

GOD AND THE WORLD IN NIETZSCHE AND RATZINGER

MAURICE AGBAW-EBAI

“Only when we know that we are creatures loved by God, forgiven by God, and called into friendship by God, as Ratzinger invites us to consider, do we live truly free and with purpose and hope.”



INTRODUCTION

In the history of Western thought, Friedrich Nietzsche (October 15, 1844–August 25, 1900) and Joseph Ratzinger (April 16, 1927–December 31, 2022) appear so diametrically opposed that finding a meeting point between them might be a near impossibility. Because both were German, one might be tempted to think they shared what one might call the *German spirit*—whatever that category entails. But even more strangely, what might further unite Nietzsche and Ratzinger is the question of God, which logically leads one to the question of the human world. Given Nietzsche’s interest, or perhaps even obsession with the God-question, Ratzinger frequently engages him in his own theological reflections. Both figures take the dialectics surrounding the question of God seriously, and yet arrive at such vastly

different conclusions that it might seem impossible to consider a dialogue taking place between the two. Yet in principle, the subject of God cannot leave anyone really indifferent: human beings either have to assent to or deny the existence of God. Everyone is united by this question, and by the necessity of living within the implications of their decision regarding it for their daily lives.

1. NIETZSCHE AND RATZINGER ON THE GOD-QUESTION

For both Nietzsche and Ratzinger, the God under consideration is, of course, the God of the Bible, the Judeo-Christian God who first revealed himself to Israel, as testified to in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament (Ex 3:14). Ratzinger shows a clear sensitivity toward Nietzsche, especially in the consequential and significant questions about God's existence and what they mean for human existence, for at its most profound level, the God-question is intrinsically linked to the human question.

Already in Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity*, the Bavarian theologian was engaging Nietzsche as an interlocutor, when he talked about the desire, already taking shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to do away with the master-slave relationship.¹ Ratzinger appears to agree with the implications of the "death of God" on human society in terms of Nietzsche's diagnosis: "But, as Nietzsche describes it, once the news really reaches people that 'God is dead' and they take it to heart, then everything changes."² In effect, the death of God does not leave the religious, ethical, and political order unaffected. Profound consequences follow that are often disruptive and unpredictable. Nietzsche is right, for, as Dostoevsky famously declared, if God is dead, everything is permissible. If everything is now permissible in terms of ethics and the moral life, then God is dead. We can argue it from effect to cause.

But was this battle against God a reaction to a religion gone sick, or an objective response to the being and action of the

1. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 17.

God of Jesus Christ? If Nietzsche continues to fascinate many a contemporary, it is likely that the scenario of absolute freedom that emerges with the death of God is attractive to many. To imagine living in a world where one is free to do as one pleases is understandably tempting. It is a long battle that has marked human history from its very inception, as captured in the double dynamisms of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the Tree of Life, as narrated in Genesis 3:1–24. Little wonder that for many today, particularly in the developed Western world, the postulate that God is dead does not appear difficult to accept. It is therefore likely that Nietzsche enjoys the continuous relevance and fascination that he does, because he embodies this liberation of the human spirit from the real or imagined shackles of religious dogmatism.

For Nietzsche, the movement from the objective to the subjective in modern thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inevitably resulted in the demise or death of God. Within this context, his dramatic articulation of God's death made Nietzsche the central figure of the God-question. To him, God's death was the *kairos* moment for the great cultural transformation of progress that society needed. With God and a transcendent referent no longer in the picture, the time for the reassessment of societal values was reached; it was now time for each one to become a god, to become the ultimate principle in one's subjective existence. In a sense, Nietzsche embodied the aspirations of the new social order that was at the heart of the modern project. Such a social order could only come about and flourish if its past ties to the Judeo-Christian *Weltanschauung* were completely repudiated and replaced. In the new worldview, the absolute point of reference was no longer the God of Jesus Christ, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather the autonomous individual who must now shape the contours of his existence according to his subjective preferences.

In Nietzsche's vision, God is a presence that inhibits the exercise of human freedom and the promises that come with such an understanding of freedom. Nietzsche grew up the son of a Lutheran pastor, and it might perhaps have been the case that the atmosphere of devotion and religiosity around him sowed the seeds of revolt against God in general, and Christianity in particular. If God is viewed as antithetical to human freedom, then

Nietzsche's revolt against God is not only necessary but likewise salutary, for an enslaved humanity is a depraved humanity. It suffices for now to state that to Nietzsche, a freed person is characterized by unbridled, even boundless, self-assertiveness. The *Übermensch* is therefore the freed human being at his or her best.

In this light, it becomes quite understandable why the Christian understanding of God is repulsive to Nietzsche, for Christianity, by presenting a crucified man as God, enhances and further strengthens the notion of enslavement, defeat, and failure—all conditions that degrade the human person. To oppose this Christian conception of God, which Nietzsche saw as anemic and insipid, he put forth the *Übermensch* as the prototype of what a person perfected by liberation from God would look like, a presentation completely antithetical to the Christian vision. Nietzsche argues:

We should not deck out and embellish Christianity: it has waged a war to the death against this higher type of man, it has put all the deepest instincts of this type under its ban, it has developed its concept of evil, of the Evil One himself, out of these instincts—the strong man as the typical reprobate, the “outcast among men.” Christianity has taken the part of all the weak, the low, the botched.³

By enshrining devotion to the weak, Christianity in effect emasculated its followers, depriving them of the energy that comes with self-assertion and power. Christianity poisoned strength and power, and by so doing, brought about an understanding of human beings and God in which both are content to be underdogs in the experience of life and in the grand scheme of reality. It is to redress this lopsided view of reality as propagated by the Christian God that Nietzsche felt compelled to turn to the Greeks, specifically, pre-Homeric Greece, for what must have occurred to him to be an urgent existential redress. Along the lines of revolting against God, Nietzsche declares:

I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous—a crisis without

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (Middletown, DE: Tribeca Book, 2016), 5.

equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that has been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite. Yet for all that, there is nothing in me of a founder of a religion—religions are affairs of the rabble; I find it necessary to wash my hands after I have come into contact with religious people.⁴

Leaving aside the polemical and vilifying rhetoric, the position of Nietzsche is clear: he had to reject his religious upbringing in order to be free, in order for him to liberate himself and the world from the obsequiousness that comes with religion. Hence, the proclamation of the death of God by the madman in the marketplace,⁵ ambivalent as the post-death scenario might be, remains, for Nietzsche, the defining deed of the modern era. Nietzsche writes: “There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto. . . . [R]equiem aeternam deo. What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”⁶ Because God is dead, Christian dogma is destroyed by the erasure of the foundations that had hitherto supported its morality, and everything is now permissible. Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*:

This only is the grand emancipation: that no one be made responsible any longer, that the mode of being be not traced back to a *causa prima*. The concept of “God” has hitherto been the greatest objection to existence. We deny God, we deny responsibility by denying God: it is only thereby that we save the world.⁷

The denial of God’s existence is thus the first necessary act that must precede the human quest for freedom and ultimate bliss. The death of God is the inauguration of new opportunities

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 1.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), III, 125.

6. Ibid.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Thomas Common (Overland Park, KS: Digireads Publishing, 2018), 8.

for humanity. We can now set the standard for ourselves for what is good and what is not good.

Nevertheless, in spite of the radical individualism that characterizes Nietzsche's pursuit of human freedom—a freedom that can only come about thanks to the death of the highest authority outside of the self, namely, God—the figure of the madman, the one who brings the life-changing message of God's death, has a role of great symbolism and significance. In a sense, the madman himself is a parable: the whole scene of the madman with a lantern in the bright morning hours at the marketplace, is itself, certainly emblematic, in that the madman appears as a seeker, searching for God: "I seek God! I seek God!" is his initial cry. "Whither is God?" The madman responds, "We have killed him—you and I." Even if only meant to serve the purposes of a rhetorical device on the part of Nietzsche, the *quaerere Deum* of the madman is not devoid of symbolic meaning. To borrow an interpretation that Benedict XVI gave to the *quaerere Deum* of the monks at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris: the search for God captures the desire to move from the inessential to the essential. Amidst the confusion of the times, this searching for God captures the desire for the permanent and perennially valid behind the provisional and the temporal.⁸ By starting off as a seeker before dramatically declaring God's death, the madman takes his place in the long history of those for whom God represents the only real hope for breaking open an enclosed existence of isolated meaninglessness. Hence, before subscribing to the atheism of the death of God—which is certainly different from the atheism of the nonexistence of God—the madman had some experience of faith, without which he could not have started out with searching for God. Could this be indicative of an enduring lingering of some form of faith in Nietzsche? It is difficult to say, but it should not be out of place to raise the question and to ponder the significance of the fact that the madman begins by searching for God.

8. Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture" (hereafter "World of Culture"), Address at the Collège des Bernardins (Paris, 12 September 2008), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080912_pargi-cultura.html.

2. GOD AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD: THE ANA-THEISM OF NIETZSCHE

The mere proclamation of God's death from the point of view of resentment, as we see in Nietzsche, is insufficient to set the stage for the future, that is, for what comes after God's death. It would seem everything still remains open after Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, which did not usher in the extinction of God from human consciousness, and certainly does not immediately usher in a blissful life, even for Nietzsche. After the triumphant proclamation of God's death, there remains a sense of ambivalence that is not entirely celebratory, an impression that is discernible in the madman's apparent lament that follows the proclamation of the death of God:

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?⁹

One senses in this text an admixture of excitement and uncertainty, and even a lingering Shakespearian, Macbeth-like guilt, as the murderers of God face the herculean task of cleansing themselves of the guilt of having killed God. In effect, the promised new reality of bliss marked by uninhibited freedom appears not to have automatically followed the demise of God. Even Nietzsche himself appears to come to this realization when he declares in the *Twilight of the Idols* that "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar."¹⁰ In effect, to the extent that humans have an intrinsic respect for the intelligent order—that is, for rationality, for reason, for logos—we are a few steps away from believing that some intelligent power put that order in place. Might Nietzsche have been echoing here the argument from design articulated centuries before by Aquinas? The logic appears strikingly similar. But perhaps even more

9. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, III, 125.

10. Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 5.

puzzling about Nietzschean atheism is the feeling that there is a kind of uncertainty that is as unsettling as the idea of the death of God itself, even though Nietzsche rejoices over the idea that the death of God leaves us with space to live uninhabited lives.

3. THE WORLD AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD

The question one must now confront is, “What kind of world emerges from the death and burial of God?” What kind of world emerges from this line of thinking of the death of God? For if the word “God” no longer has any existential significance, and if the reality or being of “God” is dead, the question is not so much what happens to God as it is what happens to the human being. For Nietzsche, the death of God brings a world in which there are no facts, only interpretations; in such a world, objective truth dies with God. The human being becomes the absolute, the measuring standard of right and wrong. In effect, it is a world governed by perspectivism, in which truth is not the same for everyone. But as has been noted:

the problem is that simply by virtue of being offered, any view is inevitably offered in the conviction that it is true. But then, despite any assurances to the contrary, it is presented as a view which everyone must accept on account of its being true. Accordingly, Nietzsche must count as a dogmatist or anti-perspectivist anyone who puts forward a claim as true, or even puts forward the claim itself. But how can Nietzsche take a stand in favor of perspectivism and against dogmatism without turning his own position into a dogmatic one?¹¹

We are therefore now confronted with a dilemma, in which Nietzsche the anti-dogmatist becomes the perspectivist dogmatist.

But even with the proclamation of God’s death, what we have is not complete triumph, but uncertainty, and even some form of anxiety. We saw above that the proclamation of the death of God is not a triumphant one, irrespective of how much Nietzsche would have wished it to be. He displays a certain

11. Ken Gemes and John Richardson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 301.

admirable honesty about the purposelessness of a life with no religious bearings, a life that has no transcendental reference. Nietzsche's acknowledgment of the finitude and limitations of the human being before the splendor of the earth, the sun, and other facets of creation bears a striking resemblance to God's response to Job after Job takes God to task in his attempt to prove his innocence before God and his friends, whose faith was in the God of theodicy. Thus, contrary to what one might have expected, Nietzsche—much like Sartre and yet unlike Sartre—does not rejoice at the death of God, even if he is glad that God's death leaves us free to live uninhibited lives.

The most crucial question about this proclamation of God's death arises at this point, a question taken up by Ricoeur: *which* God died in the *Gay Science*? For if by the word "God" is denoted all the good that humans hope for, the death of God is, in the final analysis, the death of human hope: there is nothing to hope for beyond the human person, since there is no transcendence. Ricoeur's position is clear:

Which god is dead? We can now reply: the god of metaphysics and also the god of theology, insofar as theology rests on the metaphysics of the first cause, necessary being, and the prime mover, conceived as the source of values and as the absolute good. Let us say that it is the god of onto-theology, to use the expression that was coined by Heidegger, following Kant.¹²

Ricoeur, clearly following Heidegger, sees a link between morality and metaphysics, and thus draws the inevitable conclusion that if Nietzsche's reaction is against Christian morality, which he sees as emerging from resentment, envy, and a guilty conscience, then the death of the God of morality inevitably implies the death of the God of metaphysics. In language reminiscent of Kant, Ricoeur writes:

Behind the so-called autonomy of the will is hidden the resentment of a particular will, the will of the weak.

12. Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," trans. Charles Freilich, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 445.

Because of this exegesis and this genealogy, the god of morality, to speak in the manner of Nietzsche, reveals himself as the god of accusation and condemnation. Such is the nature of the god who has perished.¹³

In this light, the death-of-God philosophy did not succeed in eclipsing God from the face of the earth. If anything, the shadows of God remained; and the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first, show the resilience of the God-question in the face of the proclamation of God's death. The path from the Enlightenment to modernism—the severing of the relationship between faith and reason that marked the former and the eschewing of religion that shaped the latter—paved the way for the secularist mode of thinking, the next logical phase in this trajectory of humanity's interaction with God.

What can be clearly asserted is that the God-question has refused to go away, even in the face of an outright rejection or subtle agnosticism by the modernist mode of thinking. Does this indicate a weakness of human psychology, such that it cannot help defaulting to a transcendent worldview? Or perhaps does it demonstrate the need for the madman to spread the word more effectively, so to speak? Or is the persistence of the God-question the result of something more fundamental? As Blondel argued, the immanent phenomena, whatever they might be, are necessarily related to the transcendent order of things, and human action is the bridge between immanence and transcendence.¹⁴ In effect, there is an intrinsic entelechy in the phenomenon of human action toward the supernatural, whose appearing on the horizon of humanity posits itself as the one thing necessary to save the human being from existential nihilism. With Nietzsche in mind, for example, one would say that not even the *Übermensch* could ever be self-sufficient in and of himself; for the human question can always only be responded to with resources beyond the capacity of the autonomous self. The wedge between the willed will and the willing will, as Blondel characterizes it, or the restless heart, as depicted by Augustine, remains true, even

13. *Ibid.*, 446.

14. Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, "Blondel, Maurice, Writer," in *The Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*, ed. Christopher John Murray (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 93.

for a world that has sung the requiem for God and moved on to other seemingly more important preoccupations, perhaps money, power, and pleasures in all their modes and tenses.

4. THE RATZINGERIAN RESPONSE

With the religious landscape of the West chiefly in view, Ratzinger sees Nietzsche's philosophy, founded in the experience of the death of God, as relevant and timely. It touches not only on the decline or demise of the practice of religious faith, but even more on the uncertainties that often define the life of faith itself, especially when viewed from the perspective of God's goodness and benevolence vis-à-vis human misery and suffering. In effect, the questions of human weakness and vulnerability, of freedom and sin, and of the drama of human redemption, together constitute a powerful force that touches the heart of the meaning of human life and its relationship to God. In a word, Nietzsche's philosophy has relevance both from the perspective of the existence and from the nonexistence of God.

Interestingly (though clearly with a different twist), Ratzinger appears sympathetic to the notion of God's death. From Ratzinger's pastoral perspective, Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God finds its most fitting image in Holy Saturday, in the stillness that characterizes the world and human life between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Given the fact that many, particularly in the West, live as if God does not exist, Ratzinger wonders whether our contemporary world is not becoming one large Holy Saturday, the day in which God is absent from the world because he lies in the tomb. The reality of the coldness of the tomb, of religious desertification, indicates a world without God. The metaphor of the spiritual life today seems to be that God sleeps while all is on the verge of collapse:

Wake up—don't you see that we are sinking? Wake up, don't let the darkness of Holy Saturday last forever, let a gleam of Easter fall in our day too. Go with us when we walk despondently to Emmaus so that our hearts may be enkindled by Your nearness. You who, in hiddenness, guided Israel's path, until finally you were a man among men, don't leave us in darkness; don't let Your Word be

drowned in the prattle of these days. Lord help us, for without You we would perish. Amen.¹⁵

Along this line of reasoning, an unexpected turn occurs precisely within the questions posed by contemporary secularism: the recognition of the glaring futility of exalting the human being to the point of excluding God becomes the point wherein genuine liberation, love, and hope can begin for humanity today. By recognizing the insufficiency that human effort seeks to overcome by postulates such as Nietzsche's will to power, the human being is able to come to terms with the possibility of a double transcendence: the transcendence of God, on the one hand, and subjective transcendence made possible by participation in God's transcendence, on the other. If such is the case, then the ultimate question that Nietzsche must face, at least from the Ratzingerian point of view, is whether the seemingly autonomous person can bring himself or herself to recognize the existential impossibility of self-redemption, and this on the basis of the very malaise of societal ills that Nietzsche himself so decries and tends to ascribe to the Christian religion. To turn again to Blondel: Can the new human being, post-mortem God, attain freedom without external help? Can we—and must we—only be “gods” over and against God; or is there, in the relationship between the human being and God, the real possibility to become and be God with God and for God? Is there a real possibility that the *Übermensch* could be reconciled with the liberation that union with the Divine offers, in such a manner that the “autonomy” sought after by Nietzsche can be healed, transformed, and brought to a more humane fruitfulness?

In effect, once we recognize that we are creatures, then finding the meaning of life and our place in the world is no longer frightening and apocalyptic, as Nietzsche would have us think. And this is the point, therefore, from which Ratzinger can offer fundamental insights to address the Nietzschean worldview, characterized as it is by the absence of God and existential meaninglessness. I will explore three of those insights below.

15. Joseph Ratzinger, “Meditations on Holy Week,” trans. Lesley Rice, in Daniel Mason, *The Sabbath of History: William Congdon, with Meditations on Holy Week by Joseph Ratzinger* (New Haven: Knights of Columbus Museum; Milan: The William G. Congdon Foundation, 2012), 148–49.

4.1. *First, a rediscovery of God as Love: The crux of the matter*

In his first encyclical as pope, Benedict XVI observed:

In the critique of Christianity which began with the Enlightenment and grew progressively more radical, this new element was seen as something thoroughly negative. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Christianity had poisoned eros, which for its part, while not completely succumbing, gradually degenerated into vice. Here the German philosopher was expressing a widely-held perception: doesn't the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?¹⁶

Rather than destroying eros in its pre-Homeric form, Ratzinger argues that Christianity saved and redeemed eros by opening up eros to agape. In fact, Ratzinger points out, the presentation of eros in Greek tragedy is hardly one we would want to idealize:

The Old Testament firmly opposed this form of religion, which represents a powerful temptation against monotheistic faith, combating it as a perversion of religiosity. But it in no way rejected eros as such; rather, it declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divinization of eros actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it. Indeed, the prostitutes in the temple, who had to bestow this divine intoxication, were not treated as human beings and persons, but simply used as a means of arousing "divine madness": far from being goddesses, they were human persons being exploited. An intoxicated and undisciplined eros, then, is not an ascent in "ecstasy" towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation of man. Evidently, eros needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.¹⁷

16. *Deus caritas est*, 4.

17. *Ibid.*

Certainly, throughout Christian history, there have been those who have distorted eros. For Benedict, however, it is precisely Christianity that could correct these disordered notions or expressions of eros, precisely because of the fact that Christianity refused to exclude human rationality from the concrete forms and manifestations of eros. With agape, the corporal expression of eros is grounded in a spiritual rationality that is both uplifting and liberating for eros. In effect, eros has an embedded grammar in what John Paul II characterized in his theology of the body as the law of the gift. The human being cannot understand the self without love, as John Paul II taught in *Redemptor hominis*. Together with John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, Benedict's *Deus caritas est* might prove a significantly helpful resource for healing the human wounds of isolated eros and restoring a genuinely Christian understanding of love, of civilization, and of culture. Both texts see the person as a unity, a *compositum*, to use the Thomistic term, irreducible to the merely physical or the merely spiritual. Only in the totality of our being does the true beauty of love emerge in all its brilliance and attraction: its meaning, its purpose, and its destiny. It is the "grammar," the "language of the gift," that liberates eros from the plague of intoxication and madness that had come to define it in Greek culture. Hence, in rejecting grammar as the last bastion of belief in a transcendent God, Nietzsche was in fact unwittingly one step away from rejecting the greatness and beauty of eros as well. The anthropological reductionism of Freud and the sexual revolution after him were but the consequences of this rejection of the grammar of eros, and we live today still in the aftermath. In the final analysis, Nietzsche's rejection of Christian love ends up impoverishing eros and the breadth and depth of human existence as a whole.

4.2. Second, a rediscovery of God as Logos in light of Nietzsche's lament against grammar

For Nietzsche, as we have seen, the orderedness of grammar was the final barrier to genuine human liberation and the triumph of atheism, because it posited a given overarching structure to the very way in which human thinking and communication take place. Against this, Ratzinger sees grammar, an expression of

logos, as a privileged hermeneutic of faith, a significant dialogue partner that ultimately liberates the human being. For him, grammar/reason/logos is not a hindrance to the human quest for genuine freedom. Rather, both the world of rationality and the world of faith stand to gain from mutual purification. Already with his 1959 inaugural lecture at the University of Bonn, “The God of Faith and the God of Philosophers: A Contribution to the Problem of Natural Theology,” the young Professor Ratzinger had anticipated the affirmations of *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II’s magisterial peace treaty between the Kingdom of Thought and the Kingdom of God, to use a Hegelian phrase, in which John Paul II spoke of faith and reason as two wings thanks to which the human mind is able to rise to the contemplation of truth.¹⁸

We must admit that this is a live and ongoing question of urgency for us. In a postmodern world, it remains to be seen whether reason, or grammar, can actually continue to believe in itself. The challenge today, then, is not just with faith; it is with reason. It is striking in this regard that Ratzinger appears to have more faith in reason than Nietzsche, who is supposed to be the philosopher! In all, rebuilding a post-Nietzschean world would demand, from the Ratzingerian perspective, both a transcendent reason and a reasonable faith.

4.3. *Third, a rediscovery of the cultic center of culture*

Who is the murderer in the act of deicide that Nietzsche has the madman proclaim? Ricoeur argues that the murderer is not the atheist per se, but the nothingness at the heart of the ideal, which Ricoeur describes as the “superego’s lack of absolute authority.”¹⁹ In other words, a culture of nihilism—through its embrace of nothingness, or more fittingly, thanks to its surrender to nothingness or emptiness—has murdered God. The nothingness of Sartre comes to mind here. To the extent that our culture continues to have little or no reference to God, we enter into what Ratzinger describes in his September 2008 Paris address as *regio*

18. Maurice Ashley Agbaw-Ebai, *Light of Reason, Light of Faith: Joseph Ratzinger and the German Enlightenment* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2021).

19. Ricoeur, *Religion*, 446.

dissimilitudinis, the zone of dissimilarity. A culture in which God is dead is one of nothingness, of emptiness; and it is precisely that nothingness and emptiness that kill God. In such a culture, we have the remoteness from God, and the human being no longer reflects the *imago Dei*. The human being becomes “dissimilar” to God, to self, to neighbor, and to creation.

As Benedict XVI pointedly concluded his Paris Address, “A purely positivistic culture which tried to drive the question concerning God into the subjective realm, as being unscientific, would be the capitulation of reason, the renunciation of its highest possibilities, and hence a disaster for humanity, with grave consequences.”²⁰ In effect, when God is set aside as Nietzsche advocates, then we see a “flattening” of culture, a culture deprived of a transcendent referent. With this horizontalization of culture that eschews the vertical dimension, what we have is really no longer culture, for the *cultus*, the worship of the Supreme Being is no longer center stage. What are the results of such a flattening of culture? Pascal tells us that we become persons marked by diversion and indifference. Pieper and Dawson further characterize this godless culture as boredom. Little wonder that we now have the replacement of culture by the techno-scientific and the entertaining.

To Ratzinger, a rebuilding of a world of culture from pseudo forms that present themselves as culture demands a re-discovery of the primacy of the *cultus*, of worship, of Sunday, as that which holds all together. Without worship, as he maintains in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, even the Promised Land is no longer a place of joy, peace, and flourishing for Israel, but rather, a place of violence, marked by new forms of enslavement. We are only genuinely free if we can kneel before God in worship, for the worship of God frees us from all idols, whether they take the form of the will to power, eros severed from agape, consumerism, or some other idol. For in spite of their grip on contemporary societies, these realities never fully satisfy the human heart. Augustine was right then as he is now: the human being was created for God, and the human heart continues to be restless until it finds rest in God—*quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*.

20. Benedict XVI, “World of Culture.”

CONCLUSION

The question of God provides the hermeneutical framework for the question of the human being in the world. To Nietzsche, the God of Christianity constitutes the antithesis to human flourishing, and so he perceives the killing of God as a great service to humanity. But as stated above, this rejection of God, this setting aside of God in the name of human freedom, has not delivered on its promises. The act of deicide has not ushered in the era of fulfillment and bliss that ought to have followed it. It merely leaves us abandoned, possessing only an ideology of freedom that is divorced from its anthropological and existential foundations. It leaves the human being at the mercy of other human beings: we are given, not a world of freedom, but a world dominated by the will to power, in which the strong dispose of the weak and nothing is allowed to stand in the way of one's subjective preferences.

As Nietzsche himself clearly understood, what comes after the will to power is more power. The world becomes a theater for control, characterized by what Ratzinger famously called in 2005 "the dictatorship of relativism."²¹ This is an impossible world, for it is a world of seven to eight billion absolute persons, with each absolute, autonomous person asserting his will over the other. The promised paradise of an Eden of freedom—in which God no longer has anything to say because we have made the choice to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and are now beyond good and evil—unfolds in its truest reality, namely, a totalitarianism. If Nietzsche had envisaged a world without God as the bastion of freedom, what emerges is precisely the very thing he wanted to avoid, namely, slave morality and servitude. Ironically, Nietzsche moves us from what he saw as the slavish status under God and ends up putting us under the slavish status of the strongest human, the *Übermensch*—in whatever form this takes in daily life.

Unlike Nietzsche, Ratzinger does not see God as antithetical to human freedom. If anything, the yawning abyss of the absence of God leaves the human being in an existential exile,

21. Joseph Ratzinger, "Homily at the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*" (Vatican Basilica, 18 April 2005).

marked by violence and alienation. The atrocities of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century remain a lesson to all about what a world without God could look like and mean for the human being. Two anthropologies therefore stare us in the face: the anthropology of the “will to power” of Nietzsche on the one hand, and the anthropology of the “will to love” of Ratzinger on the other hand.

This is not to say that Ratzinger does not acknowledge the pathology of religious fundamentalism that has marked the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In fact, a prime objective of both *Deus caritas est* and his famous Regensburg Address was to rescue the name of God from religious fundamentalism and various forms of religious pathology that have scarred the name of God.

In this way, Ratzinger offers a profoundly different solution to Nietzsche regarding the “post-God” world. He sees God as the way of love, of eros-agape, thanks to which humans can live free and forgiven lives. God is not an oppressor. Rather, God is love, and it is God’s love that liberates us from existential annihilation and pessimism, both within our own hearts and in our relationships with others. That explains why Ratzinger sees God’s love as that which moves the sun and the other stars, for God as love is light.

Additionally, God as love is what guarantees the unity of the human person, who is no longer seen as mere matter, devoid of soul. If our contemporary world ever overcomes the wreckage that has come with the Nietzschean-Freudian conception of eros, the truths expressed in Benedict’s *Deus caritas est* and John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* will have been crucial to this process of anthropological recovery, forgiveness, and healing.

On every page of Ratzinger’s theology, all that is said about God and the world finds its center in the Christ-event. In Christ, the human being encounters true freedom by discovering how much God loves us. In Christ, the human being discovers that true freedom is self-gift and not self-assertion. In Christ, the Logos, the human being discovers that the divine order inscribed in the cosmos, expressed in grammar, is not an obstacle to freedom, but is rather a path that, together with faith, liberates us, as we come to the realization of the unity between faith and reason, between the Kingdom of Thought and the Kingdom of

God, as mentioned above. As a philosophical principle, the logic of the gift of love, in Christ, is more compelling and more livable than the logic of the Nietzschean death of God and a world without God.

In all, to the extent that Nietzsche declares the death of God and the inauguration of the world without God, he compels us to confront the God-question today. And that is not entirely a negative or meaningless achievement, as Ratzinger himself attests in his reflections on Holy Saturday highlighted above. But it must be said that the Nietzschean prescription for a free world is the perfect prescription for an enslaved world. And rather than liberating us, so that we all become *Übermenschen*, post-Nietzschean gods, in this brave new world, we rather become tools in a world in which the human ego is the only standard. That kind of world is not tenable, for it is a world without love, and a world without love is a world without hope. It is a world of endless immanentism, as Nietzsche himself shows in his doctrine of the eternal recurrence. Only when we know that we are creatures loved by God, forgiven by God, and called into friendship by God, as Ratzinger invites us to consider, do we live truly free and with purpose and hope. The true *Übermensch*, the one who has truly conquered the world and who lives in the freedom of the sons of God, is one who accepts the limitations that come with being a creature, and who accepts God's salvific work embodied in Christ Jesus: life in abundance to all, through the gift of God's forgiving love (Jn 10:10). □

MAURICE AGBAW-EBAI is a priest of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Mamfe, Cameroon, and professor of philosophy and theology at the Catholic Institute of Technology, Castel Gandolfo, Rome, Italy.