

Article

The Death of God as Source of the Creativity of Humans

Franke William 

Department of French and Italian, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235, USA;
william.franke@vanderbilt.edu

Abstract: Although declarations of the death of God seem to be provocations announcing the end of the era of theology, this announcement is actually central to the Christian revelation in its most classic forms, as well as to its reworkings in contemporary religious thought. Indeed provocative new possibilities for thinking theologically open up precisely in the wake of the death of God. Already Hegel envisaged a revolutionary new realization of divinity emerging in and with the secular world through its establishment of a total order of immanence. However, in postmodern times this comprehensive order aspired to by modern secularism implodes or cracks open towards the wholly Other. A hitherto repressed demand for the absolute difference of the religious, or for “transcendence”, returns with a vengeance. This difference is what could not be stated in terms of the Hegelian System, for reasons that poststructuralist writers particularly have insisted on: all representations of God are indeed dead. Yet this does not mean that they cannot still be powerful, but only that they cannot assign God any stable identity. Nietzsche’s sense of foreboding concerning the death of God is coupled with his intimations of the demise of representation and “grammar” as epistemologically bankrupt, but also with his vision of a positive potential for creating value in the wake of this collapse of all linguistically articulated culture. He points the way towards the emergence of a post-secular religious thinking of what exceeds thought and representation.

Keywords: negative theology; critique of religion; secularization; foundationlessness; theological transcendence; postmodernity; theology and literature



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1. The Medieval Dialectic of Divine Transcendence and Immanence

The enormous interest of this topic (“The Creative Death of God”) lies in the uncontainable creativity unleashed by the death of God. All genuine or radical human creativity arguably originates (whether consciously or not) from what we might well call the death of “God”, or in other words the loss of foundational values. The irrecoverable absence of God, or the lack of an absolute grounding for life and thought, proves to be a primary impetus and inexhaustible source of the creativity of humans particularly in the modern era. The “death of God” is a name for the dramatization of this predicament of the foundationlessness of humans in their capacity and, one might say, their “calling” to create, or at least their drive and need to be creative. The creativity in question here, of course, is not creation *ex nihilo*, as in certain especially Christian theologies since antiquity and the Middle Ages. Human creativity works by shaping previously existing material. Nevertheless, even human creating distinguishes itself as based on or issuing from “nothing” in the sense of being without sufficient grounds or reason. Considered radically, such creating is “without why”, after the renowned motto of Angelus Silesius: “The Rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms” (“Die Ros’ ist ohn warumb/sie bluehet weil sie bluehet”, I. 289) [1].¹

It is especially from the confrontation with the nothing of our mortal existence that our lives show up as creative and that our thoughts and imaginations are spurred to create new vistas. This is an old story and nothing new in the modern era. Even creative artists like Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) who believe in an absolute metaphysical foundation for their faith, to the extent that they create radically new forms of expression, do so through an experience of the *lack* of a stable and verifiable presence of this absolute. If we scratch a

little below the surface of the celebration of the ontologically positive and manifest glory of God in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and particularly in its culminating canticle, the *Paradiso*, we find a constant confrontation with the fundamental ineffability and radical evasiveness of the divine at every step of the way along Dante's journey to God, including the final step, the *visio Dei*. It is the inadequacy of Dante's language to its object or intent and his own being absolutely unequal ("mia disuguaglianza") to what he experiences that drives the creation of his poem from first to last. Even premodern poets like Dante create in the face precisely of an absence of the absolute—or of an experience of the absolute as absence, an absence that requires the invention of something new on the part of humans in order to forge a connection with this unattainable ground and fill in for this absence. I have brought out these negative theological underpinnings of Dante's vision in numerous books, most systematically in *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso: The Metaphysics of Representation* (2021) [2] and in *Dante's Paradiso and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* (2021) [3].² However, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: 'The Trespass of the Sign'* (2013) already emphasized the parallels with French post-structuralist thought of difference as a contemporary form of thinking in a negative theological mode [4].³

The issue here is how to connect immanence and transcendence, the finite and the infinite, and we are still heirs of the Middle Ages in trying to cope with this challenge. I have treated this problematic extensively, especially in relation to Dante [5].⁴ I have previously drawn out Dante's theological revolution in parallel—and in contrast—particularly with the metaphysical, proto-scientific thinking of John Duns Scotus.⁵ Scotus refounded metaphysics on the principle of the "univocity of being", maintaining against Aquinas's doctrine of the analogia entis that "being" had to mean the same thing applied to God as to any other beings, all of which were God's creatures. This reconceptualizing established metaphysics as a positive science of being. However, the being in question was reduced to a concept; only so could it be defined univocally. We cannot concretely understand being that is infinite, but in Scotus's system we could still, nevertheless, at least abstractly, define it. This produced a positive metaphysical science, but it was hypothetical and based on abstraction. This remains true for all modern science understood as a formal system of concepts and hypotheses. A system of concepts can calculate and predict certain aspects of things, but what they concretely are in the depth of their being remains mysterious and an unknown. *That they are* at all is not explained by however many positive properties or qualities specifying *what* they are. The fact of being is a metaphysical mystery such as Gabriel Marcel (*Le mystère de l'être*, 1951) [6] well appreciated, as did also, in a more analytical vein, Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922) [7]. Still, for Scotus, metaphysics could be considered a science, a purely rational science, and indeed all our empirical sciences likewise leave unsounded the metaphysical mystery *that* there is anything at all in order concentrate on certain defined aspects of *what* things are, aspects that can be measured and analyzed.

Dante (1265–1321) was an exact contemporary of Duns Scotus (1265–1308), and he too felt excruciatingly the crisis of the Thomistic synthesis of faith and reason in the generation after the death of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Like Scotus, Dante experienced a radical disconnect between what can be known about God rationally and what is revealed through Scripture. This results for Scotus in a split between a positive, rational metaphysics and a fideistic theology based on Scriptural revelation but not rationally understood. For Dante, in contrast, this rational incomprehensibility combined with revelation in Scripture and in the book of the universe results in a poetic theology. Unlike Scotus, Dante continues to strive to know God analogically, but this is now the work primarily of poetic imagination. Dante has an acute sense of God's ineffability, of the inadequacy of narrowly rational discourse to say exactly who or what God is. Yet the experience of God by analogy in and through created beings as expressed in poetic language and its figurations is eminently real for Dante as the path to a true knowledge of divinity.

Dante's position can, in certain illuminating respects, be aligned with that of Saint Bonaventure rather than with Aquinas's. Between Averroes's complete separation of God from the world in the name of God's absolute transcendence and Joachim of Flores's collapsing of the difference by placing God within the world as its immanent spirit, Bonaventure's Christian theology of the Incarnation enables a reconciliation. The two realms remain separate and incommensurate and yet are intimately related. Each needs to reach beyond itself towards its other, and in so doing they reach also beyond any delimited theology, including any narrowly or rigidly conceived Christian theology. They move into the undelimited space of negative theology with its negations of theology's positively defined doctrines in order to open them toward the God that they cannot encompass.

These are just a few examples of medieval forms of thought in which the fundamental unknowability of God made divinity tantamount to an absence and unleashed unprecedented forms of human creativity. A certain increase in self-reflexivity late in the Middle Ages with Scholasticism made awareness of God's transcendence more acute and led to negative forms of mystical theology with Meister Eckhart and the beguine mystics or with the negative poetics of ineffability in Dante. Such a poetics of ineffability finds echoes down through the baroque mysticism of Angelus Silesius and beyond into Romantic expressions, for example, in Friedrich Hölderlin, or modernist and postmodern writers like Franz Kafka, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan. There are countless examples in contemporary art and culture of how this acute self-reflexiveness continues to engender creative expression out of the experience of metaphysical absence of anything graspable at the core and origin of the universe [8].⁶ This cultural revolution has continued in essence down to our own time.

Dante defies the limits of both affirmative and negative types of theology that cut themselves off from their opposite number—whether through one-sided affirmation of radical transcendence or through uncompromising adherence to pure immanence. He keeps both tendencies and exigencies open to what they cannot comprehend or attain yet still need continually to journey toward. Neither immanence nor transcendence alone can suffice. Only their continual interaction and interpenetration in challenging and undermining one another can render thought fecund. Moving from the limits traced by such a dialectic, Dante's theological imagination sets out to relate blindly beyond language to the truly infinite and incomprehensible (*Dantologies*, 138).

Dante's creativity is theological and poetic at the same time. This bifocal creativity continues especially in a theological and philosophical register in modern times, although neither of these discourses is devoid of its own intrinsic poetics. Whether it is played out philosophically or theologically, language must be stretched beyond concepts and be used figuratively in order to intimate some inkling of the divine transcendence. The problematic of divine transcendence as a spur to human creativity is, I believe, a modern form of this dialectic of transcendence and immanence that is given a dramatic turn by the slogan proclaiming the "death of God".

Modern thinkers of the death of God have most often been thinkers of immanence. However, it is also possible to think the death of God as opening the world to a dimension of ungraspable transcendence. I have dealt with this issue repeatedly in my work on Dante but most directly and explicitly in the tenth and concluding chapter of *Dantologies*—"Dante's Theology and Contemporary Thought: Recovering Transcendence?"—where I address this question in relation to contemporary thought.

The absolutization of immanence has been the key to modern appropriations of theological revelation based on the death of God motif. This holds from Hegel and Nietzsche through Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek. It can be traced even more amply from Spinoza to Deleuze. When absolutized, immanence itself transcends all conventional frameworks and all conceptualities that might be called upon to try and tame it. Immanence itself, in its uncontainable, uncontrollable presence and radical worldliness, takes on the essential traits of the divine. I find all of this to be prefigured in Dante. We should recall that Thomas J. J. Altizer, the death of God theologian par excellence, had designated Dante as one of the essential precursors of John Milton, William Blake, and James Joyce in his *History as*

Apocalypse [9].⁷ I have myself elaborated, with acknowledgment of Altizer's influence, this particular chapter in the history of the death of God as realized in imaginative literature and particularly in the Christian epic tradition in my work throughout numerous books that trace Dante's sources and scions over the wide arc of Western intellectual tradition [10,11].⁸

The creativity of Dante originates from relating to the whole of existence, which is nothing that can be humanly grasped, certainly not conceptually, to an unknowable source or ground. We are galvanized to use our imaginations in order to traverse an expanse that is otherwise unnavigable for us. This is a veritable revolution of thought that, having been initiated in some crucial ways by Dante's poetic creativity, remains open in our present and guides us toward an open future [12].⁹

2. Modern Secularization and Post-Modern Deaths of God

Modernity has been the age of secularization par excellence and, therefore, also of the apparent eclipse of Transcendence. The immanent world of empirical realities such as science can measure and analyze has become more and more accepted as the *only* reality that exists in the true and proper and sense of the word. Spiritual worlds have been marginalized and discredited as fictions. Religious teachings and beliefs in a spiritual reality or another world have been frequently attacked as lies used to manipulate the masses of unreflective human beings used for the machinations of power. It is true that such doctrines deal with what are not purely objective realities but rather always depend on a factor of subjective investment and faith: however, that is perhaps simply the true nature of human reality. The not quite completely calculable reality of human experience, with its unpredictable perceptions and inventions, may well be even more crucial to transforming everything than the pure facts and abstraction that have given us such power over the world, most recently through digitalization.

Postmodernity could mean some kind of collapse of—or at least crack in—the regime of the secular that seemed to be imposed by modern science and society. Postmodern writers cry out in protest against the suppression of all otherness in the pragmatic and technologically managed world of the modern state and its managerial society. Thus, the sense of postmodernism could be seen as that of setting some limits to modern progress. But one could also interpret the secularization process as having gone so far and succeeded so well that it implodes for lack of any resistance whatever. In either case, whether by critiquing it or by playing it out to its extreme consequences, postmodernity has brought the secularizing project into question and opened up new possibilities for religious existence in its wake. Postmodernity seen in these optics takes a specifically post-secular turn. Moreover, even the powerfully secularizing thrust of modernity has to be understood as powered largely by Christian theological revelation.

I contend that the human creativity released by the death of God includes and can even be led by theology, or more precisely negative theology, as the type of reflection par excellence that is called for and drawn into the emptiness that the death of God opens in the phenomenological weave of the world. The death of God is a metaphysical event that opens a metaphysical space in which what I consider to be the truly significant and world-shattering type of human creativity takes place. It is possible to analyze the death of God strictly as an event in cultural history, as does Terry Eagleton [13].¹⁰ This sociologically documentable death of God is indeed a richly thought-provoking event. However, its full import cannot be exhausted in terms of finite phenomena. Eagleton registers some awareness of this in his explaining how God persists in postmodern times and in offering a curiously fideistic interpretation of the death of God. However, being and declaring himself to be a Marxist, he looks to economic and social infrastructure rather than to metaphysics to find his answers.

Significantly, Eagleton realizes that the death of God is not an idea that denies theological tradition and specifically Christian belief but, instead, one that actually issues from Christian thought and Scripture: "That the death of God involves the death of Man, along with the birth of a new form of humanity, is orthodox Christian doctrine, a fact of which

Nietzsche seems not to have been aware" (159). This aligns with my attempt, echoing Altizer's, to make the death of God a portal for authentically theological thinking rather than a dismissal of it.

Nietzsche's "genealogy" ruthlessly demystifies morals, showing them to be "the fruit of a barbarous history of debt, torture, revenge, obligation and exploitation" (Eagleton 165). And yet Eagleton quotes Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy* to the effect that "without myth, every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity" (163). So the death of divinity and of myths and ideals of all kinds, Platonic as well as Christian, is recognized as the source of creativity moving within Dionysian strains of culture even within Nietzsche's own thought. His overman or "Übermensch" is the embodiment of such a striving beyond all hitherto achieved configurations from the opening paragraphs of his *Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1883-85) [14].

3. Negative Theology as Critique of Modernity without Transcendence (or God)

Modernity, in effect, realizes the messianic and chiliastic projects of Christian theology. But in doing so, rather than establishing perpetual peace, it creates chronic disequilibrium. Moreover, a worldly utopia is only a penultimate state. This "millennium" of the world pursuing "progress" for its own sake and on its own immanent terms is understood in Christian historical perspective as an interim period turned towards eternity. In this "time that remains", the saints are to rule with Christ over the peoples. They are to dominate the earth. Something equivocally resembling this has been made possible in the modern period through technology with its apparent subjugation of nature, together with Western hegemony over the world of history in the form of colonies and global markets and military spheres of influence. These can appear to be aspects of a mastery that is the fulfillment by the modern world of chiliastic expectations.

Jürgen Moltmann's narrative of modernity shows how deeply its secular program was actually the realization of a religious, specifically messianic and millennial drive to achieve Kingdom Come in our own terms here on earth [15].¹¹ The secularism of the modern West was made possible and was driven by its deeply rooted, traditionally Christian culture and vision. Even the worst aspects of modernity are understood by Moltmann as perversions of hopes and promises originating in the Bible. The death of God can bring this narrative into focus from another revealing angle of vision.

Moltmann speaks with prophetic authority not only of the systemic crisis and historical collapse of this Western hegemony but most powerfully of its moral bankruptcy. The success of the project of modernity is brought strictly into line with the demise of the subject peoples and the earth itself, all of which have fallen victim to the seizure of power by Western civilization following its messianic and specifically millenarian scenario out to completion. The first movement of Moltmann's essay brings out the powerfully biblical paradigms for the unprecedented empowerment of a certain part of humanity achieved in the modern world, with its appropriation of messianic and chiliastic promises for its unremitting exploitation and domination and destruction of all available resources, material and human, to build its own kingdom of power and self-aggrandizing fulfillment.

The vision of a secular, worldly fulfillment of messianic promise in the modern world can be traced from a medieval source in Joachim of Flores (12th century) to its German Enlightenment appropriation by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his landmark essay "The Education of the Human Race" ("Über die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts", 1777). The general rational enlightenment of mankind progresses from merely historical belief in Church teachings ("historische Kirchenglauben") to authentic and autonomous beliefs based on universal reason ("allgemeine Vernunftglauben"). Thus, Kant's summons of the mature human being to finally come of age in the *Aufklärung*, to reach beyond the bounds of all confessions and ecclesiastical mediations, would be fulfilled. The extreme optimism of the Enlightenment concerning human self-realization included the expectation that the newfound power of science and technology achieved in the modern age would give humanity back the lordship over nature that it had lost through Original Sin (20).

The second movement of Moltmann's essay stresses the dystopic pole that has paid the price of this would-be utopia. He assesses the consequences for the third world and for the masses of humanity that have suffered the consequences of modernization in the West. The fourth world within the West, as its own self-created ghetto suffering its subjection, is evoked also as belonging to the sub-modern world that modernity inevitably produces with its high hopes modeled on biblical Messianism. Just as modernity is the child of this hope, so is the despair created and left in its wake.

In a third movement, Moltmann considers what efforts be undertaken now in order to make amends without attempting to turn back from modernization, which can never be undone. He raises the question of how to reform this modernity so that it is no longer simply imposing the human image everywhere but can be turned outward towards a transcendence, towards a kingdom beyond us, one in which we are subject to God's higher rule and transcendent order. This requires us to consider the question of where God is in this world. The answer is that he is not reigning in righteousness with the victors who enjoy the paradise created for some by modernity but is rather to be found suffering among their victims. God is present in the appalling suffering that modernity with all its the greed and power has inflicted on humanity. By suffering with the defeated and dispossessed, the divine is still present rather than having deserted this kingdom of injustice and anarchy. This is where hope in God can be preserved but purged of its millenarianism and of every appropriation for self-interest against God's kingdom of equal respect and dignity for all. This hope in God's kingdom even in the midst of great tribulation is witnessed to in resistance to the inhuman powers ruling the world and in martyrdom. This is what, according to the Bible, must come *before* the kingdom of God.

Moltmann outlines what is emphatically a theology of the public realm. He analyses the way that theological paradigms have historically transformed human society and the earth itself. He insists on the responsibility of theology to the public realm. Yet the Kingdom of God can only be realized as a universal order that is not confined by any human institutions, whether ecclesiastical or cultural. I take this type of kenotic, self-emptying understanding of Christian theological revelation to be compatible with negative theology and even with the death of God theology. Reconciling affirmative and negative theologies, or making them work together in tandem, is my overarching purpose, but not because of nostalgia for superannuated traditions. Instead, I think the meaning and purpose of the death of God can be brought out only through theology—the way that negative theology requires cataphatic or affirmative theology in order to gain any traction and have something to say. I wish now to suggest how this double destiny of the death of God is inscribed into its double formulation in the history of Western atheism with both Hegelian and Nietzschean versions of the death of God. This is the key also to linking the death of God with the birth of unlimited human creativity.

4. The Deaths of God in Hegel and Nietzsche

With these developments of modernity and postmodernity in mind, we can now return to the decisive departures of the idea of the death of God in modern intellectual history and understand them in their full illumination of this general history and of our own era. The tradition of negative theology, for me, provides the connecting tissue. I have considered myself all along to be a theological, or more exactly a negative theological, thinker. Negative theology is above all a radically critical form of thinking. Critical thinking has to become fundamentally critical even of itself on the basis of a ground or unground beyond and above reason itself. This ground is unknown and ungrasped: it registers at all only in that it relativizes reason by an inescapable relation to an Other by which reason is commanded in ways beyond its control. Negative theology is critical reason that is critical first and foremost of theology. It is critical of any attempt to conceptualize God, finding concepts of the divine to be idolatrous. And yet it recognizes in theology its own ground of possibility, the ground of possibility of its negations. What I wish to emphasize here is

the synergism between theology and the death of God as a dramatization and figurative radicalization of theological negation.

In light of the proposed topic of the creative death of God, I come to realize that what is dramatized as the death of God is indeed the creative source of thought as I think it. However, for me to explain what it is to be a thinker of the death of God, we need to think in a differentiated mode about the creative *deaths* of God. The deaths of God that have been staged in the history of Western thought are indeed multiple: they remain infinitely open to an uncontainable variety of appropriations. I will differentiate two destiny-laden deaths of God, one in Hegel and one in Nietzsche, and explain how these scenarios illuminate the negative theological thinking that I recognize as my own essential inspiration as a thinker across the disciplines and the literary traditions of the humanities.

Although declarations of the death of God seem to be provocations announcing the end of the era of theology, this announcement is actually central to the Christian revelation in its most classic forms, as well as to its reworkings in contemporary religious thought. Indeed, provocative new possibilities for thinking theologically open up precisely in the wake of the death of God. The death of God harbors a powerful rebirth of theology in a negative guise.

Already Hegel envisaged a revolutionary new realization of divinity emerging in and with the secular world through its establishment of a total order of immanence. However, in postmodern times this comprehensive order aspired to by modern secularism implodes or cracks open towards the wholly Other. A hitherto repressed demand for the absolute difference of the religious, or for “transcendence”, returns with a vengeance. This difference is what could not be stated in terms of the Hegelian System for reasons that post-structuralist writers particularly have insisted on: all *representations* of God are indeed dead. Yet this does not mean that they cannot still be powerful, but only that they cannot assign God any stable identity [16].¹²

Nietzsche’s sense of foreboding concerning the death of God is coupled with his intimation of the demise of representation and “grammar” as epistemologically bankrupt but also with his vision of a positive potential for creating value in the wake of this collapse of all linguistically articulated culture. He points the way towards the emergence of a post-secular religious thinking of what exceeds thought and representation.

5. Two Contrasting Paradigms of Divine Death¹³

The modern and by now postmodern predicament of religion, in its perennial endeavor to relate an immanent world to its supposedly transcendent ground, has often been equated essentially with the realization that God is dead. Whether it is declared outright or merely suspected or reacted against, the idea of the death of God inaugurates a new era for the philosophy of religion and more generally for all aspects of culture. Every domain of values finds itself affected in the deepest way by the proposition that there is no transcendent theological grounding for the world in which we live. A new prospect arises that this world must somehow ground values immanently within itself. Such a world cut loose from transcendent moorings is the predicament announced as so profoundly disturbing by Nietzsche’s madman in *The Gay Science (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft)*, section 125, but it can also be experienced as the actual realization of divinity in humanity, as it was by Hegel. The death of God in this latter case becomes the prelude to a new age of unprecedented human self-realization. In effect, the death of divinity heralds the kingdom of heaven on earth, as Ludwig Feuerbach was quick to perceive. Finally free from alienation of its essence into unworldly and otherworldly abstractions, humanity can recognize itself as its own master and realize its nature and destiny fully, unhampered by any superior instance such as a divinity standing over it. There is therefore something of a mood of triumph present in certain utopic versions of modernism as the era of the death of God. In postmodern times this triumphalism appears most often only in an ironic key and is lacking in the pathos and high seriousness of Hegel’s characteristically Enlightenment optimism. Still, this irony

itself becomes one more signifier of the profound upheaval for values provoked by the presumed death of God [18].¹⁴

There is a very obvious way in which the much-touted death of God necessarily brings in its train a fundamental crisis of values, especially moral values. The consequences for the common man are envisioned, for example, by Dostoyevsky in his novel, *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Raskolnikov, the protagonist, is haunted by the thought that, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted”. This reasoning, together with his own personal motives of indignation and desperation, drive him to the murder of his greedy landlady. The book thus stages the drama of the collapse of moral values pursuant upon the collapse of the theistic belief that had been philosophized by Immanuel Kant, Hegel’s immediate predecessor, as an indispensable underpinning to morality. Kant thought that the existence of God was a necessary practical postulate for the possibility of moral action, even if theoretical proof of God’s existence is impossible. Dostoyevsky, realizing how very fragile was the theistic belief that Kant assumed as a necessary concomitant to belief in morality, begins to explore in some of its terrifying consequences the world in which such belief no longer obtains. When we turn to the statements concerning the death of God in the philosophers, it turns out to be a good deal more complicated than Raskolnikov’s plainly poisonous thought. God’s death does not mean that he simply is not at all—and much less that he never was—anything more than an illusion. Nietzsche finds God to be still all too real and present, even after his death, in the form of his decaying corpse: “the divine decomposition” (*die göttlichen Verwesung*). The madman even goes to church himself to sing an eternal requiem to God (*Requiem aeternam deo*) after discovering that he has come too early for his message to be received by human ears.

We think of Nietzsche as the aggressive iconoclast out to smash idols with his merciless philosophizing by means of the hammer. But Nietzsche actually meant for this instrument to be used as something like a tuning fork. And Nietzsche’s madman is very far from gloating over the death of God and from hurling this message gleefully into the teeth of despised believers. On the contrary, he is himself shattered, driven to distraction and a state of panic by the death of God. He is mocked for his sincerity by the more cynical bystanders to whom he announces this news. They seem to take this as no news at all, whether we are to imagine them as churchgoers or not. And this callousness confirms what the madman has presumably seen—that sincere belief in God is no longer possible at all. What sets him apart is that he has seen, as the bystanders have not, the disastrous consequences that this entails: “Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Does not the empty space breathe on us? Has it not become colder? Is not night and ever more night coming?” [19]¹⁵ The implications for a world wrenched loose from its moorings in theological transcendence are unfathomable: “Where is the earth going now? Where are we going? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling?” This event ushers in a whole new era of history, and the thought of it is hardly to be borne: it is enough to make one mad.

Hegel projects a much more optimistic interpretation of the death of God. This divine death is actually the way in which God realizes himself concretely in his infinity and identity with and as humanity. Death is sublated into the infinity of the divine life by God’s taking death upon himself. Death is negated and overcome thereby; it is in Luther’s phrase, which Hegel echoes, “the death of death”. “God . . . maintains himself in this process [of death], and the latter is only the death of death. God rises again to life, and thus things are reversed” (*Lectures* 65) [20].¹⁶ God’s death as abstract and unknowable is “the death of the *abstraction of the divine being* which is not posited as Self”. It is at the same time his resurrection in worldly form as self-conscious humanity: “This death is, therefore, its resurrection as Spirit” [21].¹⁷

Divine death is seen by Hegel as a certain way and means, unprecedented and magnificent, of God’s self-realization in the world. The central message of Christian revelation is the Incarnation of God as fully human in a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, and his living out fully of the human condition culminates in death by Crucifixion. This is taken

by Hegel to announce the death of God as an abstract, merely metaphysical being by his complete immersion in history and human life, even to the point of death. Only in the temporal world can God truly live, and this entails submitting to death as well. As a dying God, he can also be resurrected. He is resurrected in the Spirit that lives in the community of believers, the congregation of the Church. From the basis of this incarnation in the world, the Spirit radiates out more widely into the world, converting and redeeming it.

Among those who have pursued Hegel's thinking into the postmodern age, Thomas Altizer emphasizes the "total presence" realized by the death of God that issues in an unlimited sacralizing of the profane, secular world in all its crass and insignificant banality as portrayed, for example, by James Joyce in *Ulysses* and in *Finnegans Wake*. Thomas Carlson, on the other hand, stresses that the resurrected life envisioned by Hegel entails an overcoming of finitude. But in either case, there is an emancipation of this world from any overshadowing other world that would deprive it of intrinsic value and bleed it of its own inherent meaning. The immanent human and historical world is freed to realize itself as infinitely meaningful in itself and without reference to any other reality [22].¹⁸

Nietzsche too, beyond the moment of foreboding registered by his madman, envisaged the new age as an era of a possible emancipation and of the opening of an unlimited new field for human creation and invention of values. Such was to be the task of the Overhuman (*Übermensch*) undertaking a transvaluation of all values. Still, at a deeper level, the two versions of the death of God take us in two different, even opposed directions. I wish to maintain that of these two versions of the death of God, Hegel's is deeply secularized, while Nietzsche's is not. Nietzsche is provoked by what destroys the order of the world rather than realizes and fulfills the human and historical project. He focuses on and is obsessed by the Dionysian force of difference and disruption that rends any world order asunder. Hegel, by contrast, envisages a total order of knowledge realized in the perfect articulation of "the concept". And history is the working out of the identity of this concept with the reality of the world.

Thus, the impact of the death of God on values varies with one's attitude towards the secular world, particularly with whether one sees this world as fundamentally opposed to or as potentially identifiable with God. I have attempted here to outline these two divergent attitudes towards the collapse of a divine foundation for values—represented here schematically by "Hegel" and "Nietzsche"—through their metamorphoses in the modern and especially the postmodern eras.

6. Extreme Secularism's Reversal into Negative Theology¹⁹

To conclude, I wish to show in what follows how thinking the death of God can be and has become a fertile motif among contemporary thinkers in one specific example. I wish to illustrate and explain in some detail how extreme secularism, in its denial of theology, dialectically reverses itself and turns into a (negative) theology of the death of God. This can be seen exemplarily in Slavoj Žižek's work specifically as it revolves around the issue of transcendence versus immanence. Again, creativity defines itself by a kind of transcendence of what already exists.

A meeting of ideological opposites, of Christian theology and God-denying secularism, is wrought, emblematically for postmodernism, by Žižek. Žižek takes inspiration from the conservative Christianity of G. K. Chesterton, even while propounding a radically profane and deliberately blasphemous politics. His intensive debate with John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy enables us to ponder how his apparent erasure of transcendence—or rather of its representations—can also open contemporary thought to what transcends every definable order in its quest for universality [24]²⁰.

Žižek is protesting against the view that "God is up there somewhere, while we are here on Earth" [25]²¹. This traditional picture of transcendent divinity, in his view, fails. He inveighs against traditional interpretations of Christ's atonement in terms of paying a debt, as in Saint Anselm's famous treatise *Cur Deus homo* (11th century). Such interpretations are for him relapses into paganism and its ethics of cosmic justice. They are like a fascist regime

of total order imposed throughout the universe. Against this, the basic idea of political liberalism says that “you, as an individual, independently of who you are—black, white, man, woman—have a right to direct contact with the universal” (170). This idea is, for Žižek, peculiar to Christianity (and perhaps also Buddhism). It enshrines the greatness (and even immortality) of the individual as irreducible to just a particular instance of existence. The absolute worth of individuality is asserted through gestures of defiance such as Žižek finds in a drawing of Michelangelo’s given by the artist to Vittoria Colonna (and later demanded back from her). Christ’s uplifted, cursing finger in this drawing, according to classical codes relayed by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, confirms the aggressive expression on his face by signifying defiant rebellion of a single member become autonomous like the upraised fist in the film *Fight Club*, or in the Grimm brothers’ “The Egotistical Child”, or again in Antigone and her American counterpart, Rosa Parks, or in Goethe’s “Prometheus”. Goethe (like Nietzsche) asserts that one must be god oneself in order to rebel against God. All are examples of going all the way to the end of egotistical rebellion against a monolithic and, finally, monotheistic rational order.

Christ’s moment of abandonment on the Cross is interpreted by Chesterton radically as a moment in which God himself seemed to be an atheist. If Christ’s cry of despair is taken seriously and not as a bluff, this means that a part of God does not know what God is doing. The implication is that only through doubt and atheism can you reach God. This would be the revolutionary message of Christianity against the transcendent notion of God in other religions. Only in Christianity does God lose faith in Godself. And precisely this is the key to his being or becoming God—beyond containment by anything or anyone else. A thoroughgoing coincidence of opposites is effected here by a radically revolutionary Christianity. Yet this is a Christianity that still communicates with the Dantesque cosmos, in which all contingency is finally overcome (or overtaken) and reined in (or reigned over) by divine providence, particularly by Christ, because stupefying, incomprehensible exceptions among the blessed in heaven (Trojan Rhiphaeus, Emperor Trajan) stand for the singularity of salvation beyond all calculation by human reason!

Žižek argues against the traditional reading of Job as indicating some higher meaning for creation and for its suffering that is beyond our comprehension. Such is the view that the three theological Comforters insinuate, but it is blown out of the water by God when he speaks from the Whirlwind in chapter 38 and following. God is himself astonished at the creations passed in review and avows the inexplicability of everything, the unreasonableness of the cosmos. Žižek writes that this results from a close reading of the text! At least it plausibly represents Job’s point of view when he is suffering without any apparent cause or justification. For Žižek, following Chesterton once again, Job prefigures Christ and his crucifixion as signifying the end of all guarantees of global meaning and of transcendent divinity itself. Only the Holy Spirit is left and is reduced to only the love between human members of a community.

Meaning, as something established transcendentally by God in heaven and fixed in the universe, is refuted by the Christ story as anticipated in Job. Žižek asserts, “The temptation to be resisted is the temptation of *meaning* itself” (178). Somewhat less categorically, he also suggests that the message of the Crucifixion is that we must make meaning ourselves by banding together (“Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, I am there in their midst” Matthew 18:20; cf. Joan Baez’s “Joe Hill”) because there is no higher cosmic purpose and no “big Other” (in Jacques Lacan’s terms). There is only the community of outcasts, as in primitive Christianity, to rely on for organizing positive change in the interests of justice in society.

However, Žižek is also against any simplistic translation of theology into secular humanism. Instead, we must be invaded by some other, higher force than ourselves. This is displayed terrifyingly in horror films, as Žižek understands them. The alien organizes itself and becomes unfathomable. “This is the divine element. I think horror films are the negative theology of today” (180). Hence Žižek’s conviction that Christianity is far too precious a heritage to be left to the conservative fundamentalists (181). It must be re-appropriated

against them by radical leftist philosophers—like Žižek himself and Alain Badiou. Žižek is proposing, after all, a kind of theology, one that reflects what a number of contemporary postmodern philosophers think they find in Christianity at its best. He is speaking as a champion or advocate of Christianity, for it harbors a revolutionary political theology protesting against the universal order of things that can justify sacrifice of individuals like Job or Jesus.

Christianity embodies the spirit of rebellion against fascist governments because it enacts the death of God as the wholly other, the “big Other”, and entails God’s birth as the Holy Spirit in the community of believers. This is vintage Hegel, though it is not without echoes likewise of the spiritual revolution envisioned by Joachim of Flores and embraced, also, by Dante. Dante celebrates the Calabrian abbot “Giovacchino” in *Paradiso* XII.141 for his gift of the prophetic spirit (“di spirito profetico dotato”). Žižek expressly credits this view of the Spirit to a Freudian slip on Hegel’s part. Hegel attributes to Western Christianity a specious doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Son. This blunder is an erroneous rendering of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine, in which the Spirit proceeds only from the Father rather than from the Father *and* the Son (*filioque*), as Western (Roman) Christianity has it. Hegel and Žižek following him thus replace the Father by the Son.

This is the Son that Žižek embraces as Savior, the Son in a moment of doubt and despair when God is divided even against himself in defiance. Such is Žižek’s purely immanent theology: God does not transcend human community. Neither, however, is this simply a humanism because the human is not an order of things that is known and comprehended. Hence the monsters and horror movies evoked by Žižek as a contemporary “negative theology”. We are spurred to recognize what cannot be humanly comprehended and what shocks our rational human self-understanding as the “divine element”. So really Žižek does not want to limit himself to simple immanence either—any more than Gilles Deleuze does.

Deleuze (1995) [26] makes immanence into an absolute, but as such it tends to transcend all articulable immanent systems and formulas. It becomes the transcendence of the immanent—the immanent *as* transcendent. Absolutized, immanence cannot be contained within any express, articulated frame but rather transcends them all. Christianity is seen as effecting just this sort of dialectical reversal of immanence into transcendence by many secularist Christian theologians, notably death-of-God theologians—Thomas J. J. Altizer, for one, who shares the Hegelian heritage in common with Žižek. Absolutizing the autonomy of the worldly opens up a transcendent, inconceivable dimension from within it, one that paradoxically exceeds it from within, and theology is the discourse that interprets this dimension.

Like Žižek, Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou have also taken extreme secular thinking over the edge to where it reverses its course and departs in a post-secular direction of thinking. Hence Badiou’s consecrating of Saint Paul as the prophet of modern universalism and freedom, and hence Agamben’s plumbing the archives of religious history and institutions for a messianic moment of a revelatory and revolutionary event of the inconceivable. I have myself focused on tracing the revolution in poetic language in both medieval times (Dante) and modern (Mallarmé) as revelation in a negative theological vein that proves to be inseparable (like negative and positive theology) from revolution in poetic language (“Revelation: Mallarmé and the Negativity of Prophetic Revelation in Modern Literature”) [27]. New horizons for human creativity have been opened dramatically by negative poetics modeled, whether consciously or not, on negative theology. All this belongs paradigmatically to the creative legacy of the death of God.

7. Conclusions

A final reflection will serve to draw together the underlying strands of this essay and place its topic in historical perspective. The theme of the creative death of God rather elegantly and audaciously conflates the Christian doctrine of God’s death (and resurrection) with its corresponding opposite at the other end of the biblical narrative—namely, the

doctrine of the Creation. This latter doctrine, based on Genesis 1-2, is Hebrew in origin, but Christian understanding and exegesis of it insisted especially on the idea of *Creatio ex nihilo*. This doctrine is crucial to the idea of a God who is absolutely transcendent, the one and only source of all and not merely co-eternal with something else, some sort of matter, as is the case with the classical Greek demiurge, who creates from pre-existing matter in Plato's *Timaeus* (48A-51E) [28]. Plotinus's Hellenistic interpretation of Creation as an emanation from the One likewise seemed to make divinity continuous with the rest of being and thereby, in the view of Christian fathers, risked compromising the absolute transcendence of God. Christian fathers understood this absolute transcendence in terms of God's unconditionally free will, which became a distinguishing mark of Christian doctrines of Creation. This radical transcendence also opened the way to a more radical conception God's absence from the world as not merely a withdrawal (as in the *Tzimtzum* of Rabbinic interpretations of Genesis) but as a fully actual and dramatic divine death—in Christ.

Radical transcendence thus came to coincide with absolutely radical immanence consummated in death. In these ways, the theology of the death of God has been associated with, and has been a kind of template for, some of the most radical forms of human creativity as manifest especially in Western arts and literature, with their peculiar penchant for dramatic representation of the temporal and actual, including actual death. The human capacity to die, to give up one's own being completely to nothing, as is required and realized in certain radical forms of artistic expression and creation, becomes the revelation of an absolute transcendence of the world, a transcendence that is truly divine.

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- 1 My original English translations are based on *Angelus Silesius: Cherubinischer Wandersmann. Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Louise Gnädiger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984) and are published in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, edited with Theoretical and Critical Essays by William Franke vol. I (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
- 2 *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso: The Metaphysics of Representation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); *Dante's Paradiso and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
- 3 *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: 'The Trespass of the Sign'* (London and New York: Continuum [Bloomsbury Academic], 2013).
- 4 *Dantologies: Theoretical and Theological Turns in Dante Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 246–264, chapter 10: Dante's Theology and Contemporary Thought: Recovering Transcendence?
- 5 *Dante's Paradiso and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection*, Part II.
- 6 Examples from modern and contemporary art (Malevich, Kandinsky) and music (Schoenberg, Cage) and literature (Hölderlin, Kafka, Rilke, Celan), to select only a few, are treated in volume 2 of my *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*.
- 7 Thomas, J.J. Altizer, *History as Apocalypse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).
- 8 Most directly relevant here is *Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press: 2016), which builds on *The Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine to Dante* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).
- 9 See, further, William C. Hackett, "William Franke and the Unfinished Philosophical Revolution of the West", chapter 4 in *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, eds. N. Brown and J. A. Simons (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 39–56.
- 10 Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Particularly chapter 5 specifically on the Death of God (151–73). Terry Eagleton on The Death of God (2015)—YouTube. Available Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka-HG-WeW_U (accessed date on 14 April 2024).

- 11 Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt: Beiträge zur öffentlichen Relevanz der Theologie* (Götersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1997), trans. Margaret Kohl, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). My remarks concentrate on the first and title essay of the volume.
- 12 Mark Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) stands as a signpost along this critical trajectory.
- 13 In this section, I am adapting material from my article, “The Deaths of God in Hegel and Nietzsche and the Crisis of Values in Secular Modernity and Post-Secular Postmodernity”, *Religion and the Arts* 11/2 (2007): 214–241 [17].
- 14 Maurice Blanchot explores how modern and contemporary humanistic and atheistic culture in the wake of the death of God is fraught with ambiguities that devolve from its inextricably theological premises.
- 15 Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Book 3, sec. 125. My translation.
- 16 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 65.
- 17 Quoted in Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, 34–35.
- 18 See also Eberhard Jüngel’s important discussion of the death of God in *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*.
- 19 This section of the essay is adapted from my book *Dantologies: Theoretical and Theological Turns in Dante Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 259–264. An earlier version appeared as part of an article in *Forum Italicum* 55/2 (2020): 627–641, eds. Rachel Jacoff and Lino Pertile, Special Issue in honor of the seventh centennial of Dante’s death [23].
- 20 John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
- 21 Žižek, “A Meditation on Michelangelo’s Christ on the Cross”, in *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davis (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 169–182, 169.

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