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The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy

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commitment to faith as continuously seeking understanding, and Mascall's Thomism moved through his lifetime from the thoughtful Neo-Thomistic positions of his *He Who Is* (London: Longmans, 1945) into positive reflections on the work of Rahner and Lonergan in his Gifford lectures, *The Openness of Being* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), as well as on *Christian Theology and Natural Science: Some Questions in their Relations* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965); Mascall, we must always remember, was trained as a mathematician. Among his other works which still bear careful scrutiny, although occasional pieces from the late 1970s, are his *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London: SPCK, 1977) and the companion piece, *Whatever happened to the Human Mind? Essays in Christian Orthodoxy* (London: SPCK, 1980).

One does not go to Mascall's *Memoirs* to find in them the same depth one finds in the works already noted; one goes to them rather after having read the earlier works for dinner conversation with a friend. They are not well-integrated and although autobiographical are not an autobiography. They are memoirs, no more and no less. One might have wished that Mascall had said more about some issues, and although his obsession with British eccentrics is often humorous, the book might have done well with fewer such tales. One is not always certain that the length of a biography in the piece is necessarily a mark of a character's value or that all comments are worth the stating, until one recognizes that every word guides the reader to become better acquainted with the character of the *Memoirs* himself—his laughter, his catholic tastes, and his final deep concern for the unity of Christendom. [Note on this topic his *The Triune God: an Ecumenical Study* (Worthing: Churchman, 1986) and the earlier *The Recovery of Unity: A Theological Approach* (London: Longmans, 1958).]

Not every press would have risked a book of this size and most would have administered a much heavier editorial hand—I among others am pleased that Gracewing (Fowler Wright Books, distributed in Canada by Meakin and Associates, Nepean, Ont.) chose to allow the last words, whether they always be necessary or not, to this author.

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The Genesis of God: A Theological Genealogy

Thomas J.J. Altizer

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993

200 pp.

In this highly original work, the chief exponent of "death of God" theology reconstructs the Deity's origin. Perhaps best known for *The Gospel*

of *Christian Atheism* (1968), Thomas J.J. Altizer has since quietly continued his subversion of mainstream Christianity with such works as *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977), *History as Apocalypse* (1985), and *Genesis and Apocalypse* (1991). *The Genesis of God* is Altizer's latest subversive act.

From the beginning Altizer's thought has arisen from his reading of Hegel. And in the eight dense chapters that make up *Genesis*, Hegel's theology looms in the background (and, at times, in the foreground), setting the tone and dictating the dialectical method of Altizer's argumentation. (Readers unfamiliar with the debate concerning Hegel's Christianity might consider first reading chapter 2, "Hegel and the Christian God".) For Hegel and Altizer, the self-emptying of God in the incarnation signifies the divestment of a transcendence that means detachment, aloofness, and passivity—it means the death of that "God" understood by Nietzsche as "the deification of nothingness". The crucifixion *is* the death of that God but, simultaneously, the resurrection of God, now understood as fully identified with human beings and their fate. The essence of secularity, viz., the refusal to acknowledge a reality beyond concrete historical existence that renders life meaningful, is (so the argument goes) a product of this Christian insight. For Hegel, immanence emerges as the only true transcendence.

But immanence involves finitude and temporality. These, in turn, imply beginning and ending. Herein lies the rationale for tracing back the genesis of God, a project that orthodox Christian theology could never undertake. Holding firmly to the principle that the *kenosis* of God in Christ reveals the true (eternal?) identity of God, Altizer argues that the act of creation itself is a type of Christ's self-emptying and death. The crucified Creator reverses the absolutely sovereign and transcendent Creator of orthodoxy "who is and only is infinite and eternal" (p. 112) by willing to dirty His [sic] hands in a historical creation. In this sense, "the crucifixion is a repetition of the creation... a repetition which is a total enactment of the self-emptying or self-sacrifice of the original creation" (*ibid.*).

Readers of the Trinitarian theology of Julian of Norwich will be familiar with such parallelisms. But in Altizer's hands, they assume a strongly anti-trinitarian tone. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, he claims, represents a compromise with a conception of God which, taking apocalyptic Christianity as the norm, is fundamentally anti-Christian. If God is fully revealed in Christ, Christ exclusively defines God; there is no transcendence holding immanence in tension. For Altizer, the logic leading to this conclusion is inescapable, as is confirmed by the history of the West which has slowly but consistently abandoned orthodox Trinitarianism and accepted, implicitly, Hegel's Sabellianism. This development, suggests Altizer, is reflected in the anti-trinitarian tendencies in the great epic poets of the West—in particular, Milton, Blake, and Joyce. And Altizer uses these artists effectively in making his argument.

Altizer's prose is often unnecessarily difficult, but he is a serious thinker who periodically rewards the diligent reader with the exhilaration that comes from beholding an exquisitely designed conceptual edifice.

The question remains: Would we want to live in this building? But perhaps the question misses the point. Altizer implies that we already do. Indeed, a case could be made that were modernity forced to explain its faith in Christian terms, Altizer's thought would be a sure guide. But for Trinitarians who have not yet made modernity their eternal home, the value of *Genesis* lies in unveiling the tacit unorthodox presuppositions of the contemporary West and in making possible a more discerning orthodox response—and, perhaps, in forcing a more thorough understanding of the Trinitarianism they so piously espouse.

Highly recommended for readers of apologetic, systematic, and philosophical theology.

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Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context

Douglas John Hall

Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993

566 pp.

Having moved to Lunenburg from rural New Denmark, it was a shock to me that the church is no longer the centre of the community in most of Canada. In thinking about the reason for this, it has been interesting to read *Professing the Faith*. Hall's book addresses the question, "What does it mean to profess the faith as North American Christians living at the close of the second millennium C.E.?" (p. ix)

I have appreciated Hall's book because it addresses an urgent question for all of us—a question which will certainly affect our weekly preaching. Hall writes in a style I can understand, which means he is clear and straight forward. Many of the theologians that I have read in the past I could not really understand. I also appreciate that Hall tries to base his answer to the main question on Biblical themes and the historical interpretations of those Biblical themes. In doing so, he shows respect for both conservative and liberal traditions.

Hall begins his book with an introduction to the situation in North America today. Being a Canadian he addresses both the Canadian and the U.S. situation. Canada is not always lumped in with the U.S. However Mexico is left out of North America.

The book has three main parts: Part I Theology: The Christian Doctrine of God; Part II Creaturely Being; Part III Jesus the Christ, Savior. Each part includes three chapters. The first chapter in each part deals with