



## Genesis and Apocalypse: A Theological Voyage Toward Authentic Christianity

By Thomas J.J. Altizer

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Thomas J.J. Altizer, long a proponent of so-called radical theology, probes the centrality of apocalyptic transformation within the Christian tradition and argues that the vision of a total apocalyptic inversion is the unmet challenge facing us. Christianity has the unique vision of the radically new that can both embrace and transcend the death of God that makes it possible to allow the new into its full revelatory potential. For Altizer, the Christian vision of radical creation out of nothing, the hidden dialectical partner of apocalypse, negates the ancient and primitive view of the eternal return that denied radical newness in favor of the continual reiteration of the powers of origin.

The death of the eternal return and the birth of the novum is further celebrated in the history of Western literature from Milton to Blake to Joyce, whose last major work, *Finnegan's Wake*, represents the consummation of the night vision living at the hidden heart of the Christian tradition. The apocalyptic imagination went underground into literary production so that the death of God and the celebration of the self-emptying of both Christ and Satan could unfold with its own dialectical logic.

The history of philosophy has its own hidden relation to the apocalypse that emerges into its inner clarity when seen in the light of the Western commitment to new and novel history, history that cannot be the mere mirror of an eternal now or static structure. Hegel grappled with the self-emptying of Christ and the Spirit into a world that has now become unnameable. The plunge into history itself, as an absolute denial of eternal return, is also a plunge into the end of history as the apocalypse that is both origin and goal in one. Hegel's own categorial structures reflect this tension in which the radically new is also self-othering and evocative of its own conflagration at the end of the world.

Christianity, Western literature, and Western philosophy all converge in the common realization that the apocalyptic vision shatters, once and for all, the concept of a nameable Christ, a world center, a self with an identity, and a sovereign God. For Altizer, the experience of the death of God is actually one of the many gateways to the apocalyptic transfiguration in which the creation surpasses itself and becomes open to the abyss at its core. In this sense, the death of God brings us to an absolutely new beginning in which revelation gives us



the possibility of a non-centered opening to the ever reticent abyss that lies on the edge of history and historical consciousness.

Altizer makes some evocative connections in his apocalyptic rereading of the tradition. His analysis of Aquinas and the conception of God as pure actuality or the pure act of Being is intriguing and sheds some light on the inner dynamism of actuality as it stands over and against its other. There is clearly a sense in which Aquinas moves beyond Aristotle in showing how *actus purus* creates the new and is itself a revelation of radical creation out of nothing. When Altizer probes into theological concepts like predestination, particularly as redefined by Barth, he strains the traditional structure to break it open to apocalyptic possibilities that may be only dimly or incompletely present, or, a cynic might argue, only present in the mind of the author. The language and style of the text is worthy of some brief comment. On reading through Altizer's many layered structures, one can conclude one of two things. Either the style expresses the solemn cadencies of poetry, in which the repeated transformation of key motifs enhances the eventual exhibit power of the work, or the sheer repetition and excessive eulogization of certain key themes represents a bombastic camouflage masking a deeper theoretical fatigue. A serious reader will be tempted by both hermeneutic readings in turn.

This book is written for those with a fair amount of theological and philosophical training, which is perfectly appropriate, but its style and its often grandiose claims sometimes ring hollow in the face of the more complex and vexing problems facing any perspective that wishes to revive apocalyptic imagery. The reader is entitled to more nuanced analyses that reflect greater craft in shaping a theological perspective that chooses to honor the entrance of the novum in our time.

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