

# Who is the “God” Nietzsche denied?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article examines the reasons that brought Nietzsche to the point of declaring that God is dead, thus doubting the existence of God. Nietzsche's was a reaction to modernity's belief in progress as perceived through the philosophy of Hegel, while also being a reaction to the knowing subject of Descartes and Kant and the theology of Strauss. Nietzsche's quest was for a concept of God that would be free from human domination.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, originally written in 1882, Nietzsche narrates the following story:

Habt ihr nicht von jenem tollen Menschen gehört, der am hellen Vormittage eine Laterne anzündete, auf den Markt lief und unaufhörlich schrie: “Ich suche Gott! Ich suche Gott!” – Da dort gerade Viele von Denen [sic] zusammen standen [sic], welche nicht an Gott glaubten, so erregte er ein grosses [sic] Gelächter. Ist er denn verloren gegangen? sagte der Eine [sic]. Hat er sich verlaufen wie ein Kind? sagte der Andere [sic]. Oder hält er sich versteckt? Fürchtet er sich vor uns? Ist er zu Schiff gegangen? Ausgewandert? [sic] – so schrieen [sic] und lachten sie durcheinander. Der tolle Mensch sprang mitten unter sie und durchbohrte sie mit seinen Blicken. “Wohin ist Gott? rief er, ich will es euch sagen! Wir haben ihn getötet [sic], – ihr und ich! Wir Alle [sic] sind seine Mörder! Aber wie haben wir diess [sic] gemacht? Wie vermochten wir das Meer auszutrinken? Wer gab uns den Schwamm, um den ganzen Horizont wegzuwischen? Was thaten [sic] wir, als wir diese Erde von ihrer Sonne losketteten? Wohin bewegt sie sich nun? Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? Und rückwärts, seitwärts,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on André Johannes Groenewald's DD dissertation, entitled “Nietzsche's impulse towards the development of a concept of God that transcends modern atheism and theism: A philosophical theological study”. The dissertation was prepared under the supervision of Prof Dr Johan Buitendag and co-supervisor Prof Dr Conrad Wethmar, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (2004).

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vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Giebt [sic] es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts? Haucht uns nicht der leere Raum an? Ist es nicht kälter geworden? Kommt nicht immerfort die Nacht und mehr Nacht? Müssen nicht Lanternen am Vormittage angezündet werden? Hören wir noch Nichts von dem Lärm der Todtengräber [sic], welche Gott begraben? Riechen wir noch Nichts von der göttlichen Verwesung? – auch Götter verwesen! Gott ist todt [sic]! Gott bleibt todt [sic]! Und wir haben ihn getödtet [sic]! Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder? Das Heiligste und Mächtigste, was die Welt bisher besass [sic], es ist unter unseren Messern verblutet, – wer wischt diess [sic] Blut von uns ab? Mit welchem Wasser könnten wir uns reinigen? Welche Sühnfeiern [sic], welche heiligen Spiele werden wir erfinden müssen? Ist nicht die Grösse dieser That [sic] zu gross [sic] für uns? Müssen wir nicht selber zu Göttern werden, um nur ihrer würdig zu erscheinen? Es gab nie eine grössere [sic] That [sic], – und wer nur immer nach uns geboren wird, gehört um dieser That [sic] willen in eine höhere Geschichte, als alle Geschichte bisher war!” – Hier schwieg der tolle Mensch und sah wieder seine Zuhörer an: auch sie schwiegen und blickten befremdet auf ihn. Endlich warf er seine Lanterne auf den Boden, dass [sic] sie in Stücke sprang und erlosch. “Ich komme zu früh, sagte er dann, ich bin noch nicht an der Zeit. Diess [sic] ungeheure Ereigniss [sic] ist noch unterwegs und wandert, – es ist noch nicht bis zu den Ohren der Menschen gedrunen. Blitz und Donner brauchen Zeit, das Licht der Gestirne braucht Zeit, Thaten [sic] brauchen Zeit, auch nachdem sie gethan [sic] sind, um gesehen und gehört zu werden. Diese That [sic] ist ihnen immer noch ferner, als die fernsten Gestirne, – und doch haben sie dieselbe gethan [sic]!” – Man erzählt noch, dass [sic] der tolle Mensch des selbigen [sic] Tages in verschiedene Kirchen eingedrungen sei und darin sein Requiem *aeternam deo* angestimmt habe. Hinausgeführt und zur Rede gesetzt, habe er immer nur diess entgegnet: “Was sind denn diese Kirchen noch, wenn sie nicht die Gräfte und Grabmäler Gottes sind?”

(Nietzsche 1973:159)

One cannot help but wonder what exactly Nietzsche meant with his statement: “Gott ist todt [sic]! Gott bleibt todt [sic]! Und wir haben ihn getödtet [sic]!” What was he trying to say? Over the years, there has been a great deal of speculation regarding Nietzsche’s statement and the meaning thereof. Reading Nietzsche one cannot help but think that he went to his grave with a secret (cf Porter 2000:i). Bergoffen (1983:35) admits: “This is not to suggest, however, that distance has rendered Nietzsche’s thought clear to us; it has not; for though we are closer to understanding Nietzsche, we are still quite far

from comprehending him.” When we study the writings of Nietzsche, it becomes clear that he most probably intended for his philosophical heritage never to be fully comprehensible and understandable as historical facts. As a philologist he deemed it important that his words should be interpreted as often as they were read. Schrift (1995:126) says that Nietzsche predicted a century ago, that a century hence, he would find his rightful heirs, the so-called “philosophers of the future” to whom his works were addressed. I agree with Schrift’s opinion (1995:126) that “Nietzsche’s works call for a performative hermeneutics.”

Nietzsche distanced himself from his own writings. In *Ecce Homo* (1888) he states that his person as an ordinary philosopher differs from his philosophical insights and works.

Aber es wäre ein vollkommener Widerspruch zu mir, wenn ich heute bereits Ohren und Hände für meine Wahrheiten erwartete: dass [sic] man heute nicht hört, dass [sic] man heute nicht von mir zu nehmen weiss, ist nicht nur begreiflich, es scheint mir selbst das Rechte. Ich will nicht verwechselt werden, – dazu gehört, dass [sic] ich mich selber nicht verwechsle.

(Nietzsche 1969b:296)

I agree with the solution Schrift (1991:123-143) offers to this problem, namely to interpret Nietzsche’s philosophy in the light of his philosophical language (cf Klein 1997:50-55; see Van Tongeren 2000:51-103).<sup>2</sup> According to him, Nietzsche’s critique of philosophical language has been directed at releasing the activity of interpretation from the dogmatic, life-negating constraints of divine and linguistic authority. Nietzsche’s deconstruction of epistemology opens the text of becoming an unending, pluralistic play of interpretation. This insight helped me to understand Nietzsche’s statement that God is dead.

I am of the opinion that Nietzsche’s statement (that God is dead) should be seen as a reaction to his time (cf Nietzsche 1969a:168; Küng 1978:383-384; Pannenberg 1984:10; Maurer 1994:102-122; Ruprecht 1996:23-32; Heilke 1998:58; Kee 1999:37-38; Van Tongeren 2000:295; Hatab 2001:45-46; Murphy 2001:12-13; Roodt 2001:319-347).<sup>3</sup> With this statement

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<sup>2</sup> Hart (1998:319) agrees when he adds that God is an effect of grammar as far as Nietzsche was concerned.

<sup>3</sup> “The term ‘modernity’, in Nietzsche’s sense, refers both to a condition or self-conception on the one hand, and a philosophical response to this experience on the other. These two components inform and sustain one another within Nietzsche’s critique of his age” (Roodt 2001:326). The transition from premodern tradition to modernity was experienced in theology as a crisis in history in the doctrine of historicism (cf Roberts 1998:192-193).

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he announced the death of the god of modernity (Ward [1997] 1998:xxix; cf Macintyre & Ricœur 1969:67-68). Nietzsche did not share his fellow scholars' enthusiasm for “Fortschritt” (cf Lampert 1993:276, 283-286).<sup>4</sup> In his 1873 essay, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* and in his book *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (1873-1876) he deals with this issue of his time. The doctrine of “Fortschritt” states that history has proven that human beings develop to greater heights of their own accord and that the potential for progress is intrinsic to humankind. God's existence and providence could then be proven on account of this optimistic progress in the course of history. This potential to progress is both actual and necessary. Nietzsche was convinced that a crisis had developed in German culture as a result of the enormous and fast expanding influence of Hegelian philosophy. This philosophy had led to a way of thinking, which had accustomed Germans to talk about the *Weltprozeß* and to justify their own age as the inevitable result of this world-process. Thus God became associated with this world-process. “Man hat diese Hegelisch verstandene Geschichte mit Hohn das Wandeln Gottes auf der Erde genannt, welcher Gott aber seinerseits erst durch die Geschichte gemacht wird” (Nietzsche 1972a:304; cf Tassone 2002:64-68).

Therefore, I would attempt to read and understand Nietzsche's prophecy that “Gott ist tot [sic]!” in the light of his rebellion against the modernistic period's belief in progress. The period from Descartes to Whitehead (with Nietzsche being included in this frame) is widely known as the modernistic period (cf Küng 1987:199-200). This period is characterised by the secular idea of progress, which was expanded to include every aspect of life as a temporary model of all history (cf Moltmann 1988:31). “Die Menschheit stellt nicht eine Entwicklung zum Besseren oder Stärkeren oder Höheren dar, in der Weise, wie dies heute geglaubt wird. Der ‘Fortschritt’ ist bloss eine moderne Idee, das heisst eine falsche Idee” (Nietzsche 1969a:169). I will attempt to indicate that Nietzsche did not, *per se*, affirm or deny the existence of God. He was reacting to the Christian concept of God of his day (cf Madelon-Wienand 1998:302, 306-309; Ward [1997] 1998:xxviii). Nietzsche's “atheism” must be seen relative to a particular definition of God (cf Haar 1998:157). He wanted to show the people of his time what the terrible consequences of the death of God, whom they had murdered, were (cf Haar 1998:158; Roberts 1998:187). He was in actual fact looking for a concept of God that transcends modern atheism and theism.

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<sup>4</sup> Tassone (2002) explains that the idea of progress is underlain by a philosophy of history. According to him positive and negative philosophies of history can be found. The difference between the two does not lie in their different conceptions of time and history “but in the different value judgements they attach to the course of history” (Tassone 2002:340).

Der christliche Gottesbegriff – Gott als Krankengott, Gott als Spinne, Gott als Geist – ist einer der corruptesten Gottesbegriffe, die auf Erden erreicht worden sind; er stellt vielleicht selbst den Pegel des Tiefstands in der absteigenden Entwicklung des Götter-Typus dar. Gott zum Widerspruch des Lebens abgeartet, statt dessen Verklärung und ewiges Ja zu sein. In Gott dem Leben, der Natur, dem Willen zum Leben die Feindschaft angesagt! Gott die Formel für jede Verleumdung des “Diesseits”, für jede Lüge vom “Jenseits”! In Gott das Nichts vergöttlicht, der Wille zum Nichts heilig gesprochen!

(Nietzsche 1969a:183)

Several reasons can be given for Nietzsche’s quest for a concept of God that would be neither atheistic nor theistic. The confessional institution lost credibility during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when a change occurred in theological thought, brought on by the modern views of the *Aufklärung*, as embodied in German idealism and Romanticism. Modern theology had become integrated with the empirical world, which changed the general understanding of the human condition, the community, the world and even of God.

Modern theology found itself in a crisis because of modern scientific views, in particular as embodied in the philosophies of philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and Whitehead; modern democracy; modern critique against religion from Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; modern anthropology and social science; modern exegeses such as the historical critique by De Spinoza, Semler and Strauss; and modern liberal movements (cf Küng 1987:199-200). Theology was in a crisis because humanity, rather than God, had become the centre of attraction. Modern theology became a human tool: for humankind, and in the service of humankind. The question whether there would still be any place for God on earth at all, arose.

By reading Nietzsche it becomes clear that he distanced himself from all the theologians of his time; from the German philosophy in its entirety; and from the superficial atheism of the natural scientists, which left them apathetic in the wake of issues of which they did not suffer the consequences.

Ah diese Deutschen, was sie uns schon gekostet haben! Umsonst – das war immer das Werk der Deutschen. Die Reformation; Leibniz; Kant und die sogenannte deutsche Philosophie; die Freiheits-Kriege; das Reich – jedes Mal ein Umsonst für Etwas, das bereits da war, für etwas Unwiederbringliches ... Es sind meine Feinde, ich bekenne es, diese Deutschen: ich verachte in ihnen

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jede Art von Begriffs- und Werth-Unsauberkeit [sic], von Feigheit vor jedem rechtschaffnen Ja und Nein.

(Nietzsche 1969a:249-250)

## **2. AGAINST WHOM WAS NIETZSCHE REACTING**

### **2.1 Introduction**

It is clear that Nietzsche reacted against all the theologians of his time; the entire German philosophy; as well as against the shallow atheism of the natural scientists, because they remained apathetic towards issues under which they did not suffer.

Ich sprach vom deutschen Geiste: dass [sic] er gröber wird, dass [sic] er sich verflacht. Ist das genug? – Im Grunde ist es etwas ganz Anderes, das mich erschreckt: wie es immer mehr mit dem deutschen Ernste, der deutschen Tiefe, der deutschen Leidenschaft in geistigen Dingen abwärts geht. Das Pathos hat sich verändert, nicht bloss die Intellektualität. – Ich berühre hier und da deutsche Universitäten: was für eine Luft herrscht unter deren Gelehrten, welche öde, welche genügsam und lau gewordne Geistigkeit!

(Nietzsche 1969c:99)

I will illustrate how Nietzsche reacted by focusing on three themes or ideas in his work, namely:

- his reaction against the idea of the subject that knows himself or herself, God and his or her world, as propagated by the German philosophy of his time (although Descartes was not a German, his influence on German philosophy will become apparent);
- his reaction against the idea of progress in history,<sup>5</sup> as propagated by the philosophy of Hegel<sup>6</sup> and used in the evolution theory of Darwin;

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<sup>5</sup> “Mit seiner theologisch-moralisch-politischen Chiliasmuskritik will Nietzsche die ganze eurogene Fortschrittsgeschichte treffen” (Maurer 1994:111).

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche reacted against the conception of history as teleology, which results from a certain reading of Hegel's philosophy of history. The central problem here relates to the emphasis on teleology and the achievement of goals (cf Roodt 2001:327). It however remains an open question whether Nietzsche himself studied Hegel intensively (cf Stegmaier 1990:99).

- his reaction against the ideas of theologians who did not practice what they proclaimed such as Strauss, who caused Nietzsche's break with Christianity.

## 2.2 Nietzsche as reacting against the idea of the subject<sup>7</sup> that knows himself or herself, God and the world

"Aber mein Gefühl schlägt um, bricht heraus, sobald ich in die neuere Zeit, in unsre Zeit eintrete. Unsre Zeit ist wissend ...." (Nietzsche 1969a:208). With these words, Nietzsche summarised his feelings about his time.

During the Enlightenment period the individual or the centered subject was discovered and found expression in the words: "Cogito, ergo sum" (Descartes [1911] 1984:92, 150; cf Milovanovic 1997:www.soci.niu.edu/critcrim/papers/drag-pomo.html). Descartes, the father of modern intellectual knowledge, gave the subject knowing abilities on which many truths could be founded (cf Pippin 1991:23). Descartes occupied himself with the problem of his time, namely how to turn philosophy into a science that would work with provable facts and truths, such as those that were discovered by Copernicus, Kepler and Galilei (cf Küng 1978:47).

It therefore became important that philosophy should also work with provable certainties. Descartes ([1911] 1984:92) designed a method, consisting of four rules, whereby it could be indicated how a human being can acquire knowledge. The first rule he applied was to accept everything which, when perceived, can be recognised as true. The second was to divide the problem into smaller fragments and to solve each part separately. "The third was to carry on my reflections in due order, commencing with objects that were the most simple and easy to understand, in order to rise little by little, or by degrees, to knowledge of the most complex, assuming an order, even if a fictitious one, among those which do not follow a natural sequence relatively to one another" (Descartes [1911] 1984:92). The fourth rule was to look at the whole of the problem so as to see whether all the arguments had been taken into consideration. Descartes moved from the unknown to the known, from

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche tried to create with his philosophy a new subject, one to overcome the old constructed subject. But as long as God existed, such a subject could not come into being. By killing God, he made it possible for human beings to construct a new subject. Lackey (1999:754) says "... for in killing God and metaphysics, he has set into motion the creative self-overcoming of 'self' which will empower individuals to expand the borders of what was once known as humans." Nietzsche wanted to free the subject from humans, so that individuals could achieve something more dignified and more improved. Nietzsche had a problem as far as the subjectification of knowledge and the subjectification of *praxis* was concerned. There is a general scepticism in history concerning the "value of an objective reality that bears no relation to subjective experiences" (Roodt 2001:329). The problem is that subjective experiences are used, above the objective reality, to acquire sure knowledge. Instead of "cogito ergo sum" Nietzsche prefers the reference of "vivo ergo cogito" (Nietzsche 1972b:325).

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doubt to knowledge. It is therefore rather apt that Descartes' method is called the method of methodological doubt.

Descartes made it possible for human beings (as subjects) to know. The human race no longer depends on the object to know. Humans have rational abilities, which help them in the process of knowing (Descartes [1911] 1984:101; cf Descartes 1993:18).

Descartes does not mean to suggest that the human being knows and understands his or her being completely. The only certainty with regard to the human being's existence is his or her existence (cf Descartes [1911] 1984:150; 1993:18). From this self-certainty, Descartes then sets out to prove the existence of God based on the idea that everything the human being may think of, must be certain and truthful. He concludes that because God is perfect, he cannot be the cause of any error. Descartes thus argues that, from the certainty of the thinkable abilities of the human being, God definitely exists. If one thinks of God, one must conclude that God exists (cf Descartes [1911] 1984:178; 1993:25; Cahoon 1988:45).

Another reason Descartes offers to prove the existence of God is that God is the creator to whom everything belongs. He realises that all things depend upon God. Descartes ([1911] 1984:184; 1993:25) comes to the conclusion that his perception of God cannot be untrue and that nothing causes him to doubt this truth. This certainty of the existence of God opens the doors to other modes of being in the external world (cf Flew 1984:91). It was important for Descartes and his time to have certainty about the existence of God. God alone could make the subjectivist world coherent. Without God or without concepts equally as transcendent, the definitively modern notion of the thinking subject tends to lose the grounds of its relation to the rest of reality (cf Cahoon 1988:69). It was also important that this certainty begins within the rational powers of human beings; that the existence of God is dependent on the rationality of human beings. European history reached a turning point with the philosophy of Descartes when basic certainty was no longer centered on God, but on humans (cf Küng 1978:36).

Nietzsche (1968b:23) did not share the same enthusiasm for and certainty of the human being as subject. He called Descartes and his following “harmlose Selbst-Beobachter” who believed in things such as “unmittelbare Gewissheit”, “absolute Erkenntnis” and “Ding an sich” which were contradictions in terms (cf Madelon-Wienand 1998:303). To him the event expressed in the word *cogito* (I think) attained a series of statements which were difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove. When Nietzsche spoke of knowledge and the certainty thereof, he came to the conclusion that this certainty of knowledge could not exist.



What was certain to Nietzsche was the needlessness of rational proof of the existence of God. To him an intuitive feeling could not prove God. Nietzsche realised that in the knowing subject the idea of knowledge outside the borders of the subject was not possible; that no truth, no certainty and no knowledge existed outside the knowing subject. Humanity could not decide upon the truth or untruth of certain questions. All problems relating to values and morals were beyond human reason. True philosophy to him was to understand the limits of reason. Nietzsche distanced himself from the system-based thinking of his time (the modernistic period). The universal whole was not the only reality that existed. He found it problematic that the philosophers, the scientists and the theologians obtained their truths and thoughts within certain systems. He claimed that truths could also lie behind and outside certain systems (see Schoeman 2004:13-14). Derrida agreed with Nietzsche that the subject was not the only given and certain existence within any and every context (cf Derrida 1974:97-99; 158). In dispersing the subject within a system of textual relations, Derrida adopted a Nietzschean strategy of refusing to hypostasise the subject. For Nietzsche, this refusal was grounded in the affirmation of a multiplicity of perspectives, of seeing the world with new and different eyes, that animated his philosophy of will to power as active force within the infinite play of becoming (cf Schrift 1995:30). The only way to escape systems was through creativity as we find in art (see Beukes 1995:24; Schoeman 2004:14).

Nietzsche agreed with Kant in rejecting the claims of the knowing subject. Kant focused on the importance of the limits of reason (cf Plaisier 1996:234). Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God can be viewed as a result of the speculative process of thought made possible by the limits imposed on reason by Kant's critique of this human faculty (cf Lawler 1986:1). Kant replaced Descartes' idea of the infinite as the *primum cognitum* with the transcendental ideal of reason. Kant set up certain criteria on the grounds of which the rational could know. He agreed with the empiricists that knowledge is possible from experience, but he was not prepared to say that all knowledge must be derived from experience (cf Flew 1984:190). For Kant there are two types or categories of knowing, namely theoretical and practical knowing. Theoretical knowledge is knowledge that can be obtained empirically through that which we can see. Practical knowledge is obtained on another level. It pertains to knowledge of the unknown (that which cannot be seen), such as faith and God. He rejects any notion of knowledge of God in the theoretical sphere.

To Kant, knowledge of God from his revelation is not possible, because God cannot be empirically seen as an object amongst others. To know faith,

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he set up a second category of knowing, namely to know the unknowable by practical reason. Kant believed that the imagination (“Einbildungskraft”), is in a sense the root of all objective knowledge, a claim it shares with the transcendental unity of apperception (cf Cahoone 1988:62). Faith is not knowledge, but a useful function of rationality in its practical capacity.

Ich kann also Gott, Freiheit und Unsterblichkeit zum Behuf des notwendigen praktischen Gebrauchs meiner Vernunft nicht einmal annehmen, wenn ich nicht der spekulativen Vernunft zugleich ihre Anmaßung überschwenglicher Einsichten benehme....Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen  
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(Kant [1899] 1976:28)

It is a function all humans must fulfil. The idea of God originates from rationality and is based upon the human acceptance of moral laws. God becomes something of a protector and guarantor of the moral order of the world (cf Maimela 1990:23).

Nietzsche (1969a:176-177) rejected Kant's idea of the practical reason, which included knowledge of God and faith. He blamed Kant for inventing a type of reason for something such as morality, that one was not supposed to reason about. Nietzsche (1969a:193) also rejected the “sittliche Weltordnung” of Kant as a lie of the philosophers and the church. To Kant humans were moral beings that had to perform certain moral duties. God was not an object, but an idea of the rational mind. The idea of God rested on moral grounds, that is, on practical reason's willing of the good and its acknowledgement of moral law. Moral considerations must lead us to suppose that such a God did in fact exist (cf Schacht 1984:257). Any reference to God was grounded in morality. However, Nietzsche did not agree with this.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche accused Kant of escaping his rational conscience by inventing a scientific method of reasoning to accommodate morality such as practical reason (Nietzsche 1969a:176-177).

For Kant, Jesus was the example of the ideal moral man. Jesus was the ideal man that satisfied God. Similarly, every human must strive for morality. Nietzsche did not agree with Kant, because to Nietzsche, morality meant danger. “Eine Tugend muss [sic] unsre Erfindung sein, unsre persönlichste Nothwehr [sic] und Nothdurft [sic]: in jedem andren Sinne ist sie

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<sup>8</sup> To Nietzsche there is no transcendent source of values. God is not the true source of legitimation of values. The source is to be found in the “Wille zur Macht” for which those values are real values (cf Ibanez-Noé 2001:9). For those who are interested in reading more about Nietzsche's understanding of morality, see Marinus Schoeman (2004:20-45).

bloss eine Gefahr" (Nietzsche 1969a:175). For Kant, morality served as humankind's redemption. Kant reinterpreted religion in terms of rational morality (cf Maimela 1990:26).

Kant rejected metaphysics, because knowledge could not be derived from the metaphysical world as a project of the empirical sensing of the order of things in the world. Sensing could never become a (false) deed. A metaphysical world that did not exist, could not be supposed. Nietzsche pointed to another reality, one that refused to invent ideal worlds, to visualise false abstract schemas, or to interpret the world in terms of reality, certainty and appearance. This was in opposition to the ideal world of Kant and of theology (cf Wilson 1994:17). In his book *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878), Nietzsche rejected any notion of a Christian metaphysical worldview. Such a worldview had no value since it could not help resolve the questions of life. If such a world existed, the knowledge thereof would be irrelevant like the knowledge of the chemical analysis of water to the sailor in danger in a storm (cf Nietzsche 1967:25-26).

But why did Nietzsche accuse Kant of metaphysics, when Kant was supposed to have rejected metaphysics? "In particular ... it is Immanuel Kant whom Nietzsche castigates for continuing the agenda of metaphysics. This castigation is tinged with irony because Kant was supposed to have rejected metaphysics" (Wilson 1994:16). Von Schelling (1994:95) solves this problem by explaining that: "... Kant's critique was initially directed against the metaphysics accepted in the schools, but that from another side and, as it were, unintentionally, it also again became a defence of precisely this metaphysics."

### **2.3 Nietzsche as reacting against the ideas of progress in the philosophy of Hegel and the science of Darwin**

Hegel<sup>9</sup> exerted much influence in Europe, especially in the sphere of historical research. "Hegel is our only thinker who has made the forward movement of advance the very center [sic] and ground of pure thinking itself, and that advance is inseparable from the dark mystery of *Trieb*" (Altizer 1993:15). He expanded the Kantian categories of rationality and knowledge, which were related only to nature, to the sphere of history. Everything that happens in creation is purposeful and part of the duration of history. There is progress in the duration of history, because everything in history points to a teleological

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<sup>9</sup> Although Hegel and Nietzsche differed on many accounts, it is not to suggest that there are no common ground in their thinking. After having discussed Nietzsche's and Hegel's different opinions on their critique of metaphysics, Horstmann (1993:301) concludes that in the end both ask the same question, namely: "wieviel Objektivität braucht der Mensch?"

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development. To Hegel this history is found in the divine idea where God as Spirit is part of a process of revealing himself in the world. He is bound to his revelation (Hegel [1969] 1980:194-195; [1970] 1980:32-33; cf Walker 1989:89-96).

Hegel rejected the anthropomorphic and naive idea of God above the world. He also rejected the idea of a rational deistic God who created the world but then left it to its own devices. However, this does not mean he rejected God. To Hegel ([1970] 1980:456-457; [1971] 1979:408-409) God existed in the sphere of thinking in general, in the form of representation and for experience, for subjectivity and in the subjectivity of Spirit, in the innermost being of subjective Spirit.

He places the existence of God in another sphere, that of relational relatedness with God. God is transcended above any reason or rational activity. Hegel differed from Kant in the sense that Kant made a distinction between God and humans. God stands opposite human reason. Hegel interpreted God, truth and the rational as events in the history of the human race. God is Spirit; he is the unconditional motion (Hegel [1969] 1980:221, 280).<sup>10</sup> In his religious philosophical thought De Spinoza influenced Hegel. For De Spinoza, God is the one who did not live apart from the world. He said that God is in the world and the world in God.

An otherworldly (transcendent) God was no longer acceptable. Humans wanted a God who was close to them and in whom they could trust. This becomes evident in Hegel's definition of religion. To him religion is objective with regard to the content of religious consciousness and subjective in the fact that God as Spirit is manifesting himself in the religious self-consciousness.

To Hegel the death of God is a historical event and a reality. This suffering and death of God mean that the human race shares in the divine history, that they are part of God himself. It is the nature of the divine to die a sacrificial death. With this philosophy Hegel ([1969] 1980:291-293) tried to reconcile the finite human with the infinite God. God reconciled himself eternally in his death with the world and himself.

The death of Christ must not be seen in a moral light, but as the forsakenness and hopelessness of the absolute, godly Self. It is not just the death of an individual but also the death of God himself, which says something of his nature. He had to die in order for human beings to live. This task of satisfying God lies only in the hands of God. No human can ever achieve this. But Hegel does not see the death of God as the end. The god-

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche attached another meaning for “Geist”. To him it meant life, which is not necessarily associated with God (cf Stegmaier 1997/8:300-318).

forsakeness of the world is captured in the forsakeness of God himself. God identified himself with the world. He overpowered death. Three days after Jesus was crucified and buried, he was resurrected. "Auf die Auferstehung folgt die Verklärung Christi, und der Triumph der Erhebung zur Rechten Gottes schließt diese Geschichte, welche in diesem Bewußtsein die Explikation der göttlichen Natur selbst ist" (Hegel [1969] 1980:291). In his philosophy Hegel tried to put God at the top of the order of all things, as the only principle for knowledge. To do this, he created a system (cf Küng 1978:171). Hegel called the way in which the "absolute Geist" manifested itself in history, phenomenology. "Die Geschichte des göttlichen Geistes selbst: beschrieben vom Philosophen getreu nach der Stunde, wie sie ihm schlug. Insofern ist die Phänomenologie eine theologische Geschichtsphilosophie und eine philosophische Geschichtstheologie" (Küng 1978:176). With his phenomenology Hegel tries to show how God is related to the world. God is part of the world in development and in history. He leads the world as Creator and as Spirit to himself and to his infinity and divinity (cf Küng 1978:177). This development of God in the world is a mighty, self-moving circle, where God turns from outside himself to within himself. There is a continuous dialectical movement in God. Hegel prefers to speak of God as Spirit, because Spirit is the expression of a God who comes to himself out of forsakeness and suffering. To Hegel, God is the ultimate reality in the world, in humans and in world history. Hegel was convinced that world history was driven on by an unknowable force, which he called a "Weltprozess" (Hegel [1969] 1980; cf Marlaud 1982:26; Hespe 1991:177-179). He saw the history of the world as the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth (Hegel [1969] 1980:280-281).

After Hegel, it would have been impossible to return to the old concept of a deistic God. Hegel paved the way for a new concept of God, namely God as the immanent in the transcendent, the God which is here and now. Hegel called it *bestimmte Religion* (Hegel [1969] 1980). To him God is no longer a being above and beyond this world, an unknown being whom the human race does not know. Humanity knows God because he has revealed himself in the process of history as the "absolute Geist" (see Hegel [1971] 1979:408-409).

Nietzsche (1972a:305), however, distanced himself from any notion of humans being trapped in the manifestation of historical events, which he called "Macht der Geschichte". Nietzsche rejected the idea of human beings as the authors of the progress of history as it would eliminate the future of humanity and would lead to stagnation. Nietzsche (1972a:304) was of the opinion that the philosophy of Hegel was dangerous in its views. Nietzsche

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could not commit himself to accept the idea that God could be derived from history.

Hegel, according to Nietzsche, did not realise the consequences of his philosophy of history as a world-process. His philosophy of history as a self-moving force is the beginning of nihilism (Nietzsche 1972a:310). Nietzsche (1973:280) believed Darwin owed much of his ideas to Hegel.<sup>11</sup> He was convinced that were it not for Hegel, there would have been no Darwin. In his book, *On the Origin of Species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle of life* (1859), Darwin demonstrated that organisms had evolved from a simple beginning into new forms by means of natural selection (cf Brooke 1991:275). Through this theory of evolution he explained several phenomena in nature. All species on earth try to increase their replicate to ensure their own survival. “In one respect, Darwin’s theory, no less than Genesis, implied one ultimate origin; in another, however, it could be used to underwrite the notion that different races were incipiently distinct species, the ‘fittest’ of which had their superiority demonstrated by the very fact of their power and success” (Brooke 1991:280).

In his second book, *Descent of man* (1871), Darwin deals with the evolutionary processes of the human race. Many scientists welcomed the evolution theory, because it brought new insights into science. Furthermore, it opened doors to other scientific fields of study. But it also brought about theological reaction. There were the “creationists” who believed either in God, in the evolution theory, or in the “big bang” (cf Drees 1993:20). The evolution theory can be classified as positive (optimistic) or negative (pessimistic). “...[O]ptimistic in that natural selection invariably worked for the good of the species, pessimistic in that nature was riven with struggle and strife” (Brooke 1991:289).

Nietzsche (1930:460-461) sees in evolution a form of finality, which he rejects. He rejects any idea of humans progressing to a greater species. Human beings do not exhibit any sort of progress. Instead, the ideal cases of evolution are exposed to every form of decadence (Nietzsche 1930:461). Nietzsche (1930:674) sees in humans a combination of the “Untier” and the “Übertier”, “Unmensch” and the “Übermensch” with the opposites belonging together. Nietzsche (1968c:329-332) argues that it is important to know that whenever there is growth within humans towards greatness, there is also another side that needs to be considered; a side that conveys their growth into

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<sup>11</sup> However, Nietzsche was “suspicious and highly critical of the projection of Hegelian philosophical notions into Darwin” (Johnson 2001:71). Johnson (2001:65-69) pays attention to Nietzsche’s critique of Strauss, whom he castigates for using Darwin’s theories to attack “established religion, superstitions, and discredited theological doctrine.” Johnson (2001:65-69) states that as far as Nietzsche was concerned, Strauss did not fully understand the theories of Darwin.

their own desires – desires, which would eventually destroy them. Decadence is a vital necessity and there is no progress without constant regress.

This evolution in species is the product of natural processes, with no sign of progress. It is humanity's will to survive. Nietzsche (1930:462-463) perceives the ultimate reason and character of all change in the will to power, which is part of nature. The principle of the will to power entails "wie man wird" (Nietzsche 1969b:291), where identity, and not change, plays a decisive role (cf Marlaud 1982:30). For Nietzsche the dogma of evolution is nothing but faith in the universal goal of human beings. In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche (1968a:10-11) said that the greatness of a human being resided in the fact that he or she is a bridge and not a goal. Nietzsche did not contest the scientific facts of evolution (cf Johnson 2001:70-79). He questioned the idea that the human race developed as an ideal, perfect utopia. Nietzsche argued that if this were true, humans would already have attained such a stage. He dismissed the idea of infinite progress as an unreasonable assertion (cf Marlaud 1982:30).

Nietzsche accepted progress only on the grounds of the growth of power. Evolution is nothing but the will to live. "Der Kampf um's [sic] Dasein ist nur eine Ausnahme, eine zeitweilige Restriktion des Lebenswillens; der grosse [sic] und kleine Kampf dreht sich allenthalben um's [sic] Uebergewicht [sic], um Wachsthum [sic] und Ausbreitung, um Macht, gemäss dem Willen zur Macht, der eben der Wille des Lebens ist" (Nietzsche 1973:267-268). Nietzsche was of the opinion that the reality of his world differed from the one Darwin and the philosophers claimed to know. "Ich sehe alle Philosophen, ich sehe die Wissenschaft auf den Knien vor der Realität vom umgekehrten Kampf ums Dasein, als ihn die Schule Darwins lehrt, – nämlich ich sehe überall Die [sic] obenauf, Die [sic] übrigbleibend, die das Leben, den Wert des Lebens kompromittieren" (Nietzsche 1930:463).

#### **2.4 Nietzsche's contact with Strauss and his break with Christianity**

Strauss was a student of Hegel. In 1835 he published *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*. He was one of the nineteenth century thinkers who prepared the ground for Nietzsche's conclusion (cf Lawler 1986:1). The rationalists and the naturalists removed all the supernatural elements from the Bible and turned Jesus into a figure that everyone could follow. His sayings could be obeyed because they related to reality. Strauss claimed that the Gospels were the interpretations of the disciples of Jesus, who lived in a world filled by myth and legend. Strauss and Nietzsche agreed that the biblical writers clad Jesus in some unhistorical ideas. The statement that Jesus was the Messiah gave rise to many heresies, such as that Jesus fulfilled the Old

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Testament and was the prototype of Old Testament prophets such as Elijah and Elisha (Nietzsche 1969a:199-200).

Strauss ([1836] 1984:273) found similar examples throughout the Bible. He distinguishes between two tendencies in the myth of the incarnation of Jesus. The first is the desire to see Jesus as the incarnation of Moses in a higher form. The second is to bring Jesus as the Messiah in contact with his predecessors, so that he could be exemplified as fulfilling the kingdom of God.

Strauss and Nietzsche tried as philological scientists and with the help of modern science, to reveal the real facts about Jesus because these facts were hidden behind unhistorical myths and legends that were retold by the disciples in their interpreting of Jesus. Strauss and Nietzsche could not find anything of the life of Jesus in the Gospels. To them the Gospels are nothing but the opinions of his disciples, for they are filled with contradictions. “At this point the similarity of outlook stops, for each critic has different arguments as to just how obscured the *life* [sic] and *religion* [sic] of Jesus are and as to just how much of this can be recovered from the Gospels” (Wilson 1994:28). Nietzsche (1969a:197), unlike Strauss, was not concerned with the contradictions in the various traditions in the Gospels. He was more concerned with the “psychologische Typus des Erlösers” (Nietzsche 1969a:197). He was not concerned about the authenticity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus or the real facts about his death, but whether Jesus as a type of redeemer was still credible at all. He was not sure whether this type of redeemer was delivered by tradition.

Strauss admitted that Jesus was a historical person who acted in public and who gave the impression that he was the Messiah. He denied the claims of Jesus as the incarnate God on the basis of historical criticism and on the basis of speculative philosophy (Lawler 1986:45). To him it was part of the dogmas promoted by the church. The dogmatic statements of Jesus could, according to Strauss, be neither traced nor proved. According to Strauss the history of Jesus had to be dogmatically reconstructed. He attempted to do so through a Hegelian understanding of the history of Jesus (cf Sandberger 1972). Strauss agreed with Hegel that the dogmatic statements about Jesus originated from conversations the disciples had after Jesus’ death. The fact that the disciples believed in the resurrection is not enough reason for us to believe in it too (cf Brooke 1991:269). Nietzsche distanced himself from any human-made image of Jesus, such as Jesus as the Son of God and Jesus as the Christ. He tried to find the historical Jesus to free him from all the dogmas and interpretations surrounding his life. Nietzsche wanted to do away with the “man mache Jesu”.



Nietzsche (1972a:155-238) called Strauss a “Philister” and a poor writer. He felt that Strauss did not practice what he had proclaimed (Nietzsche 1972a:196). Nietzsche accused Strauss of ignorance. Strauss proclaimed that he (Strauss) was no longer a Christian and that he did not want to influence anyone. He nevertheless still did. His views led others to also break with Christianity. Furthermore, he was not wholly honest with the readers of his book *Der Alte und der neue Glaube: Ein Bekenntnis* (1873). Nietzsche (1972a:196) did not hold this book of Strauss’s in high regard. According to Nietzsche (1972a:206) the themes in this book were not logical. Strauss assumed, for instance (in his first chapter) that all humans were Christians, as if “alter Glaube” simply and solely refer to Christianity. Nietzsche said that this reflected Strauss’s true nature – he remained a Christian theologian. He was not a philosopher either, because he could not distinguish between faith and knowledge and he constantly referred to his so-called new faith and the new science in the same breath (Nietzsche 1972a:206). Nietzsche questioned the goal of Strauss’s work, which presumably was to expound a “neuer Glaube”.

To Nietzsche (1972a:207) this new religion propounded by Strauss was neither new faith nor modern science. It was actually no religion at all. He concealed to his followers what he actually did with God, and instead turned to metaphysics. “Er wagt es nämlich nicht, ihnen ehrlich zu sagen: von einem helfenden und sich erbarmenden Gott habe ich euch befreit, das ‘Universum’ ist nur ein starres Räderwerk, seht zu, dass [sic] seine Räder euch nicht zermalmen!” (Nietzsche 1972a:195).

### 3. IMPLICATIONS OF NIETZSCHE’S PHILOSOPHY

Now that we have heard Nietzsche’s voice, it is evident that he indeed had a message for the people of his time (and for ours). The whole idea of progress and historicism is nihilistic. The idea that humans can *know* – and know everything – is going to destroy humankind (Nietzsche 1972a:309). To Nietzsche, the “Ewige Wiederkehr”, as a myth, is the replacement for all religions (cf Van Tongeren 2000:294-296). It is ironic that Nietzsche, who himself suffered so much because of the onslaughts of life, propagates this theory and as a consequence, a love for life. Nietzsche never justified atheism. To him, it was a datum. He did not want to either affirm or deny the existence of God. He wanted to show the psychological reasons for belief in God. Humans believe in God because they strive for power and cannot bear the feeling of powerlessness. It is these psychological reasons explaining the Christians’ belief in God that make the Christian faith unacceptable to him (see Nietzsche 1969a:223).

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If Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity is correct, then, we have to concede Nietzsche his anti-Christianity. His critique was aimed at a church estranged from life (the tomb of God); at the priests who thrived on people’s feelings of guilt; and at the contemporary view of God. Contemporary society saw God as the Santa Claus of the weak, the sick and the poor, and as the enemy of life.

Küng (1978:452) therefore asks:

Wird man nicht zugeben müssen, daß diese Kritik an Gott um des Menschen willen geübt wird: um gegen einlähmendes Wissen, eine kleinliche moralische Beaufsichtigung, eine erdrückende Liebe Gottes die menschliche Identität zu bewahren? Entledigte sich Nietzsche also nicht Gottes um des Menschen willen: Gottlosigkeit nicht als Selbstzweck, sondern als Vorkehrung gegen die das Menschsein abwertende Gottgläubigkeit?

To Nietzsche the God of his time, that is the God created by the Christians (the God of progress in history, the God of morality and proven by rationality), was dead. The consequence of this death (atheism) is nihilism. The death of God means the death of everything that exists. Nietzsche’s statement “Gott ist todt [sic]!” challenged theology to have a rethink of God. If God is dead, there is only one alternative, namely that of a “dancing God”, which is both useful and harmful, friend and foe, admired by good and bad, and a contrast to the Christian concept of God (Nietzsche1968a:45; see Lampert 1986:46; Haar 1998:158; Madelon-Wienand 1998:301-312).

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