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The Problem of Nihilism

One of the most striking features of post-World-War-I religious thought is its exploitation of the experience of meaninglessness as the basis for Christian apologetics. In a well-known commentary on Paul's "Letter to the Romans,"¹ Karl Barth described faith in a way intended to shatter all prior conceptions of the religious life. Faith, according to Barth, is a void (*ein Hohtraum*), a "not knowing" that is characterized by the absence of belief, conviction, and confidence rather than by their presence. An individual is genuinely religious, Barth seemed to suggest, when he or she is most forlorn, despairing of every possibility of truth, estranged from all value and meaning, lost in "a condition of shattering confusion, from which he can never escape" (*Romans*, 85). The experience of the impotence of knowledge and the futility of action—of the senseless, empty quality of life—was portrayed as the condition, indeed the only condition, of religious affirmation.

Had this work fallen stillborn from the press, it would today be little more than an intellectual curiosity, interesting, perhaps, for its peculiar juxtaposition of faith and

what appears to be a form of nihilism, but not something warranting sustained attention. But the impassioned rhetoric of the then-unknown pastor from Safenwil was hardly stillborn; in the words of one contemporary, it "fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians."² Not only did it serve as the avowed manifesto of Dialectical Theology, or the Theology of Crisis³ (whose members included Emil Brunner, Friedrich Gogarten, and Eduard Thurneysen, as well as Barth himself), but more than any other single work of Protestant thought, its appearance marked the break with the liberal theological tradition that had flourished for nearly a century. Even those thinkers who found Barth's views problematic or repellent were forced to take his position seriously; consequently the importance of this work for understanding twentieth-century religious thought in the West is unsurpassed.

Barth's *Roemerbrief* becomes all the more important when one realizes that the emphasis on meaninglessness as the ground of the genuinely human life was not limited to the theological sphere. Most of the thinkers loosely grouped together under the title "existentialist"⁴ similarly stressed that the loss of meaning and confidence in one's life is the basis—or at least the beginning—of what they termed authentic existence. Although the precise terminology varied, the work of Heidegger and Jaspers in Germany, and of Sartre and Camus in France, shared this preoccupation with meaninglessness and the conviction that its confrontation is instrumental in the positive affirmation of life.

While the ways in which this preoccupation was expressed were diverse, *Der Roemerbrief* throws into relief the underlying logic shared by most of the existential thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century. The goal was to wrest positive benefit from a condition which seemed paralyzing and inescapable: the advent of nihilism, the loss of all sense of contact with anything that is ultimately true or meaningful. The collapse of the liberal paradigm on the battlefields of the First World War, the corresponding loss of confidence in reason and

history, and a growing sense of the sterility of romantic subjectivity created a great emptiness that both needed to be filled and yet seemed impossible to satisfy. The dialectical theologians' attempt to make this condition a prerequisite for genuine religious faith was but an extreme instance of a more widespread trend to transform an apparently unavoidable state into a virtue. Thus when Friedrich Gogarten wrote in 1920 that "the last and deepest source reveals itself only at that point at which all our foundations have been destroyed, have become worthless and meaningless" and that "only in this state of meaninglessness can the eternal meaning of all things shine through,"⁵ he was expressing essentially the same sentiment one finds in Heidegger's early claims about the revelatory power of anxiety or in Camus' portrait of the existential hero as the individual who lives in self-conscious confrontation with a meaningless world, refusing either to deny or succumb to its power.⁶

What unites these somewhat disparate thinkers is their desire to embrace a condition that many of their peers found disastrous and cataclysmic. As the twentieth century unfolded, it became increasingly difficult to deny that the combined legacy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was dubious at best, for it had left its heirs with, on the one hand, a conviction of the desirability, even the necessity of truth and, on the other hand, a radical suspicion of all claims to have found truth. The existentialist response—to focus on precisely this absence of any legitimate ground, outside the commitment of the individual, upon which to stand—was widely criticized as pessimistic, even nihilistic. This criticism stemmed not so much from the fact that the existentialists pointed to a world of purely human origin and found its promise of meaning counterfeit, but because they seemed to welcome this void, even to cultivate it, as a necessary aspect of human existence.

In many ways, the existentialists and the dialectical theologians were pursuing a path first cleared by Nietzsche more than fifty years earlier. While the term

"nihilism" had been in use throughout the nineteenth century (and perhaps even earlier)⁷ Nietzsche was the first thinker to recognize both the severity of its implications and the subtlety of its origins. His published works, deconstructing with polemical glee both Judeo-Christian morality and the metaphysical pretensions of the philosophical tradition in which it was embedded, are but the tip of an iceberg made up of hundreds of notebook entries exploring the significance and the consequences of the advent of nihilism. Dubbing it "the uncanniest of all guests," Nietzsche believed nihilism to be "one of the greatest crises, a moment of the deepest self-reflection, of humanity."⁸ Characterizing it as a disease that was pathological in its intensity, Nietzsche nonetheless thought that nihilism had within it the possibility of redemption from an interpretation of life that was both hypocritical and debilitating. If the positive content of Nietzsche's vision of the individual redeemed through and by nihilism is unclear, his conviction that such redemption was in fact a concrete possibility is not. And while one might argue with many of the specifics of Barth's view of the "new man" and Rudolf Bultmann's portrayal of the authenticity of life of faith, these attempts to make nihilism a source of affirmation were fulfilling the spirit, if not the letter, of Nietzsche's thought.⁹

The irony that Nietzsche, despite his contempt for theologians and all that was theological,¹⁰ nonetheless served as inspiration for one of the most significant movements in twentieth-century theology makes an inquiry into the religious appropriation of nihilism a fascinating study. There is something both provocative and perverse in the often grim insistence of the dialectical theologians that the dissolution of sense is the beginning of real meaning. Central to their construction of what could be called a "soteriology of ambiguity" were two related beliefs: an understanding of nihilism as the loss of something deemed desirable, even necessary, for human survival, coupled with a conviction of the importance and value of truthfulness in the face of such a loss.

Both of these attitudes can be traced to Nietzsche, and both were necessary for the dialectical theologians' position to be intelligible. It was precisely the tension between what one wanted—in this case, a transcendental meaning or ground accessible to human inquiry—and the realization that this could never be had which provided the content for the vision of humanity they espoused. The despair bred of this tension was constitutive of human existence, they argued; recognizing and accepting the basic ambiguity of all human endeavors despite one's ineradicable need for certainty was made the basis of authenticity among existential thinkers more generally. To be fully human meant to affirm both the utter emptiness of a world devoid of meaning and the human need for a meaningful world. To give up either—to lose oneself in an "ism" purporting to be absolute truth or to deny the fundamental drive for meaning shared by all members of the human race—was, from this point of view, to succumb either to inauthenticity, in the former case, or unthinking animality, in the latter.

The heyday of both dialectical theology and existentialism more generally has passed, not without some justification, for their understanding of the nature of human existence all too easily becomes a hackneyed caricature of itself. More than that, however, there is a sense in which the *angst*-ridden reflections from the first half of this century sound dated, almost comical in their intensity and self-seriousness. One might infer from this that the dangers of nihilism, so vividly painted by Nietzsche, have passed, that the crisis has been resolved, that human reason has resumed its progressive investigation into the true and the good. Yet what in fact has happened in the last two decades is a recasting of the problem of nihilism into a framework so different from that shared by Nietzsche and his unwitting successors that the work of these earlier thinkers is in danger of becoming unintelligible.¹¹

This new framework, and the corresponding attitude towards nihilism characteristic of it, is best seen in the works of those thinkers labelled "anti-foundationalists"

and “deconstructionists.” Bearing many superficial similarities to the thought of the dialectical theologians—and, arguably, that of Nietzsche—the writings of Jacques Derrida in France and Richard Rorty in this country seek to uncover and condemn the absolutist pretensions of, in their eyes, the entire metaphysical tradition of the West. Barth attacked the portrayal of God as an object within the world, accessible to human manipulation and control; Derrida and Rorty criticize the metaphysics of presence and the portrayal of truth as something existing “out there” to be discovered. Barth argued that the investigation of human attempts to conceptualize deity revealed only relativity, ambiguity, and the utter absence of what was pretended to be spoken of; Derrida’s famous dictum that “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” and Rorty’s claim that truth is never anything more than the expression of a particular community’s values similarly reject the possibility of any transcendental, trans-cultural, or trans-historical access to truth or meaning.¹² Barth claimed to speak from a “point of view that is no point of view” (*Romans*, 58); Derrida similarly tries to speak from a “non-philosophical place,” while Rorty repeatedly denies that he is presenting a theory or a philosophical position at all.¹³ Thus the religious appropriation of nihilism as a means of announcing the end of theological liberalism prefigured the deconstructive and anti-foundationalist engagement with the same phenomenon to signify the end more generally of the metaphysical tradition of the West.

Despite these striking parallels, there is a fundamental and, in the final analysis, irreconcilable difference between the anti-foundationalism of a Rorty and the dialectical theology of a Barth. While both Rorty and Barth desire to embrace nihilism in some sense, and welcome its presence in human life and discourse, the attitude taken towards this phenomenon differs considerably. Put metaphorically, Barth saw nihilism as a disease signifying the wretchedness of the human condition, whose value lay in forcing us to become aware of precisely this wretchedness; Rorty sees it rather as a cure,

which needs no further treatment. Both seek to make nihilism the basis of affirmation, but for Barth this involved a major transformation of the self, whereas for Rorty, and perhaps for Derrida as well, no such transformation is necessary.¹⁴ For Barth, as for existentialism more generally, the advent of nihilism is an occasion for despair; for Rorty, Derrida, and their peers, it is an occasion for at least mild revelry.

The present work explores three "moments" in the history of contemporary nihilism: first, Nietzsche's portrayal of nihilism as a cultural phenomenon linked to a particular historical event—the self-dissolution of Christianity; second, the religious appropriation of nihilism by the dialectical theologians in their attempt to connect it to Christian faith; third, nihilism's domestication in the deconstructive analyses of the anti-foundationalists, typified by Richard Rorty.

My aim is twofold. First, I will show how the appraisal of nihilism has shifted in the last century (in at least some circles) away from something which we must escape to something which is a relatively innocuous characterization of the radically interpretive character of human life. For many postmodernists, the presence of nihilism evokes, not terror, but a yawn. Second, I will discuss the possible origin and implications of this transformation, a transformation which, in my opinion, is not a happy one. To anticipate, I believe that the change evident in these three interpretations and accounts of nihilism is due in part to the recasting of nihilism, understood initially as a historical event, into a phenomenon coextensive with human historicity. Regarded by Nietzsche as a condition created by a particular set of intellectual developments, by the late twentieth century nihilism is seen as implicit in the fact that human beings are historical creatures that must interpret their surroundings. As a result, nihilism ceases to be something from which we must escape, loses its potentially transformative and redemptive power, and becomes instead simply a rather banal characterization of the human situation.

As I shall argue, what we lose when we make this move is far greater than what we gain. While the good news appears to be that we no longer need to worry about a situation that we seem unable to avoid, the bad news is that this transformation essentially reifies the present values, beliefs, and judgments of the historical community to which we belong into absolute truths, albeit unintentionally and unconsciously. At its extreme, banalizing nihilism—which I argue takes place in certain postmodern thinkers, here represented by Rorty—paradoxically results in an absolutism at once pernicious and covert.

The linking of Nietzsche, Barth, and Rorty in making these points might strike some readers as odd; certainly it requires at least brief justification. While the joining of Nietzsche and Rorty seems plausible enough, and the conjunction of Nietzsche and Barth almost, if not equally, plausible, to put the three together might well appear perverse. What was the principle of selection underwriting this choice? What, in other words, justifies the joining of Rorty and the early Karl Barth?¹⁵

As I read the intellectual history of the twentieth century, Rorty and the early Barth represent opposite poles of interpretation leading away from the liberal heritage of the nineteenth century. Barth typifies what I will call below the “religious” response, Rorty typifies the “aesthetic.”¹⁶ While obviously their historical and intellectual peers were different, both speak from and to communities that regard our relationship to the truth as problematic. Both are sensitive to the radically historical nature of human beings and the perspectival, relative nature of human knowledge. Both stand, in other words, in Nietzsche’s shadow. The very oddness of their conjunction, in light of this fact, helps make my point—they have pursued two divergent paths in a roughly analogous intellectual milieu. As I will show below, Barth elected to abandon the possibility of knowledge so that he might cling fast to truth, while Rorty turns away from truth in order to save knowledge.¹⁷

The second chapter briefly outlines the conceptual history of nihilism and distinguishes between various

possible uses of the term. This is important because the term "nihilism," while widely used in the last two centuries, has no universally agreed-upon definition; although family resemblances between usages naturally exist, there is enough variation to promote substantial confusion. After viewing some of the more prominent definitions of "nihilism," Chapter Two identifies the sense in which "nihilism" is employed in this work.

The third chapter lays out Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism and his analysis of its relation to Christianity. Central to Nietzsche's portrayal of nihilism was his conviction that it was a major crisis in the history of European culture, a turning point that would signify either the beginning of our demise or the starting point of a new way of being in the world. The ambiguity Nietzsche attributed to nihilism was of fundamental importance for subsequent attempts to wrest redemptive force from this crisis. Nietzsche offered the first sustained analysis of nihilism as a cultural malaise, thereby giving birth to the understanding of nihilism that informed the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter Four explores the religious response to the advent of nihilism in the work of the dialectical theologians by examining their most formative work, Karl Barth's *Roemerbrief*. Here the historical context of the emergence of nihilism is in effect denied, nihilism being transformed into God's judgment upon humanity. The confrontation with nihilism throws the individual back upon him- or herself, raising the question, "Who, then, am I?" This existential self-questioning is made the basis of faith, or authenticity, as Bultmann's interpretation of Barth illustrates. Fundamental to this turn is the preservation of the crisis-value attributed to nihilism by Nietzsche, for only in the jolt of having one's illusions shattered does nihilism serve as a revelation of something beyond itself. The dialectical theologians baptized nihilism, in effect, by linking it both to the sinfulness of the human condition—the recognition of which is necessary for genuine religious faith—and the gracious love of

God. The experience of annihilation becomes "God's way of saving us."

The fifth chapter examines Rorty's anti-foundationalist reading of Western philosophy and his deconstruction of the philosophical and ethical search for truth and goodness as a form of bad faith. Rorty domesticates nihilism by making it an unobjectionable characteristic of human thought and discourse. Nihilism has been completely divested of its power to shock, and therefore of its power to reveal and redeem. We are left only with the prescriptions of a community, a community which it seems impossible to change without falling prey to a form of bad consciousness.

Thus the goal of this work is to show how Nietzsche's "uncanniest of all guests," the bane of the nineteenth century, is becoming an unremarkable, even banal, feature of modern life. The concluding chapter presents my analysis of how this transformation has happened and explores some of its implications. Nihilism, I will argue, comes full circle—as its crisis value diminishes, as it becomes accepted with an indifferent shrug, it devolves into its antithesis: a dogmatic absolutism.

While the presence of nihilism in our midst is widely acknowledged, there have been few attempts to trace its history or to document changes in our interpretation of it. Those works which do exist are generally marked either by a polemicism which may make them interesting reading, but renders their scholarly value problematic, or by a narrowness of focus which limits their usefulness.¹⁸ Without exception nihilism is portrayed as a monolithic phenomenon which has not changed since its discovery. The present work is an attempt to offer a larger picture of the history of nihilism, showing both that the appraisal of nihilism has changed over the last century, and how it has changed. Thus it seeks to begin to fill an important gap in scholarly reflections on the modern period. The fact that the word "nihilism" was coined within the last two centuries suggests that nihilism and modernity are somehow coextensive phenomena. If indeed this is the

case, then only when we understand something about the range and breadth of contemporary interpretations of nihilism are we in a position to begin to understand and evaluate the cultural climate in which we find ourselves.