

FAITH IN GOD BETWEEN MYSTICISM AND HUMANISM Nietzsche's Challenges

Toine van den Hoogen, Nijmegen

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes one of those texts which illustrate the prophetic power of his intuitions: „It seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully – but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion“ (§ 53).

More than a century after the year in which Nietzsche accomplished this book (1886), one has to confirm this conclusion of his ‘many conversations, asking and listening’, so far as western society and culture are concerned. During the latter decades of the twentieth century, the religious instinct is growing powerfully but the theistic satisfaction refuses it with deep suspicion. The growth of the religious instinct and the decline of theism are confirmed by many results of sociological and psychological research and clarified by a great number of theoretical models of all kind of scientific approaches of our society.

At a congress, entitled Faith of God between Tradition and Modernity, theology does not need the prophetic words of Nietzsche to underline the importance of the central theme of these days. Its urgency can be better explained in other ways. Thinking in a sociological way, everybody has to confirm that modernity and secularisation justify a lot of attention to all kinds of questions about intellectual plausibility and pastoral transformation of the process of ‘Traditio’ of the Christian faith in God. Thinking in a theological way, each theologian could affirm that our Christian faith itself justifies ‘every morning again’, in the words of the American theologian Charles Hartshorne, reflections about the question how the God of our tradition, the God of our mothers and fathers, the God of Abraham and Jesus, can be recognised and recognisable in our modern world.

Nevertheless, theology is challenged by the words of Nietzsche and is defied by them already during this whole, now ending epoch. Nietzsche’s provocation influenced me too. Curiously reading Nietzsche’s text, I have to admit that something happens, something that forges me, something that deals with us, something that deals with our existence and with our Christian faith in God, both our mystical desire as well as our humanism.

These questions arise from ‘within’, out of the mystical instinct and desire of our faith in God. Because ‘God becomes God when creatures say ‘God’, as meister Eckhart said, the words of Nietzsche are related to the many ways of Gods becoming ‘God’. And the words of Nietzsche are inevitably linked also to humanism, i.e. to libe-

ration of true Humanity and to retrieving the Human. 'Gloria Dei, vivens homo', as Ireneus said and Vatican II reaffirmed. So, the words of Nietzsche are related to our desire to retrieving the humanity of man as well as they are related to our desire that God becomes 'God'.

We do not need Nietzsche and his 'strange gaiety', as the Dutch philosopher Paul van Tongeren called his prophetic words. But this gaiety defies our theological concern in a very concise way.

Theistic satisfaction

First of all, I have been fixed to that little word satisfaction. Nietzsche does not only describe 'the decline of European theism'. Nietzsche's analysis is different from a sociological one. He analyses the ratio of this decline and he identifies this 'ratio'. Of course, the decline of the European theism can be observed as a sociological phenomenon. But Nietzsche has something different in mind. He does not stand aloof when he analyses the phenomenon which he has in mind. He gazes at it, he is fixated on it. According to Nietzsche, theism is first of all a phenomenon of our desire. Theism is something that makes us content with our world and with our existence. Theism is first of all something that gives 'satisfaction'. Theism is to be defined in reference to 'satisfaction'.

Exploring the importance of Nietzsche's word about the theistic satisfaction, I will return to a recent development in the field of 'philosophical theology'. In the field of 'philosophical theology', the question rises how philosophical theology can escape the classical borders of theism. For, within these borders the argument between theism and a-theism is captured in an interaction between a *modus ponens* and a *modus tollens*. The believer affirms God's existence and looks for foundation of it. He follows the *modus ponens*. The non-believer reflects on this affirmation and investigates its foundation in a critical and suspicious way. He follows a *modus tollens*. He comes to a conclusion that fights his opponent. So, he confirms his own previously chosen standpoint, i.e. that God does not exist. Hence, these two *modi* seem to be variations of the same argument, variations which both presuppose that the existence of God anyway positively has to be affirmed, c.q. denied. Both assume that God, if he exist, has to be affirmed as a fact of the matter of our reality. Precisely within the borders of theism, both opponents participate in the same presupposition. Therefore, this so-called dialogue is an intrinsically paralysing discussion. Both *modi* of the discussion prevent a real exchange of convictions. So, we need for an approach that can escape from this paralysing dilemma. Believers as well as non-believers benefit their dialogue, foster possibilities to mutual understanding, and favour the exchange of their point of view, if they try to escape from a mutual assumed theism.

The significance and importance of the word of Nietzsche about the theistic satisfaction can be highlighted now. Nietzsche's word reveals that theism is intrinsi-

cally connected with satisfaction. Theism (and its opposite: atheism) are dimensions of our desire. Theism (and atheism) are neither conclusions of a clear reasoning, although they can be implicated in a rational discourse which tries to evaluate 'the facts of live', nor factors in our psycho-social behaviour, although they can be determined in a rational research which tries to explain it. For, theism (and atheism) promise satisfaction. It is a strange satisfaction, as one can say in reference to the Nietzschean gaiety.

The burden of (a)theism

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Penzo writes that according to Nietzsche the problem of Christianity is the God of Christianity. The Christian longing for God is captured by a metaphysical concept. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche writes that God has become 'a spider'. Metaphysicians have spined a cocoon around God, he says, till God himself has become a spider. More and more, God has become thin and faded. Gods existence has been understood as Ideal, pure Spirit, 'absolutum', and 'Ding an sich' eventually. This is the heart of Nietzsche's criticism towards Christianity, towards the Christian way of life, and towards the European-Christian metaphysical tradition, Penzo says. The history of God has become the history of a spider.

By consequence, the history of God has become the history of the loss of Gods divinity. According to Penzo, this is also the main aspect of Nietzsche's reproach that Christianity is a religion of *décadence*, a religion of decline, a religion of corruption. Nietzsche's famous word that Christianity is Platonism for the people cannot be understood otherwise than as a blame of Christianity because of the fundamental shortage of its concept of God. According to Nietzsche, this shortage is intrinsically connected with the experience of *Ressentiment*, the feeling of gall, the feeling of rancour. The Christian concept of God is be fed by this rancour and this concept nourishes it. The German theologian Bucher understands Nietzsche's rancour as the blame of a broken authenticity, a blame of a *habitus* that is nor cordial and genial, nor naive and honest. It is the *habitus* of a man who peeks and looks out of the corner of his eyes but nevertheless thinks that he will reach real truth on this way. Looking so for real truth, the man of rancour fears his own destruction while he reduces himself and his life to an object. In his incapability to live, he anticipates his collapse. This experience of *Ressentiment* is the nucleus of the theistic satisfaction. It is a *habitus* towards God that is intrinsically dishonest, deliberate and stereotyped. Hence, the theistic satisfaction can be understood as a desire that is irreparably wounded. Theism promises an object of my desire that is my own cocoon, the cocoon that I spined myself.

Nietzsche was aware that theism is a phenomenon of modernity, as the French philosopher Francis Guibal underlines. Theism gives satisfaction of a fundamental desire of the modern 'subject'. Theism is a phenomenon that supposes a subject that

founds itself, judges itself, and rewards itself. But people who left this luggage (God the 'father'; God the 'judge'; God the 'rewarder') and turn towards a kind of atheism, act in a way familiar to the way they ascribe to God who they want to leave. (A)Theism is – according to Nietzsche – the construction of a destruction, because the theistic satisfaction brings about the loss of the divinity of God.. Likewise, (a)theism is the destruction of this construction because it reduces man and human life on a dishonest and stereotyped way to an object. (A)theism is the construction of a deconstruction and the deconstruction of this construction. That is its burden.

Philosophy in disguise

Nevertheless, many people who are looking for a-theism, want to nurse hopes that atheism will offer an other satisfaction, a real satisfaction. Often, people have had the expectation that the satisfaction of a-theism will not be characterised by Nietzsche's burden. Several interpretations of Nietzsche after World War II have ascribed to Nietzsche an atheistic humanism and have understood his writing as a plea in this respect. Among theologians, many have thought that this atheistic humanism is the heart of his famous nihilism and evaluated this plea as the Nietzschean tragedy, as Henri de Lubac did in his famous book *Le drame de l'humanisme athée* (4th ed., 1950).

But time passed by and the world changed, the world of theologians as well as the world of philosophers. In his dissertation about Nietzsche (1993), the German theologian Bucher makes a distinction between three theological approaches of Nietzsche since 1960. Some theologians read Nietzsche as a paradigm of a human existence before God. Others read Nietzsche as a critic of the shortfall of the Christian concept of God. And a third approach looks for the genuine Nietzschean concept of God. So, one can wonder if there is something left over from his famous atheism? Already in his book *Gott ist tot. Nietzsche's Destruktion des christlichen Bewußtseins* (1962), the German theologian Eugen Biser writes about a rediscovering of God in the works of Nietzsche. According to Biser, the heart of Nietzsche's pursuit is to break through every border that is essential in the main concepts which are used in the theological-metaphysical tradition to speak about God, concepts like *Ipsum Esse* and *Summum Bonum*. The challenge of Nietzsche is to speak about God beyond every concept of being, so Biser. Already in 1960, Biser asked attention to Nietzsche's own philosophical approach to God, an approach which considers each belief as a suspicion and every word as a mask. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes:

„... the things of the highest value must have another, peculiar origin – the cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the 'thing-in-itself' – there must be their basis, and nowhere else“ (§ 2).

And then he adds: „This way of judging constitutes the typical prejudgment and pre-

judice which give away the metaphysicians of all ages“ (§ 2).

To get rid of this ‘hidden God’, is Nietzsche’s passion in his struggle against the theistic satisfaction. So he wants to turn upside down the experience of Ressentiment.

Hence, although it is possible to speak about the rediscovering of God as a result of Nietzsche’s meditation, this rediscovering does not necessarily include the presupposition that Nietzsche speaks up for a theology ‘in disguise’. Perhaps, he only agitates for a (religious?) philosophy ‘in disguise’. Penzo writes that Nietzsche is one of these few philosophers who try to show how doing philosophy is intrinsically connected with the divinity of God. Therefore, Penzo argues, it is comprehensible that in Nietzsche’s approach of philosophy the Dionysian experience is considered as the highest expression both of philosophy as well as the divinity of God. Nietzsche’s atheism has to be understood in this respect. Atheism is the way by which one can cope with the instinct of decline, of *décadence*, the instinct of corruption. Nietzsche’s atheism is no religious affair, not a theo-logical problem. It is pursued from a philosophical point of view.

Beyond theism?

Although Nietzsche’s atheism is no religious affair but a philosophical one, theologians can be challenged by Nietzsche’s word about the theistic satisfaction. Nietzsche’s atheism, philosophical as it is, involves theology in so far theology involves philosophy. Since the patristic era, theology involves philosophy whenever theology meditates on itself as a *sermo de Deo* (Augustine).

In so far as theism is a phenomenon of modernity, other varieties of theism I do not discuss here, Nietzsche’s restless philosophical dispute throw doubt on theology too. Do theologians have a possibility to speak about God beyond theism? Do theologians have a possibility to develop an idiom that expresses our Christian belief in God without rancour? How can theologians avoid theism whereas they continue a biblical and mystical tradition of God talk? According to my opinion, this is one of the challenges of Nietzsche towards our Christian faith of God between tradition and modernity.

After World War II, already De Lubac characterised our human existence in a Nietzschean perspective as a ‘dance under an empty sky’. I know, like all theologians do, I know and I pray the psalms which praise God in the sun, the moon, the stars and all the heavenly creatures. But are we able to keep praying psalms like these, when our sky and our whole existence on this earth are becoming empty, e.g. by developments in our science, by developments in our society, and especially by the continuing stories of violence? If we, theologians, more and more have to pay attention to the tragic side of our existence, how can we keep these psalms in our hearts and minds and keep our theology intellectually plausible?! Do we really need a metaphysics of presence for thinking theologically about our desire for God. Is a metaphysical language of presence indispensable to express that we live under the heavens of God, the God of Abra(ha)m

and the father of Jesus? Do we need such metaphysics to express theologically that this God is „capable of clear communication, [that this God] is clear“, to say it in the words of Nietzsche (Beyond Good and Evil, § 53)?

This is the kernel of the challenges of Nietzsche towards theology. Perhaps Biser is right. In a lately published essay, entitled *Flamme bin ich sicherlich!* ('Sure, I am a flash!') (1996), Biser characterises Nietzsche's way as 'steep' (abschüssig). Obviously he does so, because Nietzsche at the end of his life hardly could hold back himself to play the role of the new Christ. But Biser also uses the word 'steep' because of the 'inner, fragmentary character' of Nietzsche's intellectual position. It is hardly possible to expect that the fight against theism and the reversal of the theistic satisfaction could bring a really new affirmation of God. Nevertheless, at the end of my contribution to the congress I would formulate a question about this specific theme: do we really need a metaphysics of presence if we want to meditate theologically about our desire for God?

A Nietzschean perspective on Gods creature

First of all, I would make a methodological remark. There is a distinction between Nietzsche's way of thinking, Nietzsches meditation on the one hand and a Nietzschean perspective on the other. His own way is of course determined by the historical and psycho-sociological context of his time. In so far as his hereditary is concerned in this historical and biographical aspect, I would talk about the context of his meditation. But, these historical aspects of his hereditary can be distinguished from its hermeneutical aspects. Nietzsches hereditary is also a question of fervor and style as well as an epistemological question. The French theologian Pierre Gisel called the hermeneutical aspects of Nietzsches hereditary the Nietzschean perspective.

Here again, I would repeat that Nietzsche's atheism is no religious affair, not a theological problem. It is pursued from a philosophical point of view. But in so far as theology involves philosophy whenever theology meditates on itself as a *sermo de Deo* (Augustine), in an era of modernity the Nietzschean perspective is almost indispensable in theological meditation on God-talk. For, in this era theological meditation on God-talk is not possible otherwise than on a hermeneutical way. Therefore, Gisel has proposed to define Nietzsche's significance and importance towards theology as a matter of hermeneutics. He calls this the Nietzschean perspective.

As the main feature of the Nietzschean perspective, Gisel considers the rediscovering of my corporeal interrelatedness in time and space. In my body, I am materially inscribed in an endless time and space. The particularity of my corporeal inscription is the one and only locus philosophicus, because as a human being I only can speak about truth and lie and about temporality and eternity in regard to this particularity. Hence, this corporeal inscription of mine is also the one and only locus theologicus, because as a person who prays the psalms I only can speak about 'the

heaven of God', the redemption of Christ and the power of the Spirit in regard to this particularity.

Is this Nietzschean perspective the expression of a steep spirituality? I am wondering if this Nietzschean perspective necessarily brings with it a steep spirituality and will lead to an intellectual position that innerly must break down at last. Perhaps, this Nietzschean perspective will invite and seduce theology, and fundamental theology in the first place, to rediscover the importance of Christian mystics as Eckhart and Ruusbroeck. Scholarly theology in its classical and modern forms pays much attention to the question which affirmation on who's authority can be done about God. In a Nietzschean perspective we probably do better to pay attention to the question who speaks about God and what drives our theological thinking? So, in stead of the classical question of the content of theology and in stead of the modern question of the subject of theology, theologians should commit themselves on the question how they desire God when they say God (Eckhardt).

Secondly, I would make a remark with respect to the question who / which drives theology? In a reflection about 'the gift', De Lubac writes some remarkable lines on this theme. When we say, so De Lubac, God gives us our existence, God creates our being, then we express a total and radical gap between our being and our existence. If we confess that all reality is Gods creation, we express an invincible difference between our existence and God. It includes the recognition of our human non-being, our essential contingency. Lubac quotes a word of a medieval theologian Robert Grosseteste (†1253): in every creature his non-being precedes his being. In a Nietzschean perspective, theology can be challenged to real doxology because all creation every day again disappears in the endless space and time. Hence, our reality disappearing in an endless time and space is recognised as our reality. Finally, doxology is perhaps nothing else than the expression of the recognition of this endless disappearing reality as our reality because it is touched by the finger and the breath of God.

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