



LIVING THE DEATH OF GOD

A Theological Memoir

THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER

Foreword by Mark C. Taylor

Living the Death of God



This page intentionally left blank.

Living the Death of God

A Theological Memoir



Thomas J. J. Altizer

Foreword by Mark C. Taylor

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2006 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written permission.
No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system
or transmitted in any form or by any means including
electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior
permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Judith Block
Marketing by Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Altizer, Thomas J. J.

Living the death of God : a theological memoir / Thomas J. J. Altizer ; foreword by
Mark C. Taylor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-6757-0 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-6758-9 (pbk. : alk.
paper)

1. Altizer, Thomas J. J. 2. Christian biography. 3. Death of God theology. I. Title.

BX4827.A47A3 2006
230'.092—dc22

2005018665

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6757-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6758-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For D. G. Leahy



This page intentionally left blank.

Contents



	Preface	ix
	Foreword: The Last Theologian MARK C. TAYLOR	xi
<i>One</i>	The Calling	1
<i>Two</i>	New York	15
<i>Three</i>	Epic Theology	29
<i>Four</i>	Initiation	43
<i>Five</i>	Holocaust	55
<i>Six</i>	Art	71
<i>Seven</i>	Yes and No	83
<i>Eight</i>	Crucifixion	99
<i>Nine</i>	Ethics	113
<i>Ten</i>	Predestination	129
<i>Eleven</i>	Prayer	143
<i>Twelve</i>	Absolute Abyss	155
<i>Thirteen</i>	Apocalypse	171
	Index	185

This page intentionally left blank.

Preface



This memoir is a recapitulation of the life work of a radical theologian, intending to recover and renew theological moves occurring over a lifetime, but occurring in the context of an ultimate ending of theology, thereby opening the possibility of the birth of a new and even absolutely new theology. It is to be emphasized that this memoir is not a personal one, but rather a theological memoir, and a memoir intending to record a voyage that is finally a universal one, truly embodied in each of us, whether directly or indirectly, or consciously or unconsciously. Augustine created Western theology by recapitulating such a voyage. This is a voyage that ever more comprehensively has occurred throughout our history, and if that voyage is ending today, its very ending has created a totally new call. That is a calling that is here explored, but explored in the context of our contemporary nihilism, a nihilism here understood to be a reflection of the death of God, yet a death of God that is an actualization of the apocalyptic transfiguration of Godhead itself.

So it is that this memoir is the record of a voyage into an apocalyptic theology, a theology that is our only totally apocalyptic theology, one grounded in a uniquely modern apocalyptic thinking and vision, but no less grounded in a uniquely biblical apocalypse, one never entered by our theological traditions. Inevitably truly new paths must here be sought. If these paths have been forged by great thinkers and visionaries, they have never been mediated to our common life, but a fundamental vocation of theology is to effect such a mediation, and that is attempted in this memoir. Throughout my theological career, I have been accused of writing too abstractly or too abstrusely. Hopefully that can largely be rectified by the genre of the memoir, but

nevertheless this writing will be vastly distant from our common theological writing, which is simply closed to the realms explored here. Truly simple theological writing may perhaps be possible for saints, but it was not possible for Augustine, nor for any other truly major theologian, and if it is possible homiletically, that, too, has been central to my theological work. For theology deeply differs from philosophy insofar as it is truly open to proclamation. Thereby it is fully open to all, and is so even in its most radical expressions. I have always been more effective in oral rather than written communication, and this memoir is intended to approximate speech, and to do so not only by way of an intimate address, but by an intimate voice as well.

It was Lissa McCullough who first urged me to write a memoir, and while I initially resisted this, and above all so because of the personal dimension of the memoir, she gradually persuaded me to proceed in my own way, even if this should prove to be a failure. Many have critically responded to this memoir during the years in which it was written, thereby truly strengthening it. These include Mark Taylor, Ray Hart, D. G. Leahy, Lissa McCullough, Brian Schroeder, Yuri Selivanov, Warren Lewis, David Jasper, David Krell, and George Chok. But I am most grateful to Robert Detweiler, who, while in a truly broken condition, gave himself to an extensive critique of the memoir, and virtually all of his suggestions have been incorporated into the text. At one crucial point in the evolution of the memoir, the poet Charles Stein was its editor, the only time that I have been edited by a poet and I also am grateful to another poet and friend, George Quasha, for the title "Living the Death of God." So, too, am I grateful to the State University of New York Press, and particularly to its acquisitions editor, Nancy Ellegate, and grateful again to my superb copyeditor, Lisa Metzger, and to my marvelous production editor, Judith Block. While I have published many books, never before have I had such an overwhelming sense of a writing that is the consequence of a genuine theological community, and while that community includes far more than I can name, it is nonetheless a genuine community, and if only in that community theology is truly alive today.

Foreword: The Last Theologian



MARK C. TAYLOR

*[I]f all of my genuine theological writing is preaching itself, I
can relish an image of myself as a Southern preacher, and per-
haps I am the last truly Southern preacher, and if only thereby
the last theologian.*

—Thomas Jonathan Jackson Altizer

Thomas J. J. Altizer is the last theologian. As such, he is the most God-obsessed person I have ever known. To speak—truly to *speak*—with Altizer is to encounter a passion the excess of which borders on madness. Madness is not a destiny Altizer avoids; to the contrary, he often seems to solicit madness as if it would testify to the truth of his vision. If his mission has a model, it is to be found in the life of his southern ancestor, Stonewall Jackson.

Jackson himself can be understood as having been truly mad, and I have often agonized that insanity is inherent in my family. One uncle murdered his son, another committed suicide, and my father was a deep alcoholic throughout his adult life. Nor was madness alien to our matriarch, who feigned infirmity throughout the time that I knew her, and who ruthlessly dominated her family. None were able truly to rebel against her. This was simply my given world as a child, a world in which the “normal” could only be known as abnormal. Later I could respond to Melville’s Captain Ahab as the very soul of America, and an embodiment of its destiny as well.

If the child is the father of the man, then the madness of the Altizer family romance prefigures the madness of his life and work. Altizer *chooses* the fate he suffers, thereby transforming madness into the identity he relentlessly seeks.

This is, of course, no ordinary madness; nor is it literal. The madness that pursues Altizer while he is pursuing it is a holy madness. For those blessed with holy madness, the foolishness of the world can only be overcome by reversing it in a higher madness that negates what others affirm and affirms what others negate. In the following pages, Altizer for the first time discloses the experience, which, he believes, gave rise to his theological vision. Whether this experience was actually as formative as Altizer insists or has grown in importance as it has been filtered through later interpretation, the rudiments of his theology can be discerned in his account. Altizer's narrative inevitably recalls Augustine's experience recounted in his *Confessions*. But whereas Augustine is converted to God, Altizer is converted to Satan.

The decisive event occurred while Altizer was a student in Chicago preparing for a ministerial vocation. The framework he provides for his narrative reveals important dimensions of his lifelong identity. While a seminary student, he was the acting vicar at St. Mark's Church, an interracial Episcopal mission in south Chicago. At the time, candidates for the ministry were required to undergo a thorough psychiatric examination. When the results from the Northwestern Medical School arrived, Altizer unexpectedly discovered that he had "totally failed." Instead of attending the Seabury-Western Seminary for his final year, doctors told him that he "could expect to be in a psychiatric institution within a year." Having provided this background, Altizer proceeds to recount the experience that shaped his life:

Shortly before this examination, I was in a turbulent condition. While crossing the Midway I would experience violent tremors in the ground, and I was visited by a deep depression, one that had occurred again and again throughout my life, but now with particular intensity. During this period I had perhaps the deepest experience of my life, and one that I believe profoundly affected my vocation as a theologian, and even my theological work itself. This occurred late at night, while I was in my room. I suddenly awoke and became truly possessed, and experienced an epiphany of Satan which I have never been able fully to deny, an

experience in which I could actually feel Satan consuming me, absorbing me into his very being, as though this was the deepest possible initiation and bonding, and the deepest and yet most horrible union. Few who read me know of this experience, but it is not accidental that I am perhaps the only theologian who now writes of Satan, and can jokingly refer to myself as the world's leading Satanologist; indeed, Satan and Christ soon became my primary theological motifs, and my deepest theological goal eventually became one of discovering a *coincidentia oppositorum* between them.

Throughout his entire theological career, Altizer *never* loses sight of this goal. Indeed, his entire theological project is an extended meditation on the radical implications of the *coincidential oppositorum* of Christ and Satan. This coincidence of opposites informs Altizer's thinking and transforms the passion that shapes his life into what can only be understood as the *imitatio Christi*.

One of the most impressive things about Altizer's theological corpus is its utter consistency. Few thinkers in the history of theology or philosophy have pursued their fundamental insight with such tenacity and rigor. For Altizer, the deepest religious and theological truths are always "genuinely paradoxical." In attempting to fathom the implications of the *coincidentia oppositorum* lying at the heart of theological truth, he relentlessly struggles to comprehend without unraveling the "absolute paradox" of Christian life. This paradox, Altizer believes, can only be grasped by a thinking that is thoroughly dialectical. Though he traces the roots of this dialectical theology back through Luther and Augustine to Paul, the thinkers that most decisively shape Altizer's work are modern. Indeed, the truth embodied in Jesus and disclosed to Altizer in his shattering experience cannot become fully manifest until the modern era. "If a *coincidentia oppositorum* between Christ and Satan is a deep center of the Christian epic, it only gradually evolves or becomes manifest, not being fully called forth until modernity, and only full modernity has envisioned the totality of Hell, or the absolute abyss or total darkness, a vision of the ultimate and final depths of an absolutely alien abyss that can be discovered in every primal expression of the late modern imagination." When the coincidence of opposites is grasped dialectically, it becomes clear that affirmation and negation are inseparable. Altizer

discovers this interplay of affirmation and negation in the writings of the three figures who have most influenced his thinking: Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche. These pivotal thinkers, he maintains, develop different variations of the same fundamental insight: every Yes harbors a No, and every No is at the same time a Yes. When Yes is No, and No is Yes, the sacred is the profane, and the profane is sacred. Repeating Hegel's insight, Altizer argues that modernity realizes the truth Jesus initially proclaimed.

It is important to understand that the "coincidence" of opposites is not the "union" of opposites. When opposites coincide, they are not reconciled but juxtaposed to create a tension, which is simultaneously the most profound suffering and its overcoming. As Altizer's thinking matures, he comes to understand this passion in terms of the death of God. Far from an abstract philosophical concept or literary trope, the death of God is, for Altizer, an actual historical event first enacted in the person of Jesus and then actualized in the course of history, which culminates in the "absolute abyss or total darkness" of modernity. This darkness is the result of the disappearance of everything once known as God. In the absence of God, an incomprehensible void overwhelms human existence. But darkness, like everything else, is both itself and its opposite. Thus, for those with eyes to see, utter darkness is at the same time pure light. While repeatedly stressing the uniqueness of modernity and the radicality of his theological interpretation of it, Altizer also acknowledges his agreement with what he describes as "classical theology." For the Christian, there can be no redemption without damnation. When sin is accepted, the No of damnation is transformed into the Yes of redemption. This dialectical reversal of negation into affirmation is not merely the function of subjective experience but signals an actual "transfiguration of Godhead itself."

Yet is this actually possible? Is it even possible to understand any kind of transfiguration of the Godhead, or does this occur in Luther's understanding of justification itself, a justification ultimately demanding a transfiguration of the God of judgment into the God of grace, and is that understanding already present in Paul, and one which has been a deep underground of Christianity throughout its history? Certainly it is not possible to think such a transfiguration apart from defying the deep-

est theological authority. This occurs in both Paul and Luther, of course, but must it occur in every genuine theological thinking?

In saying Yes to Jesus, one *affirms* both the No of sin and the Yes of salvation, thereby accepting one's paradoxical condition as *simul iustus et peccator*. This paradox is, in Kierkegaard's terms, absolute because it cannot be overcome through the machinations of reason. And yet, Altizer's dialectical vision is as Hegelian as it is Kierkegaardian. By saying Yes to both the No of damnation and the Yes of redemption, he negates negation. This double negation is an absolute affirmation, which embraces the fallen world in such a way that it becomes the Kingdom of God.

It is precisely the absolute paradox of double negation, incarnate in the life and death of Jesus, that Altizer, again following Kierkegaard, believes Christendom negates. For Kierkegaard, as for Nietzsche, the church consistently denies what Jesus had affirmed. The only way to recover the truth of Christian revelation, therefore, is to negate Christendom. If this negation is not to repeat the error it seeks to overcome, it must not be a simple negation, which is a mere rejection; to the contrary, the radical Christian *affirms* the *negation* of Christendom. This affirmation of negation does not involve the mere recollection of or return to the past, but brings about radical novelty by creating a condition that has never before existed. The repetition of the Absolute Paradox extends the dialectic of crucifixion and resurrection to nature (i.e., space) and history (i.e., time). The culmination of this incarnational process is the "full and total *coincidentia oppositorum* of the sacred and the profane," which occurs for the first time in the modern world. For modernity, the sacred is profane and the profane is sacred. Just as crucifixion harbors resurrection, so the disappearance of God turns out to be God's final revelation. In the modern or late modern world, God is *totally present as absent*; or, conversely, *absence is the presence of God*.

This insight can be expressed in terms that suggest important similarities between Christianity and certain versions of Buddhism. From his first book, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, Altizer has insisted that at the deepest level Christianity and Buddhism share fundamental beliefs. Most important, for the Buddhist, as for the

radical Christian, reality is absolute nothingness, and absolute nothingness is absolutely real. The Christian can embrace this terrifying truth in the “absolute darkness” of the modern world where God is “totally absent”: “Finally, this is a darkness in response to which we can only say Yes, and if this is our deeper theological calling, one to which everyone is called, my way has been one of naming that darkness as God. While I believe that ultimately we can only say Yes to God, now that means saying Yes to the absolute darkness or the absolute nothingness of God, and hence saying Yes to absolute nothingness or absolute darkness itself.” To say Yes to this absolute nothingness is to discover plenitude in the void. This fullness in no way represses or forgets the emptiness in the midst of life but allows us to live with an abandon that embraces loss and lack as the very conditions of our existence.

In modernity, it is writers and artists rather than theologians who teach this difficult truth. While following Hegel at every turn, Altizer sometimes finds it necessary to reverse the Hegelian dialectic to make his point. While Hegel translates artistic images and theological representations into philosophical concepts, Altizer translates philosophical concepts into artistic images and theological rhetoric. From the writings of Kafka and Beckett to paintings of Van Gogh and Monet, Altizer repeatedly rediscovers the God who is not namable as God in works of art. For those who can see in the dark, the Unnamable is the name of God today.

For Altizer, the question of style is a matter of substance. Always the Southern preacher, his sentences are crafted to be spoken rather than read. He defiantly rejects the protocols of academic writing, which, he believes, destroy the passion that is the pulse of insight. The absence of footnotes and dearth of citations testify to a longing for originality that lies at the heart of modernism. Listening to the cadence and rhythm of his texts, sentences whose length and complexity on the printed page baffle more than communicate assume a coherence that makes them rhetorically effective. Altizer believes in the power of the word as much as his great Protestant precursors. The Word is not only epistemological but ontological; its effects are a matter of being as well as knowing. Since words change things, speech can actually be redemptive. When “truly actual speech” is apprehended in “true hear-

ing,” reality itself is transformed. Speech extends the incarnational process by providing the occasion for an experience as passionate as that suffered by Jesus and undergone by Altizer. When poetic speech is effective, the Word becomes incarnate in the life of the person who receives it. In this way, the words of the theologian become the vehicle for redemptive transformation.

But words are not always effective. A profound sense of failure pervades Altizer’s *Theological Memoir*. This failure extends beyond academic positions never offered and readers’ lack of understanding. The failure haunting Altizer is more serious and more interesting. As his reflections draw to a close, he admits that he fears having betrayed his own theological vision.

I deeply believe that each and every one of us is called to a theological voyage, and that it inevitably occurs whether or not we are aware of it, so that in this sense theology is our most universal way, and even if theology has never been so invisible as it is today, that invisibility could be a necessary mask for its contemporary actuality, and my gravest fear about my own work is that it is an irresponsible dislodging of that mask, and one only unveiling a hollow and artificial theology. Perhaps any such unveiling will inevitably suffer this consequence, or any unveiling of our lesser voyages, but even those voyages challenge that deep silence that reigns among us, and while many can know silence as a deep theological virtue, it can no less so be an ultimate theological veil and curse.

Obsessed with God, Altizer is compelled to rend the veil of God’s invisibility. By naming the unnamable “God,” he attempts to reveal divine presence in absence.

One might think of a canary in the mine when considering my theological life: so long as there is any movement at all the darkness is not yet total. But this is a darkness in which genuine mining is occurring, and even if it is unheard and invisible to us, if we can name our darkness we can remain open to that mining, and this naming could be understood as the purest vocation of theology. Yes, the primary calling of the theologian is to name God, and to name that God who can actually be named by us, and if this calling has seemingly now ended, that could be

because the theologian has not yet truly named our darkness, and thus not yet truly named God. While silence is now the primary path of the theologian, and above all silence about God, this is a silence which I have ever more deeply and ever more comprehensively refused, for I am simply incapable of not naming God, and perhaps most deeply because of that very initiation which I was given.

Altizer is incapable of not naming God because he longs for a rebirth of theology. In matters theological as well as personal, he simply cannot imagine a death that is not a resurrection. This longing for a rebirth of theology, however, betrays Altizer's theological vision. His work provides an eloquent testimony to the *impossibility* of theology in a postmodern world. Theology ends with the death of God. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the continuing chatter across the theological spectrum is a symptom of the exhaustion of theology. To remain true to Altizer's extraordinary theological vision, it is necessary to guard the silence he cannot avoid breaking. In this sacred silence, the unsettling words of the last theologian will continue to echo forever.

CHAPTER 1



The Calling

This memoir is intended to be a voyage returning to those moments and grounds which occasioned and made possible my theological vocation, a vocation inseparable from everything that I have known as destiny. Hence it is not the consequence of a free choice in the common sense, but is inescapably my destiny, and while I have chosen it again and again, I look upon such choice simply as an acceptance of that which I have most deeply been given. Never have I known a moment truly free of this vocation, nor have I ever been truly tempted to abandon it; it is as though it is simply an irrevocable given, one simply unchallengeable, for it is deeper than anything else which I can know, even if it ever remains a mystery to me. This is the mystery that I shall attempt to explore in this memoir, and to do so by seeking to unravel its history, or its history in what little I can remember, and just as memory itself is a deep mystery, it is nonetheless inescapable. It is certainly inescapable here.



I was born into a family that at bottom is deeply Southern, although my mother was a southerner only by adoption, and we were West Virginians, and thus border people. My family sense was most determined by my descent from Stonewall Jackson on my father's mother side, for the origins of my grandfather on my father's side were deeply hidden, and my late discovery of this origin came as an ultimate shock. The dominant figure in our family was my father's mother, who was a true Southern matriarch. She had been widowed in early

middle age, after having borne four sons. Her husband was a self-made man, and not only self-made but self-taught, who had become a lawyer through his own power, and a quite successful one, being one of the founders of West Virginia's natural gas company, and a major attorney in Charleston, West Virginia. I lived for most of my childhood and adolescence in my grandmother's large and magnificent house. Servants were my primary source of care and guidance, but I was truly ashamed of this luxurious site, and already in early childhood knew a deep loneliness. I was taught to "walk tall," and to distance myself from everything that is "common," a role imposing its own solitude, and I have known solitude throughout my life.

Above all I was immersed in images of Stonewall, again and again given the sense that his destiny was now my own, and while I knew little then of Stonewall's ultimate Calvinism, I have come to recognize that my ever fuller commitment to predestination is a consequence of my Jackson heritage. Jackson himself can be understood as having been truly mad, and I have often agonized that insanity is inherent in my family. One uncle murdered his son, another committed suicide, and my father was a deep alcoholic throughout his adult life. Nor was madness alien to our matriarch, who feigned infirmity throughout the time that I knew her, and who ruthlessly dominated her family. None were able truly to rebel against her. This was simply my given world as a child, a world in which the "normal" could only be known as abnormal. Later I could respond to Melville's Captain Ahab as the very soul of America, and an embodiment of its destiny as well. However, I did grow up in a house in which books were sacred, a house dominated by a very large and marvelous library. Reading has always been my primary vocation and avocation, and my father was here my major guide, for he had fully intended to be a professor of literature until his mother refused this path. Indeed, his father had been a genuine lover of books, who had only once violated them—when he hurled Nietzsche's *The Antichrist* into the fireplace (a premonition of the destiny of his grandson?).

I never knew this patriarch, called Tizer by his friends, and we were forbidden to inquire into his origins, which in a Southern context is inexplicable. These origins were deeply Southern, for as I eventually discovered, the Altizer clan of southwestern Virginia (and all Altizers descend from it), was dominated by a terror of miscegena-

tion, hence they were forbidden to marry outside the clan, and when I visited their graveyard, in a vast and beautiful and abandoned area now said to be cursed, I discovered that Altizer is the only name among its tombstones. Madness? Yes, but not an uncommon one in the South, and if all deep history is forbidden, surely ours was, except for the commanding figure of Stonewall Jackson, who vicariously gave me my name, Thomas Jonathan Jackson.

At the height of the death of God controversy, while I was on a speaking tour of Virginia colleges, I formally addressed the Virginia Military Institute, which continues to regard Stonewall as its true founder. My address was given at a solemn occasion in the institute's chapel, one dominated by an icon of Stonewall. I had been introduced by the Commandant of VMI as the first descendant of Stonewall to speak here, and this occurred only after I had been escorted by VMI's chaplain to the grave of Stonewall, where I had laid myself above his bones and prayed for his spirit to inspire me. Now before this solemn assembly, all in full dress uniform, and accompanied by their military band, I proclaimed the death of God in the name of Stonewall. Not a sound could then be heard, and the program ended as though nothing untoward had occurred. It was followed by a party lasting almost until dawn, and I sensed that this was, indeed, a genuine celebration of Stonewall. For it has been my experience that the death of God resonates far more deeply in the South than elsewhere in the country, perhaps because the South has been so obsessed with God, and unlike New England where Puritanism is little more than a distant memory, an American Calvinism continues to reign in the South, or did throughout my experience of it, and if this is manifest in a uniquely Southern literature, it is no less manifest in a genuinely Southern theology. Here, once again, I accepted my destiny.

Although my home was little more than nominally Christian, I was obsessed with Christianity throughout my youth, assembling my own little chapel where I fervently prayed. I had no real religious guidance at all, being forced thereby to find my own way. This has continued throughout my life, except insofar as I came under the influence of religious masters—primarily through reading—and when I did attempt both a monastic and a ministerial vocation, I simply failed. While a theological student, I was chaplain or acting vicar of an interracial Episcopal mission in south Chicago, St. Mark's Church, at that