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Thomas J. J. Altizer
"Historical Roots of the Death of God"
July 2, 1968
Portland State University

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MICHAEL REARDON: We're very fortunate today to have Dr. Altizer, who is teaching on the summer faculty at Oregon State in the department of religion there, give the first in a series of two lectures. Today he's going to talk on the origins of the Death of God theology, and a week from today, at the same time, he's going to give a lecture on the implications of this. Dr. Altizer did his educational work at the University of Chicago, receiving from that institution both his bachelor's degree and his doctorate. And he's probably best known for his recent works; one, his *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, which he co-authored. His *Gospel of Christian Atheism* was published in 1966. And then, a book of readings that appeared in 1967, *Toward a New Christianity*, which is a book of readings on the Death of God theology. So, with that, I'm sure you'll welcome Dr. Altizer as I do to Portland State for the first of these lectures that he is going to give us.

THOMAS J.J. ALTIZER: Thank you, Dr. Reardon.

[applause]

ALTIZER: It's a pleasure to be in Portland. And at Portland State, a community which I must confess is to me very much unreal. I've been given the sense that—by friends of mine here—that you have, as it were, the utopia of the future; and after scanning Portland in vain last night

for a slum, I wondered if, in this strange brave new world, there's any place at all for theology. Presumably, none, for such that I represent. But I shall attempt to speak theologically nevertheless.

As a representative of the Death of God theology, I and my colleagues are most frequently confronted with the challenge of how can we say that "God is dead"? Who are we to speak of the death of God? Can we do anything more than simply speak of the absence of belief in God, or the absence of the experience of God in the mass expressions or cultures of our own time? And this kind of objection, of course, comes fundamentally from a root theological conviction: a root theological conviction which pervades the modern world, both in its theological and non-theological expressions. A root conviction which is adhered to by the vast majority of our most gifted and most sophisticated theologians. And interestingly enough, a root conviction which dominates the thinking about God by the so-called "man in the street."

And this conviction quite simply is that God is ineffable. God is unspeakable. Truly speaking, we can know nothing about God. But what we can know about God is at best a response, a passive response, to his revelation, or a kind of negative knowledge about that which he is not. Beyond this, we find the root conviction that God is other, God is transcendent, God is apart. That anything which we can know and experience and name and live as time and world can neither be a part of God, nor can it be an expression of God. Nor can it be anything, which in any true or actual or integral way, reflects the reality, the being of God. Therefore, man can in no sense whatsoever speak about God. And to speak about the death of God is the height of madness, presumption, and folly.

Our response to this dominant response to us is to insist on the contrary: that to speak about the death of God is to speak the one language that has now been given the Christian to speak. To speak about the death of God is the one way to life, to liberty, to energy, to actuality, for the Christian who lives at a time when the name of God is truly unspeakable and unnameable. And furthermore, many of us at least would respond by saying that in fact, the confession of the death of God lies at the center of the Christian faith, even though this center has been hidden by the tradition of the Church. Yet, nevertheless this center can be unveiled both by critical study, by scriptural exegesis, and indeed by unveiling the vision of faith.

A/V TECH: Testing one, two, three... now that's much better.

ALTIZER: Oh. Sorry, you haven't been able to hear me. I'm sorry. Should I stand there? Or is this working now?

A/V TECH: Right there. A little bit closer.

ALTIZER: Oh, I'm sorry. I apologize.

A/V TECH: *We* apologize.

ALTIZER: [laughing] ...I should like this morning, to speak about the historical foundations of the death of God, by which I here mean, the historical foundations which lie in the foundations and the traditions of the Christian faith. Because here I am speaking or am intending to speak about the Christian faith. Not purporting to make common historical judgements or rational judgments, or logical judgements, or psychological judgments, but rather attempting to speak about foundations of Christianity itself. Indeed, I intend to speak not about currents of Christian history and consciousness and faith, although indeed I am persuaded that it is demonstrable that these themselves lead to what we have come to know as the death of God. But I rather intend to focus my remarks upon a doctrinal analysis of the center of the Christian faith, in an attempt to explicate the twofold proposition that this center has always and evermore pervasively been hidden in reverse by the Christian tradition. And that in turn this center becomes most illumined, most real, by means of the language of the death of God.

Now, in attempting to speak about the center of the Christian faith, I wish to concentrate upon two root, gut doctrinal issues, or, if you like, theological issues or even, if you like, faith issues. These are, first: the meaning of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the teachings in the ministry of Jesus. And secondly: the meaning of the incarnation in the church's confession of faith. Without any doubt, I think that any observer would agree that these two issues are, at least today, *the* fundamental issues, the fundamental centers of Christianity of the Christian faith, whether in its Catholic or Protestant expressions. Furthermore, in seizing upon the symbol of the Kingdom of God, and in speaking about the Kingdom of God in the teachings and the ministry of Jesus, I am not choosing a peripheral or secondary or subordinate motif in Jesus's message, but rather choosing, as twentieth-century New Testament scholarship has conclusively established, rather choosing the very center of His proclamation.

Because, as we have seen ever more clearly—and decisively so since the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947—Jesus historically, and the early Christian movement historically, arose out of what we are inclined to call apocalyptic Judaism. Arose out of a sectarian movement, or seemingly so, within Judaism, a movement that was directed to proclaiming and preparing the way for the immediate advent of the Kingdom of God. And, as historical study has conclusively demonstrated, the symbol of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament—with of course the exception of the gospel of John, wherein the symbol of the Kingdom of God occurs only once—but throughout the rest of the New Testament, “Kingdom of God” does not refer, as we have

been prone to think, to an interior or subjective realm of the heart. The Kingdom of God is *not* “within you”; that is a mistranslation of Luke 17, a mistranslation of a Greek proposition. If you want to translate that correctly and say, “The Kingdom of God is *among* you,” not “within you.” Furthermore, and again as we have seen conclusively by historical studies of the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is by no means to be understood as the reign of God or the rule of God. Or “kingdom” in an imperial, political, monarchic, sense. As a matter of fact, the truth is quite to the contrary of this, as we shall see. Yet, nevertheless, many of us have been molded by traditions, and particularly so by the Calvinistic tradition, which as one wag has remarked is Christianity’s expression of Islam. But many of us have been led to believe, if only by such traditions, that the Kingdom of God is either a kind of subjective realm of feeling and piety or an external reign, an external rule. An external, in some sense imperial kingdom wherein the might, and the power, and the glory of God overwhelms the world and man exists in submission to this glorious and almighty power.

So it is that we must begin by recognizing that in the proclamation of Jesus and in the New Testament itself, Kingdom of God bears no such meaning. Rather, as we have come to see all too fully, Kingdom of God as a symbolic if you will, religious, or if you like, mythical category—here using “myth” in a neutral sense—comes out of a whole tradition in the Near East, a tradition going back perhaps as far as the sixth century B.C.; going back perhaps to Persian religion in the ancient world, but, regardless of its historical origins, a tradition which at the time of Jesus was at least 400 years old in Israel. Which was producing numerous prophets and groups, as witnessed the Essenes, who produced what we call today the Qumran documents or the Dead Sea Scrolls. A tradition, indeed, which had a clearly established religious language, a clearly established religious mythology—again, using the word “mythology” in a neutral sense—and wherein Kingdom of God has a quite clear and decisive meaning. And here, and we can see this all too clearly even if we only read the New Testament literally, which by the way is the most difficult of all ways to read the New Testament; as the fundamentalists teach us all too clearly how it is impossible to read the New Testament literally insofar as one exists in a traditional form of faith.

But insofar as we even read the New Testament with any kind of attention to its actual meaning, we see that Kingdom of God is a wholly new reality. As Paul says, “It’s a new creation.” It’s a new being. And dialectically, in the language of the New Testament, it is posed to an *old* reality, an old being. Not only posed against this but opposed to it as an intrinsic opposite of old being; and if you like, you can think about this in traditional schematic categories, which indeed are present in the apocalyptic literature. You can think of the Kingdom of God as a new creation, which is opposed to the old creation. Meaning quite fully the old world and world in a total cosmic sense, not simply in a human or historical or existentialist

sense. Despite Bultmann's demythologizing, which by the way arose in part for this reason; Bultmann, as a New Testament scholar, accepted fully and does accept this apocalyptic meaning of the Kingdom of God, but he demythologizes here, translates the eschatological apocalyptic meaning of the Kingdom of God into a kind of existential decision, thus repeating nineteenth-century pietism.

Now we see that in the New Testament, Kingdom of God is a whole new total reality, and it's a reality that only becomes real, that only establishes itself, by means of the *end* which it brings to the old reality, to the old creation, to the old being, to the old cosmos, to the old world. So that when Jesus proclaims the dawning of the Kingdom of God, which is the heart and center of his message and proclamation as recorded in the synoptics, in the first three gospels in the New Testament, and later is reproduced in the New Faith form in Paul and the other writers of the New Testament, with the exception of the gospel of John. That here, the Kingdom of God establishes itself only by bringing an absolute end to the world. So you have this apocalyptic imagery: when the Kingdom of God triumphs, when it fully realizes itself, when it shines in its pristine fullness, then everything which we can know and name as world will have come to an end.

So it is that we all know Jesus, and his original disciples, and Paul lived in expectation of the immediate coming of the end of the world. There is not the slightest question about that by any reputable New Testament scholar of whom I am aware. And we must understand that this was not an accidental belief; this was not a strange, crude, primitive, mythological belief; this was the very heart and center of the gospel. Because the good news of the gospel is that the Kingdom of God is dawning; the Kingdom of God is breaking into time, but it cannot fully realize itself; it cannot fully dawn apart from a coming to an end of the old world. Apart from the disappearance of old world. Apart from the absolute negation of old world. It is precisely the absolute negation or end of old world, of old time, of old creation, of old cosmos. Which makes possible, which makes real, the triumphant realization, the triumphant glory, joy, the good news, salvation of the fullness of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Now, within this pattern of imagery how can we possibly understand the presence of what we today confess to be the death of God? First, let me say this. Despite the clearly established fact that some such pattern as this lay at the center and at the foundations of Jesus' message, and of the faith and witness and worship of the primitive church—*despite* that fact, Christianity as it evolved was not only unable to absorb this original foundation of its faith, but, as we are increasingly becoming to see, evolved its own doctrine, its own religious life, its own religious practices, its own form of a church precisely to the extent that it negated its original eschatological or apocalyptic ground. In other words, from this point of view—which is not an

uncommon point of view, and more recently has even been entertained by Roman Catholic writers such as Rosemary Ruether—that the church and Christianity evolved and established itself by way of a progressive dissolution and negation of its original ground in the message of the proclamation of Jesus and the faith of the earliest primitive church, which was apocalyptic-eschatological. Hence, we see radical or primitive prophets, you know, Protestants that is, crying for a return to the beginnings of faith, a cry which in their language, and I think truly in their language, takes meaning only by way of negating everything which we know as church. That's the only way to return to the foundations of the church.

Now, one point at which we can see clearly that the church's faith, or the faith of Christendom, or the fundamental categories of the Christian culture deny or stand apart from or negate the original foundations of Christianity, is in the dominant, the established, the orthodox idea of God. This is one of the great scandals of theology; so scandalous that despite the fact that almost every critical theologian knows it exists, virtually none has dared to approach it or attempt to resolve it. Now, why do I say that what we in the Christian tradition have known as God is antithetically related to what Jesus proclaimed to be the Kingdom of God? I'm going to make a long story short; quite simply it is this: we in the Christian tradition—and here I'm not speaking of Judaism, but rather Christianity itself and of course of its offshoot the Christian culture and Christendom—we in the Christian tradition have increasingly and evermore dominantly known God in the form of, as we have seen, a distant, impassive, unmoving, isolated, transcendent Lord. The God who is holy other, the God who is mysterious and apart, the God who is unnameable, silent, unspeakable. The God who dwells wholly apart from anything which we can know or experience as time, or history, or consciousness, or world.

Now, I say that such an understanding of God—which is not an arbitrary understanding, which is not naïvely a false mode of understanding; it in fact has been the foundation of everything which we have known as Christian culture, Christian thinking, and Christian experience in their dominant and pervasive forms—that this idea or, if you like, this symbol; or even in terms of the reality of faith, this reality of God. This reality of God or this meaning of God or this image of God or this symbol of God is absolutely incompatible with any kind of understanding of the triumph of the Kingdom of God. Why? Quite simply because, as we are increasingly coming to see, and as I hope should be obvious in terms of what I have already said or even in terms of any elementary knowledge of the meaning of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament, Kingdom of God in the New Testament, or the *symbol* of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament, points to a whole new manifestation of the reality of God, of the glory of God, if you like, of the power of God. When Jesus speaks about the *dawning* of the Kingdom of God, he is quite obviously speaking about the *breaking into time* of the reality of God Himself.

He's not speaking about a reign of God descending into the world, so that some great imperial despot or some great Lord up there is extending, somehow, his hand over the earth and ruling it totally. He's not speaking of God as some kind of spark in the soul or some kind of emotional or intuitive presence who is somehow there whenever we have a moment of prayer or piety. On the contrary! He's speaking about the dawning, the *triumphant* dawning, of a whole new total reality, a reality transforming everything whatsoever, reversing everything whatsoever, as we know from Jesus' words: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." A whole new reality, which in fact is embodied. A whole new epiphany. A whole new manifestation. A whole new actualization. A whole new realization of God himself.

So long as we understand God to be immobile, unmoving, impassive, silent, transcendent, distant, mysterious, et cetera, et cetera, we quite obviously in no sense whatsoever can understand the reality of God Himself as breaking into time in the world, despite the fact that this is obviously the essence of Jesus' proclamation. In other words, I am suggesting that everything which we can name as God—and most particularly so today—everything which we can name is God is antithetically related to that which Jesus proclaimed to be the Kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed a revolutionary transformation of all things whatsoever as the fullness and reality of God breaks into the world, thus establishing what the New Testament calls a new world; thus preparing a way for the time when as Paul says, "God will be all in all." Which, by the way, of course, is the primary text of that most revolutionary of all modern Christian theologians, Teilhard de Chardin.

What symbol can provide us with a way of access to the meaning of Jesus' proclamation? How can we, or those of us who live in the Christian tradition, those of us who are somehow bound to a God who makes it possible that which Jesus proclaims; how can we be open to his message the church has never been in the past? How can we be open to his proclamation in a way that Christianity itself and all its expressions, except subterranean ones, has never been open to in the past? Quite simply by knowing the death of God. Quite simply by knowing the death of everything which we can know and name and experience as God. Quite simply by knowing that the death of the transcendent, the impassive, distant, immobile Lord, whose death, as I shall attempt to say next week, actualizes his life in a totally new and immanent form in world and time and consciousness, but whose death releases the fullness of the Godhead in the world. Whose death negates his transcendent, distant, mysterious form, and makes possible a total passage of God into everything which we can name as world or time.

In other words, I am suggesting that that which we today at least can name as the death of God in fact lies at the center of that which we can see to be the heart of Jesus' message. And it's precisely by knowing and confessing and living the death of God that we can be open to the joy

and good news of Jesus' proclamation. Only by means of the negation, the self-annihilation, the reversal, or the annulment, or the emptying of everything which we can know as the transcendent Lordship of God, can the life and energy of God pass into the world, and pass into the world in such a way as to transform all things whatsoever. Making possible, too, a transition to that final point which the early Christians expected, that final point when, as Paul once again said, "God will be all in all."

As I said, the second doctrine which I wish to take up is that of the incarnation. The incarnation, of course, refers quite simply to God's becoming man. Or God's becoming flesh; or, as the gospel of John says, "Word became flesh." The incarnation is, of course, the heart of the Christian faith, the heart of Christian belief and doctrine. Because fundamentally, the incarnation is a doctrine attempting to elucidate the meaning of the presence of God in Christ, the meaning of the movement of God in Christ. The meaning of the ultimate act of God in Christ.

Now, at this point, if you will, I want to play a little game. I want to play the game of being absolutely orthodox in the language of the traditionalist Christian. I want to attempt to show that the orthodox or the conservative or the traditionalist Christian, whether Protestant, Catholic, or what have you, has chosen a language, has chosen or received or accepted a mode of faith which itself makes impossible that which this faith claims to realize. Now, beginning in this orthodox manner, in this traditionalist manner, let us examine two additional Christian claims. And these are absolutely orthodox. "The fullness of God is present in Christ." In other words—and this of course is a Christian doctrine, I'm not speaking of any other faith—that there is nothing whatsoever which is real in God which is not present in Christ. Otherwise Christianity ceases to be monotheistic, by the way. Now that's one. Impeccably orthodox. The second point, which is also, I believe, impeccably orthodox: "God's act in Christ is the final and ultimate redemptive and revelatory act of God." [audio cuts and resumes] ...Christ, but in Christ, God has acted more fully, more finally, more totally, than in any other act. This becomes very tricky; if you want to say He acts more fully and totally here [audio skips] ...but I believe again that it is the unquestionably essential focus of it.

Let us examine the meaning of the passion and the death of Christ. Not a peripheral secondary issue; indeed, virtually all Christians and particularly westerners, as opposed to [audio skips]... and that's what we are, is western Christians, after all, if we are Christians; or at least almost all of us, I assume. For the western Christian, the source of salvation and the source of life, everything that in faith we can name as life, and for that matter by the way, even the source of love and compassion, for us, lie in the suffering, the passion, and the death of Christ.

Now, let us ask two questions. Is the fullness of God present in the passion and the death of Christ? Has God finally acted in the passion and death of Christ? Do we find here the fullness of God's redemptive and revelatory acts? Now, it's very interesting to observe that in Christian meditation—think, for example, of the Stations of the Cross—or in a great deal of Christian devotional poetry or Christian hymns or Christian devotional writings and practices of all sorts, the Christian is called in a certain sense to re-live, to re-actualize, to participate once more in the passion and in the death of Christ, as his means, his primary means rather, have become united with Christ even now. And furthermore, I would presume that when such practices are conducted properly, we are not here simply participating in the death of a man. We are rather participating in an ultimate, a final passion and death.

Indeed, we could say that Christianity has given a greater and more profound and pervasive emphasis upon the motif of death than any other religion. Indeed, it is only in Christianity that man finds life through actualizing or making present to himself the actual and real act of death. Nowhere else in the world's religions do we find a savior or a source of salvation who truly dies. Here, of course, we face a long story; here, of course, we face the story of the paganization of Christianity, wherein Christ himself was transformed into a Near Eastern savior God and was resurrected in the form of Lordship. But we can't go into that now; I simply want to examine, if you will, the guts of this issue.

How do we treat the passion and death of Christ? Well, I think we all know that the so-called average Christian—and if truth must be said, most theologians—not that they will really do this; they know it is absolutely wrong but what they are driven to do it insofar as they are being bound to the tradition. But still it's quite common for the average Christian and for many theologians and, for that matter, popular belief to assert that it was the man, Jesus, who suffered and died on the cross. After all, as you know in Christian orthodoxy, Christ was fully God and fully man, and it was the *man* who suffered and died on the cross, not the God. That, by the way, theologically is absolutely heretical, splitting Christ in two like that; absolutely heretical. But nevertheless, a common pervasive belief. Why?! Because it's so impossible, seemingly, to face what, from my point of view, is the essence of the Christian faith: that it is God himself who suffered and died in Christ.

Think, for example, of that all-too-pervasive Christian mode of belief, which ever occurs again and again and perhaps most clearly reflects a common faith, and which is in fact a continual reactionary realization of an ancient gnostic heresy which goes something like this—and I'm now speaking of a heresy, but nevertheless a heresy which I am persuaded is a dominant form of actual Christian belief. That is to say it goes like this, "Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived. The highest of God's prophets and the most perfect man in history. To Jesus came the

spirit of God at his baptism, hence the descent of the dove. Then God entered into Jesus; that is to say, then God entered into this perfect and noble prophet. And henceforth, throughout his ministry, the man Jesus was, if you will, a kind of robot through whom the spirit spoke. So that even though his words were human words and his speech was human speech, the words were literally the inspired words of God himself, the spirit who dwelt within him. Thus it is that in the words of Jesus, nicely of course for good Protestants and I understand sometimes for Catholics printed in red, those absolute words, revelations coming literally from the spirit who dwelt within this noble man, Jesus. Then, when the time came for the suffering and the death, the spirit left Jesus. Hence, on the cross, Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' as the spirit leaves him. And then the man, Jesus, here nicely resurrected, suffers and dies. So that a perfect man, a martyr, an innocent martyr has suffered, but not God himself. God is impassive, God is unmoving, God can in no way whatsoever be affected by world or creation or man or time."

How could God suffer in Christ? Have we not long since heard that patripassianism, that is to say, the doctrine that God the father suffered in Christ, is a heresy? How can we possibly believe that God himself has suffered and died in Christ? This is absolutely impossible of everything of which we as Christians know about God. And of course that's quite true; everything we've been told is God by the Christian tradition could not possibly have suffered and died in Christ.

But once you say that God could not suffer and die in Christ, can of course you say the fullness of God is not present in the passion and death of Christ? Then you say that God is not fully and finally acted in the passion and death of Christ, despite the fact that in Western Christianity, particularly the passion, the death of Christ is the source of life and salvation of the Christian. So here, in a certain sense, we've got a source of life and salvation which is not even God, it's somehow this holy prophet; and we've got the center of Christianity which has nothing to do with God. God's up there in heaven; he's not suffering on the cross. And so it is we have, in my opinion, in the dominant and pervasive and orthodox expressions of Christianity, a *reversal* of the very intentions of Christian orthodoxy itself.

So the for the man who lives within the framework of Christian orthodoxy, he cannot even fill the fundamental principles and claims of the orthodox expressions of Christianity. All too obviously, we can see that it is the symbol of the death of God that provides us with a mode of access to the passion and death of Christ. And all too clearly, I think we can see that this must have been a total, final, passion and death. Not a death that was reversed and annulled by the resurrection of Jesus in the form of an exalted heavenly being. Not a passion and death that was reversed and annulled by a form of Christ which as spirit returns to his father in heaven,

seemingly leaving all traces of his suffering and passion behind him. No, if we wish as Christians to accept Christ himself as the fullness of God, and wish as Christians to find in Christ's passion and death the source of life and salvation, then surely as Christians, we can do nothing less than to understand Christ's passion and death as being the death of God himself; death that realizes us from every clinging to a transcendent realm. From every aspiration for heaven. Releases us from every nostalgia. From every yearning to return to some kind of primordial womb and beginning, and instead releases us for a total life: a new life, a final life, in world and time and life and energy. Wherein through the death of God, we can know time and life itself as the fullness of life and energy.

Thank you.

[applause]

REARDON: Dr. Altizer will answer some questions, but if any of you have to leave for a 12 o'clock class, why don't you do that now, and then we'll start again in a couple of minutes.

[some side conversations in background]

[audience member asks question in background, off-microphone and inaudible]

ALTIZER: Maybe I should repeat these things. He's been challenged to define theology by this gentleman who has asserted that theology as a discipline is dealing with a fantasy. And with some interesting remarks. Oh, I'm a sense inclined to agree with this only from this point of view: I think that man will inevitably deal only with what we call fantasy. But then, I happen to believe that the imagination is the only thing that's fully real to us. And to give my own—that is, imagination with a capital "I," if I may say so as a Blakean—but to give my own definition of a theologian, I would only attempt to define a Christian theologian, recognizing that every form of faith produces its own theologians. Whether it's Buddhism, whether it's Marxism, whether it's pragmatism, whether it's positivism, whether it's Americanism, we always have theologians. And they are all dealing with fantasy; sure, all. Including, I would say, the positivists and the pragmatists; all fantasists.

But in any case, the Christian theologian, I believe, is one who by various means is called to explicate or to communicate that which is real in the Christian faith in his space and time. He's not one that indulges in speculation; he's not a metaphysician, he's not a historian, he's not a psychologist. He's one, rather, whom I believe fundamentally attempts to explicate the hard meaning of the Christian faith at the particular time in history in which he lives, with the

assumption that Christianity—and I believe Christianity alone among the higher religions—is a continually evolving faith, a continually self-transforming faith, which continually needs new theological expression and statement.

AUDIENCE: Do you consider the death of God in Christ as being more created in time because of the truth of the Christ doctrine? Or is it being irrelevant of time because of the nature of man... ?

ALTIZER: I would say that it is located in time because it is only in time that there is reality. That there is life, that there is meaning. I mean, this is a Christian statement, of course.

AUDIENCE: Is that excluding people before that point in time from being... [background noise makes question inaudible]

ALTIZER: No; just as I would want to understand Christ or the incarnation of Christ or the transformation or the self-negation of God in Christ to be a continual forward-moving, self-transforming process. By the same token, its initial expression in Christ inherits and embodies and transforms the fullness of time and consciousness in a world which perceives it. Now, not all of the world—you may press me; I happen to be one of the few Christian theologians who happens to believe in the truth of Buddhism, for example. And it becomes a rather difficult—well, it's not really difficult, the way I've tried to—I don't think the position is so intrinsically difficult; it just takes a lot of time, I think, to show this. But I would want to state that I think it's quite possibly the Christian belief, as I, myself believe, that the higher expressions of mysticism or religion or, if you like, of faith, in the Orient in particular—and I wouldn't want to exclude other areas, it's just I'm more concerned with these myself—but that here we find a purity, a height, a comprehensiveness of truth, of reality.

Which in no sense whatsoever is inferior to Christianity; it's only different from Christianity, and yet I believe that dialectically it's the contrary of Christianity. And there are all kinds of things to be done with this dialectically, but you see, I want to say that one can live in absolute truth by being a Buddhist. And that the Christian believes that he lives in the fullness of truth, but he doesn't live in the only truth or the only life. He, from my point of view, lives in the only incarnate life or the only actualized life, or the only bodily life, of what we know as body. But he doesn't live in the only reality or the only truth.

AUDIENCE: What does the Protestant Orthodox doctrine of the Holy Spirit mean to you?

ALTIZER: The question is about the Protestant Orthodox... did you mean Protestant in particular; the orthodox doctrine of the Holy Spirit? Or just Christian?

AUDIENCE: Well, Christian.

ALTIZER: Because I didn't know that... Two things here; one it's not for nothing that as all theologians confess, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the great unfulfilled unexplored area of Christian theology. There practically is no such thing as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. That's not accidental. That's inevitable, I mean, given the foundations of orthodoxy. Now, I'll simply present my own position, which I believe to be a Pauline New Testament position as opposed to Christian orthodoxy. Christian orthodoxy of course is Trinitarian, that is to say, in a static sense. It believes that there are three eternal persons of God; from my point of view, that's tri-theist, I'm a monotheist. Now, I know that I shouldn't say those things so quickly and so glibly, but we have to go with so much material here.

From my point of view following Paul, spirit is the name—the Christian name—of the resurrected or triumphant or salvation, body, and life and energy of Christ. Spirit is the name of that total energy and life which has been released into the world, into the cosmos by the crucifixion. In other words, to oversimplify again, in Jesus Christ. We find the initial expression of the incarnation, wherein God is fully present in the life and consciousness and body, if you will, of the man Jesus, of course, the God-Man Jesus if you will. However, in the crucifixion, this form of God or this embodiment of God or this incarnation of God dies, and Jesus truly dies. Jesus Christ truly dies, and that which God was in Christ prior to the crucifixion here truly dies. But, as a result of the self-negation or the reversal of this initial individual expression of incarnate or embodied word and spirit, word and spirit is released into the fullness and the totality of history and consciousness and time. So that whereas—if you'd like to use Trinitarian language—in the second person of the trinity, we find an individual, isolated, particular, initial expression of the incarnation. And third person of the trinity, or in spirit, we find the total expression of the incarnation; whereas in spirit, God fully and totally enters the world.

Let me use some imagery here which might bring a little more meaning to this—I realize it's somewhat obscure—of the orthodox or the traditional Christian has as a primary dogma, I believe perhaps a central dogma, despite the fact that he doesn't talk much about it. Often the things you most deeply believe in you don't talk about: the dogma of the ascension. Some of you may have heard about, and I deeply rejoiced; there were some seminarians at the Episcopal theological seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who several years ago when one of these great ecumenical gatherings occurred the National Council of Churches, I don't know. And you can't imagine such a bunch of stuffed shirts, you get that kind of meaning. But when

that crowd, was descended upon their campus, meeting to celebrate some sort of ecumenical shindig—and that's where the really orthodox people are in Protestant theology now—these Episcopal seminarians, since it happened to be Ascension Day, to celebrate the occasion of this ecumenical gathering and to celebrate Ascension Day, had a big balloon which they released into the air, and had a joyous kind of pop festival. And you've never seen such an outraged people as all these established Protestant theologians.

That, to me, was a great act of Christian celebration, but at any rate, this dogma of the ascension is very revealing here, because what we have here is a kind of belief, if you will, that the resurrection of Jesus returns Christ safely to heaven. That is to say that the resurrection of Christ is a way of Christ returning to heaven, a way of Christ annulling the incarnation, a way of Christ ceasing to be incarnate, a way of Christ becoming once again, if you will, a heavenly, transcendent, spiritual, exalted, sovereign being or ruler. In other words, it's a way of absolutely annulling everything that God did in Christ. Now, I would oppose as a symbol to this, this ancient Christian symbol which I think is magnificent, and which some Christians, I believe even the Methodists—why do I say even the Methodists, of *course* the Methodists—but as far as I know, most Protestants and I fear even some misguided Roman Catholics in their own faith have thrown out; namely this glorious doctrine of the descent into hell. Which I have to confess is really, to me, a great glorious symbol.

Now, if we think momentarily of a Christian mode of belief that centers in the symbol of the ascension. Notice that the spatial imagery is very important here: Movement back up, into the clouds, into heaven. Into spirit, you see, after Christ has been incarnate. Now, opposed to that, the symbol of descent, not ascent; and we have, to me, a real symbol of spirit; because from the point of view of which I represent—which by the way has an old tradition, I believe a Biblical tradition—according to this point of view, the resurrection, truly understood, does not return Christ to heaven; it releases Christ totally. Into earth, into world, and time. So that the descent is very important. You think of the incarnation as the descent from heaven to earth, from eternity to time, from spirit to flesh, right? Incarnation is descent, if you want to use that spatial imagery. When you think of ascension, you think of a reversal of that descent, don't you? A return back up there to heaven. Well, if you think of descent into hell, which seems to me, as I say, is the true doctrine of spirit, then what happens to the resurrection is: the life and energy of movement of Christ is herein released for an even deeper descent into time, into world, into man, into cosmos. So that then, through the descent into hell, that initial individual incarnate expression of God in Christ becomes universal, and pervades all time and world and consciousness whatsoever. And I would call that pervasion, that totality, that new, universal reality of word: spirit. Okay? Yes.

AUDIENCE: Is your concept of time such that it would be evolving?

ALTIZER: Yes, yes. With a forward movement, moving from a beginning to an end. Yes. And the apocalypse. Many people say I am hung up on fundamentalism there, but symbolically and conceptually and theologically, I don't see how a Christian theologian faith can avoid being grounded in the fundamental symbols of beginning and end. And I think there has to be a beginning and there has to be an end. I think this is very, very important, because Christianity is talking about a radical transformation of things; it's not talking about something that's internally true or real or unchanging. I think that beginning and end are crucial in such a mode of understanding and faith. Yes.

AUDIENCE: There are a number of points at which I see a selection of traditions of the Christian past which I think you've made, rather than trying to take into consideration many of the different kinds of things that have been said. I wanted to know why you have chosen particularly the immovable, impassable—that is, the Greek sort of notion of God—rather than the more Hebrew notion of God, a God who is a living God? Which is also present within the Christian tradition from the first century on, as well as during that period. That is question number one. Question number two: in discussing the Holy Spirit, in the Pauline theology as well as in later periods of time, the discussion of the awareness of the spirit, that is, in Pauline terms “Spirit of Christ, Spirit of Jesus,” which are almost synonymous in Pauline theology... [audio is distorted] ...coming in. Which they are; they are very nearly synonymous in Pauline theology.

ALTIZER: Go ahead.

AUDIENCE: This is that “coming in.” You have selected to interpret the ascension as that spirit moving back up. But I don't think that that is what ascension is intended to mean at all. You have selected to choose the descent into hell without being aware of the four different interpretations in Christian tradition of what that language meant at the time it was spoken. I'm just kind of disturbed that you selected certain things which fit your pattern very well, but that are not totally comprehensive of the tradition of the Christian church from beginning to end.

ALTIZER: Let me speak on this first issue. I'm not sure I follow the second; maybe I can get to that, but the first is a big enough problem itself. Did you all hear that? All right. There are several things to be said here. We've got this whole question about the incompatibility or the division between Greek or Hellenic and Hebraic or Old Testament modes of understanding God. There's undoubtedly a great deal of truth in this. Now, I want to say several things here: one, the so-called living God of the Old Testament, I believe that's... I don't want to say so-called; I think that truly speaks of the God of the Old Testament. This meaning of God which we now

can recover by means of historical and critical scholarship—and by the way, it took that—this meaning of God was lost in Christianity. It's not present in the dogmatic expressions of Christianity; it's not present in the doctrine of God.

AUDIENCE: That's not true.

ALTIZER: Would you give me one example of where it's present?

AUDIENCE: Sure; I don't know the specific fathers... but I can, with some research; there are like three or four fathers who very consciously worked at stating that very thing, the living action of God in the present, not the immovable and impassive.

ALTIZER: Well now, no doubt... there is a great deal of logical incompatibility of the fathers, don't forget. No doubt they do speak about the life of God and the action of God and the redemption of God, but do they not—progressively and gradually, I think we have a big difference between earlier and later fathers here—do they not, progressively and gradually—and this already true of Augustine of course—adhere to a fundamental conception of the immobility and impassivity of God? A doctrine which finally becomes totally sanctioned in Thomism.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, aren't you forgetting the whole reformation theory, though?

ALTIZER: Oh, well, that's another matter now. You want to move into the reformation period.

AUDIENCE: You talked about it as well.

ALTIZER: All right, I think there is a movement and transformation of Christian faith and thought. Now, one of the very interesting things about the so-called reformation fathers. Gee, "fathers," I guess that's these Roman Catholics; we're going to call Lutheran Calvinists church fathers. Well, one of the very interesting things, theologically, about the reformation is that it left absolutely untouched the whole Christological traditions of the church in terms of its doctrinal expressions. Now there's some messianic things in Luther, of course, which go beyond this, but in terms of the fundamental doctrinal statements of the reformation, as is being pointed out again and again today—we can see this clearly in some recent books, for that matter—nothing happens to the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the incarnation; and we do have something happening to the doctrine of God, of course, but what happens to the doctrine of God is very interesting. God, in Calvin, all too clearly is a far more transcendent, a far more alien, a far more distant God than the God of a Saint Thomas Aquinas. And in my opinion, we've

got this pattern in the whole history of Christianity. Now, I want to understand it dialectically; I happen to think it's necessary and real and even true in terms of some expression. But we have progressively in Christian history an ever fuller sense of the transcendence and distance and impassivity and alien reality of God. Moving from the beginning all the way up to the present, with, of course, various subterranean, heretical expressions and mysticism and apocalypticism that reverse it. But predominantly you move in this direction, which can be seen all too clearly in terms of... I suppose you could point to Neothomism in the modern world, and point of course to Kierkegaard and [...] in the Protestant world, where in a certain sense God is more transcendent, more impassive, more immobile, than he ever had been previously in history of Christian theology.

So, now, as I understand the Christian faith and Christian theology, there is an evolving movement that God initially appears in the Old Testament all too truly as an active, moving, revealing, living God. But one of the consequences of the movement of Christian history is that its movement is irreversible; there's really no possibility of going back to an earlier point in history. That's a Protestant illusion, I believe. An illusion that's been demonstrated again and again. We today can't go back to the God of Moses or the God of Amos or the God of Isaiah. Or the God of Deuteronomy. Or the God of Job. Oh, I take that back: somehow that God is awfully real. But nevertheless, we can't really go back to the Old Testament God, and neither could Paul. Matter of fact, Paul was radically alienated from the Old Testament God. [audience member speaking in background] Okay, this will take us a long way.

AUDIENCE: [inaudible]

ALTIZER: It's a great problem. You know, Bultmann in his *Primitive Christianity* treats Jesus in the category of Judaism and not in the category of Christianity; a lot of people think that way. [aside, to REARDON] You want to close this now, after I answer this very briefly?

REARDON: Why don't you take this one?

ALTIZER: All right, let's make this the last question. Without any question, of course, Jesus was steeped in Israel, in Judaism of his time. Of course he was. I would want to say that his real break occurred at two points: in his proclamation, or in his teaching or in his announcement of the dawning of the Kingdom of God. I think that's a radical break with Judaism. The advent, if you will. And two, in his ministry. In the way in which he was radically able to suspend Torah law. Suspend it, set it aside, you know. Transcend it, whatever you want to call it. With these two decisive points, he broke with Judaism; that's an initial break which is carried forward by

the movement of Christian history that becomes ever more pervasive and comprehensive.
Thank you.

[applause]

REARDON: Come back a week from today, and Dr. Altizer will resume.

[applause and some background talk for about fifteen seconds; program ends]