

# intersections online

Volume 10, Number 1 (Winter 2009)

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Craig Wiley, "I Was Dead and Behold, I am Alive Forevermore: Responses to Nietzsche in 20th Century Christian Theology," *intersections* 10, no. 1 (2009): 507-517.

## ABSTRACT

Karl Barth and Paul Tillich were two of the foremost Protestant Christian theologians of the twentieth Century; Nietzsche was one of the nineteenth century's most influential prophets of atheism. Even so, Barth and Tillich did not simply read Nietzsche; they encountered his ideas head on and even used them in the exploration of their respective theologies. This article discusses the different ways each thinker addressed Nietzsche, and what this encounter meant for their theology.

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## I Was Dead, and Behold, I am Alive Forevermore Responses to Nietzsche in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Theology

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*God is dead.*

The ominous, more than century-old words of Friedrich Nietzsche have been repeated to the point of becoming cultural wallpaper, often by people who have no idea who said them or what they actually mean. Nietzsche's contention that God would no longer be able to function as a means of orientation in the world has sent shockwaves through the modern and post-modern world. Still, religion persists.

It does not simply persist in ignorant masses, among those who remain unexposed to Nietzsche's thought. God is defended by intellectuals. Among religious thinkers, Nietzsche is neither unquestioningly accepted nor rejected; he is wrestled with and analyzed, co-opted and contradicted. Even Christians, for whom he reserved special bile, have found Nietzsche's writings useful. Two significant examples are noted Christian theologians Paul Tillich and Karl Barth; each engaged and used Nietzsche's writings in the delineation of their respective theologies.

Tillich and Barth were born a few months apart in the year 1886, the year that Friedrich Nietzsche published his *Beyond good and evil*.<sup>1</sup> They were 14 years old in the year 1900, both the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the year Nietzsche died.<sup>2</sup> Although each one would become a prominent theologian, and would each draw on Nietzsche, they would do so in very different ways to achieve very different ends: Tillich, to deconstruct the notion of rejecting God by considering him "dead," and Barth, to discuss the implications of Nietzsche's thought for a genuine Christian worldview.

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<sup>1</sup> See David L. Mueller, *Makers of the modern theological mind: Karl Barth*, (Waco: World Books, 1972) 14; See also Sam Addison, "Biography—Paul Tillich", *Gifford Lectures*, <http://www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=169> (accessed December 6, 2008); and Friedrich W. Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann, *The portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 23.

To understand Paul Tillich's perspective on the "death of God" requires first some grasp of the foundational notion of God which Tillich holds. Tillich uses the phrase "ultimate concern" as his description of God. In discussing this concept, he writes:

The religious concern is ultimate; it excludes all other concerns from ultimate significance; it makes them preliminary. The ultimate concern is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or our world is excluded from it; there is no 'place' to flee from it.<sup>3</sup>

If one is to genuinely relate to God, in Tillich's terms, one must relate to God as "ultimate concern." This is not simply to understand God as important; it is to see God as that which is essential to "being" – "the whole of human reality, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence."<sup>4</sup>

To address Nietzsche's idea of the death of God from this perspective, Tillich discusses an excerpt from Nietzsche's *Thus spake Zarathustra*. In it, the character Zarathustra confronts "the Ugliest Man," whom he accuses as "the murderer of God."<sup>5</sup> The Ugliest Man admits guilt, claiming that God "had to die; he saw with eyes that saw everything; he saw man's depths and ultimate grounds, all his concealed disgrace and ugliness."<sup>6</sup>

According to Tillich, Nietzsche, in saying this, demonstrated that he "knew more about the power of the idea of God than many faithful Christians."<sup>7</sup> Why? In Tillich's words, "anyone who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God Who is really God."<sup>8</sup> Such a God means that "our privacy is public."<sup>9</sup> Simply put, this God is utterly inescapable.

The omnipresence of the Christian God, however, is a fairly non-controversial point. As for the human desire to do the impossible and escape from this God, Tillich is able to quote a passage from a biblical Psalm which expresses the same sentiment: "O, where could I flee from Thy face?"<sup>10</sup> These are but foundational

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951): 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 376.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Tillich, "The Escape from God," in *Nietzsche and the gods*, ed. Weaver Santaniello (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 174.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. Tillich quotes Psalm 139.7.

issues in raising the central issue of Nietzsche's parable: the death of God. The death of God is arguably the form that an escape from God must take—there is no temporal escape from an omnipresent deity. Even one's own death is no escape: "If I make hell my home, behold, thou art there."<sup>11</sup> Thus, rejection of the omnipresent God means that this God must be "killed." It is the only conceivable way to hide oneself.

Still, does the Ugliest Man have the ability to do so? Tillich answers resoundingly in the negative. Tillich writes that "the Ugliest Man subjects himself to Zarathustra, because Zarathustra has recognized him, and looked into his depth with divine understanding. The murderer of God finds God in man. He has not succeeded in killing God at all."<sup>12</sup> The Ugliest Man has attempted to liberate himself from God as an ultimate concern; in trying to make Zarathustra the object of ultimate concern, he has proved that he is not free from God. If the death of God means that God is no longer a valid way of drawing meaning from the world, then God is certainly not dead. If God were truly dead, then his murderer would be able to seek meaning in some way not dependent on having a god: even in its rejection, the idea of God exerts its frightful influence. In this way, escape from God is impossible to Tillich existentially as well.

One could argue that as the one attempting murder is the Ugliest Man, rather than Zarathustra, it could have represented for Nietzsche a failed attempt to kill God. This does not seem to be the case from *Thus spake Zarathustra*, though. Although the Ugliest Man is seen as disgusting or pitiable in many ways, it is Zarathustra himself, Nietzsche's voice in the book, who makes the accusation of murder. Nietzsche regards the Ugliest Man as successful in his killing of God, and so any failure to see that God is not yet truly dead belongs to Nietzsche as well as the Ugliest Man.

This is not to say that Tillich's viewpoint has no problems. Paraphrasing Walter Kaufmann, Leonard Wheat writes, "a theology of ultimate concern imputes gods to everyone. 'God' is one's ultimate concern, and the only question is whether one's concern is truly ultimate or merely idolatrous."<sup>13</sup> Tillich agrees. He writes that the example from *Zarathustra* demonstrates "the utter impossibility of atheism."<sup>14</sup> The question, then, becomes a question of idolatry. What

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 174. Tillich quotes Psalm 139.8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 176-77.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard F. Wheat, *Paul Tillich's dialectical humanism: unmasking the god above God* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Tillich, "Escape From God", 176.

constitutes the genuine ultimate concern? Zarathustra's divinization in the eyes of the Ugliest Man is no doubt idolatrous; Tillich's point was not to claim that Zarathustra had become a legitimate god, just that the Ugliest Man was unable to escape the notion of ultimate concern.

Tillich, however, has much higher idols in mind, writing that even theological concepts can be problematic. In using terminology such as "Divine Omnipresence" and "Divine Omniscience, one runs the risk of turning God into "an object besides other objects, the existence and nature of which are matters of argument."<sup>15</sup> At that point, atheists are "justified in destroying such a phantom and all its ghostly qualities."<sup>16</sup> Tillich's thought here becomes eerily reminiscent of a passage in Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. Nietzsche writes that in the conception of the philosophers God became "something ever thinner and paler; he became an 'ideal,' he became 'pure spirit,' the 'Absolute,' the 'thing-in-itself.' The deterioration of a god: God became the 'thing in itself'."<sup>17</sup>

In his rejection of what is certainly a common conception of God among the religious as well as atheists, and in the abstract and ambiguous nature of the God which he does affirm, Tillich certainly seems to be discarding a large part of Christianity. It is no wonder that there are some, such as Leonard Wheat and Walter Kaufmann, who assert that Tillich is some sort of crypto-atheist. In Kaufman's words, "even if we were to concede Tillich a verbal triumph over the atheist, the substance of atheism has been conceded."<sup>18</sup> For people on both sides of the discussion of the death of God, Tillich's response may be too equivocal and esoteric to prove ultimately satisfactory.

One may, at least at first, argue that Karl Barth does not seem to take Nietzsche anywhere near as seriously as Tillich does. In a letter to a colleague, written toward the end of his life, Barth writes:

Be cheerful and of good courage. The statement that God is dead comes from Nietzsche and has recently been discovered and trumpeted abroad by some German and American theologians and now by certain schoolboys. But the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 585.

<sup>18</sup> Wheat, 18.

good Lord has not died of this; he who dwells in heaven laughs at them. This is all I have to say on the matter.<sup>19</sup>

He clearly does not believe that Nietzsche's thought is dangerous in terms of the actual existence of God. Then again, he does not think that God's existence was what Nietzsche was focused on, per se: he writes that Nietzsche "knew atheism neither as an experience nor as an event, but by instinct. 'God is dead' – there is no need for heat or polemics."<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche was speaking to those for whom the statement was already becoming an experiential reality.

For the follower of a God who still lives,<sup>21</sup> then, the statement becomes not a problem of God's existence, but of a culture which has lost its access to this God. To the death of God as a cultural (rather than ontological) event, Karl Barth was keenly attuned. Stephen H. Webb writes that German liberal theologians' endorsement of German action in the First World War shocked Barth into reevaluating the positions upon which he stood; he concluded that "no longer should theology trust in any alliances with the political or philosophical powers of its day. No longer should theology take God for granted as an adjunct to human affairs. In fact, Barth was to decide that theology itself was part of the problem."<sup>22</sup> Barth was to mount a reevaluation of Christian thought in contradiction to the liberal theology of his day. Instrumental in the development of this thinking was Franz Overbeck, a friend and colleague of Nietzsche and adamant critic of the liberal theologians.<sup>23</sup> Barth was to draw from Overbeck's critique in looking at the places where Christianity had gone wrong when developing into its German liberal form.

Barth was certainly no Nietzschean. Still, as in Overbeck's case, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity was to prove useful. For example, in Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*, commenting on Paul's statement that "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God":

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Letters 1961-1968* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 243.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Church dogmatics*, Vol. III, 2 (New York: T&T Clark International, 1960), 238.

<sup>21</sup> I do not here mean to imply that Barth simply assumes the existence of God with no epistemological foundation; the issue simply does not factor in to Barth's dealings with Nietzsche, and is thus beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen H. Webb, *Re-Figuring theology: the rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

The recognition of the need of the forgiveness of sin has nothing in common with pessimism, with contrition and the sense of sin, or with the ‘heavy depression’ of the ‘preachers of death (Nietzsche); [...] the need for forgiveness of sin might in fact be regarded as a Dionysiac enthusiasm, were it not that it can be placed in no such human category.<sup>24</sup>

Barth here does not simply take exception to a Nietzschean critique of Christianity; rather, he is taking exception to the very attitude that Nietzsche critiques. Paul’s statement, says Barth, is in context a declaration of the equality of all who stand before God. After all, in full, Paul’s passage reads “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned, and fall short of the Glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> For this statement to lead to the “heavy depression” of the “preachers of death” is precisely the opposite of what is intended. While Nietzsche would almost undoubtedly criticize the results of Barth’s own interpretation upon different grounds, his critique has still provided a tool useful for Barth to evaluate and correct an area in which he felt the Church had gone astray.

Where Barth most fully grapples with Nietzsche is in Barth’s discussion in his *Church dogmatics* of what must be conceived as the point of origin for the Christian conception of humanity. It is a critical point for Barth’s theology, as it is the fundamental element in determining one’s “responsibility before God,” if such responsibility exists.<sup>26</sup> Barth writes that in order to do this, “we have to rule out the possibility of a humanity without the fellow-man.”<sup>27</sup>

Barth clarifies what he means by a humanity without the fellow man, describing it as the conception that “I am, that I am for myself, and neither from nor to others. [...] ‘I am’ means that I satisfy myself even in the sense that I have to do justice to myself, that I am pressingly claimed by myself.” This conception sees the self as the primary reality, as the point from which all of life must be confronted. Upon this battlefield Barth confronts Nietzsche.

This is not to say that Barth sees Nietzsche as the only proponent of the view of humanity without the fellow-man. Barth’s phrasing of the view in terms of “I am” is reminiscent of the Cartesian “*cogito, ergo sum*”: that the existence of the self is the only thing that cannot be doubted, and that all other thought must proceed from this. Although Barth does not explicitly refer to Descartes, he attacks those

<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 100-101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> Barth and Bromiley, *Church dogmatics*, 228.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

who would criticize Nietzsche too hastily, by noting that “Goethe, Hegel, Kant and Leibniz would come under the same condemnation,” as holding the same underlying ideas that gave birth to Nietzsche’s thought.<sup>28</sup> Barth is clear that he does not see this way of thinking as limited to these philosophers, either; it belongs to “the spirit of all European humanity.”<sup>29</sup> The perspective has simply been “represented with less restraint and we might almost say with greater honesty by Nietzsche.”<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche was willing to make actual tendencies in philosophy that had previously been only potential, following trains of thought to radical conclusions rather than stopping where social norms dictated. Others did not see the incompatibility of their worldview with Christianity because they “did not go far enough and were not consistent enough.”<sup>31</sup>

Nietzsche’s expression of what Barth termed “humanity without the fellow-man” can be clearly found in Nietzsche’s *The genealogy of morals*, in which Nietzsche writes, “all truly noble morality grows out of triumphant self-affirmation. Slave ethics, on the other hand, begins by saying *no* to an ‘outside,’ an ‘other,’ a non-self, and that *no* is its creative act.”<sup>32</sup> What Nietzsche terms “slave ethics” he views as inherently problematic: its establishment in distinction from a powerful other leads to hatred and vindictiveness, which are bottled up and poisonous.<sup>33</sup> The “noble” who acts from self-affirmation is not subject to these intrinsic inner poisons.<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche does not view this self-affirmative state as simply impulsive or random. Rather, he writes of the noble that “being truly free and possessor of a long-range, pernicious will, he also possesses a scale of values. Viewing others from the center of his own being, he either honors or disdains them.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, in Barth’s terms, Nietzsche is an avid proponent of a humanity not rooted in the fellow-man.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Barth goes so far as absolving Nietzsche of particular responsibility for the rise of the Third Reich: “if Nietzsche prepared the ground for National Socialism, the same may be said with equal justification of other manifestations of the European spirit during the last centuries” (ibid). Barth even states that “Nietzsche directed his most scathing terms against the German nationalism of his age, the age of Bismarck, so that any contribution he made to [National Socialism’s] development was highly indirect” (ibid).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche and Francis Golffing, *The birth of tragedy and the genealogy of morals* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 170-71.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 191.



Christianity, to Nietzsche, must not simply be one of the many sets of externally imposed moral structures to be overcome and thus made irrelevant by an individual asserting his will. If that were all it was, one could not explain Nietzsche's utter focus on attacking Christianity; why he must "finally act in this matter as if there were no other foe on earth, and no more urgent task than to vanquish it."<sup>36</sup> Certainly, Nietzsche classifies Christianity as a form of "slave ethics" which had developed in response to hatred of Rome.<sup>37</sup> This viewpoint does indeed explain some of Nietzsche's antipathy toward Christianity. Still, the fact that Nietzsche could not simply leave his critique here indicates that there must be something more fundamental at stake. The distinction between noble and slave ethics is made in *The genealogy of morals*, and it is only afterwards that Nietzsche wrote his polemic *The Antichrist*.

Barth points to a passage in *The Antichrist* which is key: Nietzsche writes of the image of God himself being crucified as meaning that "all that suffers, all that is nailed to the cross, is *divine*." Why can he not simply ignore this? Why does it offend him so? According to Nietzsche's *Thus spake Zarathustra*, an individual, asserting himself, should raise himself above the masses of humanity— to "overcome" man,<sup>38</sup> to be a god unto himself. He makes himself the "overman." Barth points to the inherent solitude of a life lived out completely through self-affirmation.<sup>39</sup> If one derives value totally from the expression of one's own will, the other contributes nothing; an overman may derive value from what he gives, but not from what he is given. To do so would be to accept the imposition of the other, to allow that other some level of power over the self.

Christianity stands opposed to this solitude. It says, in Barth's words, that the individual "is not God but a man, and therefore under the cross of the Crucified and one of its host."<sup>40</sup> Christianity confronts the individual with the "suffering man," Jesus, and in doing so "demands that he should see the man, that he should accept his presence, that he should not be man without him but with him, that he must drink with him at the same source."<sup>41</sup> The crucifixion, in divinizing suffering, functions as bestowal of value which extends to the sufferer from an *other*. The other must thus be acknowledged, which means that value, from a Christian perspective, cannot be totally derived from within. The acceptance of

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<sup>36</sup> Barth and Bromiley, *Church dogmatics*, 239.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche and Golffing, 186.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 124.

<sup>39</sup> Barth and Bromiley, *Church dogmatics*, 234.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

this externally offered value for oneself also means the acceptance of this value for and in others, meaning one is put on the same level as the rest of humanity, no matter how much one tries to transcend them. Christianity, then, is inherently at odds with a view of humanity that does not include the fellow-man; the concept as spelled out by Nietzsche is in direct contradiction to the cross of Christianity.

Barth, as a Christian, thus rejects as a dead end the conception of humanity rooted entirely in self-affirmation. The basic form of humanity must include the fellow-man. Does this mean that Barth is left simply having to affirm “slave ethics?” Barth does not seem to think so. Upon his rejection of humanity without the fellow-man, he offers an altered form of the “I am” statement, owing a considerable debt to a line of thinking exemplified by Martin Buber’s *I and thou*.<sup>42</sup> He writes that the act of speaking “I am” implies speaking to another, to whom the words are addressed: a “Thou”.<sup>43</sup> The addressee of this implied “Thou” may in turn address the first speaker as a “Thou”.<sup>44</sup> Through this, implicit value is established on both sides, and must be worked out in relation. In Nietzsche’s slave ethics, one’s starting point is the distinction from and rejection of the other; here, the other is recognized, and the self and the other are mutually affirming even in their distinction from one another.

Ultimately, Karl Barth seems to give more credit to Nietzsche than does Paul Tillich. Barth sees Nietzsche’s philosophy as one following as a natural (if regrettable) Nietzsche than does Paul Tillich. Barth sees Nietzsche’s philosophy as one following as a natural (if regrettable) conclusion from his starting point, while Tillich sees Nietzsche as ultimately being deluded in his attempt to argue his escape from God. Ironically, this means that Barth must reject Nietzsche’s thought far more fully than Tillich does. Barth must go back to the very source of Nietzsche’s arguments, while Tillich may simply chisel away the elements that do not fit with his views.

It is doubtful that either of these theologians has had the final word on the contentious relationship between Christianity and Nietzsche. God certainly does not seem to be dead yet, but the madman who proclaimed the death of God in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* also announced that he “came too early” – that it will take time for the event to reach human minds, just as it takes time for the light of

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<sup>42</sup> Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: the life of dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 325.

<sup>43</sup> Barth and Bromiley, *Church dogmatics*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

a star to reach human eyes.<sup>45</sup> One does not know if a star has been snuffed out until long afterward. Only time will tell; in the meantime, God still seems to very much have the spark of life.

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<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche and Kaufmann, 96.