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“God is Dead:” Envisaging a New Theology after Nietzsche's Obituary

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Abstract: Literally, theology is a ‘science of God’. Traditionally Christian theology was understood as a discourse on the nature, attributes and existence of a divine God. In the fall of nineteenth century Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), one of the forerunners of the contemporary schools of thought and a radical critic of Western society and culture published an obituary that ‘God is dead’. This was developed as the death of God philosophy and some theologians later formulated the death of God theology. In the background of the announcement ‘God is dead’ the traditional theology as a study about a living God becomes invalid because the God of the traditional theology is no more. Therefore, a new theology is urgently envisaged based on a God who involves with the human situations and ‘who dances with the humans’. It will not be a theology about a God captured by a religion, but about a God as such and will be free from the barriers of religions, moral and value systems. It will lead the

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human beings to a universal spirituality acceptable to all, not a spirituality based on a particular religion.

Keywords: Anti-Christ; Secularization; Nihilism; Revaluing and Rediscovering Values; Consumerism; Slave-morality

Introduction

Theology, etymologically coined from the two Greek root words, *Theos* and *Logos*, is literally understood as a ‘science of God’. Earlier uses of the word were by the ancient Greek thinkers, especially Stoics, Plato and Aristotle as ‘a reasoned analysis of the deity’. Such uses were naturalistic. Christianity from its origin used the word as what its etymology suggested. Augustine was probably the first one to define theology as “a discourse or reasoning about a divine God” and this definition is still used in the classical and traditional colloquies. However, during the peak of modernity Friedrich Nietzsche announced the ‘death of God’ and argued that the modern science and secularization of the European society has ‘killed’ God. If Nietzsche’s announcement is taken seriously, the traditional notion of theology which was a study about a living God is no more valid and out of date because that God about whom the traditional theology was concerned about is no more.

If theology is a science of God, a new theology is urgently envisaged after the announcement of the death of the old God of Christianity by Nietzsche. For him the theology which Christianity upheld from its beginning was based on dry dogmas about a God who was placed far away from the human situations. Such a theology is useful only to safeguard a God who does not involve with the human beings and ‘who cannot dance with the human beings’. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche announced ‘I would only believe in a God who could dance with me’ (Nietzsche, 1982: I, §.7). Here by ‘dance’ he means the involvement of God in human affairs. Thus according to him God has become one of the idols or appendages of humanity which scientific growth, materialism and consumerism have created. The new theology for Nietzsche must be free from all the barriers of religion, morality and other value systems which will not be a Christian or any other religious theology, but a theology as such which speaks not about a God captured by a religion, but about a God as such. In this way this new theology will result in a universal spirituality acceptable to all, not a spirituality based on a particular religion.

This study analyzes Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God together with its background and his call for a new theology based on a creative God who is needed for the contemporary society. Nietzsche has a lot to contribute to get out of the post-modern crisis because his ideas extend

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believers to re-think the belief in God and revalue the value systems once more.

1. Background of Nietzsche's Provocative Thoughts

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is one of the forerunners of the contemporary schools of thought as well as a most radical critic of Western philosophy and culture. His writings inspired many of the twentieth century intellectuals, including those who counted his work as a proto-fascist doctrine. Only after the first World War, which was the first massive breakdown of the European culture and which had shattered the vain self-image that Europeans had had of themselves did readers begin to gauge the seriousness of Nietzsche's reflections.

The ordinary Christians regard Nietzsche as a great enemy of God and one of Christianity's fiercest enemies because he challenged the foundations of Christianity and traditional morality by asserting "God is dead". Many a times, his prophecy of the 'Death of God' has been taken too literally and it resulted in charging him as a diabolic atheist who seeks to deny God absolutely. (Neusch, 1982: 110) Even now there are some Christian scholars who have such impression about Nietzsche. However, if one could appreciate his thinking in his own background, with the situation of Europe during his time and especially in the milieu of the growth of science and technology, materialism and consumerism, surely that will give a different picture of Nietzsche who as a prophet foretold the impending danger to humanity by those adverse situations prevailed in Europe.

In his autobiography which was named 'Ecce Homo' he foresees his mission as follows: "I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous - a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far.

I am no man; I am dynamite” (Nietzsche, 1979: §.1). Nietzsche was able to write so prolifically and profoundly for years while remaining in a condition of ill health. This is deemed as a testimony to his stunning mental capacities and willpower. He had the power to influence an entire century as intellectual dynamite.

2. An Obituary for the Christian God

Nietzsche recognized that Western civilization has been built upon the foundation of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. He also realized that this fact had been rejected by the Western intellectuals of his day. Far from welcoming this rejection, Nietzsche realized that the Western civilization was confronted by the most serious challenges in its history. The major ones as seen by Nietzsche were the rapid growth of science and the increasing secularization of the European society of his time. The Christian God who had served as the starting point for meaning and value in the West for nineteen centuries has no place now with the advent of materialism and secularism.

Nietzsche saw that his contemporary European society was in a crisis situation due to the dilemmas created by the promethean nature of science and technology. The West believed and depended on science as its sole redeemer which promised everything: massive food production, new medicine and health expertise, new warfare technologies to defend the borders of the countries, aeronautic researches, new communication and entertainment facilities, etc. In such a

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situation Nietzsche was skeptical about the contribution of science for the human race in an integral sense. The restless character of science and its agent technology secularized everything in Europe and its culture which was filled with religious and moral values

started its decline. As a way of proposing an answer to these challenges of the modern society he published an obituary of God. Before entering into the proper announcement of the death of God, it is important to delve into some of the conditions that made him to make this obituary.

3.Christianity and its Elements of ‘Anti-Christ’

Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God targeted only the God of Christianity. The major ideological force which he opposed was the Christian religion. On the basis of his researches, Nietzsche sketched out a programme for the critical reassessment of Christian civilization of the West of his time.

a. Rejection of Pauline Christianity

For Nietzsche the arch villain in Christianity is St. Paul, to whom he applies the name ‘bearer of bad tidings’. (Miccoli, 2000: 53) The ‘no’ to life which was a typical characteristic of the Christianity of dark ages, is not coming from Jesus who proclaimed a joyful message. Paul became the preacher of this message of Christ but eventually made Christianity a ‘sad science’. As a contrast, Nietzsche used the phrases ‘gay science’ and ‘gay message’. (Nietzsche, 1974: §.24) According to him Paul is the first ‘anti-Christ’ or the enemy of true Christianity of Jesus Christ. Though Paul showed himself as opposed to legalism, he was a ‘Pharisaic Jew’ who studied law and this legalistic mentality saturated his psyche. That is why Paul was more concerned about obeying the laws and constituted variety of punishments for not obeying the laws. Hence Nietzsche concludes that Paul is the one who drove away freedom from the Christian religion which Jesus wanted to give to humanity.

Basing on Nietzsche, Jeremy Bentham continued to develop the Anti-Pauline mentality. He says that the Pauline Christianity has many laws and taboos, whereas Jesus’ Christianity did not have any taboos, but has only one commandment of love. While commenting on this Bertrand Russell would pose a prankish

question and answer; ‘Does Christianity prohibit smoking? No...! Why...? Because, Paul did not know about smoking. Had he known, he would have prohibited smoking also.’ Thomas Jaberson also basing on Nietzsche would condemn Paul as twisting the true message of Christianity and paving the way for all the subsequent divisions among the Christians.

Thus according to Nietzsche, the ideas of Paul perverted the teachings of Jesus and Paul’s Christianity is a deliberate lie. Therefore, he accused Paul and the leaders of the Church after him for betraying the true and joyful message of Jesus. (Nietzsche, 1962: §.169)

b. Christianity: a Religion of the Weak

According to Nietzsche, the beginning of Christianity in Europe, comparing to the standards of culture and enlightenment that had become widely spread among the educated classes of the Roman Empire, Christianity was a lapse into primitive modes of thought. Most of the doctrines and intellectual yielding of the early Christian scholars were derived from neo-Platonism. It is a religion mingled with much morose psychology; it is a religion of the weak and defeated; it propagated a morality of the meek. (Nietzsche, 1962: §.200). For Nietzsche, what humanity needs is a morality of strength, power and the will-to-power. In place of what he called the ‘slave-morality’ of Christianity, Nietzsche proposed to substitute a ‘master-morality’ in which the chief virtues would be strength, dominance and the will-to-power (Nietzsche, 1962: §.151).

Thus Nietzsche concludes that Christianity as it is now is against humanity. The true Christianity that existed immediately after Jesus is no more. Through its long historical journey, Christianity has absorbed many anti-Christ elements. Therefore, it has become a self-destructive force and lost its meaning for the contemporary world.

4. The Historical Context of the Obituary

Nietzsche's proclamation of the 'Death of God' has to be understood in the background of some of the previous events and theories in the history of humankind.

a. Copernican Revolution

As long as people believed that the earth was the centre of the universe, a universe that was comparatively limited in size, it seemed to make sense to say that God had created the world, and that he gave man a central position in this creation. The Copernican Revolution, however, had displaced the earth from the centre of the universe and subsequent astronomical discoveries had made it increasingly obvious that even the solar system was nothing but an infinitely insignificant part of a cosmos that had become so large that nobody could conceive its limits. The idea of the central role or position of God as an omnipotent creator in this inconceivably vast universe became so naive. It was partly for this reason that the medieval Christianity opposed the new scientific discoveries which went against the biblical verses. Therefore, for Nietzsche the Copernican revolution was the first step to shatter the central place of God in the universe.

b. Evolution Theories

Another landmark in the deconstruction of the eminent position of God was the theory of evolution. In the light of Darwin's hypothesis, the universe and all that contained in it were not created by an all-powerful God which is contrary to the claim of the Bible. All are simply the temporary and accidental products of an evolution which in principle could go on forever. Even the human beings are not unique species anymore. Man is only an animal among other animals. Man as the vertex of creation and as the ultimate ruler of the universe as empowered by God began to look like an idea born of vanity and ignorance.

According to Nietzsche, evolution theories also removed God from being the creator and provider of all the creatures.

c. Science as a New Religion

In the 18th century increasing number of educated people began to take science more seriously than religion. But for various reasons they were not yet willing to let Christianity go away all together. They were astonished by many of the scientific inventions. The scientific theories replaced religious dogmas. Science together with technology started providing everything the human beings needed. Thus God became an addendum who was not seriously wanted by humanity.

Therefore, God had to retreat from the world to make the world suitable for the contemporary sciences, which progressed as the last recesses of the universe. The more the world can be described and explained by science, the less God is needed. Religion may continue to talk about God, but there is less opportunity to demonstrate any real effect of his existence, because religion by now is replaced with science. The very concept of God became difficult to grasp because of the growth of science. Whenever there is a conflict between science and religion, science will not accommodate religion, as in older times, but religion will adjust to scientific belief.

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Thus the meaning of Nietzsche's announcement of the 'Death of God' becomes clear in the background of these historical contexts.

5. The Prologue of the Obituary

Before making the announcement of the death of God, Nietzsche makes a preface that God has been the truth for humanity. Christianity adopted this from Platonism and made it as Christian dogma of faith. Now what the human beings are going to do when it becomes unbelievable? (Nietzsche, 1967: III, §.26) Nietzsche's discussion of the Christian significance for the Western civilization is in connection with his notorious remark that 'God is dead'. God is dead means that he must have existed before. By coining this phrase Nietzsche did not mean to make an ontological statement; he never involved himself much in the philosophical debate about whether God exists or existed. What he meant to point out with his remark was the fact that in a universe, conceived in strictly scientific terms, God has simply no conceivable place anymore, no meaningful role to play in the workings of the world. In a culture that takes science and materialism seriously, talk about God is strange, unintelligent and out of place.

a. The Madman Announces the Obituary: 'God is Dead'

In *Gay Science*, Nietzsche represents himself in the form of an allegorical narrative through a madman.¹ The madman, "who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place and cried incessantly 'I seek God! I seek God!'. He provoked much laughter as many of those who did not believe in God were standing around him. 'Has he got lost?' Asked one. 'Did he lose his way like a child?' Asked another. 'Or is he hiding?' 'Is he afraid of us?' 'Has he gone on a voyage?' 'Emigrated?' Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their

¹ The 'madman' of this narrative, incidentally, is patterned after the Greek philosopher Diogenes, the Cynic, who is said to have gone around the town with a lantern in broad daylight. When asked why he was doing such a strange thing, he replied that he was 'looking for an honest man.'

midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is God?’ he cried. I will tell you. We have killed him - you and I. All of us are his murderers” (Nietzsche, 1974: §.125).

The madman in Nietzsche’s narration is not mad of some mental illness. His speech makes very much sense. He is too far ahead of his contemporaries. The fact that ‘God is dead’ was no news to the madman and his contemporaries. What is news is that they have killed God, by their own willful act; the development of modern science and technology, secularism and consumerism are the willful acts that led to the demise of the Supreme Being.

When the madman announced this obituary the people in the market place did not realize to see any of such implications. They all have their short-term goals; they are busy with their routine mundane business. For them it does not make any real difference whether God exists or whether he is dead. Nietzsche remarks, that “the greatest recent event, that ‘God is dead’, that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe” (Nietzsche, 1974: §.343). The entirety of Western civilization still thinks and acts with a mindset what thousands of years of theistic training and practice have imparted for the masses. Habitually they obey the Ten Commandments and other traditional rules. But such rules are no longer backed up by any authority. It is only the madman who sees the implications of the death of God. He realized the impending danger of the death of God which is going to bring emptiness and darkness to hover over the world.

Nietzsche’s startling statement that God is dead was not an assertion of his own personal atheism. It was not so much a piece of speculation about the nonexistence of God as it was a diagnosis of the civilization of his day. What Nietzsche meant was that humankind no longer believes in God. For all practical purposes, Western men and women have destroyed their faith in God; they have killed God.

Nietzsche concludes his madman episode that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and intoned the requiem *aeternam deo*. There he cried out “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?” (Nietzsche, 1974: §.125)

Nietzsche’s rationale to announce the death of God is seen with more force in the current human societies. With a very few exceptions, men and women live their lives as if there is no God and yet still carry on a profession of being religious habitually. In Nietzsche’s account, there is something tragically absurd about a man who is shocked by someone else’s atheism while it is impossible to discover any genuine religious faith within himself.

6. Human Situation after the Death of God

Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God did not mainly focus on the vacuum state of Christian religion. His main concern was on ethics. He observed that even though humans no longer believed in God, they had not yet become fully conscious of the extent of their unbelief. However, the morality of the Western world was still grounded on the principles of the Christian faith. Nietzsche realized that if the human civilization was to survive, humanity is in need of standards and values by which to abide by. But he also realized that traditional morality, that is, the morality of Western Europe, went hand in hand with the Christian faith. Nietzsche saw the inconsistency in the attitudes of the human beings; they have rejected God but accepted a morality grounded on the existence of God. That is why he dared to announce that God is dead and the human beings have killed him. What will happen when men and women finally understand that the foundations of Western morality are no longer there? The result would be the feeling of emptiness, darkness and frustration. Nietzsche’s special term for such realization is ‘nihilism’. (Nietzsche, 1974: §.347)

Nihilism is a condition in which all ultimate values lose their value. That is, traditional moral values will become meaningless with the knowledge that their logical ground 'God' is no more there and non-existent. Nietzsche feared that nihilism would result in the collapse of civilization. This is brought out well in the dialogue of Zarathustra with an aged Pope. (Nietzsche, 1982: IV, §.12) If Nietzsche's diagnosis is correct, a new foundation for morality is what is needed, because the old one has been destroyed. Nietzsche's thinking has to be understood as an attempt to provide a new foundation for values, by revaluing the values. In other words, the creation of new values must be accompanied by the contextual understanding of the current civilization.

Conclusion: A New Theology after Nietzsche's Obituary

Nietzsche's intellectual contribution has two sides: one is critical, where he takes the position of a strict enemy of Christianity; the other is positive, where he tries to promote a new human race from the doom of nihilism with an affirmation on life. Nietzsche attacks on Christianity as the cause for the real decadence of humanity is located within a specific horizon, that is, the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is within this framework we have to re-read his writings. He is a prophet of doom by his obituary of the 'death of God' and rejection of Christianity. However, traditional and the dogma based metaphysical God of Christian religion was already out of context for the Western civilization during his time. In this way he became

a pioneer in overcoming the nihilistic stage of meaninglessness and thus as a major contributor to the positive phase.

Central to Nietzsche's philosophy is the idea of life-affirmation, which involves an honest questioning of all doctrines in the context of human life situations. He believed and affirmed 'life', 'creativity' and 'context' of the concrete world rather than an abstract metaphysical world. His thoughts reflected his own contemporary civilization of Europe where materialism and science were proposing higher ideals to humanity and at the same time not being grounded in the contextual life situations of the ordinary people.

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The obituary that 'God is dead' and the advent of 'nihilism' as a result of it are in no way regarded by Nietzsche as final or terminal, but instead he sees them as the necessary precondition for a 'positive creative' stage of the human history. What he indirectly proposed was that if the believers are to realize the immanent and spiritual God, the external, structured and material God has to go away or 'die'. For him, the immanent God is creative, who can come and dance with the human beings and affirm life in the creatures as well. Though the Christian faith is based on the belief in one God, most of the believers are not sure who this God is. For many God is only a concept which the Judeo-Christian tradition has passed on. The foregone traditional theologies promoted a

passive, church-based and cult-centered God who may not be relevant for the present world. Therefore there is a serious invitation for all believers in God not to condemn Nietzsche for ‘killing God’, which is a passive and negative response, but to re-discover and resurrect this God. God must be contextualized, relevant to the current generation and active participant in the human struggles. This would be the active positive response to the Nietzsche’s obituary.

This requires a new formation of theology awakened from the dogmatic slumber created by the old traditional theologies. It is urgently needed for the contemporary civilization. The traditional theology as indicated earlier is a scientific study of God with a theocentric approach. Nevertheless this study of God with mere theocentrism has become a frozen and outdated study. The actual study of theology should include not only God but also the believer in that God. The God who is studied in theology is abstract and metaphysical. But the believer in that God is in de facto life situations and struggles of life. Therefore theology which is a study of God by the human beings should become contextual and life based. Its methodology should be mingled with theo-centric and anthropocentric perspectives. This is the new theology which is envisaged for the contemporary humanity after the serious announcement of the death of God. Nietzsche’s obituary about God’s death led to the formulation of the death of God philosophy. As a response to its gravity a new theology is in formation which is widely named as the death of God theology.

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