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The Gospel of Christian Atheism

by Thomas J.J. Altizer

Thomas J. J. Altizer received his Ph.D at the University of Chicago in 1955. He taught at Wabash College from 1954-1956, then moved to Emory University as professor of Bible and Religion until 1968. The “death of God” theology became a heated debate during his professorship at Emory. In 1968 he accepted a position at the State University of New York in 1968 as professor of English. Some of his primary works are: *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, ed. Altizer and William Hamilton (1966), *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), *The Descent into Hell* (1970), *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977), *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today* (1980), *Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity* (1990), and *The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy* (1993).

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SUMMARY

Dr. Altizer considers this essay, written in 1997, to be the best summary of his theological position.

The Gospel of Christian Atheism was written in 1965, and was intended as a mediation of an American radical theology to the public at large, although its author had no expectation at all of the public furor which would arise in the following year over the advent of a death of God theology. When this book was written I had not yet found a publisher for my Blake book, The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake, so that this became an occasion for a mediation of that book to a general audience, and particularly so since I had chosen Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche as our greatest modern thinkers and visionaries of the death of God. Being persuaded that Christianity had not yet evolved a genuinely radical theology, this also became an occasion for an initial attempt to formulate a radical theology, one which would be systematic and Biblical at once, and yet nevertheless a truly modern or contemporary theology. Of course, such an intention was far too ambitious for this book, but its more realistic intention was to foster a radical theological dialogue, and in this it surely succeeded, even if the book is now in deep eclipse. At present a comprehensive conservatism has overwhelmed the world, one which certainly dominates contemporary religion and theology, and so much so that this book is now virtually invisible, even if thirty years ago it was perhaps the most controversial book in our theological literature.

Both radical politics and radical religion are now in eclipse, but in the sixties they seemingly dominated discourse in the Western world, and even the Church was under their impact, as witness the Second Vatican Council. Have these now wholly vanished from our world, or do they continue in a subterranean and hidden form, although now operating in a more powerful way, and particularly so if we are facing the end of history? It is to be remembered that Christianity began with an apocalyptic proclamation of the end of history, one which dominated the earliest Christian communities, and one which was renewed at each of the great crises or turning points of Christian history, just as it was renewed in each of our great modern political revolutions, and equally if not more deeply renewed in the advent of our deepest modern thinking and imaginative vision. At no other point is there a deeper continuity between the modern world and an original Christianity, even if this is a continuity which is alien to our theology, and above all alien to all non-apocalyptic theology, which is to say to every theology which we have known as either an orthodox or a liberal theology. The Gospel of Christian Atheism intended to renew an apocalyptic theology, one which was born in the very advent of

Christian theology in Paul, and which was profoundly renewed in Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche, who are apparently deeply and profoundly Christian at this crucial point. My second book, Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred, had concluded with a theological analysis intending to draw forth the profoundly Christian ground of Nietzsche's ultimately modern vision of Eternal Recurrence, and did so in the spirit of Eliade's most treasured symbol of the coincidentia oppositorum, so that this book was almost inevitably followed by The Gospel of Christian Atheism.

If Hegel and Nietzsche are our most apocalyptic thinkers, and Blake our most apocalyptic visionary, not only are they united at this fundamental point, but this very apocalypticism is here inseparable from an ultimate enactment of the death of God. Moreover, each of these primal modern figures enacted the death of God as apocalypse itself, an apocalypse which is the end of history, but that is simultaneously and precisely thereby the inauguration of a new aeon. What Blake could envision as the New Jerusalem, or Hegel could know as the advent of Absolute Spirit, or Nietzsche could envision as Eternal Recurrence, is the consequence of the end of history, but an ending realized only through the death of God, which each could know not only as the most ultimate ending in our history, but also as that ending which made possible and calls forth the most absolute beginning.

Now if the death of God is truly fundamental in a uniquely modern apocalypticism, is that not an absolute dividing line between modern apocalypticism and an original Christian apocalypticism, and one revealing modern apocalypticism as an absolute desacralization or profanation of Christianity? The Gospel of Christian Atheism attempts to address this challenge, and does so by centering upon the death of God as the deepest ground of Christianity, and one even present in the original proclamation of Jesus. This occurs in Jesus' unique apocalyptic enactment of the full and final advent of the Kingdom of God, for no longer is the realm of God heavenly and transcendent, but is dawning "here" and "now," a dawning only possible as a consequence of a negation of a transcendent beyond, a negation which is a self-negation, and consequently a self-negation of Godhead itself. This is a self-negation which ultimately realizes itself in the Crucifixion, a crucifixion which Christianity has known as the one source of salvation, and therein it is truly an atonement, but ultimately an atonement of Godhead with itself. Just as Christian theology has never realized a genuine understanding of evil and

nothingness, it has ever been closed to the deep negativity of Godhead itself, or closed to the negative pole or polarity of God. Now this is the very negativity which is profoundly realized by Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche, and it is only the negation of this negativity which is truly the death of God, a negation which is apocalypse itself, and precisely thereby the apocalypse of God.

Jesus could name such an apocalypse as the Kingdom of God, and it is all too significant that Jesus is alone among ancient prophets in naming the "Kingdom of God," a naming that was at the very center of his mission, but one which soon perished in ancient Christianity. The comprehensive transformation of Christianity in the first three generations of its existence is unique in the history of religions, and nothing so deeply perished as did Jesus' apocalyptic enactment of the Kingdom of God, or, if it did not perish, it was wholly reversed, and reversed by way of a comprehensive epiphany of the absolute transcendence of God. So it is that a recovery of the original way of Jesus can occur only by way of an absolute assault upon all established or manifest Christianity, as most purely occurs in Blake and Nietzsche. But it occurs no less in Hegel, and if Hegel is the deepest center of a uniquely modern philosophical atheism, that atheism could be understood as a Christian atheism if it is understood as a reversal of a uniquely Christian transcendence of God, and a Christian transcendence that is itself a reversal of Jesus' enactment of the apocalypse of God.

An absolute immanence dominates a uniquely modern thinking and vision, one which is an inversion and reversal of a pure transcendence, but the apocalypse of God could be understood as the final realization of the pure immanence of God, one releasing an ultimate Yes-saying, and a Yes-saying which is greeted with a total joy. Perhaps it is joy itself which is most missing from a uniquely modern Christianity, but it is ecstatically present in both Blake and Nietzsche, but only so present as a consequence of the death of God. Hegel could know that death as the self-negation of abstract Spirit, or a wholly self-alienated Godhead, one which Blake could name as Urizen or Satan, and Nietzsche could know as the deification of nothingness. Only in Hegel and Nietzsche does there finally occur a philosophical understanding of nothingness in the West, and this occurs only by way of the philosophical understanding of an absolutely self-alienated God, one which Nietzsche could know as an absolute No-saying, and one which Hegel could know as an absolute emptiness. But that is the very emptiness which is emptied

in an absolute movement of kenotic self-emptying, a movement which Hegel could understand as a repetition of the Crucifixion, and a repetition ushering in the final age of the Spirit. So, too, Nietzsche could understand such an ultimate and final movement as the dawning of absolute immanence, and an absolute immanence only possible as a consequence of the death of God. Only Christianity among the world religions knows the death of God, and nothing else makes Christianity so unique in the history of religions, but so likewise nothing else in modernity is more unique than its comprehensive realization of the death of God, and if nowhere else there is here a full coincidence between the depths of modernity and the depths of Christianity itself.

Must this coincidence remain closed to Christian theology? Is any genuine atheism impossible for Christian theology, and impossible if only because theology itself is inseparable from the transcendence of God? The Gospel of Christian Atheism claims that genuine atheism is possible only for the Christian, for only the Christian knows the actual and final death of God, a death of God alone releasing an absolute immanence, and a crucifixion releasing not an ascent into Heaven but a descent into Hell. Ancient Christianity reversed the way of the cross by knowing it as a way to a heavenly transcendence, just as it reversed the crucifixion by knowing it as resurrection, and even as a wholly other-worldly or transcendent resurrection, and just as the crucifixion and not the resurrection dominates the synoptic gospels, the resurrection and not the crucifixion dominates patristic Christianity, and so much so that actual images of the crucifixion do not even occur until the end of patristic Christianity. Ever more gradually these images become deeper in the medieval Christian world, until they become overwhelming in the waning of the Middle Ages, and then far deeper and even ultimately deeper in the birth of the modern world. This is a world with which Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche are in deep continuity, and a far deeper continuity than is present in all manifest or ecclesiastical modern Christianity, and if modernity has been wholly unable to envision resurrection, it has profoundly envisioned crucifixion, and even envisioned crucifixion as an absolute and total event.

But it cannot be a total event if it is not the death of God, and if the death of God is alien to Christian theology, it is not alien to modern thinking and vision, indeed, it is at the very center of a uniquely modern vision and thinking, and it is just for that

reason that a unique modernity can be known as a Christian modernity. This is the presumption of The Gospel of Christian Atheism, and even if this entails a negation of ecclesiastical Christianity, this is a negation seeking a universal horizon, and a universal horizon of our world. Certainly theology continues to be far distant from such a horizon, but nevertheless it is seeking it today, or is so when it is not engulfed by a new orthodoxy or a new conservatism. We should understand that such orthodoxy is truly new, just as our fundamentalism is truly new, and if only a newly orthodox and newly conservative Christianity is now seemingly alive, this would be without precedent since the early Middle Ages, and could well be a decisive sign of the total marginalization of Christianity. That would be historically unique, and perhaps for that very reason historically false, for an invisible Christianity could be very much alive today, or one invisible by all orthodox and ecclesiastical criteria, but one nevertheless deeply alive in our depths, even if those depths are invisible to empirical observation.

Our world is a deeply paradoxical world, one seemingly delivered into peace and prosperity, without any apparent deep threats or deep repression, and without any ultimate discord or violence except in its peripheries, and yet ours is a world wholly empty of everything which we once knew as an ultimate hope or an ultimate affirmation, except insofar as this seemingly occurs in a new virtual reality, and it is all too significant that it is only a virtual reality which we can know as a liberating reality. So much hopelessness amidst so much prosperity is a truly new situation, and even if this is most true in America, it would seem to be true in every "advanced" region of the world, and perhaps what we have come to know as advancement is the deepest form of hopelessness and inhumanity. But we should far rather say 'ahumanity' rather than 'inhumanity', for we are losing everything which we once knew as humanity. Is this not a situation that calls for radical thinking and vision, and certainly for radical theological thinking and vision, and if this can now only occur subterraneously, is it possible that genuine theological thinking can only be a subterranean thinking? If so, perhaps The Gospel of Christian Atheism can make a contribution to our situation, and if not, let it be cast into oblivion.

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