

Intellectual Freedom and Distance

Thomas J. J. Altizer

Intellectual freedom requires a liberation or at least a distance from the Given, or that which happens to be appear or to be at hand, and one that for us was made possible by the prophetic revolution of Israel. This is the revolution that Nietzsche could know as the slave revolt in morality, one rebelling against all established power and authority, and reversing an eternal return into the destiny of an absolute future. Only thereby is it genuinely Messianic, which is inseparable from being revolutionary, as revolution itself for the first time is initiated.

While it is true that intellectual freedom was later born in ancient Greece, and born wholly independently of Israel, this is a freedom inseparable from a revolutionary culture, one giving birth to philosophy and science, or to a uniquely Western science and philosophy. Therein is born a potentiality for a polarity or opposition between reason and revelation, or between a new autonomy and a new grace, each offering a new freedom, and a new freedom inseparable from a new world. Hence freedom itself is inseparable from a new world, and illusory in an old or given world, or that world which is simply at hand.

Therefore freedom is illusory in all common or given worlds, and only possible in a truly new world, commonly only being actual through a new discipline, or a new openness to grace itself. Such grace is ultimately a mystery, and perhaps our greatest mystery, but it can be given to anyone, or to anyone who is no one, and that no one is itself an ultimate mystery. This is a no one that the Bible calls forth as the Elect, and elected only through predestination, a predestination occurring wholly independently of freedom, and realized only by an absolutely free grace.

There is no greater mystery than the relation between freedom and grace,

and in the perspective of grace intellectual freedom is wholly illusory, and just as our deeper thinking and vision unveils that illusion, it does so only by realizing freedom itself. This is the very center of the Pauline and Augustinian tradition, one that is profoundly renewed by Shakespeare and Milton, and by Hegel and Nietzsche too. Nietzsche is most paradoxical here, unveiling our absolute bondage, but a bondage that can only be realized by a genuine freedom, and a freedom even born in this realization.

Here, genuine freedom is inseparable from a realization of ultimate bondage, which is why Nietzsche despite himself is deeply Pauline, a Paul who discovered an absolute freedom that can only be realized through an absolute bondage. But that freedom itself can only be realized through the Crucified, so that it is Paul who thereby discovers the death of God, a death of God again discovered by Nietzsche, who only thereby unveils a genuine freedom, and a freedom only given by the grace of the death of God.