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Human Existence and Coexistence in the Epoch of Nihilism

Menschliche Existenz und Koexistenz in der Epoche des Nihilismus

Človeška eksistenca in koeksistenca v epohi nihilizma

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Dean Komel – Alfredo Rocha de la Torre – Adriano Fabris (*Eds.* | *Hrsg.* | *Ur.*)

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Thinking God—Today?

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Abstract

The essay tackles the question of the possibility of thinking God in the present day. It emphasizes the necessity of contemporary translations of traditional talk about God, in the contemporary age, which is characterized by God's "absence," "death," or "fading." The contribution first points towards the phenomenon of "pious" atheism that is friendly towards religion; it presents the attempt to justify religion and faith in God functionally, before critiquing this attempt because of its human, all too human

access to God and because of its circularity; it instead approaches a different thinking of God, and in doing so, indicates a place for the experience of benevolence as a path to God.

Keywords: God, thinking God, nihilism, “pious” atheism, benevolence.

Misliti Boga – danes?

Povzetek

Prispevek se ukvarja z vprašanjem o možnosti mišljenja Boga v današnjem času. Poudarja nujnost sodobnih prevodov tradicionalnega govora o Bogu v sodobnem času, za katerega je značilna »odsotnost«, »smrt« ali »zaton« Boga. Esej najprej izpostavi pojav »pobožnega« ateizma, ki je naklonjen religiji; predstavi poskus funkcionalne utemeljitve religije in vere v Boga, nato pa ta poskus kritizira zaradi njegovega človeškega, preveč človeškega dostopa do Boga in zaradi njegove krožnosti; namesto tega se loti drugačnega mišljenja Boga, pri čemer nakaže mesto izkušnje dobrohotnosti kot poti do Boga.

Ključne besede: Bog, misliti Boga, nihilizem, »pobožni« ateizem, dobrohotnost.

1. Thinking in the present, *or:* The importance of translation

To think God—what can this mean? Is it possible to think God, and, if it is possible, is it even necessary? Is it not enough to have faith in God, and would not such faith in Him constitute all the connection to God one needs? Or would it actually not be enough to develop a definite feeling towards God—something similar to that, which Schleiermacher spoke of as a "feeling of total dependence" (Schleiermacher 1999, 26)—or else that feeling, so widespread today, of a total *in*dependence from God? In the following pages, these questions will be pursued with a philosophical perspective, which relies solely upon reason, rather than religious revelation.

Since antiquity, Classical philosophy famously saw no problem in making God an "object" of thinking, and in understanding God—as Aristotle did—as the highest cause, as the unmoved mover, as an always-active self-contemplation; as a thinking of thinking. Already, from very early on, Christian theology had engaged in an exchange with Greek Philosophy regarding the question of God, and the "seeds" of truth, which lay within these insights of reason, were gathered up and placed in the context of the revelation. From this perspective, revelation and reason, faith and thinking complement each other nicely. Yet, today it is only possible to engage with these traditional answers to the question of God in an interpretative, hermeneutical manner. Many of the reflections of the past are dependent upon premises, which can no longer be shared. Yet, even if we do not live in a post-metaphysical age, as is sometimes claimed, there is today, in a different historical context, no way around the need of a metaphysically different form of thinking so that God is thought differently than in earlier times. There is therefore no way around the need to become familiar with, or to discover new dimensions of, the history of humans with God and the question of God, which have been long forgotten or displaced, because they remain barely visible in the shadows of a certain understanding of reason.

This evergreen task of translation and reappropriation of the inherited tradition of thinking is necessary, because philosophy, on the one hand, moves in the realm of truth, claiming value in itself, and therefore always transcends the limits of concrete contexts, yet, on the other hand, this thinking is also

always an existential, individual carrying out of freedom, which is imbedded in a concrete historical—and that means also in a definite intellectual-historical—situation. One can thus only begin from one's own present, one's own here and now; a real approach to the question of God is not to be found in the abstractions of an empty or a merely formal universality.

This historical situation today is decisively determined by the fact that to us—that is, to humans beings in a late-modern or even postmodern society; scientifically enlightened and religiously critical; incredulous and skeptical regarding religious or other absolute claims, and often also disenchanted, fraught with, or even poisoned by an established emptiness of the word of God, or else simply indifferent towards God's word; culturally and socially shaped by the west, yet intellectually often inter-culturally and globally orientated; situated in the eastern states of Germany with their own history, especially regarding the question of God, with a pandemic behind us and a war directly ahead of us—God has become foreign. God has lost His self-evident nature, even if, for a long time, this has only been noticed by a very few people.

2. Unfamiliarity and the absence of God, *or:* How the fading of God can also fade

The contemporary western life-world still stands as testimony to a faith in God, which, whether on holy days or in the everyday, has deeply shaped and determined human life. In many places (and on many days in the calendar year), there are found traces of a remembrance, still occasionally solemnly sworn, but now slowly fading—and with these traces fade memories of God. "God and the Gods," as Peter Sloterdijk pointed out, do not die; "but fade, whether dissolved into a brighter light or rendered invisible in a falling darkness" (Sloterdijk 2017, 22). God, who was once so diversely testified and venerated, has become a stranger. He is no longer to be found there, where He was long searched for and where He was repeatedly encountered. There is no God to be found to explain otherwise unexplainable phenomena. No God to make moral creatures out of humanity. No God to hold together society, which would otherwise fall into the rule of chaos and anarchy. No God needed in culture. With the fading of God many other things become foreign; not only religious rites, which could bestow orientation, but also words—words,

such as "creation," "grace," "salvation," or "redemption"—, which were once the grounding concepts of an understanding of reality, but which today have frequently lost their meaning or been radically changed. People use many of these once meaningful—yes, sacred—words, if at all, only inauthentically, with an ironic brokenness or with a conscious sadness and sentimentality, because they are still conscious of the high tone, with which these words were once heard.

However, God has not simply become unfamiliar. His fading is perceived in a certain way: God is absent. Friedrich Hölderlin, at the beginning of the 19th century, had already spoken in his poem "Homecoming [Heimkunft]," of the "holy names," which are missing (Hölderlin 1998, 322). In "A Poet's Calling [Dichterberuf]," he then spoke explicitly of "God's absence" (Hölderlin 1998, 331). For Martin Heidegger, this absence was a "de-deification [Entgötterung]," and he considered it a characteristic trait of modernity: "a condition of a loss of decisiveness regarding God and the Gods." According to his reading, this condition is even largely caused by Christianity (Heidegger 1977, 76). In dialogue with Hölderlin's poetry, Heidegger deepens his diagnosis of modernity and confronts the "absence of God" in "meagre times." According to Heidegger, this absence means "that God no longer clearly and visibly gathers people and things around Him, in such a gathering as to join world history and humanity's stay within it" (Heidegger 1977, 269). Heidegger even supposes that our present age would grow ever more meagre, until "it is no longer possible to perceive the absence of God as an absence" (Heidegger 1977, 269). Even though Heidegger interprets this situation in a different light, it comes close to the phenomenon of "religious indifference," which Eberhard Tiefensee has analyzed in important studies (cf. Tiefensee 2009).

If God is missing and this absence is perceived, then this perception often takes painful, nostalgic, and melancholic forms. In the middle of the 19th century—a little later than Hölderlin—, the English poet Matthew Arnold, in his poem "Dover Beach," expressed this as: "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore. […] But now I only hear / Its melancholy […]" (Arnold 1950, 211). It is the poet and perhaps the artist more generally, with their special sensitivity and openness, who make this absence noticeable. That increasingly unfamiliar, that withdrawing, that no longer living God, so

their experience, leaves behind a void. His absence is a form of presence—similar to the experience some people have of feeling deceased loved-ones as being especially and painfully present through their absence, perhaps even more so than when they were alive.

Though God may be missing, the question of God has not disappeared in the least. With this question, one asks frequently after a God, though one does not wholly know who He is or could be. Sometimes, it will be explicitly asked, in many cases implicitly, in an unspoken, unconscious manner, fragmentarily, sometimes also shamefacedly or as coming from the deepest of distress. It can live on in the question of the meaning of life, of the "meaning of meaning" (cf. Gerhardt 2014), in the question of the untouchable dignity of human beings or merely in the question of the "something"—of the "more," which must somehow be. And sometimes, it shows itself only in the disquiet, in an inner trembling of an individual who feels everything to be right, but yet can sense an abysmal dissonance. The fading of God itself sometimes appears to fade. "As the present proves," to quote Peter Sloterdijk again, "God can recover Himself from a paleness, if the economy is favorable, although mostly with a dubious colorfulness." (Sloterdijk 2017, 22.) The present is not simply a-religious or anti-religious, but religious in many colorful and diverse ways, in searching and doubting, in joy and commitment, but also in sadder and more despairing ways. It is hard to grasp, and still harder to interpret.

However, it may initially seem, when it comes to questions of religion, that the present age cannot be encapsulated by a single concept. There is nothing left of that *one* grand tale of the history of Western metaphysics since Plato, though Heidegger still believed in it; of that great intellectual journey, which completed itself in the nihilism of Nietzsche, with the death of God, which could be seen as the central event of modernity. In its place, there lies a diversity of tales and stories, of anecdotes and aphorisms, which stand against one another in a complex tension, without any claim of a grand narrative to unify them. In modernity and in secularization, there is only polyphony, seldom a harmony; a plurality full of tension, which exists as a multitude of modernities. There are also atheists who are not so wholly undevout as the word "atheism" appears to suggest; some of whom, in a strange, nearly ironic turning of intellectual history even formulate "apologias" of religion.

3. Pious and impious atheists, *or:* How the twilight of the idols remains ambivalent

In the 19th century, philosophy celebrated the Twilight of the Idols (*Götzen-Dämmerung*)—the title of a famous late work by Friedrich Nietzsche, which hints with irony to Richard Wagner's "Twilight of the Gods" (*Götterdämmerung*) (from which Peter Sloterdijk also takes his references to the fading of God in his essay "Götterdämmerung"). The twilight is a shimmering, ambivalent phase of the passage from the darkness of the night into the brightness of the day or from the bright day into the night. Nietzsche asks in his work, in which he wants to bring forth a transition to a new day: "How? Are human beings only a mistake of God? Or is God only a mistake of human beings?" (Nietzsche 1999b, 60.) For him, the answer to these rhetorical questions is clear; God shows Himself to him as an illusion, as an invention of humanity, as a mistake, that should—together with Christian belief and its associated ethics—be eliminated. In His place should enter the "super-man," the "Übermensch."

The notion that, if one talks of God, one is actually talking and should actually talk about human beings, had been posited by religious critics in the 19th century. The thought of Feuerbach and Marx, but also of Freud and other thinkers contemporary to him, critical of God and religion, no longer experienced anything of the pain of a "missing God" that Friedrich Hölderlin or Matthew Arnold experienced. God was not missed by these "joyful" scientific atheists. Entirely the opposite was the case: it seemed to them that only without God the liberation of humanity, further historical progress, and human happiness were possible. When, at the beginning of the 21st century, the American religious critic Sam Harris made the demand that atheism should no longer be spoken of, as this was neither a philosophy nor a world-view, but only the acknowledgement of an obvious fact, he does so in alignment with this joyful atheism (cf. Harris 2006; Harris 2017). One does not believe in God, and yet feels completely normal or even fairly happy about it.

Yet, it is Nietzsche who raises an unfamiliar and rare dissonant voice in this choir of atheists. Clearly, he is, as he called himself, "dynamite"—the radical destroyer of everything that had been valued and held-dear since the time of Socrates and Plato, Christ and St. Paul, Kant and Hegel. Yet, there is

another, quieter side to his work, one often overlooked; a background that he vehemently attempted to erase and is significant in a way, in which he himself was perhaps not wholly conscious of. Nietzsche can also be understood as the greatest striver for God in the modern age (cf. Biser 1982; Zaborowski 2014). Contrary to Feuerbach or Marx, he knew of the ambiguity and the abysmal character of the "death of God." There still burned a fire within him, a yearning for that, which is denoted by "God." With the famous "madman" in *The Gay Science*—who, with his lantern, searched desperately in the daylight of the marketplace for God—, he had also made himself a tragic memorial, because for him the search will be unsuccessful. In empty churches, he can only intone a requiem for the eternal rest of God—"Requiem aeternam deo." But he does miss God (cf. Nietzsche 1999a, § 125). This longing, as it appears here, is also found in many atheists today. There are admittedly still radical atheists, such as Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins (Dawkins 2016), who would love nothing more than to never speak about God and religion again (which begs the question of whether they would then be missing something). Yet, next to this there appears a different, quieter atheism, which is surprisingly open to the question of God; one which also suffers from the question—that is conscious of the question or that at the very least asks the question—of what is missing, if God is missing. The philosopher Herbert Schnädelbach has referred to himself as "a pious atheist." He claims that he cannot do otherwise, "than to take this lost religion seriously, and thereby to resent the dissolution of it into a mere garnish for our profane everyday lives" (Schnädelbach 2009, 81). The Anglo-Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton wrote a rewarding book entitled *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*, in which, entirely without polemic, he traces—in the light of the possible loss, which can be connected to the "death of God"—the meaning former religious practices could possess for atheists (de Bottom 2012). (If and how exactly these positive aspects of religion could become relevant, if there is no God—to take only a few examples: religion's community forming and community strengthening dimensions, its emphasis on gentleness and care, or its meaning for the education of humanity, for art and architecture—, is a wholly different question.) The French sinologist and philosopher François Jullien searched for the remaining "resources" of Christianity, which could also be accessible

without a creed (cf. Jullien 2019), while the philosopher Tim Crane dealt not with the truth of, but instead with the significance of religious faith for the faithful, from the point of view of an atheist (Crane 2021). For him, religion is "a systematic and practical attempt, a human undertaking, to find meaning and significance in the world and a place in the world, in a form of a relationship to something transcendent" (Crane 2021, 17).

Such a positive striving for an understanding of religion from atheists is simply astounding, and yet, atheistic appeals to the religious can sometimes appear almost apologetic. The English literary scholar and Marxist Terry Eagleton refers to this as "would-be piety," firmly stating: "seldom was religious faith so fashionable amongst those without faith as now" (Eagleton 2015, 249). This pious or at least religiously tolerant, religiously half-musical atheism emphasizes that faith in God satisfies important human needs, and asks if and how it is possible that these needs will be met "after God." Faith in God and also God Himself will therefore exist primarily as a resource, which is to say, understood in terms of their individual, social, political, or cultural function, or of their meaning, or their use for life. From a religious, faith-based point of view, it is even possible to use such a perspective to justify faith in God and his existence. God exists, so this argument goes, because God Himself—or else because faith in Him—fills functions, which cannot be filled by any other means. Where God is missing, or appears to be missing, it is therefore necessary to recall those functions, which only faith and God can fulfil, so that with this He is then no longer absent. Yet, perhaps it could transpire that this now no-longer absent God would then be missing something important.

4. The functionalist justification of God, *or:* How faith in God helps to acknowledge and to cope with contingency

There is a powerful current in modern thought, which loves the functionalist perspective just described. Those who hold such a view like to ask what purpose a thing has, and by this they mean: how does it benefit human beings? The foundation of this thought is described and critiqued in detail by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer—but also by Martin Heidegger—as the ascendency of "instrumental reason" in the modern age; which has perfected the rational assignment of resources for many different purposes, but which

can say little about the purpose of thinking or acting. This instrumental logic is applied to the "dear Lord" with enthusiasm, and it has been since the beginning of the modern age. In the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes—whose personal faith in God is a matter of controversy—knew all too well of the political and social significance of religion, and therefore made religion subordinate to politics. For what could be better to hold together a community, and overcome tensions and civil war, than religion in the shape of the dogmatic and minimalistic creed "Jesus is the Christ" (cf. Hobbes 1991, 407; Manenschijn *et al.* 1997)? Theoretically similar reflections on the socio-political function of religion were developed in post-revolutionary France under devout catholic monarchists, such as L. G. A. de Bonald (cf. Spaemann 1998)— and can be found in current political and religious circles from the strictly conservative to the reactionary. Faith in God is interpreted and justified with reference to the social function of this faith. Religion, and with it God, becomes a function of politics or of society—and sometimes, if strongly psychologically orientated, a function of the mental health of the individual.

Under the title *Religion after the Enlightenment*, Hermann Lübbe—the faithful protestant interpreter and defender of modernity, and a loyal pupil of his teacher Joachim Ritter who looked for functional connections and coherence between provenance and the future—found access to religion, and with it to faith in God, in exactly such a secular, enlightened setting (cf. Lübbe 2004; Zaborowski 2009). The modern age, so he argued, could not renounce God, because religion and faith in God fulfilled functions, which even in a secular society, could only be satisfied by religion. It is therefore a matter of recognizing and coping with that contingency of human life, that cannot—and never will be—scientifically abolished. According to Lübbe, the enlightenment and the process of secularization leave "exactly that problem of human existence untouched […] that we ourselves cherish to receive in religious culture; or, formulated on a semantic level, being explicitly related to everyday life, is what we distinguish from other ways of living with the predicator 'religious'" (Lübbe 2004, 132). When one is confronted existentially with sickness, suffering, and death, religion is still needed—especially in an enlightened age.

Lübbe knows very well that pious people can never be satisfied with this theoretical access to religion after the enlightenment and hold other views. He

is conscious of the difference between observing and analyzing externally and the subjective inner-perspective. Yet, on the theoretical level, the quintessence of his approach remains that religion after the enlightenment continues to have meaning, exactly because it fulfils necessary functions that cannot otherwise be fulfilled. Can such an apology for religion and faith in God—as an attempt to think God after the enlightenment—really convince?

5. The collapse of functionalism, *or:* How the functional justification of faith anthropomorphizes God and is circular

Without a doubt, faith in God fulfils functions, which can be understood from a political, sociological, psychological, or biological viewpoints. Yet, is it possible to approximate a nearness to religious phenomena and to God solely through those functions? Is not perhaps another perspective required, in addition to the purely functional, in order to think God—that is, the divine, rather than the human-made God? And also, to place into question that prevailing, but also problematic paradigm of functionalism in view of human beings and their dignity, as Eckhard Nordhofen undertakes—from a trans-functionalist perspective—in *Corpora* and *Media Divina* (cf. Nordhofen 2022; Nordhofen 2018; Ramb *et al*. 2021)? Such a question could also be directed to some of those "would-be pious" atheists. Their desire for meaning, which they believe religion and faith in God could give them, must be taken seriously, but do they not fulfil these desires too soon, too thoughtlessly, too sentimentally, through their functionalist view of God and religion?

This question arises again, because God can also be misused in a functionalist manner. The functionalization of faith in God is not as harmless as it may at first appear. God was not and is not only worshipped as a means of coping with death. He is also invoked to torment, to torture, and to kill. Dictators, whether they have faith in God themselves or not, know the power that a reference to God can lend them. Certainly, the functionalist defense of God is not simply ambivalent to possible abuse, because such a defense of God can argue that this abuse, when used for a good purpose, cannot be questioned. To think God functionally is a systematically weak position to maintain, chiefly for two reasons.

Firstly, functionalistic thought makes God into a replaceable quantity. It is not so much interested in who or what something is, only what something is good for as a means towards some end or—from another perspective—by what means those ends, which have been determined to be good, can be achieved. Whatever fulfils a function as a means to something else can be replaced by possible equivalents, which may fulfil the desired functions ever better. Thus pseudo-, quasi-, or crypto-religions appear, which—sometimes partially, sometimes fully—take over the function of faith in God; from political ideologies to sport, culture and art to consumption—which claims to save people with its own creed and its own promise of salvation (etymologically, credit has the same roots as "creed"). A functionalist God is therefore a very weak God. He is dependent upon the benevolence of his human "customer." Some people—as trans- or post-humanism shows all too clearly—attempt to abolish the contingencies of sickness, suffering, and death altogether. If the technologically perfected "super-man" should arrive, God would find Himself unemployed. He would then show Himself as that, which he always already was: a construct, now useless in the light of truer knowledge; an idea of humanity, which cannot only be renounced, but should be renounced for the sake of human integrity. In his own way, Nietzsche knew this already.

Secondly, it can be asked whether this functionalist justification of religion, put forward by Lübbe and others, actually depends upon preconditions, which this reasoning cannot reach, but which can only, or mainly, be understood in a religious way. Why is death, as a central experience of human contingency, a problem? From an evolutionary perspective, it is necessary that people die. Without death, there can be no evolution. For a naturalist, for someone for whom there is "nothing but" nature—though on a personal level, the prospect of their own death may be unpleasant—, death is not an evil or a matter of fate, but a condition of life. Though the discomfort of one's own death can still be explained egotistically—I will not die, because life is precious to me, regardless of what the course of evolution, "Mother Nature," requires of me—, the death of other people remains a real problem and especially the death of loved ones. Is death, as peaceful as it may sometimes be, not a "thorn," a violation of the dignity of the human being who should live, because he is loved, and because he is capable of being loved? Yet does not the concept and experience of dignity

advance into an area, which cannot be understood functionally at all, while at the same time travelling into the field of religion?

Immanuel Kant spoke of human beings as having no price or value, only a dignity "without equivalence." Against this background, the functions a human being may fulfil can be formulated, but the human being can never be reduced to those functions. In human freedom, a dimension of the unconditional is revealed, which indicates something beyond all functional contexts. This understanding of the human being as a free person with an absolute, rather than a relative, dignity, leads Kant from the "postulate of pure practical reason" of the existence of God (Kant 1983a, 254 ff.) to a philosophical "religion," which remains within the borders of mere reason (Kant 1983b, 261). Because freedom and with it the dignity of the human being are capable of being thought, the existence of God is not theoretical and dogmatic, but instead assumed as a "necessary practical consideration" (Kant 1983b, 264). But that would it mean that the problem of the contingency of death, with respect to which, through recognition and coping-with, religion supposedly carries out an indispensable function, only ever portrays a problem, when one—at least in the "limits of mere reason"—stands already in the field of religion. One can argue similarly about other experiences of contingency, such as serious illness or personal guilt. These also become problematic experiences, which require recognition and coping-with, due to certain religious presuppositions. To justify religion functionally, and in this way to be able to think according to the principles of the enlightenment, Hermann Lübbe presupposes a certain form of religion—one that does not have to possess the dogmatic intricacies of a religion of revelation. Lübbe's argument is circular on a still deeper level regarding the concept of "contingency" itself, and not merely of certain experiences of contingency, because it begs the question whether such a central concept as that of contingency, may have certain presuppositions, which it cannot surpass. For the Greeks, the world was eternal. One could marvel at the world, but not at the fact of its existence counter to its possible non-existence, because such a proposition was completely unthinkable then. Can one experience radical contingency against this background—that nothing has to exist, and the wonder that it does exist and that there is not nothing instead of it? Does not the concept of contingency presuppose an understanding of reality as it

developed in the monotheistic religions of creation? And can religions like Christianity cope with the experience of contingency, or do they instead intensify the problem radically? "The truth is," as Robert Spaemann said, "that faith in an existing God creates or at least exceptionally intensifies that same contingency which it 'overcomes.' The idea of the contingency of the world was first developed philosophically in Islam and Christianity." (Spaemann 2007, 24.) And for the functionalist thinking of God or else for faith in God that means:

> Faith in God as a means of coping with contingency cannot be called anything other than the notion that a wound can only be healed by the knife which made the cut. Thus, this idea barely fits the functionalist justification of religion. The atheistic coping with contingency is more radical than the religious. They have abolished contingency altogether. (Spaemann 2007, 25.)

Attempts to think religion and God functionalistically thus reach their limits: not only because a functionalist understanding of religion—and with it of God—could easily be replaced by equivalents, and that such a God could prove to be human, all too human, but also because the functionalist justification of religion—rooted in the necessity of coping with contingency—is circular. It presupposes that, which it tries to show. This raises the question as to whether it is possible to think God differently at all.

6. Unpreconceivable thinking, *or:* How God enters thinking

Thinking is an act of consciousness. Thus, thinking is able to relate to itself, such as when—in classical transcendental philosophy—consciousness thinks about itself, about the conditions and possibilities of thinking. Thinking can introduce a representational objectivity, such as when inventing concepts or classifying systems of thought, and this happens too in the functionalist approach to God. God is reduced to an essence, which fulfils certain functions or needs. It is even possible to put everything into doubt and to question everything via thinking. This representational-objectifying thought is—as the foundation of modern scientific knowledge—an important and indispensable

way of thinking. Yet, it tends to establish itself as an absolute, as if there were no other kinds of thinking, and to understand the present and objective "thing" as a paradigm of beings. But neither God nor the human being can conform to such a thinking. Such a thinking arrives at a merely representational God. It is a conceptual God, a God, which, as the "highest being," as the ground or underpinning, either has to complete his ontological homework or has to fulfil the functions of the most diverse human needs.

Yet, is God, thought as such, really a divine God? In his "Mémorial," Pascal radically contrasted the god of the philosophers—which means the God of modernity, of Descartes or Hobbes—with the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Pascal 2012, 212; Zwierlein 2024, 176–178). With a similar radicalness, Kierkegaard later contrasted reason and faith: the worldly genius and the Apostle touched by God (cf. Kierkegaard 2020). But there is still the question of whether philosophy's attempt to think God today can progress further than these two— thinking!—searchers of God suggest. Perhaps one should not immediately jump to faith, if the limits of thinking are shown, but instead can attempt, once more, to question and to think, deeper and differently.

Today, God has become unfamiliar. God is missing. God is, as is sometimes suspected, dead. The answer to such a diagnosis can be to either greet it warmly as radical atheists do, to commiserate oneself as pious atheists want to, or to question it and to deny it as many pious believers continue to. But perhaps it is necessary to instead take it seriously in a radical way. Is it possible for atheism to be shown to be a religious experience? If God is absent, could God be somehow experienced in His absence? The philosopher of religion Bernard Welte claimed that it is exactly in the nothing that He shows Himself as infinite and absolute, and opens Himself up to us in the possibility of a new religious experience: "[…] where God has vanished, the nothing appears. And then, strangely, it appears once again in the dimension of God." (Welte 2008, 145.) The nothing, Welte continues, keeps silent. In view of this silence, one could ask:

> Could there be something behind it, hiding from us, covering its power in darkness? Or is it merely an empty and therefore insignificant nothing? […] In any case, the possibility cannot be excluded that something could indeed be hiding behind it. (Welte 2008, 145 f.)

Welte keeps these possibilities open. And one can therefore ask, if the modern experience of nothing, of the absence of God, does not also have a profoundly positive dimension. Perhaps it is even the alienation of God, his distance—which should not be prematurely abolished via functionalism—that, which is a condition of possibility of God showing Himself in His divinity, because this alienation is of a God that humans have domesticated and—this seems to be the deepest of all human proclivities—made in their own image. Does not God have to become unfamiliar ever anew—because He is different than humans suppose, and because He shows himself differently and happens differently, than humans wish or imagine? Would that not mean that that, which has been called "the death of God," could also be a death for God's own sake—namely, a death of seductive idols, which humans have made, less to worship God than to worships themselves—their wishes, interests, and wants? And would that not indicate the possibility that God shows Himself anew in His divinity?

God is not an object, which it would be possible to place objectively in front of oneself, and He is not an ontological or logical capstone of thinking. All of these are only images of God, of a man-made God. So, what is God then? Perhaps this question has already been badly posed. Perhaps the question must be completely different: how does God show Himself in thought? How does God enter into attempts to think, and into the often-vain attempts to secure and to affirm God through thinking? How does God reverse or upturn thinking? How does God challenge thinking? How is it that God addresses one, precisely when one thinks? How do people find themselves on the trace of God? Perhaps—and it is no wonder that this word is often used in tentative, careful approaches to thinking—, perhaps God speaks to human beings in His distance and unfamiliarity, and can from this distance then approach human beings closer and be trusted.

7. The radicalness of suffering, *or:* How benevolence can set one on the path to God

Georg Büchner referred to pain and suffering as the "rock of atheism" (Büchner 2002, 60). Why must people suffer—and particularly why the innocent, the young, or the weak? It is here in the present, in the shadows

of the 20th century, in the light of the inhumanity of the wars, catastrophes, crises, and sicknesses of the still-young 21st century, that so many people call out for, and fall into despair at, God. We do not live, as Leibniz claimed to do, rejoicing in baroque excess, in the best of all possible worlds, which could assign a place for evil in the extremes of its harmony. The world, and with it creation, has become questionable in the most profound way. Each attempt to think God in the here and now can do nothing other than to take these experiences seriously. They prohibit triumphal thinking and require a style of caution and humility. Thinking God progresses by experimental paths, through essays, through failing time after time—and time after time starting anew. Prohibited are conclusive proofs, the closed system, the great synthesis. Yet, one who attempts to think God does not stand there with wholly empty hands. Because it could be that it is necessary—turning the need for the absent God around—to take the questions of theodicy and therefore of suffering more seriously than they have been taken. Perhaps, by intensifying the question of theodicy, similarly to the experience of the absence of God, a new route of access to God could be found?

Unde malum? Where does evil come from? That is the central question of theodicy. Although so many have searched, there is no answer to this question. A world without suffering would be better—which is exactly what religion desires. The question of evil must be asked for the sake of those who have suffered historically and the ones who suffer in the present, and also for the sake of God, but it is exactly for their sake that there can be no conclusive answer. Again and again, one must fall silent, because all attempts at explaining evil only ever scratch the surface at best, and the depth of the abyss of evil cannot be fathomed.

Yet, as much as we must pose the question of evil (and as much as we are unable to answer it), it is necessary to pose another, far less frequently asked question—but this time not leave it unanswered. It is the question: "If there is no God, then where does goodness come from?" "Goodness" here does not mean the pleasant or the enjoyable, the origin of which can be explained biologically or psychologically. It indicates the unfathomable experience of radical benevolence, as it seldom, but all the more impressively, occurs precisely in situations of the greatest suffering. Does this benevolence not affect

the way, in which one thinks in unique ways, not when thought as an abstract principle, but when encountered concretely, where it occurs? In devotion to other people; in radical dedication to other people or to nature, or to a certain "issue"; in solidarity with the weak, sick, poor, or aged. Does benevolence not enter into thinking, when it shows itself as something outside of thinking, as something, which cannot be objectively represented or conceptualized, but still as something, which can be recognized? Not recognized as something merely present, but instead as a happening, as a call, as a challenge, as the "wind of the absolute" (cf. Haas 2019); as an event, which irritates, frightens, and yet touches?

At least the possibility is there that in benevolence a claim is revealed, which opens up the field of our thinking and upturns our self-conscious thought; that it "turns" to "something" that is given to it, that is alert to an occurring, which cannot be grasped or comprehended in a concept, but has somehow always already passed it by—or not yet reached it. Would it be too much to suppose that with benevolence, God can enter or come to thought? Recognizing this possibility would not be a betrayal of thinking, but rather entirely the opposite; especially if a second, reflective, step is taken to follow further what has appeared in this thought experiment, while avoiding irrationality.

In this context, one can speak of the epiphanic, that divine opening dimension of benevolence or the good, as borne witness to in the tradition of thought from Plato to Levinas. It cannot be objectified, but it appears—and perhaps everything depends on one's attempt to apprehend it and to correspond to it. Is this not a contemporary intellectual approach to God; one which does not objectify God, does not try to grasp Him conclusively or conceptually, does not reduce Him to functions, but is open to an occurrence, in which, in His absence, His nearness to us is—perhaps—revealed? This God would not simply be there in a predetermined field of thinking. "He" would not exist as a present, presentable phenomenon. But He shows Himself in time (always concealing Himself anew) as a God who puts habitual paths of thinking in question, who opens new "stretches of time," who cannot be comprehended in the world, but who still lends His light to the world, who slips by, and into whose tracks one can fall; who as a future God remains futural, as an open gift, as an open field, because He is not a dormant abstract principle of thought,

but rather gives Himself to humanity and its thinking in a living and historical way. What "takes place" in such an epiphany can only be understood by rough expressions: It occurs. It takes place. It happens. The person who experiences this is no longer a sovereign subject of thinking, but is also no mere passive object, no instrument of external actions. Such an individual stands in the middle of an in-between—between I and me, between addressing and being addressed, between hearing and receiving—and thinks that, which is given to them in thought. Should this not be reasonable, if reason has anything to do with questioning? This intellectual access to God in the present age offers—here, one must also say "perhaps"—the most diverse of possibilities; to transcend the threshold of art, literature, and poetry, and their experiences of the near and the far God, of His withdrawal and His givenness, and also to transcend religious faith and theology, with its knowledges, reflections, and deliberations, and thus, in this way, to speak of a new openness to God.

Translated by Louise Shale

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phainomena

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Phainomena 33 | 128-129 | June 2024

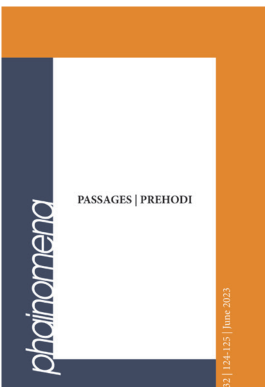
Marcations | Zaznačbe

Mindaugas Briedis | Irfan Muhammad | Bence Peter Marosan | Sazan Kryeziu | Petar Šegedin | Johannes Vorlaufer | Manca Erzetič | David-Augustin Mândruț | René Dentz | Olena Budnyk | Maxim D. Miroshnichenko | Luka Hrovat | Tonči Valentić | Dean Komel | Bernhard Waldenfels | Damir Barbarić

Phainomena 32 | 126-127 | November 2023

Demarcations | Razmejitve

Damir Barbarić | Dragan Prole | Artur R. Boelderl | Johannes Vorlaufer | Cathrin Nielsen | Virgilio Cesarone | Mario Kopić | Petr Prášek | Žarko Paić | Tonči Valentić | Dean Komel | Emanuele Severino | Jonel Kolić | Jordan Huston



Phainomena 32 | 124-125 | June 2023

Passages | Prehodi

Alfredo Rocha de la Torre | Miklós Nyírő | Dario Vuger | Ming-Hon Chu | Maxim D. Miroshnichenko | Jaroslava Vydrová | Malwina Rolka | René Dentz | Igor W. Kirsberg | Izak Hudnik Zajec | Primož Turk | Adriano Fabris