

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Nietzsche in his book, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (originally written in 1882) declared: “Gott ist todt [sic]!” (Nietzsche 1973:159). I will argue that Nietzsche thereby did not, *per se*, acknowledge or deny the existence of God. With this statement he was trying to spell out the consequences of modern atheism, for example nihilism. His was a reaction to a certain concept of God, especially the secular idea of God being part of the progress of history. To Nietzsche imagining that history would reveal absolute and total knowledge of God, was unthinkable. He thought it possible that a certain interpretation of the relation between God and history, rationality and morality could lead to modern atheism and theism. Thus, according to my understanding, by stating “God is dead”, Nietzsche referred to a certain understanding of God associated with history, rationality and morality. The god of modernism is dead, the god that is related to progress in history, the god that can be known through reason and the god that exists on the grounds of morality, that god is dead, the murderers being those who support modernism and its doctrines. Nietzsche was looking for a concept of God that would be neither atheistic nor theistic.

I will give attention to the phenomenon of modern atheism since this was the very phenomenon Nietzsche tried to avoid in his development of a concept of God. The disappearance of God in the modern age as a result of the belief in the progress of history

was one of the reasons that led to modern atheism. I will analyse and evaluate the phenomenon of modern atheism so that the reader would understand Nietzsche's critique of a concept of God that could lead to modern atheism with nihilism as its direct consequence. I intend to use the insights of Kasper in this regard. Although the emphasis will be on modern atheism, I will also refer to theism, since Nietzsche had a problem with the understanding of God as the first cause of his creation and the one who is bound to the progress of nature and history.

In the twentieth century several theologians have taken up the challenge posed by modern atheism, namely the denial of God and, theism, where God is bound to the laws of nature and history. In this regard, I intend to discuss the views of Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters. They responded to the problem that Nietzsche had with the concept of God, as it was propagated in the modern period (cf Küng 1987:157).

Barth proclaimed a concept of God according to which God cannot be accessed through human reason. He stated the total, otherly difference between God and human beings. According to Barth, it is clear that history, reason or morality cannot prove God's existence. God reveals himself to the human race where and whenever he wishes to do so. He is in agreement with Nietzsche insofar as a wrong perception of God can lead to modern atheism and/or theism.

Moltmann wanted to counter the claims of a concept of God that are atheistic and/or theistic. His answer to both claims is that God knows suffering. He suffered and died on

the cross. He is not a theistic being that is witnessing the suffering of his children from afar. In order to escape the claims of modern atheism, he cautions us not to refer to the history of God, but to the history in God, for it is the history in God that convinces us that he is not responsible for all the calamities in the history of the world. The history in God tells us of the suffering of a Father and a Son – who were willing to suffer for the love of others.

Pannenberg agrees with Nietzsche that any concept of God would require explanation. He avoids modern atheism and theism by claiming that God revealed himself indirectly in history. But he does so on his own terms, whenever he wants to. Human beings have no right to link the concept of God to world history. God has his own different history, which lies open to the future. Pannenberg develops a concept of God that is neither atheistic (a God that causes all the suffering in the history of the world) nor theistic (a God that is distant from the human race). This God makes a future possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To Pannenberg any theological enterprise should focus on the truth of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, which revealed an everlasting future to the human race.

Peters says about the concept of God, in agreement with Pannenberg, that it is of vital importance to explain the God concept. According to him, it is the act of explaining the God concept that provides the solution to modern atheism and theism. Any symbol, metaphor or depiction with regard to the concept of God that appears in the Bible or the Confessions of Faith, needs to be explained. Although he reacts to theism, he chooses in

favour of a proleptic theism that is different to modern theism. It is different insofar as God is continually involved in liberating creation out of nothingness and bringing it into the reality of life with the goal of finishing this creative work in the nearby future.

Although the solutions of these four theologians assist us in seeing another picture of God, Nietzsche's problem with the concept of God in relation to history, reason and morality remains central. It is a topic that needs to be addressed. Therefore, although their opinions are central in my discussion, I considered it prudent to bring other theologians and postmodern philosophers into the debate as well. In many respects they can provide new insights with regard to the analysis of the four theologians, as an answer to the problems Nietzsche had with the concept of God. Bultmann, in a totally different manner (from Barth and Moltmann), provides a view on God's relation to history, while Tracy provides a solution of talking about God beyond the dangers of atheism and theism. Van Huyssteen offers another perspective on knowledge about God which is different to the manner in which Nietzsche, Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters approached the matter. I will also focus on the insights of the postmodern philosophers Levinas, Derrida and Foucault, since in my opinion, they responded to Nietzsche's critique of the concept of God in relation to history, rationality and morality. They offer other solutions to the problem Nietzsche encountered with the concept of God in relation to history, reason and morality.

Throughout the study it will be my goal to make the reader aware of the challenge that Nietzsche's philosophy poses to theology. The reader will be able to understand the

nature of Nietzsche's problem with the concept of God as it was portrayed in his time and his quest for a concept of God that transcends modern atheism and theism.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

A literary study, in which the concept of God in the philosophy of Nietzsche will be scrutinised, will be undertaken (cf Vorster 1988; Van der Merwe 1996). Attention will be given to his published works, some articles, commentaries and interpretations of his philosophy by other scholars in books and journals. I will analyse his views on God's relation to history, reason or rationality, and morality.

Since Nietzsche's problem pertained to the concept of God, the scope of the dissertation will be set to include theology. In this regard I will critically compare and evaluate Nietzsche's views on God with those of the theologians Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters. For this purpose I will delve into their published works and articles, as well as covering interpretations by other scholars of their theologies. I will analyse their views on God's relation to history, rationality and morality.

Any material in support of, or material that serves as a critique of the main problem of the dissertation, will be included. For this reason I intend to investigate the phenomenon of modern atheism and works of other philosophers and theologians that might give us an insight into how the problem in respect of Nietzsche's concept of God can either be solved or revealed. I will study several sources on this subject and will search for works

of other philosophers and theologians who reflected on God's relation to history, reason and morality.

My point of departure in this research is that Nietzsche wanted to show the people of his time what the consequences of the death of God were, namely atheism, which ultimately led to nihilism. It is therefore relevant to seek the true meaning of Nietzsche's statement about the death of God. It is important to understand the consequences of this statement. In my view, his philosophy presents an impulse towards the development of a concept of God that transcends modern atheism and theism.

It is however acknowledged that the process of understanding and interpretation will never reach finality. It must always be open and anticipatory (cf Bernstein [1983] 1985:138-139). All understanding is temporal, conditional and bound by a historical dimension. "This is nicely captured by the term 'horizon', introduced by Edmund Husserl and which later was adopted in hermeneutics. All of us live within a horizon, and we perceive and understand within the limits of that horizon" (Allen 1985:272; cf Gadamer 1965:288-290). Hermeneutics therefore aims to join the different horizons of the world of the interpreter and that of the world of the text, which is to be interpreted. It is also known as the hermeneutical circle or the "fusion of horizons" (Allen 1985:272; cf Gadamer [1990] 1999:270-281; Lawn 2003:288-291; see Bernstein [1983] 1985:131-139; Palmer [1969] 1988:87, 88). The horizon of the interpreter consists of a pre-understanding, which influences one to understand the text that is being interpreted. Understanding is only possible when the interpreter moves from his or her horizon

towards a fusion of his or her world with that of the world of the text (cf Gadamer 1965:356-360, 374-375; Allen 1985:273). This can only be accomplished when the text itself is put into question and the interpreter listens to the text anew by allowing it to affect and reshape his or her understanding thereof. It is a constant flux of movement between the horizons of the two worlds, which in the end will move closer to a fusion of horizons (cf Allen 1985:273; Bernstein [1983] 1985:137-139; Gadamer [1990] 1999:270-281). I will allow myself to test my theory and will be open to any new insights that may occur.

Since the philosophy of Nietzsche, and the insights of the theologians Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters are central in my discussion, I provided summaries which can assist the reader in comparing their different views.

I decided to use the Harvard reference technique in my dissertation. For this purpose I made use of the book of Kilian ([1985] 1993) as main source of information.

1.3 OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation has five chapters.

Chapter one consists of the problem statement, the methodology and the outline of the dissertation.

Chapter two is an introductory chapter to familiarise the reader with the problem of modern atheism and the relevance thereof to Nietzsche. I will make use of the insights of Kasper and other theologians and philosophers to come to a better understanding of the phenomenon of modern atheism and, in a lesser degree, theism. Such understanding is important in order to evaluate and comprehend Nietzsche's statement about the death of God.

Chapter three deals in more detail with Nietzsche and his philosophy. I will introduce Nietzsche by providing the reader with a short biography and an overview of his philosophical works. Nietzsche's philosophy will be analysed by focusing on his reaction:

- to the subject of knowing God, as is reflected in the philosophy of Descartes (rationality);
- against the philosophy of Kant in terms of which the existence of God is explained on the grounds of morality (morality);
- to God's involvement in world history as explained in the philosophy of Hegel (history);
- against Christians who do not practice what they proclaim, as is depicted in the works by Strauss.

In chapter four the different general reactions of the theologians Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters to Nietzsche's philosophy about the death of God, are discussed. By means of introduction the particular choice of these theologians is explained. Each

has in his different way contributed to our understanding of the difficult notion of the God concept beyond the dangers of modern atheism and theism.

Chapter five focuses on Nietzsche's problems with regard to the concept of God in relation to history, reason and morality, as explained in chapter three. The concept of God that Nietzsche is developing, one that is beyond the dangers of modern atheism and theism, is explored by means of a debate between his philosophy, postmodern philosophy and theology, culminating in a better grasp of Nietzsche's concept. While Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters take the centre stage in this debate with Nietzsche, the views of other postmodern philosophers and theologians will also be introduced in this debate. In providing an answer to Nietzsche's quest for a concept of God that goes beyond modern atheism and theism, the views of the theologians Bultmann, Tracy and Van Huyssteen, as well as those of the postmodern philosophers Derrida, Levinas and Foucault are used in support of the views of Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters. Their opinions are reflected in the proposals they suggest as possible answers to Nietzsche's problems with regard to the concept of God and its relation to history, rationality and morality. In the end it will be clear that Nietzsche was looking for a concept of God that would transcend atheism and theism. It is this concept of God that is reflected in the works of the four theologians, Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters. They responded to Nietzsche's impulse towards the development of a concept of God that transcends atheism and theism.