THIS SILENCE MUST NOW SPEAK


EDITED BY MIKE GRIMSHAW
**Radical Theologies**

*Radical Theologies* is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have entered or seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

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This Silence Must Now Speak

Letters of Thomas J. J. Altizer,
1995–2015

Thomas J. J. Altizer

Edited by
Mike Grimshaw

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Contents

Series Preface ix

Introduction by Mike Grimshaw 1

1 To Brian Schroeder: on Levinas (October/November 1996) 7

2 To Brian Schroeder: on Levinas and eschaton (December 5, 1996) 11

3 To D. G. Leahy: on Evil (January 17, 1997) 15

4 To Lissa McCullough: on Resurrection (June 13, 1997) 19

5 To Brian Schroeder: on Philosophy and Theology (January 18, 1998) 25

6 To Brian Schroeder: on Levinas and Evil (January 28, 1998) 29

7 To Ray L. Hart: on God Being Nothing (April 13, 1998) 33

8 To Thomas A. Carlson: on Hegel and Heidegger (December 30, 1998) 39

9 To D. G. Leahy: on Lecture “Thinking in the Third Millennium” (April 4, 2000) 43

10 To Cyril O’Regan: on Gnosticism (April 12, 2000) 49

11 To Gan Yang: on Satan (September 8, 2001) 51

12 To Lissa McCullough: on Political and Ethical Theology (September 7, 2005) 55

13 To Lissa McCullough: on Abyss (October 13, 2005) 59

14 To Edith Wyschogrod: on Levinas (December 2, 2005) 63

15 To D. G. Leahy: on Badiou and Paul (December 29, 2005) 65

16 To Brian Schroeder: on Nihilism (January 23, 2006) 69

17 To Walter A. Strauss: on Ritual (February 6, 2006) 71
Contents

18  To Lissa McCullough: on Sacrifice (February 7, 2006)  73
19  To Friends: on Ratzinger (March 2, 2006)  75
20  To Lissa McCullough: on Genesis and Apocalypse (March 9, 2006)  79
21  To Friends: on The Young Heidegger (June 29, 2006)  87
22  To Friends: on The Young Heidegger (July 5, 2006)  89
23  To Alina N. Feld and Lissa McCullough: on Angst (September 19–22, 2006)  91
24  To John B. Cobb, Jr.: on Wittgenstein (September 27, 2006)  101
25  To John B. Cobb, Jr.: on Whitehead (October 4, 2006)  103
26  To Andrew W. Hass: on Hegel (January 5, 2007)  105
27  To Andrew W. Hass: on Hegel (January 11, 2007)  109
28  To Friends: on American Religion (January 24, 2007)  113
29  To Friends: on Theopaschism (January 25, 2007)  115
30  To Friends: On Harnack and Theopaschism (January 26, 2007)  117
31  To Lissa McCullough: on Birth of Vision (March 13, 2007)  119
32  To Donald Weinstein: on America (March 23, 2007)  121
33  To Friends: on Marcel Gauchet (March 27, 2007)  123
34  To Friends: On Gauchet and Theology (May 7, 2007)  125
35  To John D. Caputo: On Heidegger (May 17, 2007)  127
36  To Brian Schroeder: On Eschatology (June 7, 2007)  131
37  To John T. Wilcox: on Job (June 13, 2007)  133
38  To Friends: on Hegel (July 10, 2007)  137
39  To John D. Caputo: on Prayer (September 29, 2007)  141
40  To Edward S. Casey: on Ethics (November 23, 2007)  143
41  To Friends: on Altruism (November 28, 2007)  147
42  To Walter A. Strauss: on Altruism (December 4, 2007)  149
43  To Friends: on Demythologizing (October 30, 2008)  151
44  To Friends: on Good Friday (April 10, 2009)  155
45  To Friends: on Ritual (May 8, 2009)  159
Contents

73 To Friends: on the radical Tillich (April 11, 2015) 249
74 To Friends: On Benedict XVI and Augustinianism (April 26, 2015) 251

Notes 255
List of Recipients 281
Index 283
Series Preface

*Radical Theologies* encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of twenty-first century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power.”

*Radical Theologies* reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, *Radical Theologies* expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as Rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of god theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.
Introduction

Mike Grimshaw

In 1966, in the midst of what become known as the “death of God” debate, Thomas Altizer stated: “If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century, it is a passage through the death of God, the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence.”¹ Altizer has spent the past half-century thinking, writing, talking, and debating just how we may understand the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first, in the wake of the death of God. As Mark C. Taylor describes him in his foreword to Altizer’s memoir: “Thomas J. J. Altizer is the last theologian. As such, he is the most God-obsessed person I have ever known.”² As the last theologian, Altizer has been determined to compel us to acknowledge that to live in the modern world is to have to continue to think through the death of God. A theologian of the death of God may sound an oxymoron to many, but Altizer is also a self-described apocalyptic theologian—³—an apocalyptic that is simultaneously an ending and an absolute beginning. For Altizer the hope is that we can come to know the dark apocalypse embodied in a nihilistic world “as a joyous apocalypse, and one promising if not embodying an absolute transfiguration” (LDG 177).

What might it mean to think of Altizer as a theologian of transfiguration—a transfiguration of nihilism, a transfiguration of the world when the nihilism of the death of God opens us up to a new possibility, the transfiguration of hope? Central to this is naming the silence—above all naming the silence about God—and this is what gives this collection its title. It is a phrase borrowed from the letter of October 13, 2005, wherein Altizer names this as his new focus: the silence of the abyss of God. This is a theological and intellectual journey; in fact, for Altizer this has entailed a type of existential journey of the whole person into the encounter with what he names “the absolute darkness of the absolute nothingness of God,” and this involves a saying yes to God “and hence saying Yes to absolute darkness and absolute nothingness itself” (LDG 179). This is Altizer as theologian of coincidentia oppositorum and hence the last theologian, the theologian of the radical transfiguration in the abyss, in the absolute darkness, in the absolute nothing where we say Yes to God. As Altizer proclaims, by “naming the darkness of God
we precisely thereby name an ultimate transfiguration” (LDG 180). To be able to participate in this transfiguration, the theological “task is to name that darkness” (LDG 179), a naming as proclamation, a naming that is preached by the self-described “last truly Southern preacher” (LDG 181)—as all of those privileged to hear Altizer speaking publicly can surely agree.

Are these also therefore the letters of a preacher of the death of God? I would argue they often are: they are proclamations reminiscent of a sermon that declaim and name, that challenge and urge us, in a deeply Protestant fashion, to reflect as individuals on what we encounter, an encounter with the abyss that is, again in a truly Protestant fashion, that of the individual with the abyss of God. Altizer notes that a homiletic approach has been central to his theological work (LDG x), an approach manifest not only in his oral communication but, as experienced here, in his written letters.

Altizer is not only the last theologian, but also one of the last true intellectuals, a radical intellectual whose knowledge is the result of wide and deep reading across the disciplines of religion, theology, philosophy, history, and literature. His work reminds us that to do theology, to be a theologian, has required nothing less than an engagement with the history, thought, and expressions of Western culture itself. For that culture is the culture of the question of God, and more recently, the culture of the death of God.

Altizer is radical in two main senses: his work and thought take us back to the radix, the root in the Bible, in philosophy, in theology, and it is radical in the secondary sense that it proclaims an alternative, a necessary alternative, to what is taken to be normative. Central to this radical alternative is the work of William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom serve as the radix of Altizer’s theology, a radical theology that is also, as Altizer often notes, given full expression though the death of God as expressed and experienced in America. So Altizer is a radical theologian, a death of God theologian, the last theologian—and importantly, an American theologian. His theology could have arisen in no other place than America, an America that situates itself always in relation to—and often in competition with—the old world of Europe. An America open to the influence of Asia, an America that looks westward across the Pacific and so remains open to Buddhism in particular. An America that looks to Europe as a place of departure: as an old world and tradition transformed in the new world of America. Altizer is an American theologian who is open to the possibilities, both positive and negative, that are offered in America—and offered by America. This is a possibility for Western theology to remake itself anew, to rethink itself on what Altizer, in a letter of February 12, 2012, calls “the unique ground of America”; a society seeking to express itself through common speech and a common language. As Altizer identifies in this letter, furthermore, the death of God is in many ways centrally tied to America, a revolutionary America as expressed by William Blake in his epic America and as enacted in Herman Melville’s novel Moby-Dick. This theme is a constant implicit presence in Altizer’s thought and letters: what is the abyss that confronts America, that confronts American society? Why in this most religious of modern nations is the death of God so centrally, and continually enacted—and yet often denied?
Altizer’s radical theology is also therefore a political theology, a radical theology that calls for a new beginning, a new beginning inaugurated by the death of God. In these letters certain names reappear: Blake, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel, Milton, Levinas, and throughout the thought of D. G. Leahy. Altizer’s theology is positioned in an ongoing conversation, debate, and argument with all of these names. So there is a conversation in these letters not only with those receiving the letters but also, crucially, with those thinkers of whom he writes within the letters. The net of Altizer’s mind and knowledge is cast far and wide: looking back to the ancient Greeks, engaging with what can be termed radical Catholicism, and discussing ballet, theatre, literature, culture, and politics in the broadest sense. These letters are the expression and example of what theology could and should be, a theology that is inclusive in its engagement with the expressions of human life, thought, and culture. For in these letters Altizer reminds us that theology, especially radical theology, is nothing less than a continual reflexive and critical yet celebratory engagement with all of life and its possibilities. Nothing is outside the scope of theology and theological discussion. But also, in these letters, Altizer provides a crucial reminder that to attempt to do theology, to attempt to think and write theologically, to attempt to enter an understanding of modern life through the death of God, demands a deep and wide engagement with the intellectual and cultural expressions of modern life, with all that has contributed to it. This may seem an impossibility; yet, as Altizer eloquently demonstrates, theology is centrally a task of reading, thinking, and writing—ever writing one’s thinking out in new ways. Furthermore, theology is undertaken in a conversation, in an engagement with others who are likewise grappling with these questions. It involves questions far more than answers, critique far more than assurance, an honesty and emotion too often kept hidden and discouraged within the walls of institutions.

Felix Pryor, in his introduction to The Faber Book of Letters, observed: “Those who are able to write good books are usually the ones best able to write good letters. They are at home in the medium.” Thomas Altizer is certainly at home in these media: in the medium of books and articles, and here, in the medium of letters. For the past 20 years he has made assiduous use of the possibilities of the internet to circulate e-mails in which his thought has been expressed in a manner that is conversational, prophetic, inquiring, and often homiletic. He has written over 300 letters to friends and colleagues in a series of meditative essays and mini-essays on religious, theological, political, and philosophical matters that are central and vital to our contemporary era. It is from this wider body that this smaller, representative collection has been selected.

These letters exemplify new possibilities for engaging in and with radical theology. Written for the internet age, they have been circulated among a broad circle of radical thinkers across North America, Europe, and the South Pacific, and so serve as the ongoing ground for a series of conversations. In this regard they are an innovative medium for doing theology in communicative dialogue: they model a deliberately inclusive manner of sharing radical thought. It has often been thought that the internet would end the age of the letter. These letters, of and for a wide generation of scholars, demonstrate the exciting possibilities for global epistles that the internet enables. It was once thought, similarly, that the decline of the letter
would be a consequence of the rise of the telephone, and of course there are many conversations and discussions that occur on the telephone that once would have been put down on the page and circulated back and forth.

Yet the internet has seen a return to the letter in a way that transcends both these older formats of communication. As Brian Schroeder, one of Altizer’s correspondents, commented, these letters remind “a generation that there is a dying world of intellectual correspondence that can be as important as published writings for thinking through critical questions.” In this Schroeder identifies a central element of these letters: they reveal Altizer thinking though critical issues in communication with a fellowship of friends and likeminded scholars. These are proclamations of intent, insights and questions; discursive essays on issues that Altizer has been thinking his way through. They range in length from essays thousands of words long to far briefer ones of hundreds of words that raise a point of immediate interest and critical insight. Above all they are communications as the thinking through of critical questions. In these we are introduced again—and in a new format—to one of the formidable intellects of the last century of thought and theology. Altizer was and remains extraordinarily widely and deeply read. He is a scholar and an intellectual engaged in a world of words and ideas, ranging freely from the past into the present, from the present applied critically to the past.

It is important to realise that in the main this is not correspondence as traditionally understood in the age of the letter addressed to a single recipient. Even in the past, the handwritten (or typewritten) letter, while addressed to a singular recipient, would oftentimes be circulated to a wider circle of acquaintances—either whole or as partially quoted in subsequent letters to others. So letters have often operated as a medium to proclaim a message to a wider network of recipients.

The roots of this are evident to all who are conversant with the biblical tradition. The history of Christianity in particular is replete with letters—from those canonized in the New Testament, to those of the church fathers, to those of theologians both orthodox and heterodox, to those of reformers and heretics. The letter has a central role in Christianity from the advent of modernity in the Reformation. The printing press enabled the letter as proclamation and call for radical reform to be widely circulated. There are also the epistles of pastoral and institutional authority.

These letters of Altizer therefore arise in the context of a deep history of the theological letter, the letter as theological document and expression, the letter as theological conversation and act of inclusion across a dispersed community. They offer a theology of immediacy and reflection, of both the time in which they are written and for our rereading again, anew. They set forth theology as first and foremost the act of communication, arising from a desire to exchange ideas, to engage with the recipients the topical questions and insights, the proclamation and prophetical impulse that abide at the heart of Altizer’s life and work. This collection provides a new form of theology, the theology of e-letters, theology as internet epistle that circulates across time and space in an inclusive manner, drawing together a new community, truly a theology of transfiguration.
A Note on the Text

The letters were selected from the body of over 300 letters generously made available by Altizer and various of his correspondents. In considering how to proceed I had to decide between making thematic selections and grouping these in separate chapters or topic headings or undertaking a selection that allowed the central narrative flow of Altizer’s thought to be expressed. I chose the latter course and so the letters selected occur in chronological order. This I believe preserves the integrity of Altizer’s undertaking in writing these letters. They arose as expressions of his thought over almost 20 years. In reading these in chronological order we gain a far more honest engagement with how and why Altizer wrote the letters than we would if they were grouped in themes that disturbed the chronological order of composition.

Of those that I considered including, I contacted all the correspondents in question requesting permission to publish the letter. All but one agreed. The final selection is mine and mine alone; in this I sought to provide an accessible and wide-ranging coverage of the ideas and discussions included in the larger body of work. The footnotes are also my work, undertaken to provide further information for those who might not be familiar with Altizer’s work and the names, events, and ideas in these letters. In working on the footnotes I was struck again at the breadth of Altizer’s theology. Some names I have left without footnotes, believing that those reading this collection will be at least familiar with such figures and the broad nature of their thought.

In completing this work I thank Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder for their generous encouragement and assistance. They have had the privilege of knowing and working with Thomas Altizer far longer than I have—yet they have been extremely supportive of this project and for this I want to thank them.

Finally, this collection is of course the work primarily and ultimately of Thomas Altizer. Without his writing of these letters, his willingness and generosity to allow them to be edited into this collection, this project would not have come to fruition. It has been a privilege to work with one of the most original and brilliant theological minds of the past century. My first meeting with Thomas Altizer was a central inspiration for inaugurating the Radical Theologies series. I am delighted that it has enabled his voice to be heard anew.