



The Meaning of Nietzsche's Death of God

Kevin Cole

*In Time's stayless stealthy swing,
Uncompromising rude reality
We mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be.*

- From "God's Funeral" by Thomas Hardy, 1919

While neither the first nor the last, Friedrich's Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God stands as the definitive treatment of the idea. That 'God is dead' seems a persistent theme, expressed by Nietzsche in 1882 but re-articulated and given new life in the 1960s by theologians such as Thomas Altizer, Gabriel Vahanian, and William Hamilton. It is a phrase designed to shock and which engenders numerous interpretations. Fred M. Hudson has articulated four key meanings – psychological, sociological, ontological, and theological, respectively (Hudson 40, 44) – while Altizer and Hamilton identify at least ten (qtd. in Grounds 12).¹

The best passage on God's death is offered by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* in section 125, entitled "The Madman."² There Nietzsche describes a man who enters the town market or bazaar and cries out loudly, "I seek God! I seek God!" He encounters a group of mocking atheists, who laugh at him until the Madman tells of God's death. He proclaims: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" (*GS* 181).

All of the good interpretations of this passage resist a literal reading that might understand God's death as a passing away of the divine being in a manner similar to human passing.³ Neither should Nietzsche's proclamation be seen as a more grandiose way of expressing unbelief. "God is dead," writes Stephen Williams, "is not a rhetorical way of saying 'God does not exist'" (Williams 97). The metaphorical or symbolic reading of Nietzsche is clearly more accurate, but there is still some dispute over the exact nuances. Williams is probably correct to note that "the end of theism, the death of God, the end of Christianity – Nietzsche does not encourage us to make distinctions in relation to this passage. If there are distinctions, what counts against one really counts against all" (121).

For Nietzsche, these distinctions are all definitely related. However, certain interpretive emphases produce different connotations. An accurate reading of Nietzsche should take care to attend to these differences and attempt to nail down, as best as possible, the most precise meaning of the phrase "God is dead." Thus, ignoring contemporary appropriations and while keeping Williams' caveat in mind, we can still discern two dominant readings of Nietzsche. In the first, which we will term the "secularization thesis," the death of God

is seen as the death of an epoch – the end of a Christian era and the inauguration of a post-Christian one. On the alternate interpretation, which we will term the “ontotheological thesis,” Nietzsche is primarily announcing the death of the metaphysical God. On one hand we interpret God’s death culturally, historically, and/or sociologically. However, the better interpretation of Nietzsche is the latter, or a theological/metaphysical reading that sees God’s death as connoting the death of the God of the philosophers, to use Pascal’s phrase.

Insofar as popular literature even attempts to wrestle with Nietzsche’s pronouncement, the secularization thesis is probably the dominant understanding. Journalist Amy Sullivan, for example, off-handedly refers to the death of God as the assumption that we were “entering a postreligious age in which religion was at best irrelevant and at worst irrational” (41). Michael Shermer has repeatedly presupposed this interpretation as well (in *Skeptic* magazine’s “Why Nietzsche and *Time* Magazine Were Wrong,” for example), arguing that Nietzsche’s prediction of increasing secularization fails on account of the overwhelming number of people in the West who are still religious or spiritual.⁴

Similarly, Bernard Ramm has expressed the secularization thesis by writing that “in a most general way the expression *God is dead* means the emasculation and evisceration of the *Corpus Christianum*. The Christian religion is no longer the presupposition of civilization” (86). Likewise, Michael Novak frames it as the death of modernity and the move to postmodernity (88). The Madman laments that he has “come too early... my time is not yet” (*GS* 182), which might explain for Novak why postmodernity did not fully arrive until after World War II. In fact, Jeffrey Robbins specifically ties the “collapse of Christendom” to those early 20th century wars in which “supposedly civilized, and nominally Christian, nations [turned] against one another in total warfare. In other words, the ideal of Western civilization held together by a common Christian heritage and identity gets turned against itself in its full destructive potential” (Caputo and Vattimo 7).

Furthermore, Nietzsche himself writes that in the death of God “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*” (*GS* 181, emphasis mine). This, under the secularization thesis, is evidence that Nietzsche’s primary concern is historical, of the heralding of a new epoch in human existence. On this reading Nietzsche is saying less about God himself, or our conception of God, than about our culture and our history. Nietzsche “presupposes the effectiveness of the rational assault on Christianity since at least the eighteenth century,” most prominently promulgated by French Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Diderot (Williams 100). The secularization thesis is not just intelligible from the 20th or 21st centuries, but even in the 19th we find a general awareness of a shift in the *zeitgeist*. Unlike in the Middle Ages, modern men were determined to no longer “treat their lived experiences like hieroglyphics whose real significance is decipherable only a different – supernatural – plane” (Solomon and Higgins 88).

From henceforth onward, Nietzsche might be saying, our societies will be functionally atheistic, or at least agnostic. The death of God is the death of a common vocabulary, a shared framework in which politics and public discourse will operate. Christianity will no longer be our cultural given or norm, but simply become “a piece of antiquity intruding out of distant ages past” (*Human* 66). In summary then, we can say that for advocates of the secularization reading, “the death of God is something post-Christian rather than anti-Christian; by now we are living in the post-Christian time of the death of God, in which secularization has become the norm for all theological discourse” (Zabala 2).

This interpretation of Nietzsche's concept is not, however, wholly adequate. There certainly seems to be a sense in which this take is correct, but it is missing a key piece of the puzzle: *why* such a cultural or historical shift takes place. The question is better put this way: *who are we murdering* that leads to the "collapse of Christendom" or the end of the "the Corpus Christianum"? The metaphysical reading of the death of God answers both these questions and provides a more nuanced and accurate assessment of what Nietzsche meant by "God is dead." It is a superior interpretation both in terms of the whole of Nietzsche's project, but also in light of the specific passage in *The Gay Science*.

Firstly, we must note Nietzsche's overall project and his particular disdain for metaphysics. Alluding to Francis Bacon's metaphor of metaphysicians as "spiders," Nietzsche wonders, "Why did mankind have to take seriously the brain afflictions of sick web-spinners?" (*TI* 486). These web-spinners have introduced us to "ontotheology," beginning with Rene Descartes. In terms of the gradual displacement of God, it's a clear line from Descartes to Immanuel Kant to Nietzsche. The latter simply makes the move – murder – that was written in the project from the beginning. John Caputo expresses this by saying that the death of God "refers to an ongoing and never finished project of deconstructing the God of ontotheologic," a God which he also calls the "*deus omnipotens* of classical theology" (66-67).

Martin Heidegger is perhaps the most persuasive voice for the ontotheological thesis. In "The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead," Heidegger argues that Nietzsche is announcing the end of the suprasensory world, of which God is supposed to be its most real entity (61). Thus 'God is dead' is for Heidegger "the most concise and consequential summary of the meaninglessness of previous Western metaphysics" (Magnus and Higgins 314)⁵ The death of God occurred when humans thought of God primarily as *causa sui*, as Being, as "the highest value," which Heidegger says ends up *de-valuing* God by submitting him to our philosophies; in Nietzsche's case, we put Him under the will to power (105). In ontotheology, the God of the philosophers enters the picture on our terms; in biblical theology, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob forces us to address God on His terms. In the former, we reduce God and worship an image of our own making. This image, in Nietzsche's day, was an explicitly moralistic god begotten of Kant.

When we go back to Descartes, for example, God is the guarantor of our clear and distinct ideas. When we get to Kant, God is now only a regulative ideal needed for morality. It is this particular conception of God that Nietzsche most has in mind. Since "Kant thought that the existence of God was a necessary practical postulate for the possibility of moral action, even if theoretical proof of God's existence is impossible," Kant in essence killed off God (Franke 216, cf. Heidegger 107). Louis Ruprecht makes this explicit: "[Nietzsche] is announcing the death of a pedantically *moralizing* concept of God" (577).⁶ The implications for morality are what Nietzsche is most concerned about. Left without even Kant's regulative ideal, all morality becomes unhinged and requires the "revaluation of all values" (Heidegger 95). Williams puts this plainly by noting "Nietzsche's uncompromising insistence that, if God is dead, morality is dead as well" (214).⁷

It is crucial to note, of course, that this death of God is done by the thinkers of God, the seekers of God. This finds justification in the passage in *The Gay Science*. The Madman is, according to the text, a God-seeker or Christian (cf. Heidegger 111-112).⁸ He is in the market speaking to atheists, or "those who did not believe in God." The secularization thesis does not fully account for this, for it seems redundant to tell a secular audience

of impending secularization. Under this metaphysical account, however, the Madman is accusing the people of not taking seriously what happens when you philosophize God away. Heidegger clearly explicates what happens: “If God as the suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the suprasensory world of the Ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself” (61). Now straying through an “infinite nothing,” we find ourselves faced with nihilism, or “the confirmation that this Nothing is spreading out” (Heidegger 61). Just as, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche says that logic inevitably “coils around itself and finally bites its own tail,” so too does ontotheology and metaphysics, in its attempt to speak absolutely of the Absolute, coil in on itself and kill its own god (84). Thus the final blow to God, Heidegger writes, comes not truly from unbelievers and skeptics, but from God-seekers (like the Madman) who had not hitherto realized that their philosophizing God as ultimate Being was “sheer blasphemy [when] it meddles in the theology of faith” (105).

Furthermore, we might note an oft-overlooked detail in the key *Gay Science* text. Nietzsche points out that the Madman lights a lantern “in the bright morning hours.” In other words, he’s seeking light while *already in the light*, not darkness.⁹ To push on this further, it might be said that the bright morning light is analogous to the carefully constructed ontotheological God of metaphysics. To the God-seeker, this is still total darkness and so he must light a new lantern – this lighting is the proclamation of the death of the metaphysical God. To use Nietzsche’s word, in our metaphysics we’ve been handling a “mummy” or “concept-mummy” which we must now discard (*TI* 485).

Heidegger comes to similar conclusions in his own treatment of this at the end of his essay. Merold Westphal points out that “without naming them, Heidegger attributes the death of God to the Pharisees” (262). In reality, in saying “we have killed him,” Nietzsche is also pointing out that God’s death happened at the hands of unbelievers and God-seekers alike; the former overtly, the latter inadvertently. The unbelievers don’t realize the consequences of their actions, while the Pharisees (seekers of the metaphysical God) don’t even realize their act, making it all the more insidious. In creating the “notion of a supervening mystical unity conceived as the fulfillment or the crowning of metaphysical theology,” (Caputo 117) we have rendered God “unbelievable” (*GS* 279). Now, asks Nietzsche, “what thinker still has need of the hypothesis of a God?” (*Human* 27). Recognizing this fact leads to lamentation at first – the *requiem aeternam deo* in the “tombs and sepulchers of God” (*GS* 180) – but ultimately leads to “joyousness” and “cheerfulness” (*GS* 279).¹⁰ Unshackled by the chains of God and Christianity, humans are now fully able to create their own destiny without need of redemption nor slave morality. Just as “wisdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little whiff of carrion,” so too does a new morality appear on earth, inspired by a little whiff of God’s corpse (*TI* 482).

We have seen, then, that the best interpretation of Nietzsche’s “death of God” proclamation is that of the death of the metaphysical God and the end of metaphysics, at least as previously practiced. The secularization thesis fails to account for Nietzsche’s larger aims, especially as they concern morality, and does not closely attend to the details of the key text in *The Gay Science*. The ontotheological thesis provides greater detail and is the reason that we may have entered a post-Christian or post-religious era. Of course, where we go after slaying the God of metaphysics need not necessarily take the same path as Nietzsche. It is merely counterfactual speculation to suggest that Nietzsche may have

reacted different were his concept of God more like Abraham's and less like Kant's. More likely, Nietzsche would've reacted with disgust to any conception of the Judeo-Christian God so a "post-metaphysical Christianity" is not necessarily off-the-hook. As Williams writes, "As far as [Nietzsche] is concerned, by now we really should be orbiting in an atmosphere where Christianity is plain tasteless" (100).¹¹ The phrase "God is dead" can be profitably used as an overarching metaphor for all of the reasons Nietzsche rejects Christianity. Yet as we have seen, the ontotheological thesis provides the most nuanced expression of the connotations and implications that Nietzsche saw once he realized that "God is dead."

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Notes

¹ Newer work has produced readings that primarily see the death of God as "the death of reason" (Novak 263), or follow Hegel in seeing the death of God as simply God's self-emptying in the death of Christ (see Vattimo's *Belief* and *The Future of Religion*). William Franke also postulates an interesting, if ultimately unlikely, interpretation. He sees the death of God as evidence of God's true power, or the ability to "stage-manage his own death" in order to demonstrate "that nothing can stand outside him. Death is taken up into the divine being or becoming" (238).

² The first occurrence in Nietzsche is in section 108 of *The Gay Science* and the idea also occurs in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Section 125 of *The Gay Science* is the longest and most important passage and most of my work will thus concentrate there with references elsewhere as needed.

³ Heidegger: "The pronouncement does not mean – as though it were spoken out of denial and common hatred – there is no god. The pronouncement means something worse: God has been killed" (105).

⁴ More than a few others have critiqued the secularization thesis on these grounds. John Caputo, for one, rejects the secularization theory in part because it is too involved in "historical periodization" and is easily discredited sociologically or empirically (82-83, cf. 146, 150). It should be noted, of course, that this doesn't necessarily discredit this reading as a valid interpretation of Nietzsche; naturally, he could've simply been a bad prognosticator.

⁵ Heidegger: "[The] ultimate blow in the killing of God is perpetrated by metaphysics..." (107).

⁶ Ruprecht is correct to then note that "Kierkegaard, of course, did much of the same work in *Fear and Trembling*" (577). Thus while the death of the metaphysical God led Nietzsche to reject all conceptions of God, the death of the metaphysical God led Kierkegaard to re-

discover the God of Scripture, a God wholly unlike Descartes' and Kant's.

⁷ Further on: "[Nietzsche] puts the choice before us: either God plus morality or no God and no morality. Since there is no God, the fate of morality is sealed... God, the prop of morality, has gone" (215, 219).

⁸ It's worth mentioning that I read "mad" more as "wild" and/or "prophetic" rather than "psychotic" and/or "crazy." I do not think Nietzsche's conception of the "Madman" was of an unreliable narrator or delusional psychopath.

⁹ My take on this is a bit unlike his, but it was Robert B. Pippin's translation of the Madman passage, and his subsequent comments on the lantern-in-the-morning, that sparked my own interpretation that is simultaneously buttressed by Heidegger's (Pippin 497, 502, 505).

¹⁰ Cf. pg. 79 of Bruce Ellis Benson's *Graven Ideologies*.

¹¹ Cf. Nietzsche: "What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons" (*GS* 186).

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