

**METHODIST HERETIC:  
THOMAS ALTIZER AND THE DEATH OF GOD  
AT EMORY UNIVERSITY**

**CHRISTOPHER DEMUTH RODKEY**

The cover of the April 8, 1966, issue of *Time* featured the trademark red trim border of the magazine, but was otherwise all black, with large red block letters: “Is God Dead?”<sup>1</sup> The cover is not only one of the most remembered in *Time*’s history and became a symbol of the 1960s, but the cover also cemented the public face of a movement that called itself “death of God theology” or “radical theology.” While death of God theology has largely been on the sidelines of academic theology for the last forty years, its influence on contemporary evangelical Christian culture is unquestionable. For example, the July, 2008, issue of *Christianity Today* ran a parody cover of the iconic *Time* cover, promoting a rather dishonest look at the so-called “New Atheist” movement; and a recent cover of *Philosophy Now* offered tribute to the cover, reading, “Is God *really* Dead?”<sup>2</sup> In the last few years, journalist Ray Waddle wrote an op-ed in *The Tennessean* that death of God theology is one of the beginning points of the rise of evangelical mega-churches in the 1970s; and Nathan Schneider of *The Guardian* recently speculated that the death of God perspective may be the only Christian answer to contemporary atheism.<sup>3</sup> The fact is that laypeople are still responding to the death of God theology, even if they never read any of it or understood it.

This “movement” was not so much an organized group of scholars but a loose association of young theologians connected and introduced to each other by Langdon Gilkey. The young radicals were a motley, unlikely group. Gabriel Vahanian, a French Princeton Theological Seminary gradu-

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<sup>1</sup> “Toward a Hidden God,” *Time* (April 8, 1966), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835309,00.html>. The cover may be seen online at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,1101660408,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Cover, “God is Not Dead,” *Christianity Today* (July 2008); cover, “Is God *really* Dead?” *Philosophy Now* 78 (2010). Also worth mentioning is a bizarre personal situation where a resident of my own neighborhood gave me a copy of his self-published book, which he claims to have written for “apostate preachers” like myself; the book is also an intentional play on the classic *Time* cover (Willie Marshall, *God Is* [Lebanon, PA: Willie Marshall, 2009]). My point is that the influence of radical theology continues to penetrate the evangelical culture wars of the current day.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Waddle, “Megachurches arise from Death-of-God Theology’s Ashes,” *The Tennessean* (April 2, 2005) 2B; Nathan Schneider, “Could God Die Again?,” *The Guardian* (October 4, 2009), online. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/04/death-god-theology-elson>.

ate, wrote a book titled *The Death of God* in 1961, and later would be centrally involved in a faculty schism at Drew University's Theological School. William Hamilton, a Baptist minister, wrote an early death of God theology manifesto, *The New Essence of Christianity*, while working at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. Paul M. Van Buren, an Episcopal priest, was a student of Karl Barth and was heavily influenced by analytic philosophy. Rabbi Richard Rubenstein, then a campus minister in Pittsburgh, published the now-classic *After Auschwitz*, which spoke of the "death of God" in the Nazi Shoah. Rubenstein would later become the President of the University of Bridgeport.

It was, however, Thomas J. J. Altizer who would become the "star" of this loose association. Altizer spoke to the press; he was interviewed for television, radio, and magazines; and he even made an appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show*. Altizer, a descendent of Stonewall Jackson (that's the "J. J." in his name), spoke with the vivacity and exuberance of a Southern preacher, dressed in outlandish suits, and loved to say "God is Dead."

Altizer is a precarious figure in Christian theology. Although he graduated with both the M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago's Divinity School, his doctorate was in the history of religions, not in theology. Raised in a nominally religious Episcopal home, Altizer was denied candidacy for ordination by the Episcopal Church on the grounds of failing the psychological exams for the priesthood, while serving as a lay minister at a multi-racial Episcopal mission on the south side of Chicago.

After graduating from the University of Chicago, Altizer first worked at Wabash College and then continued to work at Emory University, a Methodist-related undergraduate college. There he began writing and lecturing on "the death of God." The death of God was not just a Nietzschean sign of the times or a call for atheism—as it was for the other death of God theologians—but for Altizer the death of God is a central theological concept which operates as the primary religious motif for the rest of his systematic theology. The concept works on several levels. To be brief: the contemporary "orthodox" Christian worships a God that has long died when the Christian speaks of a totality of being outside of space and time. That God once *was*, but no longer *is*: this God who has died is the primordial Godhead which existed before Genesis 1, and has debased and negated Godself in the act of creation and in the incarnation of Christ. The death of God in Christ on the cross is a continuation of a *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites), further culminating in the descent into Hell. The resurrection indicates the "total presence" and final death of transcendence into a radical immanence into human flesh.

Altizer's theology is complex; his earliest work explores the religious logic of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and turns to the *kenosis* of the incarnation of Christ as the primary Biblical example of this logic. The base heresy upon which his work rests is a denial of the immutability of Godhead, who for Altizer is continuously negating Godself and perpetually kenoting in the present through the Holy Spirit residing in human flesh. The Christological

innovation is rooted in Luther's doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*; the kenotic incarnation of Christ discloses a tremendous change for God. As such a kenotic understanding of God in history for Altizer is a God who pours Godself out completely into Christ, who is "fully God." This is to say that God *diachronally* moves in history; history itself is an apocalyptic pouring out of God; and God dies throughout history, with a particular emptying out of transcendence into the person of Christ.

All of this was enough to confuse, baffle, and offend the members of The Methodist Church, who were financially supporting Emory University. In the middle of a major (\$25 million) capital drive, a young theologian being called a "heretic" from outside brought a mixture of publicity for Emory. On one hand, to defend academic freedom would raise Emory's profile as a church-related institution committed to the highest academic standards. On the other, Emory was, at the time, largely dependent upon denominational and alumni support—and many of Emory's graduates filled pulpits throughout the southern U.S. Beyond this, the painful dissociation of Vanderbilt University from The Methodist Episcopal Church was also in recent memory; Emory had since become the one of the premier Methodist institutions of higher learning in the southeast. There is some evidence that Emory ultimately gained more financial support by supporting Altizer.<sup>4</sup> Earl Alluisi, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Louisville, wrote in 1965 that given Emory's refusal to fire Altizer, "Emory University cannot help but remain a great university."<sup>5</sup>

### First Wave of Criticism: Fall 1965

All of the correspondence from angry Methodists and others is archived in the Special Collections of Syracuse University. Altizer's profile gained attention when a short article on the Death of God theologians ran in the October 22, 1965, issue of *Time*, which introduced the death of God theologians to a national audience.<sup>6</sup> H. J. Burkett, the District Superintendent of the Jackson District in Jackson, Tennessee, wrote in a letter in an immediate response, "If God is dead, as you state, are we to continue to ask people to join a church that requires people . . . to support a seminary where one of the professors is teaching that 'God is dead?'"<sup>7</sup> In the same month David Clyburn, Pastor of Epworth Memorial Church, Rock Hill, South Carolina, wrote to Altizer, "So far as I am concerned, I don't know who I am going to

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Smith, Memo, Nov. 15, 1965; George Page, Letter to Sanford Atwood, Nov. 19, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>5</sup> Earl Alluisi, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Nov. 17, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>6</sup> "The 'God is Dead' Movement," *Time* (Oct. 22, 1965), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,941410-2,00.html>.

<sup>7</sup> H. J. Burkett, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Nov. 5, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

miss more, God or Paul Tillich.”<sup>8</sup> The following month, in December, 1965, Harold Steinbach, Pastor of First Methodist Church in Goodland, Kansas, wrote:

Please give me some pointers on how to make your systematic theology relevant during the Advent Season. For some reason your “God is Dead” movement seems somewhat lifeless amidst the singing of Christmas Carols, the story of a manger, the shepherds, the angels, and a Baby.

I seem to have a problem knowing what to do with the Son of a dead God. If you can get us through Christmas with this theology I will need some further help in order to make Easter meaningful for my congregation. Please give me some words of hope which I can share with the parishioners who face death, bereavement, illness, loneliness and unfaithfulness on the part of a husband or wife.<sup>9</sup>

While this response may be as honest as it is flippant, Steinbach suggests not only a misunderstanding of Altizer’s theology (especially since the Incarnation of Christ is a primary emphasis of the death of God for Altizer) but also a need to have a practical aspect to theology. John Leonard, who identified himself as the “President of the Disciples Class of First Methodist Church in Pasadena, Texas,” wrote to Altizer, asking for more information, and specifically whether “you see this idea as one which will be or can be [sic] accepted by Christians of the Methodist church.”<sup>10</sup>

Feeling powerless and publicly embarrassed that their flagship southern university had become a hotbed of religious radicalism, many Methodists wrote to tell Altizer, accusing him of hypocrisy for working at a Methodist-related institution. William Sprinks of Thomasville Methodist Church in Thomasville, Alabama, wrote to John Stephens, the Dean of Emory College, not only asking for a plain-English explanation of Altizer’s theology, but also:

Be assured we are for academic freedom, and we are not opposed to challenging young people with new ideas and to develop [sic] a faith of their own, but along with it we would stress academic responsibility toward our youth relative to the Christian faith in a Methodist-related institution. We also feel the necessity of a clarification in layman’s terminology as to what Dr. Altizer means by this “philosophy” that “God is dead.”<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, Altizer received numerous invitations to speak at Methodist churches, both to explain himself and also in honor and interest of his theological work. Gerald Harris, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Elmira, New York, wrote to Altizer that “So much of what you believe is absolute fact if not yet confessed by most Christians,” concluding, “[k]eep

<sup>8</sup> David Clyburn, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Nov. 11, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Steinbach, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Dec. 9, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>10</sup> John Leonard, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Nov. 17, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>11</sup> William Sprinks, Letter to John Stephens, Nov. 21, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

up the good work.”<sup>12</sup> J. Spurgeon McCart of Washington Pike Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, even wrote to Altizer that his ideas do not go far enough and are not radical enough.<sup>13</sup>

About the same time as the first *Time* story broke, Altizer wrote a short article in the pages of *The Christian Advocate*, which put forward the basic tenets of his theology.<sup>14</sup> Methodists responded in large numbers to the editors. J. L. Hartz of the Methodist Church in Clinton, MO, wrote that if he accepted Altizer’s new theological ideas “there wouldn’t be any church here where I am pastor,” and that in the pastoral appointment listings for the year his name would be read by his Bishop as “without appointment.”<sup>15</sup> Robert Crenshaw of Melrose Methodist Church in Oakland, California, wrote that what the church needs is not a new theology, but one that rejects theology in place of a church that does not “equate the voice of the churches with the voice of God.”<sup>16</sup>

In its November 18, 1965, issue, the editors of the *Christian Advocate* came out in support of Altizer. More letters followed. “I find it in poor taste for a publication of The Methodist Church to imply agreement with a view that pictures the basis of our faith to be invalid or dead,” wrote John Pappas of Camp Springs, Maryland, who chastised the editors for taking seriously “the ‘off beat’ or ‘tiny’ far left.”<sup>17</sup> Claude Thompson, a professor at Emory University wrote:

I’m a bit puzzled over all this fuss about *The Death of God* . . . for these reasons:

1. It is not new. This old idea has been tried and found wanting in religious dialogue in the past.
2. It is not intelligible. Anyone can contrive his own view of God and cry “dead”—without ever coming to grips with the Christian God at all.
3. It is not theology. It may be philosophy, but by definition it is only speculation—a negative, meaningless assertion.
4. It is not Christian. Within Christendom God is variously understood. To say “God is dead” is to repudiate the total Christian revelation and history.
5. It is not surprising. Since Altizer has publicly confessed that he is an atheist (in the writer’s presence), it would be surprising if he believed in God at all, let alone God alive. Doesn’t he mean that *for him* God is dead.
6. It is not the view at Emory. Lest anyone panic, Emory is not a nesting ground for atheism. We have our share of unbelievers, but their noise is entirely out of proportion to their number or significance . . . I strongly dissent from Altizer.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Harris, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Nov. 19, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>13</sup> Spurgeon McCart, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Nov. 18, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Altizer, “The Death of God,” *Christian Advocate* (Oct. 7, 1965), 9.

<sup>15</sup> J. Hartz, Letter to the Editor, *Christian Advocate* (Dec. 2, 1965), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Crenshaw, Letter to the Editor, *Christian Advocate* (Dec. 2, 1965), 13.

<sup>17</sup> John Pappas, Letter to the Editor, *Christian Advocate* (Jan. 13, 1966), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Thompson, Letter to the Editor, *Christian Advocate* (Jan. 13, 1966), 5-6.

Thompson also cited a letter of dissent from Altizer signed by 25 faculty members at Emory. Clearly irritated and misunderstanding Altizer—whose theology is anything but atheistic in the sense of a denial of God’s existence—Thompson’s letter indicated a looming sense of crisis among Emory’s religious (and financial) support. The following week’s *Christian Advocate* ran a letter by G. Paul Phillips, Associate Minister of Fairmont Methodist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, saying that “[t]he reaction to Dr. Altizer witnesses, in many instances, to a decline of [a] responsible, reflective community among both the clergy and the laity.”<sup>19</sup>

Thompson’s letter in *The Christian Advocate* was reprinted and quoted widely as an authoritative response to Altizer. In the Syracuse Altizer archive is a church bulletin from an unknown “First Methodist Church” quoting Thompson’s letter, sent to Altizer by the Atlanta attorney T. Emory Daniel, with a handwritten note from Daniel: “Thought you would be interested in this. These people surely do get nervous.”<sup>20</sup> Thompson was clearly offended by Altizer’s ideas, having also written a letter to the editor of *Time*, calling Altizer’s theology “a theological oddity,” “a perversion,” “a repudiation of the Gospel,” and “adrift in a sea of speculative atheistic confusion.”<sup>21</sup> The same month, Emory trustee William Bowdoin was quoted in the *Palo Alto Times* saying that Altizer is “an irresponsible individual” and “I wish he’d leave promptly.”<sup>22</sup>

### Second Wave of Criticism: Winter 1966

In early 1966, the College of Bishops of the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the of The Methodist Church passed a statement against Altizer’s theology in frustration that they had lost control of their influence on Emory; the statement was published on February 2, 1966, in *The Mississippi Methodist Advocate*. In response to the notion that “God is dead,” the Bishops wrote that “[s]uch declarations are pure fantasy, unsupported by any responsible, scientific or theological knowledge, and contradicted by the long experience of man on the earth and by the unnumbered millions who in the present know the Almighty as the living God.” While upholding the principle of academic freedom, the Bishops also invoked the clichéd “[f]reedom requires responsibility” and questioned the morality of a professor who disagrees with church doctrine and voluntarily remains employed by a church institution. The statement concluded with general support of Emory’s administration and its

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<sup>19</sup> G. Phillips, Letter to the Editor, *Christian Advocate* (Jan. 27, 1966), 6.

<sup>20</sup> T. Daniel, Handwritten note on Church bulletin, 1966, Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>21</sup> Claude Thompson, Letter to the Editor, *Time* (Nov. 19, 1965), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,834609,00.html>.

<sup>22</sup> William Bowdoin, in *Palo Alto Times* (Jan. 8, 1966), Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

ties to the Church.<sup>23</sup>

The Bishops' statement did not take seriously Altizer's theology but made clear that anything that sounded like it was contrary doctrine to The Methodist Church. The statement itself resembles a document composed to appease its constituents: the Bishops had to make a uniform statement about Altizer. By February, it may have appeared to the public that it was time to move on from the Altizer issue. But by declaring heretical Altizer's theology, Altizer was again newsworthy.

Consequently, the death of God theology once again found itself on a national platform in a news story for the CBS evening news just a few days later, on February 7, 1966. Letters from Methodists were immediately sent to Altizer. Several letters were again flippant or sarcastic, including a greeting card, "With sympathy in the Loss of your Father."<sup>24</sup> Thomas Osborn of Centralia, Illinois, wrote:

One of the most outstanding preachers in the Methodist Church today, Dr. John R. Church, said in an article that he was not surprised your God was dead—the kind of a God you have been proclaiming has been sick a long time. The bible says (of course I realize you don't believe the bible so it does little good to quote it), however the bible says "Try the spirits and see whether they be of God" and I had a good chance to do that last night on television during the interview the newsman had with you. You could tell by your expression and even the look on your face and in your eyes there was something amiss—I believe it was demon possession.

Again, I say, I am so sorry that someone so high up in the Methodist Church has any thing to do with such an ungodly and damning doctrine. As the newsman said, it gives comfort to those who are trying to avoid God, which of course is impossible, and will do much harm for the short time—and I do believe that it will be a short time that this nonsense is being carried on.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, the emotion being conveyed by this letter is an abject offense, that Altizer's theology is anathema to any sense of traditional Christian thinking. Other letters sent to Altizer during this time indicate that some Methodists understood Altizer to be speaking *on behalf* of Methodists and *to* Methodists *about* Methodism.<sup>26</sup>

The "Circle No. 1" of Methodist women at Marks Methodist Church, Marks, Mississippi, wrote to Altizer, in all italics:

*God is not dead. Your faith is dead. You are like the noisy, alarmist, little hen in the familiar old nursery story, Henny-Penny, who went about cackling that the world was falling because she felt a little piece of it fall on her tail. It's a question of point-of-view. In twentieth-century idiom, "THINK BIG!" When you cry to the*

<sup>23</sup> "Statement of the College of Bishops, Southeastern Jurisdiction," *The Mississippi Methodist Advocate* ns 19.17 (Feb. 2, 1966), 6.

<sup>24</sup> A. B. Currier, card to Thomas Altizer, February 8, 1966. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Osborn, letter to Thomas Altizer, February 8, 1966. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>26</sup> For example: Douglas Byrd, letter to Thomas Altizer, December 19, 1966; Richard McCabe, letter to Thomas Altizer, Feb. 9, 1966. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

*newspapers that, "God is dead," you should cry instead, "I do not believe!" One more noisy man has lost his faith or never had any. Nothing more has happened: Do not sound the alarm.*

Suddenly the ladies' Circle's tone of the letter changes:

*We feel that you are very unrealistic to try to take twentieth-century atheistic philosophy and convert it into theology. Would it not be more realistic for you to move to the Philosophy Department? And would it not be more realistic, too, for you to proclaim, "Paul Tillich is dead, and I am going to attempt to replace him and God with myself?"<sup>27</sup>*

This letter is interesting for a few reasons. Not only is it clear that Altizer did not communicate well that his theology is not an atheism but a new way of thinking about God, even if it is a rejection of the traditional models of God. Beyond this, Altizer's thinking might be tolerable if it were taught from the philosophy department, that there should be something uniquely Methodist about teaching religion at a Methodist college.

Jim Waits, a young Methodist minister serving as an associate pastor at the newly-merged Grace United Methodist in Blue Island, Illinois, while pursuing doctoral work at the University of Chicago, published a sermon during the same week on the death of God theology in *The Mississippi Methodist Advocate*. Waits clearly understood Altizer's theology, even if he disagreed with it, but used Altizer's ideas as a springboard to ask not *whether* God is dead but rather *which* God is dead. Waits concludes with a meditation on apophatic theology as the theology of the "living God," that "God can die in many ways," *whither* God's death *in us*, he preached, "is the question."<sup>28</sup> Waits would later become Dean of Emory's Candler School of Theology from 1978-1991. Dow Kirkpatrick of First Methodist in Evanston, Illinois, would offer a similar sermon: "Whatever the radical theologians mean, I say, the God which is worshiped so broadly these days, especially during Christmas, needs killing. The greatest affirmation faith can make is to declare to our time that he is dead."<sup>29</sup>

### Third Wave of Criticism: Spring, 1966

The *Time* cover story of April 8, 1966, continued the Altizer controversy among Methodists, but by now Altizer was famous outside of ecclesiastical circles. Just two weeks before this infamous issue, *Time* ran a story on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the University of Chicago, describing Swift Hall Library as the location of Altizer's discovery of the death of God, and in the very next sentence mentioned that Methodists are the dominant denomi-

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<sup>27</sup> Circle No. 1, WSCS, The Marks Methodist Church (Marks, Mississippi), letter to Thomas Altizer, January 17, 1966. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Waits, "An Inquiry into the Death of God," *The Mississippi Methodist Advocate* ns 19.8 (Feb. 9, 1966): 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Dow Kirkpatrick, "A Sermon on the Death of God," *Christian Advocate* ns (Feb. 24, 1966) 12.

nation represented at the University's Divinity School.<sup>30</sup> Altizer's personal life became of interest—the May, 1966, issue of *The Episcopalian* described Altizer baptizing his son, who was born prematurely “as provided for in the Book of Common Prayer.”<sup>31</sup> District Superintendants, countless pastors, Chairs of church boards, sent numerous letters and resolutions to Altizer requesting that he leave Emory University. Theosophical Societies even felt the need to respond publicly to Altizer's ideas.<sup>32</sup> James Bales, an evangelical professor at Harding College (Searcy, Arkansas) wrote to Altizer numerous letters requesting a public debate, which Altizer initially refused.<sup>33</sup> Countless pastors then jointly sent a 40-foot telegram to Altizer demanding a debate, claiming that Bales had not read his books. A debate was eventually scheduled but was then canceled. Altizer would later debate evangelist and apologist John Montgomery at the University of Chicago, published as *The Altizer-Montgomery Debate* (1967), and was scheduled to debate Billy Graham on national television, but Graham stepped out of the debate at the last minute.

Within a year, however, the controversy had died down. A friendly letter to Altizer from David Parke, minister at the Unitarian Church in Germantown, Pennsylvania, refers to a “self-imposed ban on preaching”; Altizer had cooled down his rhetoric and less attention came.<sup>34</sup> William Cannon, who would later be elected Bishop and an ardent supporter of Altizer at Emory, wrote a letter to Altizer that “there is a great deal more awkwardness about your position in the University than appears on the surface”:

- a. There are colleagues here . . . who are not as protected as you.
- b. On quite other grounds, the one difficult position for Mr. Atwood as President of Emory is his relation to the Methodist Church. It appears to me that in view of the support you have received from him, it is appropriate to try to present your views in such a way that they will not at this time intensify the pull between him and the church.
- c. In this connection, it seems to me that public controversy with extreme conservatives is not likely to be helpful. [This] can and will stir up the church.
- d. Quite apart from this specific situation, I do not know whether you realize the extent to which the administrative machinery of the University has been occupied with the “Altizer question.” It is problematical how long this can and, for that matter, ought to continue . . . .

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<sup>30</sup> “Chicago at 100,” *Time* (25. March 1966), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,842555,00.html>

<sup>31</sup> “Rumors are Flying,” *The Episcopalian* (May 1966), 38-39. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Sattleberg, “Is God Dead? A Theosophical Reply,” *The Canadian Theosophist* (May-June 1966): 28-30. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>33</sup> James Bales, Letters and telegram to Thomas Altizer, 1965. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>34</sup> David Parke, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Jan. 11, 1968. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

- e. Many people . . . have spoken up for your academic freedom . . . . It is harder for such people to defend you if you move out to a wider public.
- f. As you can see [from recent publications], you are easy to misinterpret when you appear in the news.
- g. Personally I am concerned that when your book appears, this will be regarded as an academic event.

The final point referred to Altizer's following book, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, published later that year. Cannon concludes, "[t]hese remarks are simply a personal reaction."<sup>35</sup> *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* was an event, but few actually read and understood Altizer's ideas. The following year, in 1967, Altizer admitted in an interview for a regional magazine: "Today I'm no longer the bad boy of theology. Today I feel like the invisible man."<sup>36</sup> The "death of God" came and went as a national headline; few understood what Altizer was really saying, and now even less people even acknowledged that it had happened.

Between semesters of that academic year, another article appeared in *Time* discussing the new field of religion and literature, Altizer is named as one of the few professors in the U.S. who is teaching this new subject to undergraduate students. In that coming spring semester, the magazine reported that Altizer "will lecture on the artistic expression of nihilism, concentrating on Baudelaire, Kazantzakis and Nietzsche" at "the Methodists' Emory University"—even Altizer's syllabi had become newsworthy on a national level.<sup>37</sup> At the end of that academic year, however, Altizer announced his departure from Emory for a position in the English department at SUNY-Stony Brook. Altizer left on good terms with the undergraduate college of Emory University, but his presence made divisions among the faculty at Candler School of Theology more acute. W. Paul Jones, a philosophical theologian at Saint Paul School of Theology, wrote in a letter to Altizer that "[y]ou have certainly failed to receive any support from the theological seminary at Emory." Continuing, "if your change of jobs and vocational positions is the result of pressures on you as a theologian, I am deeply disturbed."<sup>38</sup>

At the end of the academic year, in July, 1968, the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference met at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, and unanimously passed a "Petition Regarding Church Literature," resolving "that all Church-schools and Seminaries be asked to hire only those whose teachings will be (at least) friendly to the theology that is known as Wesleyan." The document continues, "[t]o be open-minded and tolerant is one thing, but to

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<sup>35</sup> William Cannon, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Feb. 28, 1966. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library. Cf. Frederick Mills, "William Ragsdale Cannon," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, accessed online. <http://www.georgiacyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1602&hl=y>.

<sup>36</sup> Betsy Fancher, "Altizer: Two Years after the Death of God," *Atlanta* 7.7 (Nov. 1967), 51.

<sup>37</sup> "Literature in the Divinity School," *Time* (Dec. 22, 1967), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,899931,00.html>.

<sup>38</sup> W. Jones, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Sep. 6, 1968. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

hire persons to destroy what we profess to believe, under the guise of scholarship is heresy.” Finally, it states: “Our people are tired of scholarship. They would now like to hear something about the Word of the Lord.”<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusions

The controversy launched Emory into the national spotlight, even if the attention was not always welcome by the Methodists. Emory’s defense of Altizer as a case of academic freedom made Emory an example of a respectable church-related national university during a time when many universities were abandoning their church connections for academic prestige and stature.<sup>40</sup> Today Emory’s alumni publications concede the Altizer ‘incident’ a key moment in the university’s history.<sup>41</sup>

The controversy also launched a national public debate and forum on Christian theology in the electronic media that would not return until the Jeremiah Wright-Barack Obama controversy in 2008. That said, Altizer’s failure to communicate his ideas to a popular audience, using the hyperbolic scholarly language of Nietzsche and Hegel, would alienate both the popular and church audiences from academic theology.

Most stunning of these is the democratic empowerment of the laity in theological conversation. The fact that local women’s groups and church boards felt that they had a voice in personnel matters at the Methodist college speaks volumes about the democratic understanding of church membership. Perhaps the most significant missed opportunity was the engagement of theology with young people in the Methodist churches; instead of dialogue, declarations of heresy ended the discussion.

That being said, it is surprising how influential Altizer was on young Methodists. *Motive* magazine covered the “death of God” theologians in the manner which popular magazines cover rock stars, and the Methodist-related magazine received national attention for its humorous obituary for God.<sup>42</sup> Numerous colleges and Wesley Foundations—including Otterbein College,

<sup>39</sup> *Journal of the Eighth Session of the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference of The United Methodist Church*, ed. W. Wilson (Baltimore: Methodist Publishing House, 1968), 259.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the profile of Emory’s President Atwood in “On the Move in the South,” *Time* (Dec. 17, 1965), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,834819,00.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Paige Parvin, “The Revolutionary,” *Emory Magazine* (Autumn 2006), 16-17; Gary Hauk’s discussion of Altizer from *A Legacy of Heart and Mind* (Atlanta: Emory, 1999) is featured on Emory University’s history website (<http://emoryhistory.emory.edu/enigmas/GodIsDead.htm>). See also Patrick Gray, “‘God is Dead’ Controversy,” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, accessed online. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-861>.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Towne, “God is Dead in Georgia,” *Motive* 26.5 (1966), 74. Some articles on the death of God in *Motive*: Fred Hudson, “Four Meanings of the Death of God,” *Motive* 26.7 (1966): 20-33; Steve Weissman, “New Left Man Meets the Dead God,” *Motive* 27.4 (1967): 20-30; Ray Karras, Reviews of *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* and *The New Apocalypse*, *Motive* (Nov. 1967): 52-54; Thomas Oden, “Radical Theology,” *Motive* 28.3 (1967): 14-17; Anthony Towne, “Excerpts from the Diaries of the Late God,” *Motive* 28.7 (1968): 46-48. Cf. “A Jester for Wesleyans,” *Time* (Oct. 21, 1966), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,836518,00.html>.

Indiana University, Southwestern College (Kansas), the University of Denver, Nebraska Wesleyan University, University of Delaware, Auburn University, and the Oxford Institute on Methodist Theological Studies—invited Altizer to speak.<sup>43</sup> Numerous letters came to Altizer from teenagers and college students asking for more information or in praise of his ideas. The Association of College and University Ministers of The Methodist Church passed a resolution (submitted by John Jordan, Edward Mack, and Sidney Tate) at their late November to early December meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska, stating that “[w]e commend those institutions which have sustained” academic freedom, calling for its “active defense by presidents, deans, trustees, and faculties as the responsibility of the church-related college or university.”<sup>44</sup> The resolution was sent to Emory President Sanford Atwood by Eugene Ranson.<sup>45</sup> The “members of the Thirteenth Annual Undergraduate Philosophy Conference” at the University of Chattanooga passed a resolution with 27 signatures “in defense of academic freedom in the case of Dr. T. J. J. Altizer,” that “Emory’s actions in defense of Dr. Altizer’s right to express his views reveal a sound understanding of the purposes of a university.”<sup>46</sup> Emory students wrote letters to *Time*; Richard Fife wrote:

We students of Emory who deeply admire and respect Dr. Thomas Altizer are appalled at the righteous indignation provoked by your article. Throughout the South, churches have preached against this theology and condemned this man as a heretic. Those of us who know Dr. Altizer consider him a sincere Christian. The statement “God is Dead” is no longer atheistic. It implies that God once lived, and if he is no longer available to man, it is because man long ago chose to forsake God. This departure is evident in the widespread lack of morality. Those who denounce Dr. Altizer the loudest are generally those for whom God has been long dead.<sup>47</sup>

The Board of Education of The Methodist Church’s 1965 *Annual Report* was perhaps the first official ecclesiastical recognition of the “death of God” movement. Instead of declaring it heretical, the Board’s response was to take the theologians seriously as a renewed call for mission to understand the changing spiritual location of teenagers and young people in American society.<sup>48</sup> In an invitation for Altizer to speak, Robert Scheiler, Chaplain at

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<sup>43</sup> Letters to Thomas Altizer from Max Hale (Nov. 18, 1965), Otterbein College (1966), the Wesley Foundation, Indiana University (May 25, 1966), Douglas Moore (April 12, 1966), Barbara Junceau (22. July 1966), Frederick Blumer (Sep. 24, 1966), Leland Hall (Jan. 16, 1967), Dow Kirpatrick (May 20, 1969). Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>44</sup> “Minutes of the Biennial Seminar of the Association of College and University Ministers of The Methodist Church, November 29-December 2, 1965,” GHAC/UMC Collection, Drew U.

<sup>45</sup> A copy of this is in the Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>46</sup> The Thirteenth Annual Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, University of Chattanooga, Letter to Sanford Atwood. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Fife, Letter to the Editor, *Time* (Nov. 12, 1965), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,834535,00.html>.

<sup>48</sup> *Annual Report, Board of Education, The Methodist Church, 1965* (The Methodist Church, 1965) 9.

Elmhurst College wrote to Altizer that “[w]e think one of the tasks of the church-related college in our day is to confront the students, faculty, and administrative members with the best contemporary theological thought and its relation to life.”<sup>49</sup> The inability of the church-related college to speak, or even theologically respond, to the death of God controversy demonstrates the generational divide that emerged in the late 1960s. The death of God theology at once coincided with this generational divide and was perhaps indicative of it.

Patrick Green, campus minister at the University of Texas’ Wesley Foundation wrote to Altizer in a letter of support, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down!”<sup>50</sup> When Altizer left Emory for Stony Brook, philosophical theology largely disappeared from church-related divinity schools: interest declined and it proved to be too controversial. Even *Time* reported in a follow-up report of the death of God theology that the discussion of philosophical theology and ontology had disappeared from the popular landscape while “Thomas Altizer . . . is quietly teaching English on Long Island.”<sup>51</sup> Altizer spent the rest of his career teaching in an English department and continued to publish. The Altizer “incident” also became part of the ideological divide between “liberals” and “conservatives” in 1970s United Methodism, as it was portrayed as a key episode in Methodist seminaries’ inability to effectively educate clergy in Edmund Robb’s famous 1975 address to the sixth annual Good News Convocation in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, titled “The Crisis of Theological Education in the United Methodist Church.”<sup>52</sup>

Altizer wrote of his time at Emory in his 2006 memoir, *Living the Death of God*, a revealing look behind the scenes at Emory in the 1960s. While discussing his first book, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (1963), Altizer describes:

It was written while I was teaching at Emory University in Atlanta, where I came under the impact of Walter Strauss, Gergor Sebba, and John Cobb, and also under the impact of the New Testament scholars William Beardslee, James Robinson, Robert Funk, Norman Perrin, and Hendrik Boers, all of whom became progressively radical while at Emory. It was as though Emory was a truly radical center, or surely it was so theologically. Such an environment would be impossible to imagine today, but that was a time of breakthrough theologically, and above all so in America, that new America which at that very time was becoming the dominant power in the world. If America was now the new Rome, we sensed that a deep destiny had been thrust upon us. Most concretely, theology had to be liberated from its deeply European ground, and this surely occurred in a uniquely American Bultmannianism, one dissolving if

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Scheiler, Letter to Thomas Altizer, June 6, 1967. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Green, Letter to Thomas Altizer, Jan. 26, 1966. Thomas Altizer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

<sup>51</sup> “Is ‘God is Dead’ Dead?” *Time* (May 2, 1969), accessed online. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,900815,00.html>. *Time* would also run a counterpoint to its “Is God Dead” cover on Dec. 26, 1969, with the words “Is God coming back to life?” This cover may be accessed online at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19691226,00.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Edmund Robb, “The Crisis of Theological Education in the United Methodist Church,” accessed online. [http://www.goodnewsmag.org/renewal/robb\\_speech.htm](http://www.goodnewsmag.org/renewal/robb_speech.htm).

not reversing the neo-orthodox ground of modern European theology. Emory was the center of this radical Bultmannianism . . .<sup>53</sup>

Altizer wrote in a letter to the editor of *Emory Magazine* that “I continue to be grateful” for “the deep support which I once received from Emory at a time of public furor,” “but it is important to remember that Emory was then a radical center and I hope that this will never be lost.”<sup>54</sup>

Yet the legacy remains that no academic theologian since Altizer has commanded national media attention nor been part of a national debate or controversy since. All of the radical theologians kept writing, but even *The Christian Century* stopped reviewing their books, as if there was an intentional effort to kill the conversation; Mike Grimshaw has powerfully demonstrated how *The Christian Century*’s historical appraisals of itself have since erased any memory of the death of God debate, as if it never happened.<sup>55</sup> Even though many of today’s major contemporary Continental philosophers of religion—Slavoj Žižek, John Caputo, and Richard Kearney—are actively engaging Altizer’s theology, none teach in theological seminaries. The history of Altizer’s tenure at Emory and his reception as a theologian suggests that the Methodists’ response poses a theological problem: Why did so many people react with such deep passion to a theology they clearly could not understand? Could it be that their abject reaction to a theology of the death of God was that Altizer was speaking the unspeakable in the American South as the “last straw” between the established mainline church and the practice of theology, so as to render philosophical theology to be irrelevant to the training of clergy and the proclamation of the faith ever since?

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Altizer, *Living the Death of God* (Albany, NY: SUNY UP, 2006), 11.

<sup>54</sup> Altizer, Letter to the Editor, *Emory Magazine* (Winter 2007), accessed online. [http://www.emory.edu/EMORY\\_MAGAZINE/winter2007/letters.htm](http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/winter2007/letters.htm).

<sup>55</sup> Mike Grimshaw, “Did God Die in *The Christian Century*?” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 6.3 (2005): 7-23. <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.3/grimshaw.pdf>.