that world-negation might be something more positive than it appears. Dialectic enters to save the world, true religion and presumably the friendship of William Hamilton, although Hamilton himself is a little troubled by Altizer's fits of Gnostic no-saying. Altizer is searching for a way in which man can recover the Sacred, which has been lost in man's autonomous, secular existence. The Gnostics attempted the same recovery, and their approach of radical world denial is even tempting today, although we must reject this simple Gnostic denial. The Sacred must return in our affirmation of the world and not by our denial of it. And how is the Sacred manifested in the affirmation of a world which has systematically alienated the Sacred from itself? Hamilton's summary of Altizer's answer is useful here:

> Apparently the answer comes in Altizer's use of the Kierkegaardian idea of dialectic, or—what comes to the same thing—in his reading of Eliade's version of the myth of the coincidence of opposites. This means that affirming something passionately enough—in this case the full reality of the profane, secular, worldly character of modern life—will somehow deliver to the seeker the opposite, the sacred, as a gift he does not deserve.[27]

This is profoundly different from Altizer's analysis of the path to the recovery of the Sacred in *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, where the ultimate meaninglessness of profane existence collapses our sense of radical autonomy and opens the way again to the Sacred. The world must now be fully affirmed, or at least he sounds as if he were saying this. Hamilton admits the confusion: "Sometimes Altizer would have us wait quietly without terror; more often it seems he would have us attack the profane world with a kind of terrible hostility so that it might give up its sacred secret."[28]

In his article, "America and the Future of Theology", published in the spring of 1963, Altizer points to the very rootlessness, vulgarity, and detachment from past history of American culture as conditions which can foster a new and creative theology. Theology must negate western history, yet "this negation must be dialectical, which means that finally it must be affirmation."[29]

In "Theology and the Death of God," published in the spring of 1964, we find the same historical analysis of the great compromise of Christianity, but here Altizer introduces dialectic again to save his position from Gnosticism. Faith, as eschatological faith, is still to be directed against the deepest reality of the world, "but liberation must finally be effected by affirmation, for negation alone must pass into Gnosticism."[30] At the end of the article we find a new statement of the uniqueness of Christianity. It is now not simply western Buddhism, although it shares major motifs with Buddhism; the uniqueness of Christianity lies in: "(1) its proclamation of the In-

27. William Hamilton, in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 29.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

carnation, (2) its world-reversing form of ethics and, (3) the fact that Christianity is the only one of the world religions to have evolved—or, in some decisive sense, to have initiated—a radically profane form of 'Existenz'."[31] It was however, an undialectical understanding of the Incarnation which led to our contemporary alienation from the Sacred and which necessitated the death of God in our time.[32] We find Altizer's attempt to formulate fully a dialectical interpretation of the Incarnation in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, although the task is begun in "Word and History," "The Sacred and the Profane: a Dialectical Understanding of Christianity," and in his final article on Blake.

In Altizer's dialectical period we have noted several changes from his position in *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*. There is a radical shift of interest from the teaching of Jesus to the person of Jesus. The radical Christian attempts "to return to the original message and person of Jesus."[33] Altizer's new emphasis on Incarnation expresses this new interest and it is, I think, fair to say that in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* he scarcely mentions the teaching of Jesus. The mystical way in which he discovered in Buddhism now becomes less attractive. Mysticism is a way back,[34] while Christianity is an "affirmation of the Sacred or the numinous Reality as forward-moving process."[35] We find a new affirmation of the world, made possible by dialectic. The world, which was unaffirmable in *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, now becomes the dialectical way back to the Sacred. Altizer has moved from Heaven to Hogtown. For Altizer Heaven and Hogtown are related in some deep way, although he does not yet feel that Hogtown is Heaven, as Hamilton does.

III. Hogtown Unmasked: *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*

The first Christmas marks one of the most incredible events in the history of the cosmos. A child is born, yet no child; in fact not even the Son of God, but God himself was born into the profane world of our existence. It was no simple birth; the labour pains shook the whole universe and affected the transcendent realm itself. God himself was born, and his birth emptied the transcendent realm both of himself and of any meaning or reality whatsoever. On the first Christmas God fully and completely entered history without remainder. It was not that he was so powerful that he could manifest himself in weakness; he did, in fact, truly empty himself and join our human history. With the birth of God into history the old transcendent God died, never to exist again except in the distorted and satanic minds of Christian (and presumably also Jewish) worshippers. God entered history and is nowhere else to be found. The real uniqueness of Christianity lies in its proclamation of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not to be understood as a

31. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
32. Cf. *ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
34. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 129.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

simple once-for-all object-lesson. Spirit did not simply become flesh, nor flesh spirit, but rather a process was initiated, an historical process which is ever moving forward. Spirit is continually becoming flesh, and flesh spirit. The Incarnation has not fully run its course, nor will it until spirit is truly its opposite, flesh, and flesh truly its opposite, spirit. Our history is the history of the Incarnation. In fact, whatever is, is Christ—or at least so it seems. So the radical Christian confesses quite properly that God is Jesus, and not that Jesus is God.[36]

Hegel was the first radical Christian to understand what actually happened on the first Christmas. The New Testament authors did not understand it; the early church did not understand it, nor the Fathers, nor anyone before him. Hegel discovered that the true nature of Spirit is continually to become its other.[37] Spirit moves and creates through a process of self-negation, ever ascending into a fuller realization of itself. Spirit dies to itself only to be transformed into a higher manifestation of itself.

Why was it Hegel who first understood the true meaning of Christmas, and why is it only now that we are coming to apprehend what the Christian faith is all about? The answer lies in man's perennial religiosity, especially as fully manifested in the most demonic and vicious creations of man's religiosity, Christianity and the church. The history of Christianity (until Hegel and Altizer) is the history of repression, resentment, guilt, and the complete denial of the Incarnation. When Christianity has admitted a true Incarnation, it has excluded it from present history by confining it to a one-time happening in the first century. It has declared the revelation closed with its canon of scriptures, and declared that the Word of God has already been fully and finally spoken—in the past.[38] But this denial of the Incarnation arose much earlier than the closing of the canon. In fact, it is obvious within the canon itself—all too obvious. The symbol of the resurrection is a denial of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is resurrected in the religious hearts of his followers, and this resurrection symbolizes the victory of the transcendent Other over the Incarnate God.[39] Christianity does not take death seriously;[40] it has refused to accept the presence of God himself in Christ's passion;[41] its Jesus is alien and lifeless and is born out of the negation of the original Jesus;[42] it has demonically identified the church as Christ's body and thereby set itself up in opposition to the body of humanity;[43] it is oppressive of all life and energy and activity and movement; it has imperialistically set out to conquer the world and its expansion is really an expression of the will to power;[44] and finally the Transcendent God that it worships is, as Blake pointed out, really Satan.[45]

Altizer's indictment of Christianity is thoroughgoing and heated. The

36. Cf. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 44.
37. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 63.
38. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 27.
39. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 43.
40. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52.
41. Cf. *ibid.*
42. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 55.
43. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 132.
44. Cf. *ibid.*
45. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 97, 99.

great compromise of Christianity is not without its positive side, however. For, ironically,

> it would be possible to understand Christendom's religious reversal of the movement of the Spirit into flesh as a necessary consequence of the Incarnation, preparing the way for a more comprehensive historical realization of the death of God by its progressive banishment of the dead body of God to an ever more transcendent and inaccesible realm.[46]

And again, it is something about which we can, in a way, rejoice, for by Christianity's creation of the most alien, the most distant, and the most oppressive deity in history it prepared the way for the liberation of "humanity from the transcendent realm, and made possible the total descent of the Word into the fullness of human experience."[47] It should be no surprise that Altizer's irony smells suspiciously like Hegel's cunning of reason. The only surprise is that Altizer does not see that it was the Incarnate Word himself, either in a spirit of world-historical playfulness, or with vestigial transcendental spite, who originally perpetrated the hoax that God still existed in transcendent glory. It is perhaps too much for Altizer to suggest that Jesus himself was a pawn of the cunning of reason. Some things are still sacred.

Religious Christianity must be overthrown and transcended by radical Christianity, and *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* is at once the justification of, and a programmatic essay for, radical Christianity. Altizer rises to great speculative heights in describing the programme of radical Christianity, although his argument fizzles out somewhat in the last chapter when he attempts to stir up existential excitement with "wager" and "risk" talk. The fizzle is partly explained by the fact that he is never able to identify the radically historical and kenotic Christ. Ultimately, the radical Christian is all dressed up with no place to go. Altizer tries several times to identify this new kenotic Christ, or even to point in his general direction, but each attempt fails, and he finally has to bet on his presence and identity.

The Word is present—he is sure of that—but how and where? Certainly it is not present in its traditional expressions. As a dialectical and kenotic Word it negates and empties its past expressions. The Word is affected by its own movement.[48] Therefore, for us the Word in history is not the ancient Jesus of Nazareth, nor the cultic Christ nor the Lamb of innocence,[49] nor the Word of eighteen centuries of Christian theology, nor the word embedded in symbol and language. We cannot know the Word as unchanging or as possessing a common nature or substance.[50] It is precisely in turning from all these now alien and lifeless expressions of the Word that we can be open to the Word in our present. But how do we recognize this Word? Altizer never really says. He raises the question but he fails to answer it. Apparently we recognize him in our radical affirmation of the present; or rather, in our radical affirmation of the present, the moment, we participate

46. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
48. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 53.
49. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 71.
50. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 89.

in the Word. The Word is now manifest at the centre of the radical profane;[51] he "is the Jesus who is fully manifest in a present and actual moment of time."[52] However, lest we begin indiscriminately to affirm every present and actual moment of time, Altizer qualifies this "present."

> Now, it is not simply any moment of time that is fully actual and real, for the mere passage of time is not to be identified as actuality, just as the brute factuality of history cannot reveal a human hand or face. Only a fully lived time is actual and immediate, its actuality deriving from a fullness of life that its movement releases as time here receives a fully human expression.[53]

Blake helps here. Jesus is the body of humanity, and is present in every human hand and face,[54] present in "Experience."[55] In fact, "we might even say that Jesus is the Christian name of the Totality of Experience, a new actuality created by the abolition of the primordial Being, whose death inaugurates a new humanity liberated from all transcendent norms and meaning."[56] Or we can say that "Jesus is the name of the love of God, a love that eternally dies for man."[57] We can, however, never isolate the Word and affirm that here it receives its final and definite expression.[58] The Word is present in our ever-changing history; history is the very "incarnate Body of God."[59] But "it is crucial to maintain that God remains God or the divine process remains itself even while in a state of self-estrangement."[60] In fact, God is most truly himself while in a state of ultimate self-alienation.[61] God is dialectical process and not existent Being.[62]

We can embrace the dialectical Word only by willing and experiencing the death of the transcendent Other, the God of Being. The good news of the gospel of atheism is that with the death of this transcendent Other we are freed "for a total participation in the actuality of the immediate moment."[63]

> It is precisely by a radical movement of turning away from all previous forms of light that we can participate in a new totality of bliss, an absolutely immanent totality embodying in its immediacy all which once appeared and was real in the form of trancendence, and a totality which the Christian must name as the present and living body of Christ.[64]

This total affirmation of the immediate moment is not, however, a "mere submission to the brute reality of the world,"[65] for "such a submission does not affect the world, nor does it embody a self-negation or self-annihilation of the Incarnate Word."[66]

It is clear in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, and in several shorter works published just before *The Gospel*, that Altizer has combined his newly

51. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 51.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 58f.
54. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 70.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
58. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 83.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
61. Cf. *ibid.*
62. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 90.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 134f.

discovered dialectical principle with a kenotic interpretation of the Incarnation. Kenosis, for Altizer, is a dialectical movement. The Incarnation created and negated at once. It created the new dialectical force of history and negated the transcendent God. And once in motion it continues to create and negate. Having found dialectic in the very uniqueness of Christianity—in the Incarnation—Altizer systematically interprets theology, history, and faith by means of this principle. We can admit a certain consistency and creativity in his interpretation. The only really real is the kenotic (dialectic) Christ as he moves dialectically through history. This new insight allows Altizer to oppose radical Christianity to all forms of religion which yearn for a primal innocence, or which look backwards to a past revelation, or which express themselves in terms of the past. It allows him to begin anew, to call rootlessness and detachment from history a creative condition for theology. It allows him to affirm the present even though, to judge from his previous work, he has no great love for the present. For the present shall go the way of the transcendent God—it too shall pass away.

It is also clear that we have a radically new interpretation of the Incarnation. Whether the New Testament, in witnessing to the Word which became flesh, was really witnessing to the Word which became history is a question which we cannot attempt to solve here. And whether the Word became dialectical history is a further question. Altizer is rather consistent in following the implications of his dialectic principle—except, it seems, at one point. The Word truly becomes historical process. It dies to its old transcendent self. Good enough. But Altizer hedges on his thoroughgoing kenotic interpretation. It is, he says, "crucial to maintain that God remains God or the divine process remains itself even while in a state of self-estrangement."[67] In this warning, we detect a little purple peeking through the swaddling clothes, or a transcendent twinkle in the eye of the kenotic Christ. Altizer was put on his guard too. The Transcendent is utterly emptied. "God is most truly or actually himself while in a state of ultimate self-alienation or self-estrangement."[68]

The Incarnation is not the only doctrine to be transformed by the logic of Altizer's dialectic. Atonement, resurrection, forgiveness, sin, damnation, and hell are all given their dialectic expression. Crucifixion and atonement are the complete negation and abolition of the alien and repressive transcendent Other. Atonement truly frees man from the tyranny of the external transcendent and frees him to embrace his present, wholly. The crucifixion is "the reversal and transformation of the fallen or transcendent epiphany of Spirit."[69] It is "not simply that God is the author and agent of atonement but is himself the subject of reconciliation as well."[70] Atonement is a continual process occurring whenever alien oppression is negated.

The traditional Christian interpretations of resurrection and ascension are exactly the reverse of their real meaning. Resurrection for the radical

67. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Christian is a descent into hell. It signifies a descent "ever more fully into darkness and flesh."[71]

The forgiveness of sin is the abolition of the memory of sin.[72] God's demands are annulled at Calvary.[73] Forgiveness annihilates the solitude of selfhood and being. The death of God is the death of transcendent moral imperatives and the liberation of man from Satan's power.[74]

Finally, Altizer's wager is no other than Pascal's wager, although Altizer chooses sides with the libertines; he chooses not to lose this world. Now Hogtown is Heaven.

IV. The Contemporary Problematic

Altizer's protest against the God of Christianity, his radical reinterpretation of Christianity, and his proclamation of the liberating gospel of atheism grow out of his convictions about the contemporary theological scene, the contemporary world, and the contemporary church. Modern theology is either meaningless or pernicious. It separates life and faith. In its attempt to make sense of the Word, theology has isolated faith from the concrete reality of human existence.[75] Altizer is deeply convinced that faith should be meaningful for life, and therefore that Christ must be, and is, present for us. The most fundamental expression of theology's betrayal of the Incarnate Word has been its adherence to the static concepts of western logic and to a static and lifeless concept of being. Even those who have revolted against the unholy marriage of metaphysics and dynamic theology have affirmed this static and alien wholly Other.

The theological betrayal of the meaning of the Incarnation is manifested in the life of the church and in the lives of Christians. "No graver charge has ever been leveled against Christianity than the typically modern protest that the Christian faith is a flight from life, an evasion of suffering, a refusal of the burden and the anguish of the human condition."[76]

Altizer's protest also has its roots in the modern historical consciousness, especially as that consciousness has come to operate in the field of biblical studies. The modern historical consciousness is radically autonomous and relativistic. It has necessarily and quite properly eliminated the transcendent in order to understand man as an historical creature. It has directed our attention to the historical Jesus (not God), and has revealed the wide gap between a historical religion and historical faith. In its religious quest for the historical Jesus it has eliminated the very possibility of a religious quest backwards. We must now admit that both the New Testament and early Christianity present "exotic and alien forms of religion."[77] The radical Christian accepts the verdicts of the critical-historical analysis of the New Testament, but he transcends them. There is only one Christ and he is present.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
72. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 123.
73. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 124.
74. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 127f.
75. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

It is clear also that part of Altizer's protest is based on contemporary concepts of reality, existence, and personality. For Altizer, process is a more adequate symbol of life than being. Altizer has learned from Hegel that "contradiction is more real than a seemingly unchanging identity."[78]

Altizer is revolting against the divorce of man's moral or religious life from the rest of his life, a divorce presumably traceable to Kant. Altizer, if my recollection is correct, does not speak of Kant, but we can, I think, grant that Altizer would look on Kant's God as alien and tyrannous. For Altizer, God and immortality become morally unnecessary. Kant's God is an infringement of human freedom. There is for Altizer, as there was for Hegel, no ultimate difference between finite and infinite, the history of God and the history of man. The moral imperative is the oppressive echo of the transcendent God who has died in Christ. Kant divided life and left the moral life controlled by an alien Other, who is now being shown to be Satan himself.

The contemporary rebellion against religion is bound up with all these protests, and it is here that Altizer is most enigmatic. We noted that his first book attempted to "discover a meaning of religion that will be relevant to our time,"[79] and that he conceived the primary theological task of our time to be the liberation of Christianity "from its nonreligious garb."[80] In *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, Nietzsche is invoked to witness to the radical world-negation of Christianity, and in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* he has been fully baptized as one of the first radical yes-saying Christians. Altizer seems simply to have changed his mind, although there are some basic similarities between his first and his most recent book. In both he attacks being, in the first as the great obstacle to a real apprehension of the Sacred, and in the most recent as the condition of sin. His nausea of the world in his first book becomes euphoria in the most recent, although it is accompanied by a mild dyspepsia. In *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* Altizer does not like history. In his articles in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* he likes it dialectically, because it contains its opposite, the Sacred. In *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* he likes it because it is the Incarnate Body of Christ. In *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* radical autonomy is an expression of the loss of the Sacred, while in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* it is the only condition for apprehending Christ. We note also that despite his theoretical affirmation of forward-moving, dialectical—that is, non-religious—history, Altizer's actual and practical interpretation of western history in both *Oriental Mysticism* and *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* resembles a rather early and rather crude Greek interpretation: namely, history is decay.

Altizer's dialectical-kenotic interpretation is undoubtedly useful. It allows him to deal creatively with some of the contemporary objections to Christianity. It is not so useful in dealing with less recent theological problems, for

78. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
79. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism*, p. 10.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

example, the problems raised in Marcionism. In dealing with what most assuredly is a theological problem, the canon of scripture, Altizer sounds like the young man who killed his parents and then begged leniency from the court because he was an orphan. It was Marcion, to whose theological programme Altizer's bears a strong relation, who made the first canon of the New Testament known to us.[81] On the other side, "the closing of the N[ew] T[estament] canon [was] not based on any argument similar to that of Judaism regarding the O[ld] T[estament]—viz., that the Spirit ceased. Such a view . . . was never considered in the argumentation regarding the N[ew] T[estament] canon in the first centuries."[82] Altizer tries to deal with the matter of his Marcionism: "The name of Jesus Christ is simply meaningless apart from its Old Testament background, for it is the God of the Old Testament who becomes fully actualized and historically real in Christ."[83] We judge his attempts unsuccessful, for the logic of his dialectic leads him, with Blake, to the conclusion that the Incarnation is the redemption of God himself. God redeems himself and is saved by entering history.[84]

Altizer is dedicated to revolution. He writes: "perhaps the most demonic consequence of a theology that accepts as its foundation the primordial sovereignty and holiness of God is its submission to the providential authority of what Hegel called the 'Given,' or that which happens to appear or to be at hand."[85] His dialectical interpretation of Christianity presumably overcomes this submission. Yet it is precisely the uniqueness of Israel and then of Christianity that their God was and is "a God who wholly transcended both nature and society and who could therefore sit in judgement not only on routine transgressions of the 'status quo,' but on the 'status quo' itself."[86] The fundamental question is whether Altizer's system does not, in its radical affirmation of the present, eliminate both reform and revolution.

Yet, however we answer that question (and other critical questions), we must recognize that Altizer is dealing with the right issues. The questions he attempts to answer are the right questions, and therefore his work can be adjudged a serious contribution to contemporary theological discussion.

81. Cf. F. W. Beare, "Canon of the NT," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), I, 526.
82. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *ibid.*, I, 429.
83. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, p. 87.
84. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 116f.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
86. Brooks Otis, *History and Christianity: I, The Problem*, Episcopal Church Faculty Paper (New York: National Council, Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., n.d.), p. 15.