

Nietzsche, Christianity and the Moral Idol

Abstract: One of the famous sayings by Nietzsche is that “God is dead!”. In the current article, I will refer to Heidegger’s interpretation and, further on, Jean-Luc Marion’s respective interpretation of this saying. Heidegger considers that it is about the fading away of transcendence, on which the traditional metaphysical discourse was based, while Jean-Luc Marion hints to the “moral God”, who is considered as an Idol. Starting from this viewpoint and from Gianni Vattimo’s idea, according to which the secularization process is another manifestation of Christianity itself, I have attempted to debate the relation between the traditional moral values and the way in which the Christian tradition can be interpreted today.

Keywords: Christian God, Nietzsche, idolatry, moral, Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, metaphysic, ontotheology, secularization

1. Introduction

The scene in which the madman is looking for God at midday, holding a lamp in his hand (Nietzsche 1994, 129) or the fragment in which Zarathustra tells himself that “God is dead!” (Nietzsche 2012, 61) are certainly one of the best known places in Nietzsche’s philosophy. The fact that “God is dead” is considered by most readers to be the same thing as “Nietzsche’s philosophy”. Because of this, but also due to his anti-Christian pathos, Nietzsche is often thought as the spearhead of Western modern atheism (von Der Luft 1984, 268). As a matter of fact, Nietzsche has been considered and interpreted in various ways by his followers throughout the twentieth century. His writings have inspired the vitalist philosophies at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the Nazi regime has claimed its own ideology as stemming from Nietzsche’s philosophy of the Superman. The first philosopher who tries to extricate Nietzsche from the monopoly of the Nazi ideology and tries to see in him more than a mere philosopher of culture, a thinker who stands at the end of Western metaphysics, is Martin Heidegger (Heidegger 1991, I, IX–XIII). Heidegger considers that the entire history of Western thinking comes to fruition in Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power, which manifests itself in the technique and in nihilism as a side effect. The technique is the supreme form of domination by the metaphysical reasoning, while nihilism is the consequence of this

* Hyperion University, Bucharest, Romania; e-mail: sabaugelu@yahoo.com

domination, brought about by the vanishing away of the symbolic world and by the world of the ideal. Heidegger believes that Western metaphysics comes finally to fruition in Nietzsche's theory of the will to power and that Nietzsche is the last greatest Western metaphysician (Heidegger 1991, I, 3-7).

In the second half of the twentieth century there have been interpretations which challenge the Heideggerian perspective on Nietzsche and which portray Nietzsche not as the last representative of metaphysics, but as the forefather of the thinking of difference, who attempts to change the understanding of the being as plenitude, stability, unity, which is specific to the metaphysical way of thinking, into a thinking which searches for the difference, the ever changing, the unstable, etc. Among the most important authors who interpret Nietzsche's philosophy in this way one can name Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze (Vattimo 1996, 79-82; von Tongeren 2004, 174). In the following article, I will especially refer to the Heideggerian-inspired interpretation of Nietzsche, by special reference to Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion. After presenting the various interpretations of the two philosophers, I will try to show what the consequences of such a viewpoint are, pertaining to the way in which the Christian tradition is perceived nowadays.

2. Nietzsche, Heidegger and the ontotheology

Heidegger has studied closely and for many years Nietzsche's philosophy, the scripts of his university lectures and seminars (in the period 1936-1940) having been collected into four volumes, which were published in Germany in 1961. For Heidegger, Nietzsche is the last Western metaphysician, his nihilism being the bankruptcy of Plato's idealist philosophy and its following through Christianity: "Nihilism is the process of devaluing the supreme values until now. The decay of these values stands for the decomposition of the truth so far relating to being as such in its entirety. The process of devaluing the supreme values until now is not, as a matter of fact, another historical fact among many others, but it is the fundamental event of Western history, a history backed up and led by metaphysics. Inasmuch as metaphysics has known, by the means of Christianity, a certain theological seed, the devaluation of the supreme values present until now has to be also expressed theologically, by the following saying: "God is dead". God refers here to what is beyond the senses which, as an eternal world, is "true", "from beyond", in opposition to what is here, "the worldly" place, and it stands for the truth and the final aim. When the ecclesiastical Christian belief loses all vigor and its worldly standing, God's authority has not yet vanished. The very fact the supreme values until are being devalued means to say: these values have lost their power to shape history." (Heidegger 2005, 43)

Nietzsche considers that by his own proposal of overthrowing all values, his philosophy could be understood as an inverted Platonism. If the European nihilism consists of the bankruptcy of all values, it needs to be said that its origins are to be found in the overthrow of the ancient times, in the philosophies of Socrates and Plato and in the birth of the intelligible world, as a reaction to life, the world of instincts and feelings etc. (Bondor 2008, 174-179). At the same time as the intelligible world is borne, the ontological hierarchy shows up for the entire Western metaphysical tradition. The bailman of this ontological hierarchy is the Supreme Being, the Good in Plato, the Prime Mover in Aristotle, God in the Christian tradition, *causa sui* God in Descartes or *ens realissimum* in Leibniz etc. In this way Heidegger starts talking about the supreme principle, which is a trademark of all metaphysical thinking, that ensures the existence of all the whole ontological hierarchy and which he calls “the ontotheological God”. What is the ontotheological problem and what does it have to do with Nietzsche?

It is mainly about the ambiguity present in the Western thinking since its very beginnings and which refers to the identification of Being with the Supreme Being or, using Heidegger’s parlance, the transformation of Being into the Supreme Being. How does this problem or this ambiguity come to pass? Heidegger considers that, ever since the beginnings of the philosophical interrogation, the ontological question about being has overlapped with the theological meaning of the question: “The question ‘What is an entity?’ [or ‘What is that which is?'] simultaneously asks: Which entity is the highest [or supreme, *hochste*] entity, and in what sense is it? This is the question of God and of the divine. We call the domain of this question theology. This duality in the question of the being of entities can be united under the title ontotheology.” (Thomson 2005, 13)

This ambiguity of the Western philosophical thinking has begun in the seventh century BC, within the pre-Socratic school in Miletus, where the question about the first principle (*prote arche*) has been asked by Thales from an ontological perspective, who questioned himself about the supreme and last Being (Thomson 2005, 31). In his *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 1996, V, 1, 1026a, 23-32), Aristotle overlaps the supreme being with the universal being, with what things have in common and considers the supreme being as universal, only because it is supreme: “In the *Metaphysics*, when Aristotle explicates his own *prote philosophia*, he formalizes the proto-ontotheological ambiguity inherent in the Presocratic conception of the *koinon* (which had already functioned as both the theological ‘where from’ and the ontological ‘in common’ of entities). Aristotle explicitly divides this *koinon* into an ontological ‘*koinotaton*’, a universal being ‘shared in common’, and a theological ‘*katholon (Theion)*’, a being ‘on the whole, [or] in general (the *Theion*)’.” (Thomson 2005, 32) This ambiguity, which has been taken by and

transmitted by Aristotle, is introduced later on within the body of works belonging to the Christian theology. Although the whole history of philosophy and theology is not ontotheological, however, the ontotheology triumphs in modern philosophy with Descartes, which conceives God as *causa sui*. This comes to fruition in Hegel's philosophy, which is, by definition, the embodiment of the ontotheological conception (Heidegger 1969, 42-74). Modern philosophers deal with a concept of "God" which is another way of expressing the search of the truth of being. This trajectory of modern philosophy will find its end in Nietzsche's philosophy, which unmasks the pseudo-morphisms present in modern philosophy. Nevertheless, it is not at random that Nietzsche is a radical anti-Hegelian, and not in the sense that he sets himself against Hegelian dialectics (if he had done that, he would have finally accepted the dialectical reason), but in the sense that he is looking for its origins and, finding himself at the original start, to unmask it and to show what makes its functioning possible.

3. The Death of God, the Idol, and Morality

The French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion interprets, in Heidegger's foot tracks, the Nietzschean saying referring to the death of God. For Marion, the God that dies is but an idol sprung for man's will to power. It is a God in the image of man. Hence, there is death. True God is not dead because it cannot die. To Marion, Nietzsche is still idolatrous, since his way of relating to God is inadequate. Nietzsche comes too closely to God and, hence, the price paid: madness. To Marion, the proper relation to divinity has to keep safe the distance between man and God, while the French phenomenologist identifies within tradition some ways of a proper discourse: the apophatic discourse, the praise discourse and the icons (Marion 2007, 201-352). If man does not keep to this distance, but tries at any cost to determine the divine being, then, at a certain moment, he will rise up surrounded by concepts and notions, but bereft of God. Nietzsche's idol God is not the true God, but it is the God of morality: "Morality brings into disrepute its idol because it itself gave it credit and, by this move, has fatally looked at it. This is, again, a brutal affirmation of the same paradox: "God's death" holds to itself as far as morality is concerned." (Marion 2007, 64)

In his demonstration, Marion quotes more passages from Nietzsche, which relate explicitly to a moral God or to God, as it appears in man's imagination. What Nietzsche does is to destroy the image that people themselves have of God.

Here is a first paragraph which confirms explicitly this hypothesis: "Alas, my brethren, and this God I have conjured, human work and illusion it has been, like all gods!" (Nietzsche 1994; 2012, 80)

The human work and illusion refer to that process of imagination by means of which human beings project their representations about divinity, which aids them into explaining various phenomena from the world around, without which these would be incomprehensible. The whole phenomenon is part of the psychological process of erecting a divinity (*Gottbildung*), which transfers God later on, by fixed representation, into an idol. "To have thought up the concept of "God" as a concept set against life." (Nietzsche 2012, 160) or "The concept of God is alienating oneself from life, a critique and even contempt for life itself;" (Nietzsche 1999, 101)

We have here explicitly Nietzsche's reference to the Platonic-derived opposition between the world of senses (life) and the intelligible world (the concept of God). If one interprets this in the light of the will to power, this opposition tells us that those who made up the intelligible world have done it in order to subdue those in possession of stronger instincts or of those who love and cherish life. It is a victory of the weaker ones over the stronger ones. It is the beginning of nihilism. The beginning of the end of nihilism happens now, at the same time with Nietzsche, when the world of ideas and ideals is being devalued, by laying bare its own ignoble origins.

"Question: has the pantheistic attitude, which approves to all things, become itself impossible? In fact the moral God has been exceeded on." (Nietzsche 1999, 42)

The moral God, who has been abandoned, is the one that ensures all the moral values of the European civilization, that God who denies the world from beneath in order to discover a supreme ideal, in the world of the spirit or in the afterworld. This God is negated, in exchange for a pantheistic attitude, which acknowledges and explores the world and life itself the way they truly are, here and now.

"Religions fade away because of moral belief. The moral-Christian God is not viable: consequently "atheism" – as if there were no other forms of gods." (Nietzsche 1999, 105)

The Christian religion has lost its impetus because it has turned into morality. Confronted with this reality, modern atheism, the negation of God, seems the only remaining alternative. However, the possibility of other "forms of God" to exist, of other forms of divine revelation and expression, confronts us with the hypotheses that atheism is not the only option left against the worn-out Christianity, but that divinity can always manifest itself under a different guise.

"The more important was God as a person, the less human beings have shown it devotion. They are more tied up to their mental representations than they are to the most beloved among the loved ones; this is the reason why they give themselves away to the State, the Church and even God – as long as it is their own creation, their own thought and it is not taken too personally." (Nietzsche 1999, 396)

What we have in this paragraph is a penetrating example of the way in which human beliefs turn into idols and ideologies. Moreover, the idols acquire easily man's adherence, since they are representations and projections of the human ego, towards which man feels attached and which man cannot forswear. On the contrary, the relation to divinity presupposes forswearing the *ego*, self-abandonment and subordinating one's personal life to divinity's will. The episode of Jesus having been forsworn on the cross is, from Marion's point of view, a proper way of man's relation to divinity. Due to the episode of abandonment before death, Jesus manages to emphasize the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature, as well as the means through which man's belief is protected from idolatry (Marion 2007, 107).

If the corner stone of all moral values is man's tendency to dominate nature and the desire of the weaker ones to dominate those in strength, then the metaphysical knowledge offers the theoretical tools for this tendency to be accomplished. Nietzsche explicitly mentions the fact that man's *ego* and its need for safety, directed against a hostile world, underlies all metaphysical knowledge. "We find ourselves in different circumstances in regard to "certainty". Man has been brought up in fear so far, and any bearable existence has always begun with "the sense of security"; all these still act within man's thinking. But, as soon as the outside "danger" fades away, there is a craving for uncertainty, for indeterminate horizons. The reason why philosophers so often highlight the ego's and the species conservation, and take it up as a principle, is just the binding together of fear with primitive living." (Nietzsche 1999, 276) Out of the uncertainty which man confronts in his natural environment, the need for "certainty" is borne. Religion and the arts are, from Nietzsche's point of view, just forms in which the metaphysical spirit substantiates itself, before expressing itself into "systematic philosophical constructions" (Vattimo 2001, 143). Both religion and metaphysics look for, under different guises, the same unity, as an answer to the diversity of the natural environment. Both are in search for certitude, as an answer to the uncertainty faced by man every day, by the means of the idea of the existence of a world Creator or of a theme within life.

4. Morality, secularization, and the Christian tradition

Therefore, the God of morality is the one who testifies to the hierarchy of moral values, as the God of ontotheology is the one who attests the ontological hierarchy of metaphysics. It is now clear that the vanishing away of such a "God", of an idol, will lead to the impossibility of preserving the concept of moral worth. Is the idol, which holds fast to and stabilizes an image of divinity, essential to the well-functioning of religion? Does God need, in order to express itself, an idolatrous image? Or is the latter an

adulteration of the divinity's image, a threat which we have been informed about in the Old Testament? Marion expresses the same enquiries in his argument: "Do we have to accept the idol as a true image of the divine?" (Marion 2007, 27) His pointwise answer is positive: "Undoubtedly yes, but with the condition of evaluating the standing of such a divine. Man has to feel it and decide upon it. Through the idol, the human experience of the divine is placed before the image the divine acquires through it. We form an image in order to ask the divine to open itself into it, to look at us through it, to smile and to threaten." (Marion 2007, 27)

However, if the idol is the form through which man expresses the way in which it feels the divine experience at a certain point, then perhaps the idol becomes essential for preserving and transmitting a certain religious tradition. For the Christian religion, its morality is essential and that is why Nietzsche blows it up by debunking it. Could the Christian religion be transmitted without its traditional moral values? Is it possible to relate to the Christian tradition, if one comes to cast aside its traditional moral values? It is not an easy question, and, at first, one would be inclined to offer a negative answer. What is left of the Christian tradition if one casts aside the authority of clergyman, given the grace they have received? How is Christianity to be transmitted if we do not trust in them and respect their authority? What is left of Christianity if we cast aside the authority a man traditionally has within his family? What is left if we give up on the traditional family and accept gay marriages, as it is suggested? If we accept abortion, can we consider life as a divine sacrament, which is untouchable by man? What if modern medicine and its unprecedented efficiency seems more like, because of its *hybris*, Prometheus's attempt to steal the fire from the gods and Lucifer's attempt to possess divine knowledge?

As we have stated earlier, one is inclined to answer all these questions in the negative. It is hard to imagine that we still belong to the Christian tradition if we answer all these questions in the positive. Nonetheless, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo submits a new hypothesis, which is surely open to interpretations, but which could, otherwise, prove fertile. Vattimo sees a similarity between his weak ontology (Vattimo 1998, 10-25), that modality of thinking being which gives up on the "hard" criteria of being, which belong to the metaphysical tradition, and the message of Christian revelation: "The embodiment, which is the descent of God to man's level, what the New Testament calls God's *kenosis*, will be interpreted as a sign that the non-violent and non-absolute God of the post-metaphysical age has as a distinctive feature the very vocation towards weakening, referred to by the Heidegger-inspired philosophy." (Vattimo 2005, 29) The God of love, which empties itself in order to reveal itself to people, is similar to the post-metaphysical being which gives up the hierarchical traditions. If we cast aside the restricting hierarchies of the traditional morality, then we can only offer people mere love.

Having been inspired by René Girard work, *Violence and the Sacred*, Vattimo believes that Jesus Christ has come to abolish the violent-prone dimension of the sacred. This is also the reason why he was crucified. From this point of view, the traditional metaphysic, which imposed some really hard values, sometimes even forcefully if the case be, is a remnant of the sacred which Jesus Christ came to abolish. Christianity, which is based on the message of loving one's neighbor preached by Christ, has been contaminated further on with the metaphysical thinking and, through the Church, which played an active role historically, has grown used to the reality of violence. We know for certain that, not infrequently, the authority of the Church resorted to violence if necessary. From this point of view, the secularizing process, specific to the Western modernity, is akin to a certain weakening of values, especially the religious ones. By the mediation of the secularizing process, the violence that religion is involved with in its historical existence is transferred to the political and economic domains.

The secularization process is a phenomenon particularly modern and it is usually interpreted as an evolution set against the principals, which back up the existent influence of religious beliefs in society. Hence, we are dealing with a division between the spiritual and the political power, the state and the Church, with the banning of religious references from the public sphere and with the autonomization of some spheres, belonging to the human activity, by their independence from religious principles and rules of conduct. In the modern world, economics, politics, culture and education become autonomous fields, which have their own set of rules, without any religious reference.

The independence of human activities from religious subordination is parallel with a process of individual autonomization from the divine. There is also the possibility of religious choice, since a modern individual belonging to a certain religious creed is not necessarily connected to his/her birthplace, as it used to be the case in more traditional communities. All these forms through which modernization manifests itself in the modern world help us to understand the whole phenomenon as set against Christianity, and, therefore, more often than not, the secularization process is associated with de-Christianization.

Totally set against this is Vattimo's perspective regarding the phenomenon of secularization. To him, the secularization process is "a constitutive trait of an authentic religious experience" (Vattimo, 2005, 6), the medium through which the Christian message is revealed to us at present. If Jesus Christ's message was deployed against the violence of the sacred, present within traditional societies, the Church being an active force in history and sacralizing power, then the secularization process, which obviously weakens the temporal power of the Church, is pictured as a divine work of Jesus Christ's message. The deprivation of the Church's temporal power, the

secularization and the desacralizing of the state power, the autonomization of man's reason in relation to an all judgmental God, passing to an ethics of autonomy, all these are quoted by Vattimo „as the full accomplishment of [the Christian] truth, which, is, one should remember, *kenosis*, God's descent to earth, the denial of the divinity's "natural" features.” (Vattimo 2005, 38) We are here obviously faced with a division between Christ's message and the ecclesiastical authority. Having been abandoned by God, the modern man can also be interpreted, by analogy, with the distance, which is assumed by Marion, to be the proper relation to the divine. The fact that God has drawn back today and does not beckon to humankind or that, on the contrary, the signals should be traced in its retreat, makes Vattimo consider secularization as an essential Christian phenomenon, being “positively connected to the meaning of Christ's message.” (Vattimo 2005, 31)

There could certainly be drawn a parallel between Vattimo's viewpoint and the idea of Christianity as “the religion which has done itself out of religion” (Gauchet 2006, 6), defended by the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet. For Gauchet doing away with religion does not mean the end of the religious experience, since relating to the divine otherness is part of our anthropological structure, but “the end of the role of the dependency principle had in structuring the social space” (Gauchet 2006, 261), i. e. by the divinity. Christianity is responsible for this process of social emancipation from the tutelage of the supreme deities, along with the advent of the modern world. Within the Christian religion, God's embodiment offers “the metaphysical condition of possibility of doing away with the principal of hierarchy present in our world” (Gauchet 2006, 130). Therefore, the spheres of human activities break loose from under the gods' power and man becomes autonomous in regard to his own self-administration. Both Vattimo and Gauchet read the playback of the Western history as an absolution, thought embodiment, of man from the metaphysical God's tutelage and as an actualization of the division of powers present in the New Testament (*Mt.* 22, 21). If Gauchet sees in the accomplishment of this principles the emancipation of the modern societies from religious dominance, Vattimo sees the disengagement within the domination of the sacred, which defines natural religions, Jesus's own deliverance. In a way, Vattimo goes deeper than Gauchet, since where one sees religiously unbounded societies, the other considers it as a further step in the direction of the Christian revelation, which is the very social possibility of furthering the Christian message.

Naturally, there are certain signals coming from the direction of the Catholic Church, which show a tendency of the Church, in the way referred to Vattimo, of “emancipation” from certain principles, which had been until now self-explanatory for the Catholic doctrinaire corpus. Following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church abandons the doctrine of the

just war and engages into defending peace, in the name of Christian values. It breaks away with the compromise of political regimes and grants Catholics the liberty to choose according to their own consciousness, acknowledging the freedom of consciousness in religious matters. It is certainly a sign of the Church being involved in the desacralizing power and of a retreat from the place of power, which it had assumed to have in regard to most Christians' self-consciousness. Then, closer to our times, there are the messages of Pope Francis who call on Christians to ask for forgiveness from gay people or for the fact they have blessed weapons, messages which support forgiveness for abortions or others that make plausible the union of gay people within the Church.

The Pope's message clearly renounces the traditional moral values present within a naturalistic metaphysic and asks for forgiveness and love, without taking into consideration certain moral options which divide people. This is the reason why the Pope's statements are controversial and are contested, especially by the more conservative side of the Catholic believers.

5. Conclusions

Going back to the main idea of the article, from Heidegger's and, in his foot tracks, Marion's interpretations of "God's" death, one distinguishes between the God of metaphysics and the God of morality. From this point of view one could say that Nietzsche inaugurates a post-metaphysical world. However, if the God murdered by Nietzsche is an idol, the moral idol, it is self-evident that Christianity's value-prone "reinforced structure" and the identity of the Christian tradition have been built on the foundation of such an idol.

Can we still hope to preserve and transmit the Christian tradition once this idol is smashed to pieces? Vattimo's answer is, true, a scandal to the traditional Christian's mentality, a positive one. Christianity will not only survive, but, moreover, once having been freed from the constraints of the traditional morality, Jesus's message will be perceived in its proper meaning. It is true that within the Catholic Church there is a clear move towards conformity, not only in regard to the modern secularized society, but also to the requests of post-modern political activists. Could we consider this tendency to be demanded by the accomplishment of Jesus's message? Can Christianity preserve its own identity, if Christian values, that idol smashed to pieces by Nietzsche, are unable to back it up? Can the Christian tradition be passed on if it casts away the Christian values, which it has become synonymous with? If the dialectical exercise, engraved in the heart of Christianity from its origins, makes possible the passing on of the Christian message, as Vattimo states, even against Christianity itself, can one hold on

to the continuity following this rupture? How could a post-Christian Christianity look like? Under the circumstances, could one speak about “Christianity” as in the proper meaning of the term? How can the Christian message be recovered? All these are still unknown to us, but, undoubtedly, the questions are so provocative that it is worth musing upon them.

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