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Michael Peters

*University of Auckland, New Zealand, ma.peters@auckland.ac.nz*

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## Orthos Logos, Recta Ratio: Pope John Paul II, Nihilism, and Postmodern Philosophy

[Michael Peters](#)

University of Auckland,  
New Zealand

I appeal also to *philosophers*, and to all *teachers of philosophy*, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth – metaphysical truth included – which is proper to philosophical inquiry.

John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, # 106 (151)

God is dead; but given the way of men, there may be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. <sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #109 (167)

### Introduction

1. On a recent trip to Roma, my wife and I played the ‘good’ tourists – ‘good,’ at least, for any person from a Christian culture – making the ritual visit to the Basilica at San Pietro, the Sistine Chapel, and the Vatican Library. Like many others before us, we were overwhelmed by the wealth, the cultural riches, the sheer splendor, variety, craftsmanship and dedicated artistry of the buildings and the exhibits. We walked through the great Basilica, marveling at the scale, the sumptuous detail, the marble in-laid floors, the frescoes, the paintings, and other artwork that adorn and help constitute all aspects of Christian religious practice. We also toured the Treasury in the Basilica with its seemingly inexhaustible presentations of some of the world’s most beautiful art treasures: bejeweled crucifixes and chalices, the most exquisite tapestries dating from earliest times, relics and reliquaries adorned with precious stones, vestments and cloaks embroidered in silk thread, and all manner of religious iconography.

2. One of my favorite pieces was the Tomba di Papa Sisto IV, commissioned by Di Guilo della Rovere Guilo II, and completed by the artist Antonio Pollaiuolo in 1493, in the time before Columbus ‘discovered’ the New World. The tomb is surrounded by depictions of the seven virtues and the ten ‘sciences’ in the form of the nine Muses, with the addition of ‘la Propeptiva’: the Trivio (*grammatica, retorica, dialettica*), the Quadrivio (*arithmetic, geometrica, musica, astronomia*), and with *theologia* and *philosophia* symbolically located at the head of the entombed figure. Reason has always had a strong relationship to the Catholic faith.

3. The next day, we returned to Città del Vaticano to visit the Sistine Chapel. We walked through the long, massive corridors, entry-ways, and chambers of the Sistine Hall, and, along with masses of other people from all over the world, made our way to the chapel itself. There are words to describe this tourist experience, but few adequate ones to describe the works of Michelangelo on display, which remain spiritually sublime in that region of the human experience where art and religion fuse horizons. The experience of ‘religio-tourism’, now a specialist field in its own right, was in some respects quite daunting. The ‘throughput’ was astounding, and at every major junction or turning point was a gift shop selling every conceivable kind of copy, replica, or model: paintings, pages from illuminated manuscripts, photos of buildings and architecture, books of all shapes and sizes, trinkets, and broaches. The Catholic Church has generally entertained a happy relationship to money and, somewhat later, to capitalism – a relationship that maintains its worldly as well as spiritual position, and one that, in the history of the Church, has not always reflected well upon it.

4. Overcome with these images, riches, and experiences, one cannot help reflect on the role that the Church has played in the development of Western culture. Indeed, such reflections are nothing more than idle truisms. It is not possible to contemplate the past of the West without this heritage, whatever one might think about its role in defining our future. The Church’s relationship to philosophy (and theology) must be high upon any historical agenda designed to assess such influence. Indeed, is it possible to think of post-Socratic philosophy without thinking of Catholic theologians, thinkers, and philosophers? It is, perhaps, easier in this age of increasingly secular education and culture to speak of the strands of contemporary philosophy or modes of thought that, despite their historical genealogies, are not Catholic or Christian. One might mention, for example, forms of non-Christian phenomenology and existentialism, Marxism, ‘scientific’ philosophy, most analytical and linguistic philosophy, non-scriptural and non-Christian hermeneutics, non-Christian religious philosophies (Islam, Judaism, Confucianism), much of contemporary liberal political philosophy, non-Christian humanist philosophies, and, more recently, a range of emergent philosophies that have developed out of contemporary social and cultural movements – feminisms, eco-philosophies, revitalized indigenous or traditional philosophies, and philosophies of decolonization. In addition, it is possible to talk broadly of those evolving forms of European formalism – structuralism and poststructuralism – and, even, of ‘postmodern’ philosophies, if I can use this broad, imprecise, and contentious term.

5. Equipped with this list, it might be tempting to conclude that the most salient feature of these contemporary developments in Western philosophy is precisely that they represent a sustained break with the Church and its influence, with Christianity, and with its historical legacy. Indeed, one interpretation that suggests itself is the neat categorization of Western philosophy into a triptych (ancient, medieval, modern) or, better, into four: the pre-Socratics, the Socratics, Catholic-Christian, and post-Christian. This kind of periodization is, of course, problematic, insofar as it accepts a kind of time-referencing based upon a linear and historically progressive concept. It is possible that Catholic or Christian philosophers in the future will develop hybrid forms: there is nothing inherently contradictory, say, about Christian feminism, or Christian ‘scientific’ philosophy, or even Christian postmodern philosophy, as much of the literature on postmodern theology would seem to demonstrate.

6. On the first day of our ‘religio-tourism’, we visited the Basilica bookshop to purchase a copy of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*, delivered to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the relationship between faith and reason. The letter, as the Pope writes, was “given in Rome, at Saint Peter’s, on 14 September, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, in the year 1998, the twentieth year of my Pontificate” (154). In terms of the Church’s relationship to contemporary philosophy, there is no better text than *Fides et Ratio*. In this article, I will first review and discuss the argument of the letter in general. Secondly, I will briefly sketch Pope John Paul II’s argument concerning the relationship of the Church to philosophy. Finally, starting from Nietzsche’s “death of God,” I will provide an account of postmodern philosophy and nihilism that contests the Holy Father’s interpretation, while, at the same time, suggesting lines of possible debate between Catholic theologians and postmodern philosophers.

7. Pope John Paul II suggests that postmodernism appears on the horizon at this point in history as a form of nihilism, resulting from the crisis of rationalism, for which Catholic theology provides the precisely correct philosophical antidote: self-certainty and absolute values based upon faith in the truth of personal existence sought in relation to God. He writes:

As a result of the crisis of rationalism, what has appeared finally is *nihilism*. As a philosophy of nothingness, it has a certain attraction for people of our time. Its adherents claim that the search is an end in itself, without any hope or possibility of ever attaining the goal of truth. In the nihilistic interpretation, life is no more than an occasion for sensations and experiences in which the ephemeral has pride of place. Nihilism is at the root of the widespread mentality which claims that a definite commitment should no longer be made, because everything is fleeting and provisional (71).

Modern philosophy, he says, has abandoned the investigation of being to concentrate on knowing. This move accentuates the limited capacity to know rather than the use of knowledge to reach the truth, leading to forms of agnosticism, relativism and pluralism. The Pope argues, “A legitimate pluralism of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of the most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in the truth” (10). Against the ‘postmodern’ nihilistic view, Pope John Paul II pits a set of absolute values based upon the radical question of truth about personal existence, about being, and about God. He reaffirms the truth of faith and the faith in truth as a foundation for personal and communal life, suggesting that a core of philosophical insight in the history of thought has revealed certain principles as a “spiritual heritage of humanity” – an *implicit philosophy* – which all schools should use as a reference-point. He includes the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, certain fundamental moral norms (unspecified) “which are shared by all,” as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth, and goodness. This is what he calls “right reason”:

Once reason successfully intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being and correctly draws from them conclusions which are coherent both logically and ethically, then it may be called right reason or, as the ancients called it, *orthos logos, recta ratio* (8).

8. My difficulty with the Pope's argument is that he does not sufficiently distinguish among the different kinds of modern philosophy or, indeed, between postmodernism and poststructuralism.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he falsely attributes *nihilism* to 'postmodern' philosophy when, at least in the case of Friedrich Nietzsche, it is nihilism that must be overcome. For Nietzsche, nihilism is a consequence of the fact that, as his madman announces, "God is dead." In other words, God and all transcendental truths are no longer believable. God has died because humans have become too weak to sustain their belief in him. God has died out of *pity* for human weakness. It is the imperative of Nietzsche's figure of the philosopher-artist, in face of nihilism – of suicide, pessimism, cultural dissolution and fragmentation – to *create* new values. It is also the case that those who follow in Nietzsche's footsteps – including Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault – are fundamentally concerned with the history and meaning of being (as the history of Western metaphysics) and with the question of value. These contemporary philosophers, as Pope John Paul II suggests, investigate "the philosophy of being," but they pursue their lines of inquiry in such ways that cast doubt upon the very concept of the (humanist) "free person" to which Pope John Paul II appeals. I shall elaborate these kinds of difficulties with the Pope's interpretation in the final section of the paper.

### *Fides et Ratio*

#### The Invitation and the Challenge

Philosophical thought is often the only ground for understanding and dialogue with those who do not share our faith. The current ferment in philosophy demands . . . an attentive and competent commitment, . . . to discern the expectations, the points of openness and the key issues of this historical moment (148).

9. The Supreme Pontiff's encyclical letter ought not to be dismissed by philosophers too quickly or in summary fashion. The text is even-handed and, as one would expect from such an august authority, it is historically well informed and built on a genuine concern for humanity. Further still, it is clear that John Paul II's letter is motivated by the major problems that face humanity and the world in the next millenium. His specific intentions to encourage a better relationship between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, in order to develop a "planetary ethics," ought not to be considered by philosophers or scientists as quaint or hopelessly out of date. *Il Papa* is kind to philosophers, though he castigates the direction of contemporary thought for its *nihilistic* tendencies, for its lack of concern for truth and the traditional metaphysical questions of the meaning of life. Nevertheless, he valorizes and confirms the significance of philosophy in the development and formation of cultures.

10. John Paul II's letter is important for philosophers for the simple reason that it represents the first time a Pope has addressed himself to the question of philosophy for over a hundred years. Not since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter, *Aeterni Patris* (4 August 1879), "the one papal document . . . devoted entirely to philosophy" (87), has the Church systematically addressed issues and questions of direct concern to philosophy. While the Holy Father's primary concern is specifically the relationship between faith and reason, the present encyclical also distinguishes "the different faces of truth" (28-35), describes the historical "drama of the separation of faith and reason" (45-48), defines "the Church's interest in philosophy" (57-63), comments upon "the demands of philosophical reason" (72-74), and identifies the "different stances of philosophy" (75-79). In addition, there ought to be much of interest for philosophers in John Paul II's comments upon theology and its relationship to philosophy. Although contemporary philosophers, especially 'postmodernists,' might be a little scornful of his transparent use of the history of philosophy to buttress the values of the Catholic religion, they should nonetheless welcome his courage in speaking to a group that can be characterized, in many instances, as highly specialized, narrowly focused upon technical questions, separated from the rest of culture, and academically over-professionalized. Philosophers may well question his uncritical and unreflective faith in a narrative of philosophy as an historical 'journey' towards the ultimate truth of revelation, a single and unified narrative that leads to Catholic values as the apex of Western cultural development. Still, we should welcome his metanarrative and engage in debate constructively.

11. Indeed, I believe that many of his criticisms of contemporary philosophy are well deserved, and that philosophy, especially because of its alleged intellectual autonomy, urgently needs to be held to account for its record in contributing to the betterment of humanity and the world. John Paul II, for instance, recognizes the contradiction that goes to the heart of the philosophical institution (even though in terms of faith or theology he risks a performative contradiction) – namely, the temptation and mistake "of identifying one single stream with the whole of philosophy" (7). He also criticizes contemporary philosophy for its lack of historical self-understanding (especially in relation to the so-called *wisdom literature*), its narrow instrumentalization, its abandonment of "the investigation of being" in favor of the question of human knowing, its ignoring of "the radical question of truth about personal existence," its emphasis on the *limits* of human reason and capacity to know the truth, and its agnosticism, relativism, and skepticism (10-11).

#### The Narrative of Western Philosophy: The Separation between Faith and Reason

12. Pope John Paul II addresses the question of the relationship between faith and reason in Chapter IV, after a sequence of chapters entitled, "The Revelation of God's Wisdom" (Chapter I), "*Credo Ut Intellegam*" (Chapter II, where He examines the so-called wisdom literature), and "*Intellego Ut Credam*" (Chapter III, in which He describes the search for truth and its different faces). It is worth dwelling briefly on the contents of Chapter III, for it is in this section that the Pope defines the human being as "*the one who seeks the truth*" (45). This he does on the basis of appeals to both Aristotle and St Augustine, by arguing that all human beings desire to know, and that truth is the proper object of this desire (40). Truth first comes to us as a question, "Does life have a meaning?" and truth presents itself as a universal. As he continues, "the first absolutely certain truth of our life, beyond the fact that we exist, is the inevitability of our death" (42-43). Yet beyond these universal truths, we seek an absolute, a supreme value or final explanation that will give our search for meaning an ultimate ground.

13. The Holy Father distinguishes between several different modes of truth: (1) scientific truth, which is confirmed through experimentation; (2) truth that is proper to everyday life, which, he says, is dependent upon immediate evidence; (3) philosophical truth, which is attained through speculation, and, finally, (4) religious truth, which is grounded in philosophy and which, through the various religious traditions, offers answers to ultimate questions. Pope John Paul II also appeals to the notion of the *unity of truth* that he describes as a fundamental premise of human reasoning. It is on the basis of this unity that he claims the "Truth which God reveals to us in Jesus Christ . . . [that] is not opposed to the truths which philosophy perceives" (51). It is at this point that Pope John Paul II examines the links between faith and philosophy in the course of history in order to arrive at a set of principles to establish the correct link between the two.<sup>3</sup>

14. Pope John Paul II recounts important moments in the encounter of faith and reason: the engagement of the Apostles with Epicurean and Stoic thought, the christianizing of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, the synthesis devised by Augustine, the scholastic theology of Anselm, and the originality of Aquinas. It is only with the growth of the first universities during the late medieval period that the separation between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, occurred. The unity between reason and faith was destroyed by a system of rational knowledge that took the place of faith. Most of modern philosophy, we are told, has taken this rationalist route, moving further away from Christian revelation. Hegelian idealism, dialectical materialism, and atheistic humanism "presented themselves as new religions" which, on the socio-political plane, "gave rise to totalitarian systems which have been disastrous for humanity" (70). In science, positivism divorced itself from metaphysics and any ethical orientation, abandoning the Christian worldview. At its worst it succumbed to the logic of the market, serving as a handmaiden to technological 'progress.' The crisis of rationalism in both its Hegelian and positivistic forms has finally led to nihilism. The search for truth has been abandoned, and some philosophers have sought instead "a subjective certainty" or a "pragmatic sense of utility" (72-73). It is this growing separation between faith and reason that the encyclical aims to address.<sup>4</sup> As Pope John Paul writes:

Deprived of what Revelation offers, reason has taken sidetracks which expose it to the danger of losing sight of its final goal. Deprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition (73)

His self-appointed task is nothing more than a restoration of a harmonious and creative relationship between theology and philosophy.

#### The Magisterium's Interventions

15. While the Pope points out that the Church has no philosophy of its own, it has nonetheless offered warnings against the "wrong turns" modern philosophy has taken. Censures have been delivered against all forms of fideism, radical traditionalism, ontologism, Marxism (including forms of liberation theology based upon it), evolutionism, existentialism, historicism, and rationalism. Pope John Paul II's concern is that certain past problems have returned. He is particularly concerned by the "deep-seated distrust of

reason" surfacing in talk about "the end of metaphysics" (83). There are also signs of a resurgence of both rationalism and fideism in contemporary theologies.<sup>5</sup> In short, he argues, "There are signs of a widespread distrust of universal and absolute statements, especially among those who think that truth is born of consensus and not of a consonance between intellect and objective reality" (86). The Pope calls for a renewal of philosophical inquiry.

16. Pope John Paul II details philosophy's contribution to dogmatic, fundamental and moral theology, and describes its different stances with regard to Christian faith. He then outlines philosophy's current requirements and tasks (Chapter VII). First, given that we face a "crisis of meaning" and a "fragmentation of knowledge," philosophy needs to recover its role as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life (119). Second, it must verify the human capacity to *know the truth* and attain knowledge of an objective reality. These two imply the third requirement: "the need for a philosophy of genuine metaphysical range, capable, that is, of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth" (122).

17. The dangers that lie in contemporary currents of thought are named by the Pope as eclecticism, scientism, pragmatism, and a historicism that tends to appear as 'modernism'. It is the nihilist interpretation that acts as "the common framework of many philosophies that have rejected the meaningfulness of being." Pope John Paul II reserves his greatest criticism for this nihilist interpretation because it denies all foundation, negates all objective truth, and thereby denies humanity and the identity of human beings. It is at this point that Pope John Paul II is clearest in respect to so-called postmodern philosophy and I shall quote the full paragraph:

Our age has been termed by some thinkers the age of 'postmodernity'. Often used in very different contexts, the term designates the emergence of a complex of new factors which, widespread and powerful as they are, have shown themselves able to produce important and lasting changes. The term was first used with reference to aesthetic, social and technological phenomena. It was then transposed into the philosophical field, but has remained somewhat ambiguous, both because judgement on what is called 'postmodern' is sometimes positive and sometimes negative, and because there is yet no consensus on the delicate question of the demarcation of the different historical periods. One thing however is certain: the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention. According to some of them, the time of certainties is past, and the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral. In their destructive critique of every certitude, several authors have failed to make crucial distinctions and have called into question the certitudes of faith (133).

Pope John Paul II continues: "This *nihilism* has been justified in a sense by the terrible experience of evil which has marked our age. Such a dramatic experience has ensured the collapse of rationalist optimism, which viewed history as the triumphant progress of reason, the source of happiness and freedom; and now, at the end of this century, one of our greatest threats is the temptation to despair" (133-4, my emphasis).

18. It is against this generalized description of our times that Pope John Paul II proceeds to lay down the current tasks for theology, the chief purpose of which is to "provide an understanding of Revelation and the content of faith" (136). He concludes by appealing to theologians, to philosophers, to teachers of philosophy, and to scientists to help recover the unity of truth that he perceives as so necessary in moving from phenomena to foundation as the greatest challenge that humanity faces at the end of this millennium.

### Friedrich Nietzsche: The Death of God and Postmodern Philosophy

19. Pope John Paul II talks of the crisis of meaning and the fragmentation of knowledge as aspects of nihilism, a philosophy of nothing where life is comprised only of sensations and experiences and where there can be no faith or commitment because everything is provisional and uncertain. He attributes this nihilism to postmodern philosophy, no doubt with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in mind (though Nietzsche is never explicitly named at any point in the encyclical). Nietzsche is often taken as the grandfather of postmodern philosophy, and as *the* thinker whose influence has been decisive on the 'movement' of contemporary French philosophy sometimes referred to as 'poststructuralism' (see Schrift, 1995, 1996). And yet, as can be seen from the above quotation where Pope John Paul II refers to 'postmodernity', his analysis is far from being dismissive or condemnatory. He is, it might be said, gentle and even-handed, suggesting -- surprisingly perhaps -- that "the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention" (133).<sup>6</sup>

20. Accounts of so-called postmodern philosophy that attribute its source and power of inspiration to Nietzsche typically begin with Nietzsche's revelation that "God is dead." Often on the basis of a rudimentary understanding of this remark, commentators falsely attribute a nihilism to Nietzsche (and to postmodern philosophy), as though Nietzsche was *advocating* nihilism as a philosophy. Nothing could be further from Nietzsche's purpose. While it is the case for Nietzsche that nihilism proceeds as a consequence from the fact that "God is dead," it is also the starting point for a philosophy of the future that promotes the reevaluation of all values "to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity," aimed at "growth, power, life" (1974: 35). It is also the case that those who follow Nietzsche, particularly Heidegger, but also those contemporary French philosophers we call 'poststructuralists,' sympathetically understand Nietzsche's philosophy as a basis to overcome the desire to substitute any surrogate or replacement for God as the transcendental truth, centre, or eternal guarantee for morality and self-certainty. And this is so, whether that replacement be Reason, Science, or -- perhaps the greatest temptation of all -- the Human. This Nietzschean trope, along with methodological concerns of structuralism as applied in linguistics and the social sciences, is the source of inspiration for the alleged anti-humanism of Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and many others (see Peters, 2000).

21. Nietzsche's famous parable and formulation occurs at #125 in *The Gay Science*, where the madman runs into the marketplace with a lantern in the early morning, crying repeatedly, "I seek God!," only to be laughed at and ridiculed by bystanders. The madman asks again "Whither is God?" and continues: "I will tell you. *We have killed him -- you and I!*" (1974: 181). After an extended poetic elaboration and questioning of this momentous event, the madman finally throws down his lantern and says: "I have come too early . . . my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way. . . . This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars -- *and yet they have done it to themselves!*" (182). At the very least, the statement must be understood, as Walter Kaufmann indicates, in relation to a reading of the relevant sections from #108 to #125 (n1, 167), but also, I would maintain, in relation to reformulations of the "death of God" that occur in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Anti-Christ*, and *The Will to Power* (though I shall restrict myself here to *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*).

22. The relevant passages in *The Gay Science* begin by discussing "our aesthetic anthropomorphisms" that characterize our beliefs that the world is a living being, and the universe a machine, when the character of the world is, in fact, "in all eternity chaos," understood as "a lack of order" (#109, 168). Nietzsche says there are only *necessities* in nature: "there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know there are no purposes, you also no that there is no accident. . . . There are no eternally enduring substances" (168). And Nietzsche ends his 'scientific' observation with two important questions: "When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to 'naturalize' humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?" (169) Nietzsche's goal here is clearly the naturalization of humanity, of knowledge and 'morality' -- the de-deification of humanity, science, nature and morality. His discussion thereafter of the origin of knowledge, of logic, and of cause and effect, extends to the moral sphere, and is essentially a discussion of the way in which humans have been educated through his "four errors" of anthropomorphism. Yet science and the growth of knowledge in the past have always been viewed simply as a means to the striving for virtue (in ancient times, "the health of *one's* soul"), an observation he credits to both the moral skepticism in Christianity and Pope Leo X. Nietzsche says: "it is something new in history that knowledge wants to be more than a mere means" (180).

23. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, one finds many references to "God is dead" and a consistent series of attacks on the forms of nihilism of Nietzsche's own time (see particularly, "Of the Chairs of Virtue" and "Of the Preachers of Death"). The second section of Zarathustra's *Prologue* begins with reference to its classic formulation, and, in the following section, elaborates the notion of the de-deification of humanity -- that the meaning of life is to be found in purely human terms. The first part also ends with a reference to the death of God -- "*All Gods are dead!*" -- and a restatement of the doctrine of the *Overman*, which, together with the eternal recurrence of the same and the will to power, constitute the main themes of *Zarathustra*.

24. In "On Blissful Islands" (Part Two), Nietzsche reintroduces the theme again with an emphasis on the notion that God is a *supposition*, before turning to a more robust exposure of different forms of nihilism. In the section "Retired From Service" of Part Four, Zarathustra meets an old man -- the last pope -- who agrees with him that "the old God in whom all the world once believed no longer lives" (1961: 271), and that he died of *pity* (272). Nietzsche historicizes the concept of God, suggesting that "When he was young, this god from the orient" was vengeful, and that much later he became mellow like an old grandfather (273).



25. There is considerable disagreement in interpretation concerning the status of Nietzsche's "death of God" pronouncement. The fable of the "Madman" has been taken as an attack on "the adherents of secularized versions of the old Christian moral ideal" (Salaquarda: 102). The bystanders listening to the madman display a curious kind of "bad faith." While convinced by historical criticism of biblical texts about the mythical presuppositions of Christianity, these bystanders, who no longer believe, nevertheless retain the underlying Christian morality. Nietzsche's historical and genealogical criticisms of Christianity, said to reveal a purely reactive morality of resentment, are to be replaced by an active morality of self-expression and self-overcoming, based upon a "revaluation of all values." Christian theologians, however, as Salaquarda notes, have been able to defend Christianity against Nietzsche's type of genetic criticism by employing a distinction between the fundamental notion of faith and criticism that may reveal historical inaccuracies of Scripture.

26. Even Martin Heidegger's monumental *Nietzsche* (1961/1991) equivocates over Nietzsche's meaning, suggesting that Nietzsche is not attacking the Christian God of biblical revelation but only a misrepresentation of God in metaphysical ontotheology (Ingraffia). Heidegger himself grew up as a Catholic, went to a Catholic boarding school, and entered the Jesuit novitiate in Tisis, before studying theology and philosophy at Freiburg. He received a scholarship for the study of Catholic philosophy, though missed out on the chair in Catholic philosophy, and finally broke with "the system of Catholicism" in 1919 (Safranski). It is no wonder, then, that Heidegger has been accused of 'reading back' upon the early Greeks the categories of Catholic theology, in particular the *kairological* and *kerygmatic* conceptions of human existence (Caputo: 280). Though he broke with "the system of Catholicism," he nevertheless influenced a whole generation of Catholic theologians, including Gustav Siewerth, Johannes Lotz, and Karl Rahner – as well as Rudolf Bultmann and the Protestant existential theologians. This he did not only through his early argument that theology is a science of faith (quite separate from philosophy) -- "of existing faith-fully" -- but also through his later "thinking," which Heidegger suggested, did not rule out a "nonmetaphysical relationship to God" (Caputo: 279, 285).

27. In the final volume of his *Nietzsche*, Heidegger traces the philosophical use of the word nihilism to Friedrich Jacobi, later to Turgenev, Jean Paul, and Dostoevsky. Against these early uses, Heidegger claims:

Nietzsche uses *nihilism* as the name for the historical movement that he was the first to recognize and that already governed the previous century while defining the century to come, the movement whose essential interpretation he concentrates in the terse sentence: "God is dead." That is to say, "the Christian God" has lost His power over beings and over the determination of man. "Christian God" also stands for the "transcendent" in general in its various meanings -- for "ideals" and "norms," "principles" and "rules," "ends" and "values," which are set "above" the being, in order to give being as a whole a purpose, and order, and -- as it is succinctly expressed -- "meaning" (1961, IV: 4).

For Heidegger, drawing heavily on the fragments of *The Will To Power*, Nietzsche's sense of nihilism is interpreted in terms of the historical process completing the *modern* era, culminating in the "end of metaphysics" and a "revaluation [that] thinks Being for the first time as value" (IV:6).

28. Heidegger's essay "Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being" (1961, Vol. IV) builds upon Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's nihilism as the collapse of "cosmological" values (unity, purpose, truth, Being), a humanization of metaphysics and morality, and, thus, the fulfillment of a metaphysics of subjectivity. It also clearly maps out Heidegger's judgement that Nietzsche never successfully engages the *nihil* -- as that which *conceals* the truth of the Being of beings. This carries the strong implication for Heidegger, that Nietzsche's nihilism can never overcome nihilism because it proclaims there is nothing to Being that has become a value. Heidegger writes:

Nietzsche's metaphysics is not an overcoming of nihilism. It is the ultimate entanglement in nihilism. Through value thinking in terms of the will to power, it of course continues to acknowledge beings as such. But, by tying itself to an interpretation of Being as value, it simultaneously binds itself to the impossibility of even casting a glance at Being as Being (IV: 203).

Nietzsche's thought is "negative ontotheology," unable to think *unconcealment* as the truth of Being. Nietzsche is considered the "last metaphysician," and it remains for Heidegger himself to initiate a thinking that encounters Being in withdrawal and, thereby, to "step back" out of metaphysics into the history of being.

29. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger have been important thinkers influencing contemporary thought and especially Continental philosophy, although also increasingly Anglo-American philosophy. Much has been made of the Nietzsche-Heidegger connection and Heidegger's *Nietzsche* as a source of inspiration for postwar French philosophy (see Peters, Marshall, & Smeys). It is also the case, however, that interpretations of Nietzsche by Bataille, Deleuze, Klossowsky, Derrida, Kofman, and Irigaray, either owe little directly to Heidegger's *Nietzsche* or take issue with its totalizing account of the history of metaphysics, emphasizing by contrast

Nietzsche's rhetorical strategies and multiplicity of styles, the difference of force and power, the playfulness of interpretative multiplicity, and what Derrida calls "the axial intention of [Nietzsche's] concept of interpretation": the emancipation of interpretation from the constraints of truth "which always implies the presence of the signified (*aletheia* or *adequatio*)" (Shrift, 1995: 335).

30. Pope John Paul II's representation of postmodern philosophy as *nihilistic* requires a more thoughtful and nuanced response that takes into account the history of the concept of nihilism (see Gillespie), its appropriation and place in the thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and its subsequent influence for contemporary Continental philosophy. Only on the basis of an understanding of this history and a productive encounter with the *nihil*, is it possible to recognize the theological implications of postmodern philosophy, in both its metaphysical and anti-metaphysical expressions, and the potential for a dialogue or on-going conversation between philosophy and theology.

31. Simon Critchley argues that it is the Christian *reactive* response to the all-too-human origin of our values in declaring existence or life meaningless that is the real source of nihilism. That is, once the transcendental guarantees of Christian morality and grand expectations based upon them have collapsed or been exposed for what they really are, an active nihilism ensues. And yet the same genealogical critique, the loss of faith in the categories of reason, can also inspire a revolutionary demand for things to be different. Critchley tells the story of contemporary Continental philosophy by narratively crafting the importance of central notions of *practice*, *critique* of the present, the production of *crisis* (especially in relation to modernity), and *anti-scientism* (as a modernist metanarrative) in defining a tradition that recognizes the essential historicity of philosophy and, therefore, also the radical finitude of the human subject and the contingent character of human experience. Post-Nietzschean philosophy not only provides a critique of the rational, autonomous (Christian-liberal) subject but also redirects our attention to historical sources of normativity that are embedded in cultures. It provides, in other words, a path for moral reconstruction after the so-called "death of God" -- a way forward and a positive response to the question of nihilism that demands the reevaluation of values. In doing so it belongs to the counter-enlightenment tradition of thought that asserts the historicity of human reason and experience on the basis of a radical questioning of the transcendental guarantee and moral authority of God, and of all possible substitutes for God (Humanity, Reason, Science, the transcendental signifier).

32. For Critchley, Nietzsche stands at the crossroads that defines the difference between analytic and Continental philosophy. He suggests, "it is arguable that much of the difference between analytic and Continental philosophy simply turns on *how* one reads Kant and *how much* Kant one reads" (356) -- that is, whether one is solely concerned with the epistemological issues of the First Critique, or whether one is prepared to entertain the systematic ambitions, in addition, of the Third Critique, and consider worthy of study Kant's attempt to bridge Understanding and Reason through a critique of Judgement -- the reconciliation of freedom and necessity. For Critchley, Nietzsche provides the critical response through his concept of nihilism which is decisive for a whole generation of critical thinkers from Heidegger and Adorno to Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, namely that

the recognition of the subject's freedom goes hand in hand with the collapse of moral certainty in the world, that the highest values have devalued themselves. Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that was posited as a transcendent source of value in pre-Kantian metaphysics becomes null and void, where there are no cognitive skyhooks upon which to hang a meaning for life. All transcendent claims for a meaning to life have been reduced to mere values -- in Kant the reduction of God and the immortality of the soul to the status of postulates of pure practical reason -- and those values have become, for Nietzsche . . . standing in need of "transvaluation" or "revaluation".

33. Yet this does not mean that there can be no theology, or, indeed, that faith and reason might not be reunified. It may, however, mean the development of a Christian theology, so to speak, after God (See Cupitt, 1995, 1997) or the notion of postfoundationalist theology (Van Huyssteen). In any event, thinkers after Nietzsche and the event of "the death of God" are actively pursuing the possibility of postmodern theologies (see, for example, Thiselton; and Tilley). Some of these postmodern theologies draw directly upon the 'descendants' of Nietzsche, including most notably Heidegger and Derrida.<sup>2</sup>

34. Merold Westphal suggests that the key themes of postmodern philosophy that have the most direct bearing on theology are "Heidegger's 'destruction' of the history of ontology and Derrida's 'deconstruction' of the metaphysics of presence" (583). In a Heideggerian manner, he goes on to maintain that postmodernism's proclamation of the end of philosophy "need not be construed as the death of God in a different vocabulary":

*The question of postmodern theology is the question of the nature of a discourse about deity that would not be tied to the metaphysical assumptions postmodern philosophy finds untenable* (583, italics his).

Westphal then considers three possibilities for postmodern theology: the negative theology tradition;<sup>8</sup> the a/theology of Mark Taylor (*Erring*, 1984), and the postmetaphysical theology of Jean-Luc Marion (*Dieu sans l'Œuvre*, 1982), written in a Kierkegaardian mode. A full inventory of forms of 'posttheology' is waiting to be composed and if the list is to be anything like complete, it must begin by mentioning the potentialities inherent in the combined legacies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, their French, German, and Anglo-American 'descendants', and, indeed, other thinkers who represent a significant anticipation of 'postmodern' philosophy, such as William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>9</sup> When this list or typology is provisionally drawn up, we might see not the "recovery" of the range of authentic wisdom and truth proper to philosophical inquiry, as Pope John Paul II wishes, but rather the impossibility of thinking we can ever escape metaphysics, together with a better understanding of the costs of thinking we could ever 'overcome' it.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>As Walter Kaufmann notes (167, n1) this is the first occurrence of Nietzsche's famous formulation that is followed in the text by the much anthologized "*The Madman*" at #125, p. 181, and "*The Meaning of Cheerfulness*" which begins: "The greatest 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."

<sup>2</sup>See my "(Posts-) Modernism and Structuralism," 1999.

<sup>3</sup>Pope John Paul II's response to "postmodernity" -- even postmodern philosophy -- is in marked contrast to that of Pope Pius X, who, in Heidegger's day (circa 1907), criticized the "modernist" tendencies in Catholic university circles and later demanded that Catholic professors swear an anti-modernist oath of fidelity to traditional doctrinal formulations (Sheehan, 74).

<sup>4</sup>For reasons of space I shall not contest this interpretation although clearly most philosophers would want to take issue, first, with the account of truth presented: how does it conform with standard accounts (correspondence, coherence, redundancy, pragmatic etc.)? On what basis can we assume that scientific and everyday life operate with the same notion of truth? And what is this notion of religious 'truth'? Second, there are many problems with the reasoning leading to the statement (given as shorthand) that "Jesus is the Truth": for instance, the ground for considering the doctrine of the unity of truth -- in what sense is it possible, for example, to argue for the unity of, say, empirical, ethical and aesthetic 'truths' (if we were to allow such notions), given old arguments surrounding the "is-ought" gap?

<sup>5</sup>This is surely the weakest part of the encyclical. In less than four pages, the history of modern philosophy and its separation from faith is described. Indeed, the relevant section (#46) addresses the question in three paragraphs. If the Church wants to engage with philosophers, then it must do better than a series of sniping remarks that do not do justice to the history of modern philosophy. These remarks, if anything, will only incense philosophers and cause them to dismiss the argument.

<sup>6</sup>Hermeneutics is seemingly exempt from criticism, although Pope John Paul II does warn us that those using hermeneutical approaches need to evaluate their philosophical underpinnings before applying them to sacred texts.

<sup>7</sup>For different accounts, see Ingraffia; and Ward, 1995, 1997). Ironically, at least in terms of the theme of this essay, Jacques Derrida, together with Gianni Vattimo, Maurizio Ferraris, Aldo Gargani, Eugenio Trias, Vincenzo Vitiello and Hans-Georg Gadamer took part in a seminar on the island of Capri in the winter of 1994 to address the question of the distinction between philosophy and religion -- reason and faith -- given the changes to the media and the new public spaces of communication that had opened up in postmodernity. In his essay, "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida returns to Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* to consider a new constellation or conjunction of "faith and knowledge" in the age of digital culture, a possible return and reunification accompanied or motivated by a capitalistic tele-technoscience, which contrary to Pope John Paul II's vision of new foundations, consistently outbids itself.

<sup>8</sup>While Derrida denies that deconstruction is a form of negative theology (as Westphal notes, Kevin Hart suggests "that negative theology is a form of deconstruction of positive theology, and in this way the paradigm of postmetaphysical theology" [585]), it has been suggested by James Bernauer that Foucault's work can be considered a 'negative theology' based on his 'negative anthropology' (178).

<sup>9</sup>I am thinking particularly of the kind of 'postmodern' reading that has been given of Wittgenstein by thinkers such as Lyotard, Rorty, and Cavell, and Wittgenstein's intellectual proximity to Nietzsche and Heidegger (see Peters & Marshall; see also Kerr).

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[CTRF@apu.edu](mailto:CTRF@apu.edu)  
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