

INTRODUCTION

**Resurrecting the Death of God**



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Now that it has been agreed that the first American coming of the death of God in [the twentieth] century was either a media event or a mildly useful emetic, it is now time—in these apocalyptic days—to examine [its] second coming.

—William Hamilton, *Reading Moby-Dick and Other Essays*

Nineteen sixty-six was a difficult year for God. A small group of young theologians, Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton prominent among them, had arrived at a conclusion about God's existence that would incite enormous controversy across America. God was dead, they told John Elson of *Time* magazine, and in scorching red letters cast across the dark cover of what would become one of its best-selling issues, *Time* shared the prospect with the country.<sup>1</sup> The response was fierce. Altizer received death threats and nearly lost his position at Emory University. Hamilton was less fortunate. Colgate Rochester Divinity School mysteriously “removed” his chair of theology.<sup>2</sup> Other theologians, perhaps afraid of the backlash, denied their affiliation with the “movement” that Altizer and Hamilton had spearheaded. By the end of the decade, both theologians found themselves teaching not only at other universities but also in a different field entirely. The controversy they started was apparently over. The death of God was dead.

Many commentators have no doubt characterized the death of God or radical theology as little more than a creation of the media, a fad of its time, or a blip on the radar screen of twentieth-century theology.<sup>3</sup> In 1969, only three years after the uproar began, *Time* magazine was already asking,

“Whatever became of the death of God?” Some, including the theologian Langdon Gilkey, acknowledged that as a “catch phrase” the phenomenon had come and gone even though its constructive value had lasting implications. Others more hostile to the idea of God’s death, or *theothanatology*, were quick, as Doris Donnelly reported, “to dismiss the movement as both irreverent and irrelevant.”<sup>4</sup> By 1976, just ten years after *Time* had brought radical theology to the nation’s attention, one journalist for the *Richmond Times Dispatch* concluded that “for millions of Americans in the pews, God never died.”<sup>5</sup> Most people were still attending church. Conservative Christianity, the reporter added, was actually experiencing a revival. Today this way of reading death of God theology and its impact continues: “God is back!” we hear. The secularization thesis was wrong. The news of “God’s demise was premature.”<sup>6</sup> Reports of the Almighty’s death, various keepers of the American sanctuary insist, have been grossly exaggerated.

Careful observers of contemporary culture would have to concur: the first decade of the new millennium was witness to an almost unprecedented resurgence of religion, at least in its fundamentalist forms.<sup>7</sup> Megachurches thrive. Christian radio bombards America with preaching that calls for the “personal acceptance” of Jesus Christ, and popular ministers ranging from Joel Osteen to Rick Warren reach millions of people through television, the internet, and other forms of media. Even the appearance of the new atheism and with it a plea to reject faith in the name of reason presupposes the ubiquity of belief. To say, then, that “religion is making a comeback” as the *New York Times* did in 1997, would now be passé.<sup>8</sup> Religion at the dawn of the third millennium has arrived, and it is big business. As John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge confirm, “The world of megachurches, ‘pastorpreneurs,’ and house churches is booming at home and abroad.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the success of “pastorpreneurs” and house churches, much less the noisy gong and clanging cymbal of the modern megachurch, tells us nothing about the existence or nonexistence of God. What it does illustrate is that sociocultural circumstances have changed significantly in the span of merely four or five decades. Today the death of God is no longer the “cultural fact” it ostensibly was for some Americans just after the middle of the twentieth century. Times are different. Western evangelical faith in God, the kind that sanctions preemptive war and American nationalism, the kind that Hamilton foresaw as “too male, too dangerous, [and] too violent to be allowed to live,” has become the norm in our churches, in our military, and among our politicians.<sup>10</sup> Radical theology, were it to speak to our situation, would accordingly do so not by confirming the widespread loss of faith in a secular society that has “come of age.” Instead, it would challenge a culture that now largely sees itself as religious. Against the grain of popular American piety, it would shift from pronouncing the death of God in terms

of unbelief to putting a spoke in the wheel of belief itself. Its task, in short, would be decide—its vocation, the murder of God.

The question is whether the return of religion demands the return of radical theology. We, the editors of the present volume, believe it does. Fundamentalist religion—particularly in its now-dominant evangelical Christian form—has become a destructive and alienating force in our culture, one that sanctifies “the unjust power of oppressors,”<sup>11</sup> validates amassing personal wealth at the expense of others, and more than ever presents a “providential God incompatible with scientific explanation.”<sup>12</sup> Radical theology may have been crucified and abandoned by popular culture shortly after its inception, but its return today is absolutely imperative. With great necessity and prophetic urgency, therefore, we declare the need to speak against a culture of misguided faith by resurrecting the death of God for public reconsideration. We invite the reader—religious or otherwise—to contemplate an updated and revised version of radical theology for our time, one that *actively seeks* to eradicate the gods of fundamentalist Christianity insofar as they threaten our civil liberties, our capacity to think critically, the progress of science, and finally the democratic principles that inform our government itself. Behind this new version of theodanatology lies a single conviction: if silence or indifference is no longer an option, then perhaps the best alternative is nothing less than a *radical* one.

### Radical Theology Never Died

One can easily imagine a first response to resurrecting the death of God: radical theology never died. Altizer’s work, for example, would reach its creative and most groundbreaking expression nearly ten years after the fad he helped inspire had vanished from the scene.<sup>13</sup> His retrieval of a fully Hegelian Christianity, one in which God the Father empties Himself (Greek, *kénōsis*) and dies by becoming incarnate in Christ followed “by Christ’s complete and irreversible self-emptying into the Holy Spirit, conceived as the bond of the religious community,” would directly influence the postmodern thought of Mark C. Taylor and, more recently, the political philosophy of Slavoj Žižek.<sup>14</sup> Hamilton likewise continued to proclaim the death of God long after the media lost interest. By 1989 he already knew that “the frightening silence of God” identified two decades prior was being replaced by “the more frightening danger of God—not silent or dead at all, but very much alive, murderous and needing to be killed.”<sup>15</sup> The emphasis may have changed, but Hamilton persevered. God’s death occupied him with a quiet passion long after the “movement” he helped initiate had evaporated.

Is there any truth, then, in the claim that radical theology was a “theology of the month” that disappeared as quickly as it came? The answer

is yes and no: Gilkey was indeed correct to note the existence of two radical theologies. The first was the sensation created by the media. In this form radical theology “fizzled only after a few years in the limelight,” reflecting perhaps what Nathan Schneider of *The Guardian* (October 4, 2009) has called a “last gasp of the liberal Protestant theology that was quickly losing ground in American culture and politics to a more literalistic evangelical tide.” The version that prompted Altizer and Hamilton to continue, however, did not die and go under like the one created by the media—it went *underground*. There, as Lloyd Steffen wrote in 1989, “death of God theology has not disappeared at all; it has simply been transformed. It has entered, or is in the process of entering, mainstream theology.”<sup>16</sup> Radical theology’s burial, in short, was not the last word; it would rise again sporadically in new and surprising ways even though *a full and more sustained recovery has not yet occurred*.

Finding glimmers of radical theology’s occasional reappearance or detecting tremors of what Hamilton called its second coming can be difficult. Close inspection nonetheless reveals traces of its activity along two primary fault lines or trajectories over the past few decades. The first trajectory is implicit. Theologians in this line appear indifferent to questions concerning the reality of God. For them, talk about God serves a pragmatic purpose, one that provides a means for producing a desired effect typically in sociopolitical terms. This, the Hamiltonian trajectory of theodanatology, tacitly informs any “metaphorical theology” that accepts the position that language for God does not actually correspond or point to divine reality; instead, the importance of theology lies entirely in its *function* to inform certain practices or behaviors and not in its alleged capacity to describe the nature or existence of God.

The second trajectory is more explicit. Its point of departure is the work of Altizer, and its initial resurgence appeared in the deconstructive “hermeneutics of the death of God” initiated by Taylor in *Deconstructing Theology* (1982) and then *Erring* (1984). Since then, several other major thinkers have criticized, appropriated, and transformed the Altizerian form of kenotic death of God theology, making the label of “deconstruction” too restrictive. In fact, as Cyril O’Regan observes, kenosis as either a story or an event that occasions the death and sometimes “self-saving” of God has been “refigured” three times since Altizer: first by Taylor and then by Gianni Vattimo and Žižek.<sup>17</sup> Obviously the Altizerian form of radical theology with its emphasis on the death of God in Christ differs greatly from its Hamiltonian sibling. Their founding conviction nevertheless remains the same: we must “clear aside” the God of conventional theism. *That God is dead*.

### Tracing the Two Trajectories

Paul Tillich, an early influence on both Altizer and Hamilton, provides the most famous modern example of “clearing aside” the God of ordinary theism in *The Courage to Be*, published in 1952.<sup>18</sup> Ordinary or objectified theism, he says, conceives of God as a being or object “out there” who is subject by implication to the broader structures and polarities of reality. This God is not God. The true God transcends the greater totality of space and time; “he” is not merely a being among beings but the depth, foundation, and power of being-itself. This means, in the language of Søren Kierkegaard, that God is the power that continuously generates or “establishes” each human being along with all other finite realities. Everything that exists derives its being from the power of being, that is, by participating in being-itself as its ground and source. Tillich calls God understood as the power of being or being-itself the “God beyond God” who appears after the God of ordinary/conventional theism has fallen away. In this respect, though critical of the radical theology that emerged toward the end of his lifetime, Tillich anticipated the movement by pronouncing the death of a *misconception* of God even though a more plausible conception of God (as being-itself) remains.

Many today would challenge Tillich’s “ontotheological” understanding of God. His primary legacy, however, lies not in the content of his theology but in the transition he invokes and endorses from God to the God beyond God.<sup>19</sup> While early admirers of Tillich’s theology would, as in the case of Bishop John Robinson, simply reiterate his move from God to the God above God in more accessible terms, others would accept the transition and then depart from it significantly. Hamilton is the best example. Once we have cleared away the God of ordinary theism, he says, we must acknowledge and live with the void left in God’s place. Robinson may therefore be “perfectly right to reject objectified theism,” Hamilton argues in 1966, “but he is wrong to think that his non-objectified theism is any more satisfactory.”<sup>20</sup> The God above God, in other words, is not being-itself. The God above God is dead, and there is nothing we can substitute in God’s absence.

What happens, then, when the God above God about whom Tillich spoke fails to appear? Does it truly mean that God is dead, and if so what are we to do? How should we respond? Hamilton suggests two possibilities. The first is to wait. Perhaps new forms of discourse for God will emerge after we take “God” out of the dictionary. The second option is more radical: we follow Jesus! When Jesus speaks, for example, of casting fire upon the earth (Luke 12: 49), Hamilton explains that “[w]e are to *be* this fire, to bring warmth and comfort where needed, to bring light to someone’s darkness,

beauty to ugliness, justice and healing to injustice and suffering.”<sup>21</sup> Talk about God is useless, but Jesus can still be the way, a “model for radical living” or a “place to be.” He becomes, as R. C. Sproul explains Hamilton’s view, “a kind of symbol for authentic action.”<sup>22</sup> Following Jesus *without God* for the sake of justice and love in the world is ultimately what matters. This way of being, one that finds as its inspiration the later writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is the ethic of Hamiltonian Christian atheism.

Few theologians since Hamilton have spoken explicitly of Christian discipleship without God.<sup>23</sup> A significant number, however, have at least moved in the same direction.<sup>24</sup> One way this becomes evident occurs when theologians refrain from using realist language for God, insisting that when a person talks about God, she or he is not truly referring to any sort of reality outside of a mental or cultural construction. The work of Sallie McFague provides a perfect example. She utilizes nonrealist God-language exclusively for the sake of addressing practical problems like environmental degradation. Statements such as “the kind of theology advanced here is what I call metaphorical or heuristic theology, that is, it experiments with metaphors and models, and the claims it makes are small” illustrate her nonrealist orientation. Indeed, when McFague observes that “what can be said with certainty about the Christian faith is very little” and that “theology, at any rate my theology . . . is mostly fiction,” she confirms the Hamiltonian death of God. The focus of theology, she implies, needs to be on finding models for God that improve the world,—not on pointless speculation about the metaphysical reality that supposedly grounds or establishes it.

Like Hamilton and McFague, Altizer also makes the world his focus even though he does so with a vastly different conviction in mind. For him, the world is a stage, not for the Bard’s “poor player” who “struts and frets his hour” but for what Altizer depicts as the ongoing self-annihilation of God brought about by divine kenosis or sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> The sacrifice occurs when God, taken by Altizer to mean otherworldly transcendence or “every preincarnate form of Spirit,” negates itself as entirely different from the world to become manifest in, through, and as world history.<sup>27</sup> This “metamorphosis” of God from one mode of being to another informs what Altizer has called the gospel of Christian atheism: the death or self-emptying of God in Christ and creation frees us from God understood as “a Father and Judge infinitely distant from the world” to live fully *in* the here and now.<sup>28</sup> The incarnation and crucifixion accordingly reenact and illustrate a “transition within God by which the transcendent God became immanent,” one where “the God-above-us had to die in order to become the God-with-us.”<sup>29</sup>

Altizer’s version of theothanatology has a rich conceptual history that reaches back through Hegel, Milton, Boehme, and Blake to Martin Luther, who claimed in 1520 that God became human in Christ to fulfill the

testament that God would one day die.<sup>30</sup> Over the past forty-five years Altizer has refined his thought considerably, moving from his early proclamation of the gospel of Christian atheism to a comprehensive treatment of the Divine Spirit's forward-moving descent into "the full actuality of the body of the world," one that "enacts genesis, exodus, judgment, incarnation, and apocalypse as an integral series of self-embodying transfigurations of the Godhead itself."<sup>31</sup> Here "Godhead" refers to a cumulative process or unfolding of divine being *in time* rather than a motionless divine entity that hovers *above time*. At the beginning of the cosmos as well as each moment thereafter the preactualized abundance of undifferentiated being (God or Being-Itself) empties and depletes itself sacrificially to bring forth the actual being of the world. This amounts to a "death" or outpouring of divine being for the sake of our existence, an existence into which divine reality then submerges itself through the process (as noted) of a dialectical unfolding.

Perhaps the most astounding feature of Altizer's work has appeared in his more recent reflections on a major implication of God's self-annihilation and subsequent descent into flesh. In *Godhead and the Nothing* (2003), the radical theologian addresses a problem especially acute for those who believe in God: "If there is a God, from where does the nothingness and death that is the annihilating ground of our infinite universe and our fleeting human life come?"<sup>32</sup> To answer this question, Altizer begins by observing that since the Middle Ages Western literary figures, philosophers, and theologians have become increasingly conscious of the abyss of nothingness and death that pervades and mercilessly swallows up human existence. By the nineteenth century Nietzsche stared into this abyss and boldly proclaimed the death of God—a death that signaled the absence of meaning in life. Like Nietzsche, many in the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries have become aware at some level of the "consuming Nihil that is the grim reaper of everything,"<sup>33</sup> a dark void that makes us mute (like Job) when we finally acknowledge and confront its inevitability and with it the horror of our own inexplicable end.

Where, then, does this void originate and what is its nature? Not surprisingly, orthodox theologians have refused to grant the "consuming Nihil" about which Altizer speaks any reality of its own. For them, death, nonbeing, and evil constitute a privation or absence of the good lacking any substance or self-sufficiency; were evil to exist then it would condition God (assuming God is good) and God would not be "all in all." Altizer offers an alternative explanation: the forward-moving descent of the Divine Spirit into flesh gradually generates its own antitype, a "fallen Godhead" or Nothing (*Nihil*) that is the cause or "ground" of the pervasive nihilism we experience in our world today. The *Nihil* or void (i.e., that reality that consumes being and life) is, in other words, a part of divine reality! It is an aspect of the Godhead we encounter when we experience meaninglessness,

death, and destruction. The erosion of meaning in our lives, the vacuity of contemporary consumerist culture, the terror of death, or the dark abyss beneath our precarious existence that Kierkegaard once described as seventy thousand fathoms deep are *all ways of encountering the negative pole of the Godhead generated by God's initial self-annihilation*.

Altizer's controversial claim regarding darkness as part of the Godhead (versus a separate reality inimical to God or entirely unreal) brings with it an enormous responsibility: we are to name the terror of the abysmal Godhead instead of avoiding it. Naming the darkness—as with naming a condition of poor health or identifying a disease—leads potentially to its resolution or transfiguration. Hope in the metamorphosis of divine darkness into divine light accordingly constitutes the basis of a truly radical, apocalyptic faith. Here “apocalyptic” refers to an absolutely new and salvific reality in history, one in our case that has evil or the darkness of the Godhead as its precondition.<sup>34</sup> Having named the darkness of God, we look forward with apocalyptic joy to a new revelation or self-disclosure of the divine, one where the light of day (i.e., a new epiphany of the Godhead) breaks the darkness of God that has enveloped our world. This shows that the fate of divine reality and the world go together: the redemption of the “fallen Godhead” has implications not just for itself but also for us. The “self-saving of God” and the healing of life (if not our planet) are inextricable.

Contrary to radical faith or genuine apocalyptic hope, Altizer sees “bad faith” as a desperate reaction against the pervasive nihilism that shrouds our contemporary experience. Instead of looking forward to a new disclosure of God *in the world* out of absolute nothingness, “bad faith” (as evident in Christian fundamentalism) denies the sacrificial self-emptying of God by focusing on what is now a shattered or vacated transcendence—just as orthodox Christianity has done over the course of nearly two thousand years. Unable to face the terrifying abyss of the Godhead, fundamentalist Christians avert their eyes out of fear and look up to an imaginary God in a heaven of their own making. Unfortunately, says Altizer, that heaven is empty: the God who resides there (the immutable, sovereign God of traditional theism) no longer exists. Here we can see that while Hamilton provides us with an example of what it means to fight fundamentalism from a radical Christian perspective, Altizer gives us a framework for understanding it.

Altizer, of course, does more than explain the origin of fundamentalism along with what he has more recently identified as “our new conservative political world or worlds.” He also provides a constructive alternative in two ways: first, we can celebrate with him the self-annihilation of God as an event that liberates us from an alien or heavenly “other” to live completely in the world. Secondly, we can share with him in the hope of a new disclosure of the Godhead to appear out of the present abyss, darkness, or pervasive nihilism so evident in our time. Both of these possibilities



illustrate that the death of God is not an occasion for sadness or despair but a release from bondage to an otherworldly transcendence as well as a profound hope in and for the future of our world. Obviously, the depth and complexity of Altizer's vision may overwhelm any newcomer to his description of radical faith and hope; divine kenosis nevertheless remains the linchpin of all his work. Whenever we find hints or talk of kenosis in conjunction with the death of God we have in our proximity the Altizerian trajectory of radical theology, the earliest retrieval of which appears in the work of Mark C. Taylor.

Taylor's appropriation and critique of Altizer's perspective as a "metaphysics of presence" have long been a topic of theological conversation and need not concern us in the present discussion. His mature work, by contrast, merits brief attention. In *After God* Taylor follows Altizer by emphasizing the importance of temporal reality and the immanence of divine presence: God subsists not in metaphysical skies above being and time but *down here* "in" emergent networks of creativity as "the network of networks," one that provides the condition for the possibility of "life to take shape" while remaining open to future possibilities of being.<sup>35</sup> These networks illustrate, as Jeffrey Robbins observes, that "after the death of God a world of stable meaning and fixed structures has given way to radical indeterminacy and fluidity."<sup>36</sup> This indeterminacy is precisely where Taylor locates the divine, totally incarnate in the flux and flow of time, giving life on earth infinite worth and value.<sup>37</sup>

Where, then, does kenosis appear in Taylor's *After God*? The answer is "nowhere," at least directly. Instead, it informs the entire discussion as the "controlling event." This "controlling event," as Caputo explains, "derives from the death of God story . . . where the Wholly Other empties himself into the world and resurfaces in the Spirit."<sup>38</sup> The Spirit, in turn, "takes the form of our informational network culture," which places the onus for its detection on the perceptive theologian of culture who "sees" the divine hidden in the midst of the ostensibly secular or, to use more traditional terminology, who finds God in the midst of what appears to be godlessness. The transition from the otherworldly to the immanent confirms Taylor's debt to radical theology. He focuses entirely on the presence of what he calls the "divine milieu" within the secular. The secular may now be a postmodern flurry of networks and God may now be the "network of networks," but the shift is all the same. "God-above-us" has become "God-with-us." The divine Spirit is fully present in the "eternal restlessness of becoming," granting form to ever-changing constellations of being as a configuration wholly within the temporal process. Nothing lies beyond our world.

Like Taylor, Gianni Vattimo also employs and refigures kenosis. The difference is that he does so ultimately for pragmatic reasons: the self-emptying of God through the incarnation becomes a "model" for affirming

secularization, one that encourages the Christian to *empty herself* of absolutist truth claims for the sake of charitable or loving coexistence with others. “In kenotic Christianity,” as Thomas Guarino explains, “religion finds its actual vocation, the weakening of strong metaphysical claims in service to the greater flourishing of [postmodern] interpretation.”<sup>39</sup> The death of “God-above-us” by way of kenosis provides the basis, in other words, for denying all metaphysically robust or ontotheological talk about God as the cause of being, the source of being, the ground of being, or the absolute structure of being. Practically speaking, a strong claim in the metaphysical sense is problematic because it suffocates multiple voices in the name of a singular, hegemonic perspective. Weak thought, the alternative Vattimo suggests, empties itself of the absolutist view and selflessly affirms “the other” based upon the Christian practice of love or *caritas*.

Vattimo’s recovery of kenosis illustrates a second tremor along the Altizerian trajectory of radical theology but with a Hamiltonian twist. By avoiding any realist language for God and interpreting God’s relinquishment of power in Christ as a model for how Christians should follow suit in the company of others who hold alternative points of view, the self-emptying of God serves the exclusive purpose of endorsing as well as explaining the arrival of secularization in the West. It is a story, not an “objective” event or referential truth. This means that Vattimo finally *empties kenosis itself* of its metaphysical content: there was no actual moment in time where God emptied Godself in Christ. Nevertheless, since the death of God through the incarnation is real as an idea influential *on* history (even though it never happened *in* history) we can draw upon it to serve the practical purpose of promoting postmodern secularization. Here the Altizerian and Hamiltonian trajectories converge. Kenosis has pragmatic value, but its content—as McFague would say—is “mostly [if not entirely] fiction.” God-above-us and God-among-us are effectively dead. Only interpretation and *caritas* remain.

### Beyond the Trajectories

Up to this point we have seen evidence for two basic and sometimes intertwining trajectories along which tremors of radical theology have occurred—refigured and transformed—since the “death of the death of God” in the late sixties. Now a new question appears before us: what would it be like to imagine and construct a more sustained and comprehensive retrieval of radical theology, heralding its resurrection or second coming both for the present and the future? What direction(s) would it take beyond the perspectives already surveyed? How might it understand and incorporate the Altizerian and Hamiltonian trajectories as well as other tributaries from

the early movement, including the work of Richard Rubenstein, Paul van Buren, or Gabriel Vahanian? What, finally, would it offer as an explanation of our moment in history and how could it challenge the fundamentalisms of a new millennium that present a God “very much alive” who, again to cite Hamilton, is at the same time “murderous and needing to be killed”?

The essays in the following collection explore and respond to questions about radical theology, its origins, its contemporary influence, and its possible second coming. They are divided into two sections. The first section aims at introducing radical theology to a new generation of readers largely unfamiliar with its claims. Rosemary Radford Ruether begins the discussion. After summarizing and situating the work of the most significant radical theologians of the sixties, she identifies the relevance of their thought for the liberation and feminist forms of theology that arose thereafter, including her own. What emerges is an important distinction: feminist theology, she says, “does not declare that all ideas of the divine are ‘dead’ but rather seeks to define a more just and life-giving understanding of divinity.” The *spirit* of radical theology may have inspired a generation of feminist theologians, in other words, but most have not adhered to the *letter*. With Hamilton especially they denounce the “idols of death” even though they still affirm a God(dess) beyond the patriarchal God.

After Ruether, John Roth helps readers new to death of God theology by contextualizing it as an “aftereffect and aftershock” of the Holocaust. He examines major responses to the Holocaust on the part of one Christian and three Jewish intellectuals, each of whom, in accordance with radical theology, insist “that talk about God [after the Holocaust] did not—indeed could not—mean what it apparently had meant in the past.” Things changed. Belief in a providential God and the meaningfulness of suffering were no longer credible theological options. So deep, in fact, was the crater in human history left by the death camps of Nazism that the questions they provoked about God and God’s existence have persisted into the third millennium. Ongoing conversation about the Holocaust, including its repercussions concerning the possible death of God, illustrates that “its place, its presence is still in the making.” It would be “lamentable,” Roth concludes, if the discussion did not continue.

In chapters 3 and 4 we shift from broader treatments of radical theology’s originating context and influence to an introductory focus on Altizer and Hamilton. Here John Cobb reflects on the work of Altizer as a longtime friend and sympathizer, calling him the greatest theologian of the second half of the twentieth century even though the profundity of Altizer’s perspective has rarely been understood or truly appreciated. Chapter 4 by Michael Zbaraschuk presents the work and legacy of Hamilton,

distinguishing his views from other radical theologians and making the case for a retrieval of Hamilton on his own terms. Indeed, Zbaraschuk says, Hamilton was unique among radical theologians not only with regard to his prophetic orientation but also for his keen emphasis upon imagination as a way to express his view concerning the death of God. Why Hamilton's explicit influence waned remains largely a mystery.

Sarah Pinnock completes the introductory section to radical theology by examining how it spread across the Atlantic and became visible in the work of the German theologian Dorothee Soelle. As a bridge to the second section of the present volume and an example of a feminist theology that stresses the embodied nature of all theological thinking, Pinnock also includes an account of how Soelle has informed her own perspective. For Pinnock, the failure of theodicy adequately to address modern atrocities like the Holocaust amounts to "the death of [the] God of philosophical theism and orthodox Christianity," both of which have endorsed "an authoritarian God of patriarchy and colonialism, the providential God incompatible with scientific explanation, and the omnipotent God who usurps human freedom." Soelle, says Pinnock, provides an alternative for our time by detailing a "mystical response to evil" that expresses solidarity with those who suffer and embodies an "openness to God" that is "transformative even despite God's death or absence." This openness constitutes *radical* faith, the kind that "ventures forth" as Kierkegaard would say—not by fabricating a new concept of God but by a "mystical seeking of divine presence hidden in human experience and suffering itself."

Having looked at the history of death of God theology for readers new to the discussion, we turn in chapter 6 to its constructive implications for political, theological, and ontological reflection. Jeffrey Robbins opens the discussion with a fascinating thesis: "in order both to understand and to more fully embrace the politics of democracy, we must first be prepared to profess the theology of the death of God." Robbins makes his case by analyzing the work of Tocqueville, who came to the conclusion that the American democratic revolution occasioned the death of God by transferring the kind of "divine sovereign power" that establishes the rule of a monarch *over* the people *to* the people. Democracy, in other words, empties God of God's power sociologically by distributing it to a body of citizens who now govern for themselves. The kenotic annihilation of God as the Lord of the universe, one that we recall as central to the Altizerian strain of radical theology, accordingly lies at the root of American democracy! This discovery was for Tocqueville an unpleasant one. For Robbins, on the other hand, it is good news. The death of "God above" *as a construct* frees us to realize that the world—political, religious, or otherwise—is what we make of it.

Christopher Rodkey turns our attention in chapter 7 from the state to the church. His driving question is one that few radical theologians have seriously considered: what kind of church would remain if a religious community accepted the kenotic death of God? Rodkey, himself a pastor, responds by assembling an “extraordinary ecclesiology” in which the church celebrates the life brought about by the progressive descent of God’s Spirit into flesh. Here the incarnational sacrifice, dismemberment, and dispersal of the Godhead into the world undergirds an ecclesiology that affirms the sacramental presence of the divine in everything. Such an ecclesiology boldly “reject[s] the church as we know it” by returning to the world and celebrating “human flesh and thinking itself as the bearers of the Holy, rendering extraordinary the banality of ordinariness.” This return to the world reflects as well an implicit return to theological tradition: the classic Ignatian claim that “God is in all things” (or at least in human consciousness) finds new life in an ecclesiology for today that paradoxically proclaims God’s death as its basis.

After Rodkey, Clayton Crockett offers a second theological revisioning of radical theology by linking together the death of God and the resurrection in an effort to provide an alternative to biblical fundamentalists who trivialize the resurrection by interpreting it as the resuscitation of Jesus’s corpse as well as to Hegel, Altizer, and Žižek, who view the resurrection as “a progressive advance” or stage “beyond the death of God.” Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche, Crockett argues that the German philosopher’s concept of eternal recurrence or “the return of the same” does not mean that things as they are will someday come back in the same form; instead, the process of becoming itself recurs, constantly rupturing all identity—self-identity, the world’s identity, and even God’s identity. God grounds and exemplifies the process, opening up the space for new life and creation by constantly passing away. Here the reader encounters a fascinating synthesis of two modern theological schools: divine reality generates life and being by what process thinkers will recognize as *its own perpetual perishing*. The continuous death of divine being, in other words, is not an end but a beginning, a resurrection—of every single moment in history.

Like Crockett, Andrew Hass makes becoming his focus in chapter 9. He starts by noting a surprising consistency among an otherwise disparate group of thinkers: every Western form of the death of God amounts to a rejection of transcendence in favor of “radical and absolute immanence.” Nietzsche, Adorno, Altizer, Hegel, Hamilton, Harris, Hitchens—each of these authors share the conviction that “[t]his world, *post Dei*, is . . . *all* we have.” The trouble with such thinking is the binary it assumes of transcendence and immanence. Hass accordingly raises a crucial question: Can we think the

death of God apart from this polarity or “will the vacillation between the two poles . . . go on indefinitely?” Weaving through the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Whitehead, Hass answers his question by forging a third way, one that isolates “the beyond inherent within becoming and its potentiality, the beyond involved in the connection between two disparate elements (not yet/will be) in the process of creation” as the locus or place of divine reality. This move, one that shrugs off the categories of “above” and “below,” provides for what Hass takes as the possibility of a return to God after the death of God.

Lissa McCullough concludes our collection of radical theology and its constructive reappraisals by looking at the possibility of a radical return to the world after the Western flight of transcendence has run its course and the soul has stopped “beating [its] wings against eternal walls.” She paints in broad strokes: the contemporary death of God marks the end of a long chapter in history that began during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), when religion, in an attempt to bring freedom from the various deities and divine powers of this world, looked beyond to a God that theology has since understood as “wholly other,” a God totally distinct from the world. Now that this God has “evaporated,” the prospect of a full return to the earth appears in its place. This return, barring the “bad faith” of fundamentalists who resist it, enjoins us to exist “presently in the immediate and local and real particularity of actual life in the world, where our deepest challenges still await us.” To heaven and back constitutes, in short, the death of God that *could be* for McCullough. Whether we have the courage to follow suit remains to be seen.

### Deicide into the Third Millennium

Nineteen sixty-six, we recall, was a difficult year for God. The fact is, however, that theologians had been discussing deicide in subtle ways prior to the arrival of radical theology. Alongside Tillich and his talk of a God beyond God at midcentury, H. Richard Niebuhr likewise spoke in 1957 of a “radical monotheism” in which “the One God [lies] hidden in the death of all gods as the object of true faith.”<sup>40</sup> Today, as feminist and liberation theologians have attested, the lesser gods about whom Niebuhr wrote abound. These gods (those of Christian fundamentalism specifically) are more dangerous than Niebuhr could have imagined. Those in our culture who speak on behalf of such gods demand the sacrifice of free and critical thinking. They call their listeners to deny the claims of science, to turn a deaf ear to climate change, and to ignore people of the third world (as evident in the prosperity gospel) who suffer so that their audiences can heap up mounds of material wealth in their god’s name for themselves.

Many justify violence and war, and they do so—without flinching—in the name of God, Family Values, and Jesus Christ. Resurrecting the death of God marks one way to challenge the idols of our age.

Of course, the reconsideration of radical theology goes well beyond the need simply to challenge fundamentalist forms of contemporary religiosity. It calls us to think more deeply about how we understand ourselves and our experience in relation to whatever it is we deem ultimate. Do the older, more traditional modes of belief in a transcendent God, for example, actually make this a better world, meet us where we are, or help us explain religious or spiritual experience? What in particular do we do with the harrowing silence we come across in prayer or the void we face in tragedy? Is it simply the case that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has mysteriously decided to refrain from speaking (whatever that means)? Or must we find more adequate ways to make sense of what the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner called our “encounters with silence”? If so, might the death of God theologies be an alternative insofar as they take seriously the experience of “Holy Saturday” and with it what Altizer calls the nihilism or emptiness of our contemporary world?

Naturally, other frameworks for interpreting the experience of “Holy Saturday” or challenging fundamentalist forms of religion exist. Prophetically, for instance, the new atheists (Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins) have taken it upon themselves to counter the destructive capacity of religion. They have also challenged people to accept their place in the universe for what they think it is: we are alone and the silence we experience in prayer merely confirms the absence of any “God” beyond this world. That said, one wonders what new atheism can do to explain the *depth* of this silence. Could it be that such silence marks the consequence of a kenosis on the part of God, a complete self-emptying whereby God sacrifices God’s otherworldly form so as to infuse the world with the divine presence, giving the silence a profundity we can only name as sacred? And what about the prophetic critique of religion? Some of the most significant detractors of the Christian faith—Luther, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and Altizer—were Christians who realized in light of Scripture and theological tradition what faith could be over and against the distortions of faith that had taken its place. They criticized faith as an act of faith, and they did so typically without assuming the conventional theism of their opponents.

Radical theology, in short, could move us well beyond more superficial alternatives like new atheism. From the beginning it has taken for granted the claim that new atheists have only more recently begun to discover: any understanding of God as a “supreme being” who exists “out there” in the universe, interfering at whim and will with scientific laws and natural processes, is either dead or should be killed.<sup>41</sup> While some of the radical

theologians may have been given to sensationalism or hubris early in the story, the majority had the courage, as Luther puts it, to “call a thing what it is.” They named the darkness, the feeling of loss, the sense of divine absence that perhaps many continue to feel—or fail to acknowledge—in our time. They also developed tools for working out a new kind of “God/less” talk that takes the otherwise overwhelming silence of God into account as the starting point for theological reflection. A reintroduction and reconsideration of radical theology thus has value today. In the pages that follow the reader will encounter various forms and interpretations of radical theology and what its second coming does or might entail. Whether the reader agrees with any of these authors will obviously be a matter of personal judgment. One thing, however, remains clear: ours is a time ripe for the reexamination of radical theology. Ours is a time for resurrecting the death of God.

### Notes

1. Discussion concerning the death of God in American theological circles actually occurred shortly before the story that made the front cover of *Time* in April of 1966. The *New York Times* and *Time* both ran articles on the topic in October of 1965. See Lissa McCullough, “Historical Introduction,” in *Thinking through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J. J. Altizer*, ed. Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), xxvii.

2. Lloyd Steffen, “The Dangerous God: A Profile of William Hamilton,” *Christian Century* 106, 27 (September 1989): 844.

3. R. C. Sproul in “Twenty Years After the Death of God Movement” (*Christianity Today* 29, 9 [June 14, 1985]: 19) provides the following preliminary definition of “radical theology” as it was initially conceived in the sixties: “Radical theology takes its name from the Latin word *radix*: root. It seeks to grapple with root issues in times of crises. The crises it addresses [had] several facets, at once cultural, ethical, ecclesiastical, political, historical, and religious. The root problem is that modern man lives in an environment where many human beings experience a profound sense of the absence of God.”

4. Doris Donnelly, “The Requiem for God,” *Religious Education* 62, 4 (July–August 1967): 316.

5. Ed Briggs, “For Millions of Americans in the Pews, God Never ‘Died,’” *Richmond Times Dispatch* (June 26, 1976).

6. William Lane Craig, “God Is Not Dead Yet,” *Christianity Today* 52, 7 (July 2008): 22.

7. Mark C. Taylor makes the same point in *After God*: “Since the early 1970s, we have been in the midst of what might be called a Fourth Great Awakening, which was unanticipated by virtually all of the most sophisticated cultural critics. This religious revival is not limited to the United States but is a *global* phenomenon whose causes and implications have yet to be adequately understood” ([Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007], 131; emphasis in original). Here we should be clear that *fundamentalist* religion in particular is on the rise—not religion as such.



It is the rise of *Christian* fundamentalism in America that concerns us (the editors of this volume) specifically.

8. Jeffrey Robbins, "Introduction: After the Death of God," *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 11.

9. Austen Iveigh, "God Makes a Comeback: An Interview with *The Economist's* John Micklethwait," *America* 201, 8 (October 5, 2009): 12.

10. William Hamilton, *Reading Moby-Dick and Other Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 177–178.

11. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Death of God Revisited: Implications for Today," chapter 1 in this work.

12. See Sarah K. Pinnock, "Holocaust, Mysticism, and Liberation after the Death of God: The Significance of Dorothee Soelle," chapter 5 in this work.

13. McCullough, "Historical Introduction," xxiii.

14. Adam Kotsko, "Žižek and Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, 3 (July 2010): 142.

15. Hamilton, *Reading Moby-Dick*, 177.

16. Steffen, "The Dangerous God," 845.

17. Cyril O'Regan, "Žižek and Milbank and the Hegelian Death of God," *Modern Theology* 26, 2 (April 2010): 286. Since O'Regan provides a thorough overview of Žižek's "repetition of Altizer's gloss on Hegel's kenotic interpretation of the incarnation" (281), the present introduction confines itself to an analysis of how Taylor and Vattimo have appropriated and "refigured" Altizer's theology.

18. The method of clearing aside names or concepts for God is an old one. Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500 CE), drawing upon an image first used by Proclus (a Neoplatonic philosopher), employs the language of "clearing aside" (*aphaeresis*) as central to the *via negativa* in *The Mystical Theology* (see *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 138).

19. One need only consider the influence Tillich would have here on feminist theologians like Mary Daly or Rosemary Radford Ruether who desired to clear away patriarchal conceptions of God the Father in favor of an egalitarian "God/ess above God." For a more recent invocation of Tillich's gesture to a God above God—with a simultaneous critique of Tillich's "ontologism"—see John D. Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics," in *After the Death of God*, 185–186 n. 13.

20. William Hamilton and Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 24.

21. Hamilton, *Reading Moby-Dick*, 174.

22. Sproul, "Twenty Years," 19.

23. An important example of a theologian who approximates following Jesus in the absence of God would be Dorothee Soelle. Like Hamilton, she was indebted to Bonhoeffer, who wrote from a prison cell in Nazi Germany about being Christian in a godless world and the importance of being there "for others" as Jesus was during his lifetime. See chapter 5 in this work for a fuller treatment of Soelle's perspective.

24. A tribute to Hamilton by Nancy Haught in *USA Today* (January 5, 2008) credits him—presumably after Tillich—with "paving the way for other radical theologians: feminists, who dropped patriarchal descriptions of God; and liberationists, who saw God in poverty and suffering."

25. Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), xi–xii.
26. McCullough, “Historical Introduction,” xxiv.
27. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 111, 109.
28. Many have since commented upon Altizer’s version of the gospel, sometimes to the point of caricature. Caputo serves as a recent example: “In Altizer the death of God primarily meant that the absolute center had shifted its residence from transcendence to immanence by means of a metaphysics of *kenosis*, by which the full presence of a transcendent God was transported to the plane of immanence. Altizer merrily danced in the street over the metaphysics of immanent presence, nay, ‘total presence,’ brought about as the dialectical offspring of ‘total absence’ or negation” (“Spectral Hermeneutics,” 68). A critique like this may well apply to the early work of Altizer, particularly as Taylor read and deconstructed his “metaphysics of presence” in *Erring*. Whether it applies to the more mature work of Altizer, especially his affirmation of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, appears less likely. After all, Altizer affirms the embodiment of the *Nihil* or an actual Nothing in the world as a consequence of *kenosis*. How can one say (as Caputo does) that the presence of God in the world is “full” according to Altizer when it coincides with an embodied absence?
29. Sproul, “Twenty Years,” 19.
30. Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, second edition, ed. Timothy Lull and William Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 227.
31. McCullough, “Historical Introduction,” xxiii. For Altizer’s own reflections on the challenges he has faced over the course of developing his type of radical theology, see Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).
32. Lissa McCullough, “Godhead and the Nothing,” *Journal of Religion* 86, 2 (April 2006): 335.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 32, 73, 93.
35. John D. Caputo, “After God,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, 1 (March 2009): 165.
36. Jeffrey W. Robbins, “After God,” *Journal of Religion* 90, 1 (January 2010): 91.
37. Taylor, *After God*, 377.
38. Caputo, “After God,” 165.
39. Thomas Guardino, *Vattimo and Theology* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2009), 27.
40. Grant Stanaway, “Faith in God When All Gods Have Died,” unpublished essay, 8.
41. John Haught makes a similar point, albeit perhaps too dismissively, in *God and the New Atheism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) when he observes that “the new atheism is so theologically unchallenging. Its engagement with theology lies at about the same level of reflection on faith that one can find in contemporary creationist and fundamentalist literature” (xi). Likewise, Nathan Schneider (*The Guardian*, October 4, 2009) writes, “Unlike some of the prominent

atheists of today, these thinkers [the original death of God theologians] knew intimately the theology they were attacking. Life after God, they believed, could not move forward without understanding the debt it owed to the religious culture that had gone before. Consequently the movement went far beyond the simplistic, scientific concept of God common to both contemporary atheists and many of their critics: a cartoonish hypothesis, some kind of all-powerful alien. Altizer spoke of the God of direct experience; van Buren, the God conjured in language; and Cox, the God that arises in the life of societies. These are incisive approaches that, lately, have too often been forgotten in exchange for the caricature.”