

## Chapter 2

### THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN ATHEISM

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In discussing the challenge of modern atheism, I will largely make use of the insights of the theologian Kasper, especially as expressed in his works *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (1982a) and *Atheismus und Gottes Verborgenheit* (1982b). Kasper, among others, reacted to the atheism of the nineteenth century. His analysis of the phenomenon of modern atheism provides a background to understanding Nietzsche's statement that God is dead. His systematisation of the phenomenon of modern atheism assisted me in coming to terms with the challenge modern atheism poses to theology.

#### 2.2 HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT *GOD*?

All Christian traditions believe in one God and hold the belief that no-one can be saved except by believing that this God, who has revealed himself through the Old and New Testament, is the God who saved humanity from sin and death. Theology is thus a discourse about God or a reflection on God (cf Barth 1947:1-10; McGrath 1996:117; see Berkhof 1990:32-39; [1982] 1991:12-15; Peters 1992:28, 68-78; Kaufman 1996:1-8). Atheism is the rejection of belief in God (see Berkhof 1990:8-10). But the question is: what does the word *God* signify (cf Large 2000:335, 339-345; see Ruprecht 1997:577)? If we do not explicitly say what we mean by the word *God*, we will not be able to answer any question about the existence or the being of God (Pannenberg 1979:361). It is therefore important that we, before embarking on any theological enterprise, inquire

about the understandings of religions and theological traditions regarding the word *God* (see Levinas 1998:56-57). We must look at the history of the theological enterprises of the past regarding their understanding of the word *God*.

During the early centuries after Christ, the early church had to deal with its understanding of *God*. However, the early church was divided in its understanding of *God*. The controversy started in Alexandria, probably in the year 318 (cf Kannengiesser 1991:2-3, 473-475; Brakke 1995:6; Williams 2002:48; see Rousseau 2002:224). Arius, a prominent presbyter in the Alexandrian church stated that God the Father is the only one in the Trinity without a beginning (Williams 2002:97). Jesus Christ, the Logos, has a beginning, which precludes him from being God (Stead 1998:671, 674-684). God the Father made the Logos. In Arius' view therefore, the Logos was subordinate to God. The Logos must be either God or creature, and since there cannot be two Gods, it follows that the Logos (Jesus) is a creature (Walker et al [1918] 1985:133; cf Stead 2000:25; see Macleod 1996:122-123; Williams 2002:101, 109). Alexander, the pope of Alexandria, decided that Arius was in the wrong (Kannengiesser 1991:393, 398-401). To him the deity of the Logos and his exact likeness to God was important (Williams 2002:156). But it seemed as if these two assumptions contradict each other. How could there be two co-equal Gods and how would it be possible for the Father and the Son to be the same? The other bishops of the church were so confused they rejected both arguments. In order to solve the controversy between the two opinions Constantine, the Roman emperor at that time, summoned all the bishops of the Roman Empire to the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor for the first universal council of the church (Rousseau 2002:225). The council assembled

in May 325. The majority of the bishops came from the East. Only six were Westerners. Arius stated his opinion that the Logos was in being like God, but not wholly God (cf Stead 1998:674-682). Athanasius demonstrated that God the Father and the Son is of one and the same being (cf Kannengiesser 1991:105, 112-113). The council ruled in favour of Athanasius's view and this general opinion of the council is reflected in the text of the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God....We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...of one Being with the Father" (World Council of Churches [1991] 1996 = WCC [1991] 1996:11; cf Stead 2000:48; Young 2002:78-79; see Walker et al [1918] 1985:131-134).

Arius and his followers decided not to sign the Nicene Creed and were banned by Constantine (cf Williams 2002:67-71).<sup>1</sup> But the controversy did not end there (cf Lieu & Montserrat 1996:151-152; see Haas 1993:234-235; Barnes [1993] 2001:19-33). It soon became clear that the bishops did not understand the depth of the theological debate between the two opinions. To them it became even more confusing after the Nicene Council. And the debate continued until the year 381 when the Council of Constantinople decided again that God the Father and the Son is of one and the same being (Walker et al [1918] 1985:145). It was during the time of the emperor Theodosius. He summoned a synod to meet in Constantinople. They decided to extend the Nicene Creed to include the deity of the Holy Spirit, who in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, "proceeds from the Father" (WCC [1991] 1996:12). The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed marked the beginning of the tradition to talk of God as

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<sup>1</sup> Constantine recalled Arius from exile in the winter of 327 (Williams 2002:74-75).

the triune God: one God with three distinct ways of existence. But it also ended a long and difficult controversy, which divided the church (cf Tilliette 2001:296).

Anselm of Canterbury said that God was the “*id quo maius cogitari nequit*” (the unthinkable) (Anselm *Proslogion* 2:245; cf Peters 1992:212-215; Leahy 2003:47; see Martin 1990:79-85; Miller 1995:25-39; McGrath 1996:130-132; Palmer 2001:4-9; Mansueto 2002:126-127). To Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.7, 1a.2.2-3, 1a.3.1-8) the word *God* denoted the ultimate origin of everything that exists (cf Smart & Haldane 1996:41, 87; Leahy 2003:14-17; see Palmer 2001:50-51; Gossiaux 2003:57-64). God is the infinite end of everything. Luther thought of God in an existential way (cf Berkhof 1990:15). To him it was necessary to state why it is important to believe in God (Luther 1964:92-93; cf Luther, in Pont 1984:13, 17-29, 33-34). According to Peters (1993:13) three understandings of the concept *God* can usually be discerned. He can be Yahweh, the God of Israel; the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and God, the Father of Jesus. Pannenberg (1988b:354) says *God*, according to New Testament usage, means without exception the Father and not the triune God. Nietzsche revealed another concept, one that explains God as having been created by human beings – an idol. Barth ([1922] 1924:19-21) calls this construction of God the “Nicht-Gott”. When we talk about *God* today, we assume too easily that we are dealing with a universal concept.

Throughout the course of the history of theology, it has become clear that the concept *God* is shrouded in uncertainty and controversy. Human beings, unlike animals, have the faculty of reason, and therefore they address and question issues and have generally been

questioning the being and the existence of God. Humans can reach beyond and above everything else, which is liberating. However, this ability to address and question everything also makes them miserable and weary. The only solution to their misery lies in their ability to find meaning in their own existence and the existence of reality that exists around them. If we accept that God is not a reality among other realities and that he is a reality that comprehends all other realities on earth, we have to conclude that the reality expressed in the word *God* can provide an answer to the meaning of humankind's own existence and the existence of all other realities (cf Peters, C C 1998:118-119). Indeed, God encompasses and transcends all answers. The *God-question* is not a categorical question, but a question of transcendental nature. God is the question in all questions, which makes it possible for him to be placed in question.

In modern times everything considered to be true about the existence of God, has changed. In the past, religious people thought of God as the only true reality. In modern times, human beings have started to question this assertion. In the twentieth century God has been considered as simply being a reflection of the world, a pure ideological construct. In this sense, Nietzsche's statement about the death of God serves as indicator and analysis of modern culture. It has become an everyday occurrence to refer to the absence or death of God. World War II deepened the suspicion of people with regard to the existence of God, resulting in atheism settling in the hearts of people (cf Neusch 1982:19-20). Ultimately, this type of atheism has become a universal problem and a phenomenon which is summarised by the word secularisation (cf Neusch 1982:24-27).

Secularisation, or in other words, the atheism of the masses, has become an everyday concept. It has become customary for humans to conceive the world in an immanent way, without a trace of a transcendental being that exists outside the realities of this world. Different evaluations of this phenomenon have been offered. Some theologians reacted by means of a counter-Christian programme of restoration, while others reacted by having a new look at secularisation. This signified the beginning of Secularisation theology, with Weber, Troeltsch, Gogarten, Metz and Löwith as its exponents (cf Pannenberg 1988c:9-13; Hefner 1998:151). They followed Hegel's thinking by maintaining that modern secularisation is a consequence of Christianity and the fulfilment of Christianity within this world (cf Kasper 1982a:19; see Lüdemann 1998:96-97). Blumenberg (1988:1-19) offered yet another theory in an attempt to explain the modern age (see Vattimo 1998:17). According to him, the modern age is a reaction to Christianity (Blumenberg 1988:14-15, 20-34). It is humankind's attempt to be autonomous and free (cf Neusch 1982:19-20; Pannenberg 1988c:13-18).

A better explanation for modern secularisation would be to look at the realities of history (cf Neusch 1982:26). Because of the religious wars of the past, it has become important for modern society to put religion in a sphere of its own, as a private matter of the individual. Religion could no longer bind people together. Rather, it divided people and society (cf Pannenberg 1988c:20-21; Trost 1998:206-207). Reality is explained in a rational way. Regardless of whether or not God existed, everything in society carried on in an unaltered way. Another reason for secularisation is to be found in the rise of modern science, which has given new meaning to the order, the nature and the existence

of everything. Religion has become something of an internal affair, which has lost its contact with reality. Pietism has turned religion into a matter of subjective devotion, a religion of the heart. This has led Hegel (1965:281-282) to suspect that religion was seeking for the God it intuitively denied. He sensed that the objectification of everything that exists and the parting of religion into a subjective sphere, could only lead to an unrealistic notion of reality and the emptying of religion. The world has become a place without God; and God as objectless being has become something that did not need the world (see Hegel 1925:148). In the statement “God himself is dead” Hegel found the expression of modern culture and of the general feeling with regard to religion in modern times. The statement “Gott ist todt [sic]!” can thus be regarded as an interpretation of modern culture (cf Pannenberg 1984:10). In two hundred years of critical thought, the statement “God himself is dead” signified the death of the metaphysical God. Even Nietzsche knew that the Christian faith perceives God’s death in terms of what he did in Jesus Christ. Jüngel (1988:109) mentioned the name of the romantic poet Jean Paul who first used the sentence (1789) in connection with the death of Christ. According to him, it was the dead Christ himself who proclaimed that there was no God (cf Moltmann 1965:152; Pannenberg 1984:9). Hegel (1959, 16:300-302) showed us that it first appeared in a Lutheran hymn (see Figl 2000:83-84), originally sung on Good Friday. It should however not be assumed that it was written by Luther himself. The phrases “Gott ist todt [sic]!” and “Gott ist gestorben” do not appear anywhere in any of Luther’s own published hymns, although the idea of God’s death was not alien to Luther. The phrases in question can be found in the Lutheran pastor Johann Rist’s *Ein trauriger Grabgesang* (cf Moltmann 1970:139-140; Von der Luft 1984:263-264; see Figl 2000:83). In short,

modern secularisation has different roots. It started as a reaction within Christianity against an absolutist picture of God and in response to human beings wanting to be free from any ties.

Hegel (1959, 16:192-193) identified the Christian concept of God with the metaphysical concept of him in a positive way. Later on Feuerbach and Nietzsche identified the Christian concept with the metaphysical concept of God in a negative way. Hegel (1959, 15:103-114) contemplated God both christologically and metaphysically (cf Brun 1994:276, 284-288; Ward [1997] 1998:xxviii; Tilliette 2001:308-310).<sup>2</sup> In Hegel's philosophy the statement about the death of God is a metaphysical one, although its Christian origin is also visible (cf Ruprecht 1997:576). Hegel (1959, 15:299-300) reminded us of the true origin of the sentence "Gott ist todt [sic]!" and of our unfinished theological task (cf Link 1974). He showed us that its original foundation is Christian.

In the history of humanity the word *God* means that God is the ultimate ground of everything that exists. Whenever God disappears as the ground of all reality, the world and everything that exist on earth, become superfluous and without any ground, goal or meaning. Everything then plunges into a hole of nothingness. This state of nothingness is called nihilism in the spirit of Jean Paul, Jacobi, Novalis, Fichte, Von Schelling and Hegel. Nietzsche was the first to challenge the nihilistic consequences of atheism (cf Bayman 2001:183-184). This he did in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882) in which the consequences of the death of God are discussed. If the mystery of God disappears, so



does the mystery of humankind. The death of God leads to the death of humankind (cf Lüdemann 1998:107-109; see Roberts 1998:187; Ward [1997] 1998:xxviii). Nihilism that originates from modern atheism is the real sign of the modern age.

### **2.3 HOW DO WE SPEAK OF GOD?**

Speaking of God poses a problem (cf Martin 1990:40-43; Clayton 2000). To speak about God on the grounds of his revelation is problematic “because no answer is intelligible unless people first grasp the question to which it is the answer” (Kasper 1982a:25; cf Kaufman 1996:5-8). On the other hand, to prove God’s existence without any pre-understanding and pre-supposition, is not possible either. Had we never heard of God, it would be impossible to prove his existence. Proof of God only convinces those who already believe in him. According to Kasper (1982a:25), in our talking about God we are forced to resort to tradition and to refer to it. His point of departure lies in the history of God-talk. Aristotle (*Met* 2 994a; see Matson 1987:131-136) said that sciences should start with those problems that emerged from previous study. Theology’s goal is to give an account of the hope that finds expression in confessing God. Theology is about faith in God that seeks understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). The purpose of theology is to grasp the understanding, the seeking and the questioning, which form part of faith itself. God is an enigma. His being remains a mystery. The goal of theology is to link everything that exists to the mystery of God and to state the importance of the understanding of the mystery of God as a response to the mystery of humanity. It can be carried out by entering into debate with the interpretations that present-day forms of

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<sup>2</sup> Hegel (1965:123-125) focuses on the relationship between God as the infinite and humans as the finite. In his view, it was a necessary development in the life of God to be crucified. God had to suffer and die so

atheism offer as projects of meaning and hope. The conflict about God is also a conflict about humankind, which is an eminently practical problem with a political dimension to it, for it concerns humankind in all its dimensions.

## **2.4 A DEFINITION OF THEISM AND MODERN ATHEISM**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

According to Peters (1992:125) theism is the phenomenon that describes God's distanced involvement in his creation. Davis (2001:1) adds that theists "hold that God is sovereign over his creation." According to Smart & Haldane (2003:8) deism is a form of theism. Jennings (1985:13-28) is of the opinion that theism started as a reaction against a trinitarian doctrine of God. During the Enlightenment period it was not plausible to speak of God in trinitarian terms. After all the religious wars, people were searching for a universal doctrine of God that would unite the human race. It was a time during which all the opposing religious views, such as the divinity of Christ, were abandoned and a universal doctrine of God was emphasised. The centre of attention was God as the infinite, eternal, personal and supreme being and the moral dignity of humanity (cf Jennings 1985:19; see Geisler 1997:16). The result was a combination of theology and Enlightenment philosophy in theism, "the belief in the existence of a supreme and beneficent Being" (Jennings 1985:19). It led to a certain image of God. In trinitarian language God was considered to be absolute being. Now he has become a personal being, the first cause of his creation and the one who is bound to the progress of nature and history of humankind (cf Kaufman 1972:222; Prevost 1990:152-153). The consequences of this view were teleology, theodicy and dissatisfaction

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that his infinity could become united with the concrete finite life of humankind.

with the moral dignity of humankind, consequences which Nietzsche predicted in his philosophy.

Atheism is the denial of everything that is divine, and in the modern age it has become a prospect to consider (cf Kee 1999:87-88). Atheism, according to Lalande (in Pannenberg 1979:348), occurs when humankind is able to explain everything without God, even irreligion. The Bible deals with the world in worldly terms and with God in godly terms. According to the Bible they are qualitatively distinct in an infinite degree. It would only be possible to deny God in a radical way if he was perceived in a radical way. During the twelfth and thirteenth century Magnus and Aquinas stressed the importance of the autonomy of the world (cf Matson 1987:230-242). To them God was an absolutist deity who acted in an arbitrary manner in the world. Descartes ([1911] 1984:92, 150) rebelled against this concept of God. His much-acclaimed saying: “Cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am), was the beginning of subjectivity, which Kant described as a Copernican revolution (cf Kee 1999:43; Leahy 2003:42; see Kant [1899] 1976:19-23; Kern 1982:11; Durfee 2003:194). However, Descartes was not an atheist. He tried to prove the existence of God through the ultimate thought of the human existence, that is to say, because I think, I exist; and because I think of God, God exists. Knowledge of God occurs in the medium of human subjectivity (cf Leahy 2003:19-36). The consequence of such an approach is that God can become a factor in the self-fulfilment of humanity. It must however be noted that Descartes never came to such a conclusion (Kasper 1982a:32).

Atheism has many forms (cf Mansueto 2002:78, 151; see Martin 1990). Kasper (1982a:33) discusses two basic types, which correspond with two different understandings of autonomy in the modern age, namely that which stems from the autonomy of nature and the secular spheres where God is no longer needed on the one hand, and the autonomy of the subject who rebels against an omnipotent God on the other. Then there are the forms of atheism that protest against the evil and wrong of the world (cf Moltmann ([1972] 1976:205-214). Rahner (1964:461-462) referred to this form as “bekümmerte Atheismus”, which encompasses the feeling of being trampled on by a secularised world, the feeling of no longer being able to make the divine real to oneself, the experience of God’s silence and the fear of the emptiness and meaninglessness of the world (cf Kasper 1982b:35-37; see Kern 1982:30). The phenomenon of atheism is a “complex and variegated phenomenon” (Fraser 2002:29). In Pannenberg’s (1979:347) dealing with atheism of the modern age, he divides it into three different categories, namely atheism of freedom, atheism as per Feuerbach’s critique of religion and atheism of transcendence. Moltmann (1970:18-22) discusses three types of atheism, which he calls “methodologischen und hypothetischen Atheismus der Wissenschaften”, “Erfahrungsatheismus” and “humanistische Atheismus”. Atheism has become an accurate interpretation of the modern age. Nietzsche anticipated the consequences of modern atheism, especially nihilism (Heidegger, in Hemming 2002:165).

#### **2.4.2 The autonomy of nature**

The rise of modern atheism is the result of the conflict between theology and modern science which dates back to Galilei (cf Drake 1978:137-156; Fischer 1983:91-114; Joubert 1997:21; Sampson 2000:27-46; see Hawking [1993] 1997:63, 74) who invented the telescope and discovered that the sun did not revolve around the earth but that the converse was true. He thereby rejected the ancient biblical geographical picture of the earth. To him the earth was not standing on pillars. It was important for Galilei that natural science should contribute towards understanding and interpreting the biblical notion of creation. This debate continued through the centuries. Darwin ([1859] 1907) with his evolution theory, and De Chardin ([1965] 1970:69-84) with his principles regarding the evolution of organic matter, further challenged the church's ideas. These debates led to the division between natural sciences and theology, the church and modern culture. Talk about God was only taken seriously in modern culture when it could prove itself by the hard standard of scientific understanding of reality.

During the Middle Ages nature and the existence of God were considered to be one reality. Copernicus and Kepler retained humanity as the spiritual centre and the reference point of the universe (cf Allen 1985:158-162). Humans could stay at the centre of the universe through their own effort. Galilei and Newton developed a new scientific method not by formulating laws of nature from nature itself, but through the interaction between hypothesis and experience (cf Allen 1985:163-166). It represented a new mechanistic approach to explain the universe. But, it was also dangerous, because the cosmos was now seen as a gigantic clockwork that functions of its own accord. It became important

to find a synthesis between faith and knowledge. According to Feuerbach (1956:53) Leibniz was one of the scholars who tried to reconcile faith and knowledge. However, new scientific discoveries forced scientists to push God aside. He was only needed to fill in the gaps for which the scientists had no answer (cf Neusch 1982:28). The relationship between God and the world could be explained in terms of deism or in terms of pantheism. Pantheism is the notion that God is in his nature one with the creation or the whole of reality (cf Vesey & Foulkes 1990:214). De Spinoza (1922:2-35) regarded God as the one, absolutely infinite substance, which by a process of immanent causality engenders his own infinite attributes and finite modalities (cf Mansueto 2002:100; see Stumpf [1966] 1988:249-250). These ideas influenced Hölderlin, Von Schelling and Hegel, as well as Schleiermacher. Einstein did not believe in a God who dissolved himself in human activity. According to his understanding God did not interfere in the activities of human beings. Deism is the notion that God created the universe, but left it after its creation to operate according to its own natural laws (cf Kant [1899] 1976:596-598; Clark 2000:4-6; see Vesey & Foulkes 1990:76). Deism sees God only in a transcendental way.<sup>3</sup> It negates any understanding of God in a mystical way. According to this point of view, God is unconcerned with human affairs. The immanence of God in the universe is denied. The consequence of this notion is a dead God, a God that no longer plays an important part in the cosmos (cf Lacroix 1965:23).

“Methodische(r) Atheismus” (Lacroix 1965:21), replaced the doctrinaire atheism of the past, according to which the natural scientist as such can and must methodically distance

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<sup>3</sup> “Kant has given the term a new meaning: for him an enquiry is called transcendental if it concerns the *a priori* preconditions of any experience” (Vesey & Foulkes 1990:284; cf Kant [1899] 1976:98-99).

himself or herself from the question dealing with the existence of God (cf Kasper 1982a:40; Kern 1982:15; see Moltmann 1970:18; Heidegger, in Hemming 2002:46, 76). According to this notion a natural scientist's own method allows him or her to make statements that are restricted to natural sciences and can neither deny, nor positively justify, faith in God. Similarly, neither can a theologian deny or confirm theories in the natural sciences. It is accepted, in a nuanced way, that natural sciences and theology operate on different levels. God and the world cannot be seen on the same level (cf Lacroix 1965:22-23). Then they become competitors, which mistakes both the absoluteness of God and the freedom of humanity. God cannot be an entity alongside or above the world.

### **2.4.3 The autonomy of the subject**

The debate on human freedom led to the modern humanistic atheism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It started with Descartes who needed God to protect the human ego. Kant (1997:34; cf Wilkerson 1976:153, 158) took it further when he stated that he needed God for humanity's happiness (cf Clark 2000:18). God was no longer important on his own, but for human's sake. Fichte and Von Schelling continued with the idea of human autonomy. In their view God belonged to the moral sphere, to the dimension of freedom. Pascal (1966:168-170, 312-323) paved the way for Hegel when he spoke of the dead Christ. As far as Pascal was concerned Jesus Christ was the mediator in the historic drama between God and the human race (Plaisier 1996:167). Later on the "dead God" signified to Hegel Jesus Christ who died. Hegel expressed the culture of his time with the statement "God himself is dead" referring to the Lutheran hymn (cf Link 1974:11;

Pannenberg 1984:9). To him God was a living God who had overpowered death (cf Jüngel 1988). One of the consequences of Hegel's philosophy was atheism, which shaped the modern age. It was mainly as a result of the interpretations of the leftist Hegelians.

Two thinkers can be regarded as the prophets of the new humanistic atheism, namely Feuerbach and Marx (cf Solomon 1988:86-98). Feuerbach, a disciple of Hegel, changed theology into anthropology (cf Neusch 1982:33-36). According to Pannenberg (1979:347) the first trend of atheism can be found in Feuerbach's critique of religion. In religion humans project and give meaning to their own being (cf Saß 1970:230-259; Bayer 1972:260-309; Feuerbach 1981:203-240). Humankind has a desire to be infinite and projects this desire onto God (cf Neusch 1982:37-39). Humans strive to be god as an ambition of what they would like to be. If God must be great, humans must be nothing. This projection leads to the estrangement of humanity. A *no* to God is a *yes* to humankind. If the mystery of theology becomes the mystery of anthropology, then faith in God becomes faith in the human being himself or herself. The end of religion is based in humanity (cf Feuerbach 1956:81-83). Anthropology is theology that has become aware of it. However, the reduction from theology to anthropology does not answer the question theology poses. It is obvious that according to the theory of Feuerbach, a human being is depicted as an absolute, independent, powerful being. This understanding of a human being is for Hegel the highest form of godlessness. However, in the centre of this understanding of a human being according to Feuerbach, lies another form of atheism, namely the atheism of freedom. This atheism can, according to Pannenberg (1979:353),



be found in Nietzsche's description of the will to power, which is the basis for his metaphysics. Pannenberg (1979:353) is of the opinion that it was Benz who showed the connection between Nietzsche and Feuerbach. According to Benz, the statement about the death of God in *The fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882) means that God must be understood as a mythical person in human reason. Nietzsche calls the first human being in his book *Der Wille zur Macht* (1889) a second god, the "Übermensch". To Nietzsche all the gods are dead while the "Übermensch" is alive (cf Nietzsche 1968a:105).

Marx took Feuerbach's humanistic atheism as the basis of his view (cf Allen 1985:241; Ainley 1998:338; Wernick 1998:349). Humanity is responsible for religion. Religion does not make humanity. Humans can create their own world and they can decide in this world what religion is to be followed (cf Neusch 1982:66-70). Marx took religion as a presupposition for a criticism of the world. The criticism of God is turned into the criticism of the earth; the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics; and the criticism of religion into the criticism of law. With this view he goes beyond that of Feuerbach's. Marx criticised the philosophers for interpreting the world and not changing it. Religion is the opium of the oppressed people (cf Kee 1999:87; see Neusch 1982:57-58; Moltmann 1999:210). History must help to establish the truth of this world when the truth of God has vanished (cf Kasper 1982a:224-225; see Moltmann 1999:221). Atheism can only be fulfilled in communism. Humans are also their own redeemers. There is no life after death. Although it may sound very appealing, a human being cannot be his or her own god. There can be no new start, not even with a revolution. Humanity is bound by history and can only find consolation in the fact that God is the Lord of the

living. Humanity can only find hope and peace in this God and not in a projective society.

Nietzsche is the third prophet of modern atheism (cf Foucault 1999:91; Bayman 2001:203-205; Henriksen 2001:162-180). He is the one who was constantly aware of the result of atheism, namely nihilism (cf Gillespie 2000:141; Bayman 2001:183-185).<sup>4</sup> He reacted to the secular belief of history in progress and the belief that God can be derived from this progress in history.<sup>5</sup> He wanted to offer a counter religion to overcome the nihilistic unveiling consequences of the death of God (cf Lampert 1986:24; Fraser 2002:115-116; Durfee 2003:192-193). He reacted to Christianity because he considered it to be an enemy of life (cf Brobjer 2001:148-152).<sup>6</sup> Faith in this dead God is the reason

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche was not the first to use the term nihilism. Before Nietzsche it was used as a critique of German idealism. According to Cho (1995:205-233) the usage of the term goes back to Oberheit (1787) and Jenisch (1796). But the usage of the term by Obereit, Jenisch, Schlegel and other French sources, did not have an impact on the philosophical discussion in Germany. It was Jacobi, in his letter to Fichte, who introduced the term to the German philosophical world (cf Gillespie 2000:152). Nietzsche was influenced by the “nigilist” and “nigilizm” of Russia (cf Cho 1995:220), through Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky, Bakunin, Herzen and Kropotkin (cf Gillespie 2000:142) and Pascal (cf Voegelin 1996:132, 153). According to Gillespie (2000:153) Nietzsche read the history of nihilism through Schopenhauer. He distinguished between two types of nihilism, namely active and passive nihilism (cf Kee 1999:51-54). To Nietzsche Buddhism is a form of passive nihilism. He chose the path of active nihilism, to declare war on the *status quo* of his time’s notion of history and moral values. Nihilism to Nietzsche is the “radical uncertainty in a god-forsaken world” or the situation when there is no answer to the question: why? (Ibanez-Noé 2001:13; cf Nietzsche 1970:14-15).

<sup>5</sup> History to Nietzsche did not mean the accumulation of past events but the realm in which decisions take place according to which human existence value and comprehend itself. He understood the history of the modern age as the unity of a twofold event, namely the death of God (nihilism) and the transvaluation of all values through the “Wille zur Macht” (Ibanez-Noé 2001:13).

<sup>6</sup> Esterhuyse (1998:239-261) says that Nietzsche’s atheism is a result of his anti-Christian and anti-Semitic feelings. To Nietzsche the origin of the Christian religion is Jewish (cf Maurer 1994:102-103). Both religions made an immense impact on the society, politics and culture of Europe. Nietzsche denied the Christian moral-God. It eventually led him to atheism (cf Esterhuyse 1998:253). However, Murphy (2001:16) cautions against labeling Nietzsche an anti-Semite. I agree with the opinion that Nietzsche’s anti-Jewish feelings are generally misinterpreted. Murphy (2001:16) says Nietzsche had a higher regard for the Jews than he had for Christianity. I also wish to add that I do not agree with Esterhuyse labeling Nietzsche an atheist. I think of Nietzsche as a prophet of the consequences of modern atheism, for example nihilism.

for nihilism. The “Übermensch” is the replacement for God. The will to live is the only drive for humanity. Nietzsche finds this in the example of Jesus. He finds in Jesus what he proclaims, a life at one with itself, a claiming back for humans of the attributes wasted on God. Nihilism to him is the belief that truth does not exist, the negation of a metaphysical world and the degeneration of humankind. According to Gillespie (2000:142) Nietzsche distinguished between two types of nihilism, namely complete (active) and incomplete (passive) nihilism. He identifies incomplete nihilism with utilitarianism, materialism and positivism which try to escape from nihilism without facing the dilemma of morals and values that come to the fore in the event of God’s death. Complete nihilism on the other hand, is deeply concerned with the death of God and the end of all eternal values and morals. It can function in an active way by seeking to destroy the values and morals which Nietzsche identified with Russian nihilism, or in a passive way by rejecting the values and morals which Nietzsche recognised in the philosophy of Schopenhauer.

## **2.5 THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN ATHEISM**

### **2.5.1 Introduction**

To Pannenberg (1979:359) the transcendence of the hidden God, as a characteristic of modern atheism, has put atheism in question. It manifests in the form of the negation of the traditional concept of God. What the alternative way of thinking of God without this concept or depiction is, remains an open question. “Daß die ‘leere Transzendenz’ als Person, als Gott begegnet, das vollzieht sich in der Geschichte der Religionen; und deren

Wahrheit zu prüfen, bleibt der Untersuchung der besonderen Gestalt der einzelnen Religionen vorbehalten” (Pannenberg 1979:360).

Modern atheism challenged theology to self-examination in order to achieve self-definition and self-criticism (cf Kasper 1982a:48; see Neusch 1982:213-216). It is however important to note that atheism never stated the non-existence of God (Kasper 1982b:32-33). It negates a specific concept of God who oppresses and negates humanity and life. The question behind atheism is whether we can speak of God in human terms of being and existence or whether we can only allocate predicates based on action. Classical theology attributed God’s action to his being, namely because God loves me, he is love. Modern philosophy reacted strongly to this approach. Philosophers such as Fichte and Feuerbach said that it is a narrowing of the being of God in the sense that he is reduced to human attributes, which exist in space and time so that he becomes an objectified finite being (cf Allen 1985:240). Fichte applies the divine attributes to the moral order, while De Spinoza applies them to nature, Feuerbach to humanity and Marx to society. Later on Fichte and Von Schelling wanted to avoid these atheistic consequences by avoiding reference to God as a substance, and to refer to him as a subject in a horizon of freedom (Kasper 1982b:37; cf Neusch 1982; Solomon 1988:94-98). Modern philosophy ultimately confronts us with the problem of whether and how the question of being, or the question pertaining to the meaning of being, can be asked anew within the modern philosophy of subjectivity.

In the face of these challenges, theologians responded in one of two ways – either by preserving the *status quo* through the defense of their own position against the challenges of modern atheism, or by stimulating dialogue between theology and the challenges modern atheism poses.

### **2.5.2 Preserving the *status quo***

Modern atheism, in particular atheism of the masses which, for all intents and purposes deny God, has challenged the position of theology. Theology finds itself in a difficult position as far as its appealing to the people is concerned. Presuppositions for talking about God such as general symbols, images, concepts and categories, have faded. People do not have these presuppositions any more. It has put theology in a crisis (cf Kasper 1982b:33). Theology has reacted with an apologetic approach: negatively by rejecting the adversaries' arguments as non-provable and positively by showing that faith in God is reasonable. This approach is motivated in the Bible. According to Psalms 14:1 and 10:4 only fools would say: "There is no God". The wisdom literature emphatically states that all who lack knowledge of God are foolish (Pr 1:7). The New Testament also agrees with this statement. In Ephesians 2:12 mention is made of the ἄθεοι although not in the sense of modern atheism. In this regard it speaks of pagans who worship idols. In the Bible atheism can be defined as godlessness and idolatry, that is to say every deed that do not accept God as the one and only God (Kasper 1982a:33-34). According to the Bible everyone who has faith in God is saved. The Bible considers atheism as a moral failure and as a demonic attack on God. It must however be clear that the atheism or godlessness in the Bible is not the same as the phenomenon we call modern atheism.

### **2.5.3 Dialogue between theology and the challenges of modern atheism**

Since the fourth century and throughout the Catholic and early Protestant periods of the church, atheism was initially ignored in doctrinal statements. It was only later in Vatican I that atheism was refuted on the basis of the destruction of the foundations of human society and as a contradiction of reason. Only in 1964 the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* of Paul VI paved the way for dialogue between theology and atheism (cf Abbot 1966:xv-xxi, 217-220; Flannery 1966:7-20; Kasper 1982b:34-35). Vatican II admitted to the seriousness of atheism, and that it deserved a more thorough treatment. With this attitude the Roman Catholic Church paved the way for dialogue (cf Abbot 1966:219). The Church agreed to handle the matter existentially in three ways. They tried to offer a definition of the problem while acknowledging the fact that there were different forms of the phenomenon of atheism. At the same time the Church also made an attempt to do justice to the positive aspects of atheism, such as the freedom of humanity, justice in society and a protest against evil in the world. Secondly, the Church used the above-mentioned positive elements of atheism as pointers for self-critique. Thirdly, the Church admitted that natural knowledge of God gained by reason could be supplemented by knowledge gained by human experience. However, the latter is rather unsatisfactory in the sense that it does not rhyme with the traditional teaching with regard to the possibility of a natural knowledge of God.

Rahner (1966:293; 1984:132-134; cf Kasper 1982b:35-36) is the one theologian in post-conciliar Catholic theology whose thinking made it possible for theology to enter into a dialogue with modern atheism. This he achieved by incorporating anthropology into the

realm of theology. To Rahner (1966:293) every human being has the pre-apprehension of the reality of the existence of God (cf Peters, C C 1998:116). In every spiritual act humans experience the necessity of the transcendental reality of God, even in the act of denying God. Rahner (in Pekarske 2002:265-266) developed a thesis outlining four possibilities to deal with atheism, namely that:

- humans can interpret their transcendental relatedness as theism and accept it (“true theism”);
- humans can interpret their transcendental relatedness as theism and deny God with a free decision (“culpable atheism”);
- humans can accept their transcendental relatedness and interpret it with the aid of an erroneous concept of God which can be rejected (“innocent atheism”);
- humans can deny their transcendental relatedness and deny all the concepts of God (“culpable transcendental atheism”).

Rahner’s theory makes it possible to reflect on the inherent possibilities of the phenomenon of atheism in theological terms without denying, rejecting, or ignoring atheism as absurd or alien. It opens the way for dialogue since dialogue, by its nature, presupposes a common basis. However, this theory has its limitations. The question that arises concerns the presupposition this theory makes, namely the acceptance of the reality of God. Is it appropriate to still speak of atheism in the true sense of the word or are we merely dealing with a veiled theism? In Rahner’s theory it is inevitable for every human being to acknowledge the reality or the existence of a transcendental being. The only thing that can be contemplated is the nature of this transcendental being. Is it an idol or

God? This theory has merit insofar as it deals with the positive elements in atheism. It makes dialogue possible. The negative side of this theory is that it admits to the transcendence of God, but restricts people to silently accept the transcendence as a mystery.

Heidegger (1960:15-28) moved beyond modern subjectivism and traditional metaphysics. It was important to him to state the ontological difference between being and the meaning of being itself. He did not have a problem with God's being as such but with the concept of God as the basis for what is (cf Heidegger 1983:8-9). This deprives God of his existence. God is a hidden reality.

Political theology and the questions it raises in the form of Liberation theology challenge modern atheism which does not deal with faith as such, but with the practices thereof. These theologies see modern atheism as a practical and political problem that can be solved through a new practice (cf Moltmann 1999).

#### **2.5.4 A dialectical relationship between theology and modern atheism**

Initially, there was no controversy between the Roman Catholic Church and churches of the Reformation about Natural theology. It was only in the twentieth century when the Protestant theologian Barth raised serious questions about Natural theology, that it became an issue. He made it *the* subject of much controversy (Kasper 1982b:37; Neusch 1982:219-221; Clark 2000:3). Barth stated the difference between God and humans. God is totally different than humans. Humans cannot know God and can claim nothing



from God. In Natural theology nature, history, reason and humanity's natural religiosity become the situation for and principle of faith, while Christianity becomes a particular instance of a phenomenon that is neutral in itself and is universally found in human beings. Barth saw in religion something of a human effort to take control over God and to form God after people's image and likeness (Kasper 1982b:37; cf Clark 2000:16, 137). Revelation from God is a different matter altogether. It comes solely from God. A human being is a subject of faith. Without God no faith will be possible (cf Barth 1947:258).

The debate started to go beyond theism and atheism. "Sie laufen alle auf den Versuch hinaus, eine Position jenseits von Theismus und Atheismus zu begründen und mit der Zurückweisung des Theismus auch die legitimen Anliegen des Atheismus aufzugreifen" (Kasper 1982b:38). It is in view of this that the statement of Nietzsche's is to be understood as an impulse towards the development of a concept of God that transcends atheism and theism. After Nietzsche, the statement "Gott ist todt [sic]!" (the origin of which can be traced back to the old Lutheran hymn) was re-entered into theology. Bonhoeffer (1977:394-396) saw in the cross of Jesus Christ the god-forsakenness of the world (cf Ford 2003:362-363, 371; see Kelly & Nelson 2003:138). God allowed himself in Jesus Christ to be helpless and weak in the world. In our situations of hopelessness God abides and helps us. According to Bonhoeffer atheism helped him to understand the biblical picture of a God who rules the world through his weakness. He took the theology of the cross as the starting point for his answer to modern atheism.

The statement on the death of God has different meanings such as the death of God in secularised culture (Vahanian); in language (Van Buren); in the silence of God (Hamilton); and in the death of God in Jesus Christ on the scene of world history (Altizer) (cf Altizer 1993; see Pannenberg 1984:16; Miller & Grenz 1998:79-86). But all these theologies have simply capitulated to modern atheism. They do not contribute to the dialogue between atheism and theology. Moltmann was the first to offer a counter statement to modern atheism. His argument (as Bonhoeffer's) starts with the cross of Christ, which he considered to be the foundation and criteria of Christian theology. To Moltmann it is clear that in the cross God anticipated atheism and conquered it. When the cross provides the point of departure, atheism becomes integrated in the reality of God and is both neglected and transcended at the same time. In this way, God is no longer a creature from outer space, but a being who suffers with his creation.

In the light of modern atheism, faith and theology have no choice but to again question at a primary level their own presuppositions as well as the conditions for their own possibility. It appears as if the questions pertaining to the relations between faith and thought, theology and philosophy, Natural theology and theology based on revelation, need to be looked at. In the case of Nietzsche's prophecy, the relation between God's revelation and world history needs to be explained for it was one of the problems Nietzsche experienced with the concept of God, as propagated in the modern age.

## **2.6 HOW CAN GOD BE KNOWN AND EXPERIENCED?**

### **2.6.1 Natural theology, a possibility?**

Basic presuppositions are required to understand faith. We therefore need to go back to the basic presuppositions of our faith and reflect thereon (cf Jüngel 1999). Reflecting on the basic presuppositions for the understanding of faith can be called Natural theology (cf Barth 1947:200; Kasper 1982a:92). Although we do not find any reflection on the presuppositions for the understanding of faith in the Bible, we do find several references to the presuppositions of faith (Kasper 1982a:92-93). The presuppositions of faith have been questioned in the modern age. It came about as a reaction to rationalism on the one hand, and on the other, as a result of the devaluation of reason, which has led to the claim that God is only reachable by faith and by way of tradition. This line was further pursued by thinkers such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Marx who destroyed the optimistic view of the Enlightenment rationalism in terms of which humans are able to know God through their own powers (cf Neusch 1982:7). Knowledge of God is only a projection of humanity. Barth (1947:134) continued with this criticism by calling Natural theology a product of idols, and by describing it as a maneuver of humanity to take power over God.

Pannenberg does not agree with Barth with regard to the issues of Natural theology (cf Müller & Pannenberg 1970:34-72). His critique against Barth is that he does not move beyond the empty assertion of God and that God himself becomes an example of modern subjectivity (cf Kasper 1982b:38). To him Dialectical theology makes of atheism a natural presupposition of faith, which turns it into Natural theology. Barth agrees with Luther that knowledge of God is only possible through faith (cf Kasper 1982b:39; Clark

2000:137). But according to Feuerbach (1956:105-106) this position of Luther's makes him vulnerable to the temptation of atheism, especially when Luther concludes that God is in your heart (cf Glasse 1975:28-35). According to Feuerbach (1956:51-52) your heart can become your god!

Atheism has become a form of Natural theology, but this does not mean to say that it meant the end of Natural theology in Protestant theology. Reflections on the intellectual presuppositions of the Christian faith continue in the work of theologians such as the later Barth, Pannenberg, Ebeling and Jüngel.

### **2.6.2 How do we experience God?**

Humans pre-apprehend the absolute mystery of a perfect freedom. They are the beings who live in the existence of an infinite mystery, who wait and hope for the free self-revelation of this mystery (cf Jüngel 1978). Humans seek for signs and words in which this mystery will reveal itself to them (cf Peters, C C 1998:121). Analogy helps humans to formulate language when this mystery (God) discloses itself to them. Through the language of analogy humankind can express this self-disclosure of God. Kasper (1982a:132) is of the opinion that we must consider the proofs for the existence of God as invitations to have faith in God. Different arguments are used to prove the existence of God, for example the "cosmological" (Palmer 2001:48-90), "anthropological" (Palmer 2001:285-343), "ontological" (Palmer 2001:1-30), "the argument from miracles" (Palmer 2001:170-224), "the moral argument" (Palmer 2001:227-282) and "the argument from

the philosophy of history”, which Palmer (2001:92-166) calls “the argument from design”, and to which Nietzsche reacted to (cf Kant [1899] 1976:566-583).

As far as Kasper (1982a:149-150) is concerned, it is only faith that opens the unending reality of God to human beings. Faith allows the human race to see a bigger picture beyond everything that is finite in this world. It liberates human beings from all the oppressiveness and sorrows of this world. In faith humans can share in the new world to come, an infinite world without pain and sorrow. Faith helps human beings to perceive their history as open-ended. It can do justice to the very reality of humankind, in its greatness and in its misery (Kasper 1982a:149).

Faith involves the whole person. “Deshalb ist der Gottesglaube weder ein rein intellektueller Fürwahrhalte-Glaube, noch ein rein willentlicher Entscheidungsglaube, noch bloße Sache des Gefühls. Er ist ein Akt des ganzen Menschen, ein Akt, durch den es erst zur vollen Menschwerdung des Menschen kommt” (Kasper 1982a:150). It is this faith that helps human beings to live a meaningful life in relation to the mysterious reality of God.

Kasper (1982a:150) urges us to see every argument that sets out to prove the existence of God as a challenge to have faith in God. It is in this respect that we should hear the voice of Nietzsche. He showed us the nihilistic consequences of the death of God, a world without faith. His philosophy must be seen as a challenge to atheism and theism.