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Theology of Relation

Pagan Postmodernity and the Refounding of Christianity

Abstract (French) – La qualité de la pensée théologique dépend, en premier lieu, de sa capacité à percevoir l'esprit de son temps, et à situer ensuite les vérités doctrinales en fonction de la hiérarchie qui en résulte. À un niveau théologique, la différence entre la modernité et la postmodernité est bien marquée. Alors que la modernité était principalement dirigée par une perspective matérialiste conduisant à l'athéisme, la postmodernité est traversée d'une forte demande de spiritualité et d'un intérêt nouveau pour la dimension religieuse. Cependant, cette demande ne s'exprime, en aucun cas, par un intérêt grandissant pour le christianisme. Alors que la demande de spiritualité augmente, le déclin du christianisme se poursuit. Pourquoi? Fournir une réponse à cette question est d'une importance vitale. Le défi que Nietzsche a lancé au christianisme il y a environ un siècle, et qui est maintenant devenu un phénomène de masse, est strictement théologique. Il ne concerne pas les fondements historiques du christianisme mais plutôt sa signification théorique: le Dieu des chrétiens est-il vraiment divin? La vision chrétienne du monde est-elle vraiment digne d'une divinité? Ce défi plaide pour une refonte radicale de la manière de pratiquer la théologie. En ce qui concerne la méthode, le travail théologique doit être reformulé d'après le principe de l'honnêteté intellectuelle la plus radicale, en passant du principe d'autorité au principe d'authenticité. La vérité étant toujours plus forte que la doctrine, le critère de vérité en matière de foi ne devrait plus être placé à l'intérieur de la foi, mais à l'extérieur, dans la vie. Une affirmation doctrinale n'est pas vraie parce qu'elle correspond à un verset biblique ou à un dogme ecclésiastique, mais parce qu'elle ne contredit pas la vie. D'un système clos, auto-référent, qui fonctionne sur une logique «orthodoxe – hétérodoxe», la théologie doit passer à un système ouvert, référé à la vie, fonctionnant sur la logique «vrai – faux». En ce qui concerne le contenu, la théologie est appelée à affronter de manière radicale la *quaestio de Deo* en se basant sur la conviction chrétienne que la nature (et, de ce fait, de l'être) de Dieu est le bien et l'amour. Cet article est spécialement centré sur cet aspect. Il affirme que la nature profonde de l'être est relation, et il souligne la suprématie ontologique du bien sur la volonté de puissance, ou, pour reprendre la définition de Spencer ou de Darwin, sur la lutte pour la vie. Parler de l'être comme relation veut dire parler de Dieu «dans la vie et dans la bonté de l'humanité» (Bonhoeffer).

Abstract (German) – Die Qualität theologischen Denkens beruht in erster Linie auf der Fähigkeit, den Geist der Zeit einzufangen und erst danach Glaubenswahrheiten einzufügen. Mit diesen Prämissen definiert der folgende Artikel den Geist der Postmoderne als „Neuheidentum“ und zeigt, dass Nietzsches Deutung ein tiefes Verständnis ermöglicht und noch immer aktuell ist. In Auseinandersetzung mit dieser Deutung entwirft der Artikel ein Modell christlicher Theologie.

Zunächst wird der Unterschied zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne theologisch gedeutet. Während die Moderne von einer materialistischen Haltung geprägt war, die zum Atheismus führte, ist die Postmoderne durchzogen von der großen Suche nach Spiritualität und von einem neuen Interesse an einer religiösen Dimension. Dieses Bedürfnis findet aber keinen Ausdruck in einem erhöhten Interesse am Christentum. Mit zunehmender Nachfrage nach Spiritualität nimmt das Interesse am Christentum ab. Aus welchem Grund? Eine Antwort auf diese Frage zu finden, scheint von äußerst großer Bedeutung zu sein.

Nietzsches Herausforderung des Christentums vor ungefähr einem Jahrhundert, die heute zum Massenphänomen geworden ist, muss als streng theologische gesehen werden. Sie betrifft nicht die historischen Fundamente des Christentums, sondern seine theoretische Bedeutung: Ist der christliche Gott wirklich göttlich? Ist die christliche Weltsicht wirklich einer Gottheit entsprechend? Diese Anfrage fordert ein radikales Umdenken darin, wie Theologie betrieben wird.

Was die Methode angeht, so muss sie geändert werden hin zu einer radikalen intellektuellen Redlichkeit, weg vom Prinzip der Autorität zum Prinzip der Authentizität. Weil die Wahrheit immer mächtiger ist als die Lehre, sollte das Kriterium der Wahrheit in Glaubensfragen nicht mehr innerhalb des Glaubens verortet werden, sondern außerhalb, im Leben. Eine Glaubensaussage ist nicht deshalb richtig, weil sie mit einem Bibelvers oder einem kirchlichen Dogma übereinstimmt, sondern weil sie dem Leben nicht widerspricht. Von einem geschlossenen, selbstreferentiellen System, das nach der Logik ‚orthodox-heterodox‘ funktioniert, muss die Theologie in ein offenes System mit Lebensbezug überführt werden, das nach der Logik ‚wahr-falsch‘ funktioniert.

Was den Inhalt betrifft, so ist die Theologie gerufen, sich der *quaestio de Deo* radikal zu stellen, indem sie die entscheidende christliche Überzeugung herausarbeitet, dass die göttliche Natur (und damit die des Seins) das Gute und die Liebe sind. Dieser Beitrag ist besonders auf diesen Aspekt fokussiert und hebt hervor, dass die innere Natur des Seins die Beziehung ist, und er betont die ontologische Überordnung des Guten über den Willen zur Macht oder, um die Definitionen von Spencer und Darwin zu verwenden, über den Kampf ums Überleben. Vom Sein als von Beziehung sprechen heißt, von Gott ‚im Leben und im Guten für die Menschheit‘ (Bonhoeffer) zu sprechen.

1. Starting from the historical moment

In one of his best essays, proceeding from a statement from Vatican II, Karl Rahner wrote: ‘Auf den letzten Konzil hat die Kirche von einer Hierarchie der Wahrheiten der Offenbarung gesprochen. Es gibt gewiß eine objective Hierarchie [...]’

Aber es gibt auch gewiß eine Hierarchie der Wahrheiten von der geschichtlichen Stunde her, in der ein Mensch leben muß, und von seiner eigenen Eigenart und Berufung her' (Rahner, 110).¹ I absolutely agree: I am of the opinion that the quality of a theological thought depends in the first place on its ability to catch the spirit of its own time, and then place doctrinal truths according to a consequent hierarchy. I am convinced, in other words, that what Hegel said of philosophy is valid for theology as well: that it is 'ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfaßt' (its own time apprehended in thoughts) (Hegel, 26). It is precisely because of this 'apprehension' of their own time that, within the same Catholic faith, different and even contrasting theologies can arise. The novelty of the theology of the twentieth century is all here, in the introduction of the spirit of time (or of the 'signa temporum', to use an expression from Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 4) in considering doctrinal truths, before 1900 conceived only objectively and not in relation to time and its turning, both merciless and generous because 'il tempo tutto toglie e tutto dà' (Bruno, 263).² It was the entry of the spirit of time that led to the rise of a storm of theologies where there had been only one theology before.

The task of contemporary systematic theological thought is indeed double: on the one hand, to seek a living communion with the present, according to what Bonhoeffer called 'Treue zur Welt' (loyalty to the world), in order to individuate the specific question that this time bears with it; on the other hand, a new approach, based upon that very same question, to the traditional configuration of Catholic doctrine. We must point out, however, that it would be a serious mistake to reduce doctrine to the expectations of the present; in doing so, the question of the world would find no answer, as an answer must by definition always contain something that the question does not know. Only in this way, only by cultivating a real communion with the present, by conveying to it what it is not, or is no longer, aware of, can theology remain theology and become present, able to touch, cure and perhaps also, to a certain extent, heal people's lives. And only in this way can it avoid the danger, unfortunately quite frequent, of 'denselben alten Kohl immer wieder aufkochen und nach allen Seiten hin ausgeben' (Hegel, 13).³ It is necessary to explain what question, in my opinion, the present age is asking the Catholic faith, and what kind of hierarchy of truths results from it.

¹ English translation: 'In the last Council the Church spoke about a hierarchy of revealed truths. Certainly, an objective hierarchy does exist...but another hierarchy exists as well: one of truths which are determined by the historical moment in which a human being is called to live, by his nature and his vocation.' The text of the Vatican II which Rahner refers to is *Unitatis redintegratio* 11.

² G. Bruno, *Candelaio* 13. English: 'Time takes everything away and gives everything'.

³ English: 'warming up and distributing on all sides the same old cabbage', translated by S.W. Dyde, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/index.htm>> (accessed April 15, 2009).

2. Postmodernism as a new Paganism

I am convinced that it is actually against Nietzsche's 'fröhliche Wissenschaft' that Christianity, even if unaware of it, is fighting a war of survival, a war as radical as the one that many centuries ago saw Christianity pitted against Paganism. In my opinion, it is in fact the same war. There are many analogies and identical opinions between Celsus and Nietzsche. To Nietzsche, Christianity is 'eine Todfeindschafts-Form gegen die Realität' (Nietzsche 197),⁴ to Celsus 'Christians do not love life' (Origen 54).⁵ Paganism was considered defeated once and for all after the Emperor Justinian closed the School of Athens in 529, but it came alive again in the Italian Renaissance (with Lorenzo Valla, Leon Battista Alberti, Marsilio Ficino, Leonardo da Vinci, Niccolò Machiavelli, Bernardino Telesio, Tommaso Campanella, Giordano Bruno), in Spinoza, in Goethe, and achieved through Nietzsche the possibility of regaining Europe's spiritual heart. Postmodernism is, in my opinion, a renewed Paganism. And it is therefore the time of Nietzsche.

Postmodernity's specific challenge to Christianity no longer consists in a criticism of faith in God in order to proclaim a purely materialistic view. This was rather modernity's endeavour: to exalt mankind, the state-party, science or other immanent absolutes by way of theoretical atheism. Modernity's collapse, however, meant the end of every immanent absolute. Today, mankind is very far from embracing an atheism committed to changing the world and eradicating every reference to the divine. Those who embody today's militant atheism (such as Richard Dawkins and other authors of the same kind) represent in my opinion an outmoded world. They wish to destroy religion just at a moment when from several sides the present age is described as the revenge of God, as a desecularization, as a return to the sacred.⁶ Perhaps, they aim to destroy it precisely because they are disturbed by this return.

The specific issue of this age, however, is another one: the return of God by no means represents a return of the Christian God. Although postmodernity means overcoming atheism, this does not mean that the growing wish for spirituality finds its expression in the traditional Christian forms. As a spiritual offering, in fact, Christianity has lost its fascination, it has become boring or, in the best of cases, comforting. If already at the end of the 19th century one could

⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §27, KSA, 6, 197. English: 'A sort of war to the death upon reality', translated by H.L. Mencken, <<http://www.gutenberg.org>> (accessed April 15, 2009).

⁵ Origen, *Against Celsus*, VIII, 54.

⁶ G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994); *The Desecularization of the World*, edited by P.L. Berger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

say 'die wirklich aktiven Menschen sind jetzt innerlich ohne Christentum',⁷ one could say it even more now. If at the end of the 19th century it was already that 'es ist unanständig, heute Christ zu sein',⁸ this is even more the case now.

The issue of the present age can then be formulated in the questions: what kind of theism (personal God) and deism (impersonal divinity), what kind of divine and spirituality? This is in my opinion the peculiar quest which drives postmodernity, an age which has a wish to be religious, spiritual, even mystical as Malraux predicted, but no longer Christian in the traditional sense of the term. Our age is, in a way, retracing Nietzsche's personal journey. He was possessed by such an intense spiritual tension that Giorgio Colli (together with Mazzino Montinari editor of a critical edition of Nietzsche's works) found in him in his introduction to the *Antichrist* 'una sorprendente affinità di linguaggio' (a surprising affinity of language) with the mystic Jacob Böhme (Nietzsche, *Opere*, XV). It is indeed because of this spiritual tension that Nietzsche was so fiercely antichristian. Nietzsche was antichristian because he was fighting in the name of life, of beauty and of life's power. His intention was to redeem the world from Christianity's vilification and from its consequence: nihilism. Nietzsche's struggle against Christianity was fought in the name of the world's *divinity*, and was actually therefore a theological struggle. To him, the main limitation of Christianity consisted in 'eine solche Reduktion des Göttlichen',⁹ since 'der christliche Gottesbegriff – Gott als Krankengott, Gott als Spinne, Gott als Geist – ist einer der korruptesten Gottesbegriffe, die auf Erden erreicht worden sind [...] Gott zum Widerspruch des Lebens abgeartet, statt dessen Verklärung und ewiges Ja zu sein!'.¹⁰

In light of all this, I think that the decisive task of theology is to understand how to meet this challenge, which has the peculiarity of being played on its own ground, namely theo-logy. As the Greek etymology shows, a drug (*pharmakon*) is most potent when created from the same poison that it is meant to defeat. For this reason, it is necessary to identify the strong points in Nietzsche's theological attack against Christianity, and to renew theology starting from there. It is my opinion that there are two strong points: radical intellectual integrity and the supremacy of life.

⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe*, §92, KSA, 3, 85. English: 'Nowadays, really active human beings are inward without Christianity'.

⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §38, KSA, 6, 210. English (Mencken): 'Indecent to be a Christian today'.

⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §17, KSA, 6, 184. English (Mencken): 'Reduction of the godhead'.

¹⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §18, KSA, 6, 185. English (Mencken): 'The Christian concept of a god—the god as the patron of the sick, the god as a spinner of cobwebs, the god as a spirit—is one of the most corrupt concepts that has ever been set up in the world [...] God degenerated into the *contradiction of life*. Instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yea!'

3. Theological methodology as radical intellectual integrity

The first task that Nietzsche's challenge lays before theology consists in redefining the theological method according to the following principle: 'Man muss rechtschaffen sein in geistigen Dingen bis zur Härte'.¹¹ In order to regain a meaning for our age, the most important methodological approach that theology must adopt is *radical intellectual integrity*. There were 20th century authors who wrote about God utilising this approach and, for this reason, left us real treasures. I refer in particular to Pavel Florenskij, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil and Teilhard de Chardin. We must continue in this way, raising moral truthfulness to the highest intensity, and from there practising theology without ever abandoning moral truthfulness. Today, the European conscience is no longer willing to credit a theology harbouring within itself even the smallest *pia fraus* (to use the curious term traditionally used to indicate the document attributed to the emperor Constantine, but actually forged centuries later by the papal chancellery, as proved by Lorenzo Valla).

In the name of moral truthfulness, practised with utmost intensity, theology must initiate a struggle within the Church and its doctrine, sometimes even *against* the Church and its doctrine, without fear of creating scandal for the faithful, because the real scandal is the betrayal of truth, and hypocrisy. Joseph Ratzinger wrote: 'Im Alphabet des Glaubens steht an erster Stelle die Aussage: Im Anfang war der Logos. Der Glaube zeigt uns, daß die ewige Vernunft der Grund aller Dinge ist bzw. daß die Dinge vom Grund her vernünftig sind. Der Glaube will dem Menschen nicht irgendeine Art von Psychotherapie anbieten, *seine* Psychotherapie ist die Wahrheit' (Ratzinger, 562).¹² Ratzinger is right. To the Catholic faith, two things are essential: being conscious of speaking in the name of truth and stating the rationality of truth that acts as logos. But here is the paradox: it is precisely by effectively applying reason for truth's sake that faith experiences the greatest uncertainty; it is precisely by unfolding within doctrine the peculiarly Catholic thought of a law of truth as logos, and therefore as logic, that acute doctrinal difficulties arise. Simone Weil, for whom intellectual probity became the symbol of her entire existence, clearly denounced this paradox: 'En fait il y a depuis le début, ou presque, un malaise de l'intelligence dans le christianisme'

¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, Vorwort, KSA, 6, 167. English (Mencken): 'One must carry intellectual integrity to the verge of hardness'.

¹² English: 'In the alphabet of faith, the place of honour is given to the affirmation: 'In the beginning was the Logos'. Faith assures us that the foundation of all things is eternal Reason, that is that things, in virtue of their origin, are rational. Faith is not meant to offer mankind some form of psychotherapy: *its* psychotherapy is truth'.

(Weil 1007).¹³ Such a ‘discomfort of intelligence’ is also documented by the theology of the 20th century, considering the fact that many among the most important Catholic theologians, in consequence of the exercise of their intelligence, encountered serious difficulties with Roman teaching. To name only Europeans, I mention here Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Stanislas Lyonnet, Karl Rahner, Bernard Häring, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Piet Schoonenberg, Carlo Molari and Jacques Dupuis. Their personal histories are very different, but on the whole they show that, in Catholicism, innovation deriving from research is destined to clash with the immobility and rigidity of doctrine. Only a quick look at the history of theology is enough to confirm this, since even Thomas Aquinas was condemned three years *post mortem* on March 7th 1277 by the highest doctrinal authority of the time, and Antonio Rosmini, beatified in 2007, was condemned twice, once in 1849 while he was still alive, and again in 1887, after his death. Nietzsche writes: ‘Es ist unsere strengere und verwöhntere Frömmigkeit selbst, die uns heute *verbietet*, noch Christen zu sein’.¹⁴ We can meet such a challenge only by demonstrating that, on the contrary, it is our most demanding wish for truth that makes us remain Christians. However, this very quest for truth within the Christian dogmatic leads to conflicts with the institution. How are we to extricate ourselves from this paradoxical situation?

Since *fides quaerens intellectum*, it is clearly faith that motivates theology’s existence. Without faith, no theology. Rahner said: ‘Theologie setzt [...] ein existentielles Verhältnis zur Glaubenswirklichkeit voraus’ (Rahner 105),¹⁵ and Karl Barth: ‘Der Glaube die *conditio sine qua non* theologischer Wissenschaft!’ (Barth 1970, 112).¹⁶ It is hence unquestionable that theology is organically dependent upon faith. Rahner, however, also added that ‘die Theologie ist eine Glaubenswissenschaft *im Bereich der Kirche*’ (my italics), that ‘sie kann nur so betrieben werden’, and that for this reason ‘sie muß eine kirchliche Theologie sein’ (Barth 1970, 105, 111).¹⁷ And it is enough to remember the adjective that Barth chose for his monumental *Dogmatics*, namely *kirchliche* (ecclesial), to rediscover the same perspective. The following idea is prevalent within Christianity: theology comes from faith and is practised within the Church and for the Church. Just as faith necessarily has an ecclesial form, so theology is called to

¹³ S. Weil, quotation from: *Lettre à un religieux* English: ‘Almost from the beginning there has been in Christianity a discomfort of intelligence’.

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Nachlaß 1885-1887*, KSA, 12, 165. English: ‘It is our own most severe and demanding piety that forbids us to remain Christians’.

¹⁵ English: ‘Theology presupposes an existential relation with the reality of faith’.

¹⁶ English: ‘Faith is the *conditio sine qua non* of theological science!’.

¹⁷ English: ‘Theology is a science of faith *within the Church*’, ‘it can be cultivated only in this way’, and ‘must be an ecclesial theology’.

have such a form as well. This thought reaches its peak in the pronouncements of Catholic teaching, particularly in the 'Instruction' *Donum veritatis* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* from 1990. The faith-church-theology link appears to be fully organic.

In my opinion, it is precisely this link that theology must examine critically if it wishes to survive as a discipline worthy of being taken into consideration by the contemporary conscience and, even more radically, if it intends to contribute to the prevention of the progressive disappearance of Christianity from the European continent. In order to enable Christianity to survive, theology must free itself from the stiffly ecclesial form imposed upon it by the hierarchy throughout the centuries. Theology must free faith from the doctrinal configuration with which it was covered and which created the grip of ecclesiastical control with its *anathema sit*.

Naturally, without the Church there can be neither faith nor theology, both because it is the Church that conveys the content of faith, and because the construction of the Church as communion and community is the natural outcome of lived faith. This is by no means a matter of eliminating the Church, as in the ingenuousness of those who imagine being able to live without an institutional dimension. According to the strict logic of history, what does not become an institution within history is soon doomed to disappear. This alone would have been enough for me not to wish for any institutional pauperism. Nor do I want a diminution of doctrinal teaching, for which I recognize, on the contrary, an essential function; it is far better to have an institution that makes decisions than not to have one. What I wish for is something else, namely for believers to overcome the conviction that the truth of their Catholic faith can be measured by the degree of conformity to consolidated doctrine, both in the dogmatic and in the ethical field. What I want is to introduce in the minds of believers a dynamic-evolutionary concept of truth (truth = good) instead of a static-doctrinal one (truth = doctrine).

At the conclusion of his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius of Loyola presents some rules for those who wish to be good children of the Church, the thirteenth of which prescribes: 'Debemos siempre tener, para en todo acertar, que lo blanco que yo veo creer que es negro, si la Iglesia jerárquica así lo determina'.¹⁸ The rule of Ignatius is based upon the equation: truth = doctrine of the Church, and this rule represents, to this day, the predominant vision within Catholicism. On the contrary, I agree with Karl Barth's words about theology: 'Ihre besondere

¹⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *Ejercicios espirituales*, §365. English: 'To be right in everything, we ought always to hold that the white which I see, is black, if the Hierarchical Church so decides it', translated by E. Mullan, <http://www.ccel.org> (accessed April 15, 2009).

Aufgabe gerade im Blick auf die Überlieferung ist eine *kritische* Aufgabe. Sie hat die durch sie bestimmte Verkündigung der Gemeinde dem Feuer der *Wahrheitsfrage* auszusetzen' (Barth 1970, 51).¹⁹ A really modern theology can no longer afford to define itself a priori as unconditional obedience to the Magisterium. Returning to the title of an Encyclical of John Paul II, I affirm that the *splendour of truth* must be such as to illuminate even the shadows and contradictions of doctrine. Theologians should expose themselves to the splendour of truth with the most radical intellectual integrity, without ever bending their thoughts a priori to justify decisions which they do not think well founded, and by doing so transforming themselves into court apologists.

Clearly, adopting this perspective of rigorous truthfulness has an unavoidable price, called heresy. However, if heresy means being ready to fight for truth to the point of destroying everything that when put to the test reveals itself to be an ideological forcing of dogmatics, then heresy is necessary to the survival of Christianity. By establishing this principle, perhaps we are looking at a revenge of history. Perhaps the time has come to pay the price for a dogmatics built at times over the centuries on violence, intrigues and games of power. Indeed, it cannot be denied that theology has sometimes been functional to power, *instrumentum regni*. The first seven ecumenical councils were all summoned by emperors, and certainly not for love of theology. And it was certainly not for love of theology that the Holy Inquisition, without which dogmatics would not be structured as it is today, was founded, because Jan Hus, instead of being burnt alive at the stake on July 6th 1415, would have been free to continue arguing and contributing to the development of some of the content of doctrine. The same can be said of thousands of other Christians before and after him.

Today, however, it is not a single dogma or liturgical custom that is at issue. What is at stake is the moral and spiritual condition of our people. To this purpose, the following words, pronounced over a century ago, will appear modern to anyone willing to open his eyes and look: 'Unsere ganze europäische Kultur bewegt sich seit langem schon mit einer Tortur der Spannung, die von Jahrzehnt zu Jahrzehnt wächst, wie auf eine Katastrophe los: unruhig, gewalt-sam, überstürzt: wie ein Strom, der ans Ende will, der sich nicht besinnt, der Furcht davor hat, sich zu besinnen'.²⁰

Neopagan postmodernity, shaped by Nietzsche, represents a challenge on a methodological level that calls for a passage, in theology, from the principle of

¹⁹ English: 'The specific task of theology towards tradition is a *critical* task. Theology must expose the preaching of the community to the fire of the *truth question*'.

²⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Nachlaß 1887-1889*, KSA, 13, pag. 189. English: 'For a long time the whole of European culture seems to have been moving, with a tormented tension growing from decade to decade, towards a catastrophe: restless, violent, reckless, like a current longing for the end, no longer reflecting and afraid of reflecting'.

authority to the principle of authenticity. This passage could be summarized by a variation of the classical saying *amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas*, traditionally attributed to Aristotle, into: *Magistra ecclesia, sed magis magistra veritas*.

In light of this thinking, assigning the supremacy to life and not to doctrine, I define my work 'secular theology'; by which I mean a theology born from faith, that wishes to serve the spiritual experience of faith, but that does not consider the teaching of the Church the ultimate and normative criterion for believing. The ultimate and normative criterion is not doctrine, it is truth. By saying this, I reject the fundamental theological equation underlying the Catholic teaching, i.e. 'truth = doctrine', and suggest another: 'truth > doctrine'.

This is exactly what the Bible says when it speaks about truth. According to the Bible, truth is not a doctrine, and even less a system, it is something vital, on which one can lean and walk; it is bread to eat, water to drink. Truth, in biblical language, means trust. Theology realizes this perspective by affirming that spiritual experience is worth more than doctrine, that supremacy is not held by dogmatics but by spirituality, that the true masters of the faith are not the keepers of the orthodox doctrine but the saints and the mystics (some of whom were formally heterodox, such as Master Eckhart and Antonio Rosmini).

Catholicism today must rediscover the biblical meaning of truth and hold it highest, above doctrinal meaning, adopting a dynamic vision of truth and no longer a static one. The loss of the dynamic status of truth is in my opinion the main cause of the crisis that, starting with the modern age, has not ceased to haunt Catholicism. This crisis is evident also in the progressive loss, in contrast to the great past, of its capacity to produce art.

In this present postmodern age, shaped by Nietzsche, doctrine can no longer represent the horizon on which truth can be thought of. Truth must again be thought of as life. Karl Barth wrote: 'Denken ist, wenn es echt ist, Denken des Lebens und darum und darin Denken Gottes' (Barth 1954, 411).²¹ For this reason, the criterion of truth in issues of faith should no longer be placed within faith itself, but outside, in life. A doctrinal statement will be true not because it corresponds to some biblical verse or to some ecclesiastical dogma, but because it does not contradict life. From a closed, self-referring system, which reasons according to the logic of 'orthodox – heterodox', theology must change into an open, life-referring system, which reasons according to the logic of 'true – false'. It is indeed life that determines whether a statement is true or false, because 'Denken, wenn es echt ist, ist Denken des Lebens'. By doing so, we must not be at all afraid of diminishing the theological value of statements. This can only increase, because it is precisely when it thinks of life that theology is 'Denken

²¹ English: 'For thought, when true, is thought of life, and in this, and because of this, thought of God'.

Gottes', of a living God here and now, and not of a God locked up in Denzinger or in the literal word of the Bible.

To this end, I give you a concrete example: can we really go on believing and teaching that death was introduced in biological life by the sin of mankind, as Paul affirms (see *Romans* 5,12) when we know today that death has existed since sexual reproduction has existed, i.e. several hundreds of millions of years before man appeared on earth? Death is not the product of mankind's sin, but it is written from the beginning in the logic of biology. Theology, in understanding truth as life and not as doctrine, cannot avoid reformulations on the basis of life's teachings. Benedict XVI says that we must obey the truth, and that a theologian must always be 'interiorly purified by obedience to the truth'.²² Wonderful words – how can we not agree? However, obedience to truth makes a revision of certain doctrinal assertions necessary, and certainly not only of that linking death to Adam's sin.

4. Life's supremacy

The supremacy of intellectual integrity in theological methodology must necessarily have consequences for the contents, starting from the main problems raised by Nietzsche:

1. The relation between Jesus and Paul, that is, the question about who founded Christianity ('Der «frohen Botschaft» folge auf dem Fuss die aller-schlimmste: die des Paulus').²³
2. The meaning of redemption through the cross ('Gott gab seinen Sohn zur Vergebung der Sünden, als *Opfer*. Wie war es mit Einem Male zu Ende dem Evangelium').²⁴
3. Original sin ('Theologie, oder die Verderbnis der Vernunft durch die «Ersünde»').²⁵

²² Benedict XVI, *Address to Participants at the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission* on December 5th 2008, <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008> (accessed April 15, 2009).

²³ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §42, KSA, 6, 215. English (Mencken): 'Hard upon the heels of the *glad tidings* came the worst imaginable: those of Paul'.

²⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §41, KSA, 6, 214-215. English (Mencken): 'God gave his son as a *sacrifice* for the forgiveness of sins. At once there was an end of the gospel!'

²⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, KSA, 6, 111. English, *Twilight of the Idols*: 'Theology: or the corruption of reason by *original sin*', translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, <<http://www.handprint.com/SC/NIE/GotDamer.html>> (accessed April 15, 2009).

4. The Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and their connection to the New Testament ('jenes unerhörte philologische Possenspiel um das alte Testament').²⁶
5. The clergy and its selection-formation ('der Priest ... dieser Verneiner, Verleumder, Vergifter des Lebens von *Beruf*').²⁷

However, today the main challenge to the content of Christianity represented by Nietzsche is different and it is a strictly theological one because it concerns the nature of God. The greatest question that at any time has presented itself to theological thought is the *quaestio de Deo*. Every age, however, has considered it in its own way, and the way in which the question presents itself in our age is no longer about whether God exists (a typically modern question, since it presupposes the centrality of the subject), but rather the intimate nature of being, or, which is the same, the nature of God. What is the intimate nature of being? What is the intimate nature of God? Is it the good and love, or is it force and power?

Christianity has it straight: 'God is love', and the rule of ethical behaviour summarized in the commandment of love derives from this theoretical principle. Nietzsche has it straight too. First of all, he declares that it is exactly the concept of God as good and love that, more than anything else, leads him to move away from Christians: 'Das ist es nicht, was uns abscheidet, dass wir keinen Gott wiederfinden, weder in der Geschichte, noch in der Natur, noch hinter der Natur, – sondern dass wir, was als Gott verehrt wurde, nicht als «göttlich», sondern als erbarmungswürdig, als absurd, als schädlich empfinden, nicht nur als Irrtum, sondern als Verbrechen am Leben'.²⁸ Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity is in fact based upon theological arguments. And here is his suggestion: 'Entfernen wir die höchste Güte aus dem Begriff Gottes: sie ist eines Gottes unwürdig ... Nein! Gott die höchste Macht – das genügt! Aus ihr folgt Alles, aus ihr folgt – «die Welt»!'.²⁹ Elsewhere, he writes about 'die *wiedernatürliche* Kastration eines Gottes zu einem Gotte bloß des Guten'.³⁰

²⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe*, Erstes Buch, §84, KSA, 3, 79. English: 'That inconceivable philological farce around the Old Testament'.

²⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §8, KSA, 6, 175. English (Mencken): 'The priest, that *professional* denier, calumniator and poisoner of life'.

²⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §47, KSA, 6, 225. English (Mencken): 'The thing that sets us apart is not that we are unable to find God, either in history, or in nature, or behind nature – but that we regard what has been honoured as God, not as «divine», but as pitiable, as absurd, as injurious; not as a mere error, but as a *crime against life*'.

²⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Nachlaß 1885-1887*, KSA, 12, 507-508. English: 'Let us take away supreme goodness from the concept of God: it is unworthy of a God [...] No! God is the supreme power – that's it! Everything grows out of this power, 'the world' grows out of it!'

³⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, §16, KSA, 6, 182. English (Mencken): 'The castration, against all nature, of such a god, making him a god of goodness alone'.

According to Nietzsche, if we look at life as an entirely natural phenomenon, we can see that being (and hence divinity) corresponds to the following logic: 'Die Natur: d. h. es wagen, unmoralisch zu sein wie die Natur'.³¹ It is here, in my opinion, that the decisive match is played. By stipulating the immorality of nature and of being, Nietzsche reintroduces Paganism and its elevation of power to an absolute criterion, power that wants only itself, power as pure will of domination. This is the concept incarnated by the figure of Zeus, the supreme God who, as Hesiod writes, is never without power (Kratos) and strength (Bia).³² The figure of Zeus is reflected in the words 'das innerste Wesen des Seins (ist) Wille zur Macht'.³³

I believe that the most suitable answer to Nietzsche should be given exactly here, where his strength lies, by contesting this central statement of his. It must be demonstrated that it is not so, that the intimate nature of being is not power as domination, but the good, because the good is the most harmonic, and therefore the most stable, the strongest and most long-lasting form of relation.

For centuries, it was believed that substance came before relation. This thought stretched from Aristotle to Spinoza, including a large part of Christian theology, through the concept of God's aseity and of the non-necessity of his relation to the world. Today, however, we have learned from science that relation comes before substance, since every substance arises only from the work of the relations that weave being (which we call energy), all the way down to the subatomic level. The only substance that can be conceived without relation is that of cosmic singularity (the primordial point with the ungraspable dimension of $10z^{33}$) in which energy and mass coincided and neither space nor time existed. Since the Big Bang, however, every phenomenon has existed first as a relation, namely a *harmonic* relation. Being is energy, i.e. *en-ergon*, 'at-work' according to the Greek term, and work consists in an uninterrupted weaving of relations, from the infinitely small of subatomic particles to the infinitely big of galaxies with billions of stars. The very same logic applies to our bodies, which consist of atoms harmoniously relating to each other and becoming molecules, molecules harmoniously relating to each other and becoming cells, cells harmoniously relating to each other and becoming organs, organs harmoniously relating to each other and becoming organisms (to mention only the most decisive stages, and leaving out many intermediate ones.) In this perspective, the structure of the world, i.e. the fact that the being-energy takes form and produces different

³¹ F. Nietzsche, *Nachlaß 1885-1887*, KSA, 12, 482. English: 'To be natural means, to dare to be as immoral as Nature is'.

³² Hesiod, *Theogony*, 385.

³³ F. Nietzsche, *Nachlaß 1887-1889*, KSA, 13, 260. English: 'The intimate nature of being is will to power'.

beings, including ourselves, can be interpreted as a 'continuous creation'. This creation must be attributed to the Logos intrinsic to the being-energy, acting as a harmonic logic of relation. The world reveals itself as a great laboratory, where the Logos is continuously at work. The foundation of the supremacy of good, which is the theoretical basis of Christianity, rests on the relational character of being, on the fact that, without harmony, beings could not exist. The good is co-natured with ontology, it consists in the harmonious logic of relation that weaves phenomena and then keeps them together. 'In the beginning was the Logos' is truly a statement that deserves to be placed first in the alphabet of Christian faith, as Benedict XVI wrote, especially if it is interpreted as 'in the beginning was the Relation'.

Clearly, relation often comes to expression also as a conflict, and therefore also as a will to power. But it is also clear that it cannot be reduced only to will to power. At least, not if will to power is intended exclusively as will to domination. If, on the other hand, we attribute to the will to power also a capacity to transcend the personal will to domination, i.e. if we attribute to it also a possibility to decide in favour of justice and beauty in itself, rediscovering a growth of personal power in the adhesion to a more noble level of being that cannot be reduced to the ego, then I have no objections to the assumption that the ultimate sense of being is identified with the will to power (an assumption already made by Spinoza). To the objection that there is no such thing as justice in itself or good in itself my answer is that by 'in itself' I mean something towards which the single subject has a feeling of dedication and communion, and not of domination. Life is not only the will to impose itself, it knows also the opposite movement, the will to deliver itself. Life is dominion and submission, activity and passivity, resistance and surrender, and mature thinking can see and combine both aspects. Besides *Wille zur Macht*, Nietzsche also knows *amor fati*.

Based upon the relational character of being-energy, good and justice emerge as the highest values by which to live, as they are the highest expression of the primordial logic intrinsic to the being continuously formed by the logos. This is the eternal kerygma, the everlasting good news, valid since the first day of the world's creation, to which Christianity with its historical kerygma must be functional. We must reach a new understanding and look at historical Christianity as functional to eternal Christianity, the institutional Church as functional to the *ecclesia ab Abel* described by Augustine. We must reach that universal Christianity that in *Acts 17,28* speaks of God saying 'in him we live, move and have our being', a Christianity friendly to people and their religions.

The real kerygma, the definitive and eternal good news is not about history (this and that happened, something else occurred), but regards the universality of being, discovered as good and justice, and translated into existence generating trust in life.

In light of the fact that being is in itself relation, Christianity, exalting relation in the most radical way by saying that God himself is love, i.e. absolute relation, is the true accomplishment of true being. Contrary to the kind of Christianity attacked by Nietzsche with good reason, a hamartiocentric Christianity based upon the 'original sin-cross' (that is, gap-stopgap) link, the Christianity that I have exposed is neither an escape from the world nor a betrayal of it, but rather the world's true expression. In this perspective I wish to realize in concrete form the desire of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (inconceivable without Nietzsche, starting from his criticism of the 'God of the gaps'): 'Ich möchte von Gott nicht an den Grenzen, sondern in der Mitte, nicht in den Schwächen, sondern in der Kraft, nicht also bei Tod und Schuld, sondern im Leben und im Guten des Menschen sprechen.' (Bonhoeffer 407-408).³⁴

5. Theology of relation

Now that we have individuated both the principle moving being-energy according to the logic of relation and the perspective from which to view the world, I can define my theological proposal as *theology of relation*. It is a *Christian* theology of relation, because in it Christ is the paradigm of the perfect relation, fully vertical (love of God as the origin and goal of being) and fully horizontal (love of neighbour and of every fragment of being). Christ is the concrete symbol manifesting that the highest relation is love, as well as the promise and hope that the completion of the logic of relation pervading being-energy will be love.

Starting from this central point, I will present the main features of my thought, although necessarily in a concise form.

1. *Supremacy of spirituality*. Theology must privilege the concrete life of human beings, their trust, their hope, their capability to keep on loving. Theology accomplishes its task when it contributes to leading human beings to union with God, to sanctity, and its meaning consists in serving spiritual experience. For this reason, dogmatics must be interpreted within the functioning of the spiritual life and must, if necessary, be adapted to it.
2. *God*. The meaning of the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity consists in the supremacy of relation over substance. There are not three persons before and the one divinity afterwards, but rather there is first the one divinity that, itself being in relation, gives rise to persons from its own relational activity. There is no Father, Son or Spirit as autonomous persons from the

³⁴ English: 'I'd like not to speak of God at the border, but at the centre, not in weakness, but in strength, not in relation to death and guilt, but in life and in the good of human beings'.

first, who later relate to each other. Thinking this way would be tritheism and would justify those Jews and Muslims who accuse Christians of polytheism. On the contrary, the Father constitutes himself as father only in relation to the Son, and could not be *father* had there been no Son; conversely, the Son constitutes himself as son only in relation to the Father, and from their relation proceeds the Spirit. Therefore, *from the first* there is a reciprocal relation within the one and only divinity, whose internal logic is relation, and *then*, as a result of relations, the persons arise. 'Persona divina', as Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches, 'significat relationem ut subsistentem' (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 4). In this sense we can also comprehend the meaning of 'God is love' (*1 John* 4,8), because love is the most intense expression of relationality.

3. *A new vision of the God-world relation.* Following the breakup of the traditional theologies of nature and history in the 20th century, the most urgent tasks in theology must today consist in rendering the God-world relation, and particularly the action of God in the world, conceivable again. In this regard, I understand the action of God as one and unique, eternally identical with itself, because there are no changes in God. The impassibility of God maintained by classical theology should be intended as permanent, continuous action without variations. If anything changes in the God-world relation, it is not because God intervenes by means of some particular act, perhaps after changing his mind. It is rather the world that changes and evolves, and through its evolution changes its relation to God. The evolution of the world-pole changes the bipolar God-world relation. There is no God creating man, first watching surprised and embittered at Adam and Eve's sin, then choosing a people preferring it to all the other ones, then incarnating himself as a human, then... It is rather the world that, being continuously created by the unique, unceasing action of God as *natura naturans*, is gaining awareness in the human mind of its union with God. The logic ruling the world's progressive organization is the divine Logos, understood as continuously creative activity, always constructing, always at work.
4. *Christology.* The titles Logos and Word apply fully to Jesus of Nazareth, because in him the eternal relation of God to the world reached its highest subjective conscience (*John* 10,30: 'I and the Father are one') and its highest ontologic manifestation (by establishing that love is the essence of God). The titles Logos and Word, and also Christ, do not belong exclusively to Jesus: there have been other historical phenomena where the continuous communication of God reached consciousness of itself as Logos, Word, or Christ. Christ is more than Jesus. The fullness of Christ, however, entirely covers Jesus' human life.

5. *Soteriology*. Salvation has always been present in creation and in its logic that operates as relation. By following the logic of relation, continuously introduced by the unceasing action of God, by practising it concretely here and now, human beings become just, that is, they partake in a more ordered dimension of being. This dimension opens up towards a life beyond this earthly life, which tradition calls *eternal life*. We must give soteriology a new foundation, by no longer thinking of salvation as redemption, but as the result of work according to justice. We should go back to Jesus' original announcement 'seek first God's kingdom and its righteousness' (*Matthew* 6,33) and dismiss Paul's view based upon the sacrifice of blood. God does not need blood to save mankind. The Father has always taken care of his children by giving them always the possibility of being with him. Salvation has always been present in creation, because salvation comes from God through the Logos, and in this sense Christ, *per quem omnia facta sunt*, is the saviour of all mankind. This everlasting union between God and mankind excludes every concept of guilt and original sin. There is no guilt weighing upon mankind, attributed to them by God the Father as sin, and for which forgiveness is needed. There is, rather, freedom's chaotic energy that needs to be tamed and disciplined to become the will to good and justice. When freedom is tamed through the appeal that the idea of good exerts upon it (the action of grace consists in this appeal) freedom finds its expression as justice and obtains life, because 'those who practise justice obtain life' (*Proverbs* 11,19).
6. *Spiritual anthropology*. When an individual reaches the point of conceiving himself as a product of God's continuous creation, he realizes that he is, here and now, a 'son' of God. When a person arrives at conceiving himself so intimately joined to the personal God as to call him 'Father', this person has become one with God. In this person, then, the Logos becomes flesh, and this person becomes a divine relation between God and the world. He becomes a mediator. Not a mediator between God and mankind, as if God should need someone to move him towards communion with mankind but rather a mediator among people, between their concrete existence and their divine essence, between temporality and the eternity that people bear within themselves. When someone becomes aware of his divine origins, he is inhabited by the Spirit, and for this reason will be increasingly led towards the good and justice. By doing so, this person will enter the dimension of the Holy Spirit. His spirit will become like the Holy Spirit. And a human being, a simple human being, will appear different to other human beings, who, for this reason, will call him *saint*.
7. *Liturgy and sacraments*. If the supremacy of Christian life belongs to spirituality, the most conscious form of spiritual exercise is liturgy. One of the

main tasks of theology, which receives its nourishment from the celebration of God's praise, is to lead post-modern people to celebrate the liturgy. In this regard, I think that the first and fundamental sacrament is the world. The category of sacrament is eminently relational: everything is a sacrament, everything is God's mediation, because everything comes from God. The seven sacraments are to Catholics the places where the fundamental sacredness of being emerges, the occasions when they become conscious of the fundamental ontological dimension of reality as God's language. However, not only the seven sacraments, but everything mediates God's grace, once we understand that everything comes from God and goes back to God, the origin and goal of all being-energy. Life in its entirety must become liturgy, and liturgy must be the celebration and praise of life.

8. *Ecclesiology.* The construction of the Church as communion and community is the natural outcome of lived faith. There is no real lived faith without community. The Christian community should also have an essentially hierarchical structure, because there is no organization in the world that does not have a hierarchical structure, starting from the phenomena of nature. The more it serves the spiritual experience of the faithful, the truer to its task the Church's hierarchy will be.
9. *Ethics.* Spiritual life expresses itself in attention, and for this reason ethics also turns into attention, an attention to the continuous revelation that every movement of being and every situation of life carry with them. The task of Christian ethics is to help mankind to live their lives in the consciousness that God is love, here and now, against every abstract doctrinalism that, by imposing abstract rules from above, deprives life of its capacity to be revelatory, thus suppressing the very meaning of spiritual life. Norms are necessary; it is essential that they exist. However, true ethics starts when norms are exposed to an actual situation. This is the sense of Jesus' words about the supremacy of man over the sabbath (*Mark 2,27*).
10. *The criterion.* The decisive criterion for judging theological and ethical assumptions is the growing quality of relations, i.e. the growing unity with others (communion) and with oneself (interior unification). Everything that increases unity and communion is appreciated by God because it reproduces his logic, and we can call it sym-bolic in the etymological sense of the Greek verb *sym-ballo*, 'to gather, to unite'. Everything that decreases unity and communion and increases dispersion is unwelcome to God because it opposes his logic, and we can call it dia-bolic in the etymological sense of the Greek verb *dia-ballo*, 'to divide, to separate.' Love is the highest form of union, union as comm-union, and therefore it is the highest form of being. Theology must serve love with unconditional loyalty.

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