



# "GOD IS DEAD"

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Aphorism 125 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* is the epiphanic place of nihilism, connected with de-divinization, with the *Gottes Tod*, with the "death of God." Unlike the scientific and anti-metaphysical discourse that developed in the space of the modern, Nietzsche did not affirm the non-existence of God, arguing it perhaps more geometrically. On the contrary, he alluded to the death of God and, therefore, to his decline; or, more correctly, to the evaporation of an order of values and ontology that found its ultimate foundation in the figure of God. In the words of *The Gay Science*:

"Who has given us the sponge to erase the horizon completely? What have we done to unhook this earth from the chain of its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Is not ours an eternal fall? And backward, sideways, forward, to all sides? Is there still an above and a below? Are we not wandering as if through an infinite nothingness? Do we not feel the breath of emptiness upon us? Is it not colder? Does not night keep coming, ever more night?"

The Nietzschean phenomenology of the death of God alludes to the cancellation of the entire horizon of meaning around which Western civilization was oriented, now at the mercy of an "eternal fall" and an "infinite nothingness" that leads it to ruin without references, without values and in an "empty space": "Is there still an above and a below?" Or, more generally, a solid point of reference for orientation in the Babel spaces of the de-divinized world devoid of foundations? For the sake of philological rigor, it is worth remembering that the death of God, before Nietzsche, figures in the work of Hegel—in *Faith and Knowledge* (1802), Hegel writes, in fact, that the sentiment on which the religion of the moderns rests is crystallized in the formula: "God himself is dead" (*Gott selbst ist tot*). In the opinion of the Heidegger of *Holzwege*, it is also the first recorded appearance of this formula in the history of Western thought.

Following in Nietzsche's footsteps, the decisive question is not whether God exists or not, but whether he is alive or dead; that is, whether or not a world of meaning and project, of meanings and symbols, is organized around the idea of God. The nihilism of the death of God does not coincide, therefore, with the subjective gesture of one who, like the fool in *Psalms* 52, denies the existence of God (*dixit insipiens in corde suo "non est Deus"*). Instead, he alludes to the historical process of devaluation of all values, to the decline of the horizon of meaning around which Western civilization was organized: a process at the end of which nothing remains of God and being. With Heidegger's grammar, "the nihil of nihilism means that there is nothing of being," and that, we may add in the Nietzschean way, there is nothing of God either. Thus writes Nietzsche in the posthumously published fragments:

"What I describe is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming...: the rise of nihilism.... What does nihilism mean? It means that the supreme values are devalued. They lack purpose. The answer to "why?" is missing.... So, we cannot postulate any "beyond" or any "in-itself" of things. Value is missing, meaning is missing.... Result [of this devaluation]: moral judgments of value are... negations: morality is to turn one's back on the will to exist."

*Die Heraufkunft des Nihilismus*, "the rise of nihilism" is what Nietzsche describes *in statu nascendi* his own epoch, prophesying the dominant character it will acquire in the history to come ("the history of the next two centuries"). In addition to outlining its development, Nietzsche highlights some defining features of the phenomenon of nihilism. First, he emphasizes its processual character—nihilism is not a "fact," but a process that has begun and is in the process of development, the logic of which consists in the fact that *die obersten Werte sich entwerten*, "the supreme values are devalued." By virtue of this Umwertung, "the end" (*das Ziel*), the answer to "why" (*wozu*), value, meaning, the beyond and the in-itself of things, morality are missing. Everything rushes into the abyss of meaninglessness, as nothingness devours every thing and every project, every meaning and every value. And, in this way, Western man finds himself condemned to live in the nihil of a civilization in which God is dead and there is no longer any answer to the fundamental questions, which are no longer even asked.

As in the film, *The Neverending Story* (1984), based on the book of the same name, nothingness has devoured all reality and all ideals. This is the horizon of meaning; or rather, of the meaninglessness of the postmodern era, perpetually suspended between "passive nihilism" and "active nihilism," theorized by Nietzsche, who understood the latter as an overcoming of the former. In the postmodern era, as has been stressed, active nihilism and passive nihilism coexist as a depressive disenchantment of those who no longer believe in anything and a consumerist superhumanism of those who make their own being and their own power coincide with purchasing power in the market. With the death of God, the sun goes out, understood in its double sense: a) as the center of gravity around which life revolves, now at the mercy of disorientation and estrangement (*Entfremdung*); and b) as a source of energy capable of illuminating and heating the life of mortals. The sun, which Plato assumed in *The Republic* as the image of the "good in itself" (αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν) and as "beyond essence surpassing it in dignity and power" (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεία καίαιον), is extinguished. And there remains only the icy darkness of the de-divinized reality, mere background available without limits for the processes of usability and transformation of the techno-nihilistic will to power.

The desolate scenario of the dark desert of the "night of the world" (*Weltnacht*) arises—darkness falls

upon the world and humans do not perceive the absence of God as a lack, even mocking those who, like the Nietzschean madman, distant heir of Plato's liberated caveman, dare to pose the problem of the Gottes Tod. In fact, the madman, when he announces in the market the death of God, provokes "great laughter":

"Where has God gone?" He exclaimed. "I'll tell you! We have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers! But how did we do it? How could we empty the sea, drinking it to the last drop?"

The murder of God coincides with the process of devaluation of values and consumption of being: a process by which, in the end, there is nothing left of values and being, since everything—at the material and immaterial level—becomes a fund made available by the technocapitalist will to power, which trades and exchanges, produces, markets and consumes everything.

In the time of *Vollendung*, of the "fulfillment" of metaphysics in planetary technic, what survives is only a grandiose apparatus which, arranging everything in view of its own unlimited power, Heidegger himself interprets as the *Weltbild*, the fundamental "world image," within which the figure of the modern Weltmarkt, of the "global market," the culmination of technique and nihilism, can be constituted. Thus writes Heidegger in "What are poets good for in times of misery?":

"The humanness of humans and the thingness of things is lost within the self-asserting manufacturing (*des sich durchsetzenden Herstellens*), in the calculated market value of a market (*in den gerechneten Marktwert eines Marktes*), which not only spans the earth as a world market, but which markets as the will to will in the essence of being (*im Wesen des Seins marktet*) and thus brings everything that exists into the action of a calculation, which rules most tenaciously where it does not need numbers."

Being and values are consumed, and in their place survives the post-metaphysical disorientation, the "absence of homeland" (*Heimatlosigkeit*), evoked by Heidegger, and the fall into an endless abyss. The ontology of capital is nihilistic, insofar as it presupposes that being is not, and that there are only entities available for the processes of techno-scientific manipulation, oriented to excessive growth. Likewise, its morality is nihilistic and relativistic, since it is based on the universal negotiability of values, which all precipitate into nothingness and become relative to the only surviving value—the exchange value of a market that has as its objective nothing but the unlimited self-empowerment of the device of the *Wille*

*zur Macht*, of the "will to power."

The Nietzschean thesis of the death of God has had, moreover, an important repercussion in the theological field; and this according to a spectrum of positions, ranging from Karl Barth's theology of crisis to Bultmann's theology of demythologization, from Bonhoeffer's theology of κένωσις (or "emptying") to the so-called "theologians of the death of God." The thesis generally shared by these authors, although quite different from each other, is that secularization is complete, man is mature and, therefore, no longer needs God. In Bonhoeffer's words: "The world lives and suffices itself, in science, in social life and politics, in art, in morals, in religion. Man has learned to fend for himself, without recourse to the working hypothesis: God.... We have seen that it goes on—exactly as before—even without God." There is no doubt. The time of the death of God coincides with that of absolutized nihilistic relativism; that is, with the "dictatorship of relativism," as Joseph Ratzinger has defined it.

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**Featured:** "Lamentation of the Virgin," by the Rohan Master, from the *Hours of the Cross*, folio 135, plate 57; painted in 1435.

