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January 11, 2013: Rest of Taking Nihilism Seriously , Parts 4&5

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Title: Rest of Taking Nihilism Seriously , Parts 4&5

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1/11/2013--4. Nihilism cannot be defeated. The world tries and fails to defeat nihilism. Heidegger assures his readers that substitutes for the authority of the suprasensory realm do emerge. Conscience. Historical progress. Earthly happiness for the greatest number. The creation of a culture or the spreading of civilization. Creativity. And finally, the business enterprise. But even all these ultimately “suffer the loss of their constructive force and become void.” Even science becomes mere technology.

--The world also tries to find a new and improved metaphysics. In Heidegger's interpretation, however, nihilism cannot be combated out of some new and improved metaphysics—out of some higher and more certain value—because the ground of nihilism's essence lies in metaphysics itself. And this is so even when sincere opposition to nihilism assumes a defensive vehemence out of the believer's self-righteous superiority. Note that the “believer” here is not the Christian, or even the religious one, but any commitment to the ideal realm. Nihilism is the failure of the ideal realm itself—the devaluing of highest valuation. Valuing itself belongs to the will to power. And that includes positing God as the highest value.

--Nihilism devalues God too, of course, which is why nihilism is announced as the death of God. But it is not the devaluing of God by critics that is the heaviest blow, according to Heidegger, but elevating the God who is held to be real to the mere status of the highest value. And this elevation is accomplished not by atheists but by theologians seeking to defeat nihilism. This kind of theology strikes down that which is as such, in its being-in-itself. That is sheer blasphemy, not a thinking in a godly way about the divine essence. As a friend of mine says, it is not letting God be God in God's own way. It is the believer's desperate act of seeking control over God, of forcing God to appear.

--Given all this, can the draft help defeat nihilism? Isn't the draft's very tone of insistent Christian restatement a merely human impatience with the way of the world today? And thus just another human assertion in the face of nihilism? Both the authors of the draft statement as well as its anticipated opponents would be understood by Heidegger as entangled in assertions of their own wills.

--While I do not know the way out of nihilism, that way cannot be the way of the draft, which is merely a way back.

---Why can't we just go back to Aquinas? Because that would not explain how we got from Aquinas to here. The draft fails to give an account, out of Christian understanding, of how the current, positivist state of world has come about. The draft's understandings of law and government at one time defined the West. Something evidently happened to that Christian conception, which even the draft assumes is no longer normative for the culture. It is fair to ask what happened and, further, to inquire how a mere restatement of the classic Christian position, which is what the draft sets forth, could possibly be an appropriate response to the historical event of nihilism? To that nihilism to which Christendom somehow led us.

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not flinch at providing such an account. He wrote that God was teaching humanity to get along without Him—was Bonhoeffer wrong? Then let the draft give us some other explanation of how we got here.

-- The draft reminds me of the last chapter in Charles Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*. After all the analysis and even critique of the history of secularization in the West, all Taylor can denominate as a way out of what he sees as an impasse, is a chapter entitled “Conversions” that describes the trajectories of certain persons who found their way back to Christianity. After all that Taylor had written, this response is ludicrous. Western civilization is not, in some act of collective will, going to reconvert to classic Christian truth. And if did, that assertion of will really would be an act of human autonomy at the expense of truth. It would be a great universal posit. Such an act would be precisely a human assertion.

5. Without claiming to know any way out of nihilism, I believe there are three appropriate responses.

--First, we must remind ourselves of our common humanity and common starting point. We should be erasing borders between us. Christians should be echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for a religionless Christianity and recognizing Karl Rahner's proclamation of the anonymous Christian. Secularists, in turn, should be celebrating the rational and beneficent elements of Christianity—that its God is not an arbitrary tyrant—and reminding itself how Christian rationality gave birth to the scientific tradition that could study nature's regular patterns in the confidence that God may be subtle, but is not malicious, as Einstein once put it.

The failure to see and appreciate this common ground expresses itself divisively in America today in a number of ways, including the struggle over religious exemptions from law, on the one hand, and the challenge by Brian Leiter, and now many others, denominated "why tolerate religion?" on the other. Religious believers claim that their commitments are altogether different from those of the world and therefore demand unique rights and privileges, and then seem surprised when the world agrees with them that these commitments are different from anything the world believes but grants to these religious commitments little value. It would be a more appropriate response to our common nihilism to proclaim that religious commitments are of the same depth as are the commitments of the secular world and therefore deserve the same level of legal protection.

Other Christians have done this. Other Christians have been more open to the truths of the world than is the draft. When Pope Benedict, writing as Joseph Ratzinger, looked at the world's religions, for example, he warned Christians against looking at them purely from the Christian perspective of their "value for salvation," calling that perspective "the burden of a question that can in fact be decided only by him who shall judge the world."

Karl Barth approached Marxists in a spirit very different from that of the draft. In "Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice," an essay Barth published in 1911, he explained to workers the relationship between Jesus and socialism:

If you understand the connection between the person of Jesus and your socialist convictions, and if you now want to arrange your life so that it corresponds to this connection, then that does not at all mean you have to "believe" or accept this, that, or the other thing. What Jesus has to bring us are not ideas, but a way of life. One can have Christian ideas about God and the world and about human redemption, and still with all that be a complete heathen. And as an atheist, a materialist, and a Darwinist, one can be a genuine follower and disciple of Jesus. Jesus is not the Christian world view and the Christian world view is not Jesus.

I believe the Pope and Barth understand that divisions between believers and nonbelievers do not arise out of differing conceptions of truth. If they did, we would engage and debate as the champions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity once did and we would learn from each other as in the golden age of Spain. No. Our divisions arise out of the looming darkness of nihilism itself. It is nihilism that turns our commitments into incommensurate posits that have nothing to say to each other.

So, common humanity is one response to nihilism.

A second response to the nihilism in which we are all caught offers for Heidegger "a faint light." At the end of his essay, Heidegger returns the reader to Nietzsche's scene of the madman. The madman enters exclaiming that he seeks God. Those in the square, who do not believe in God, are amused and make fun. Heidegger points to this difference between the madman and the comfortable ones. The madman experiences our inauthenticity and he is driven to seek the real, which he does not possess. The onlookers, says Heidegger, do not seek because they no longer think. They no longer seek the real, but accept the unreality of the ideal realm while continuing to pass these ideals off as real. Heidegger invites us to see this difference—not between believers and atheists but between the seekers and the satisfied. So, we might all join in seeking the real out of an admission that we do not know the real. We are all perplexed human beings who see through a glass darkly.

--Finally, there is one other kind of response to nihilism, one which has always been the great strength of all the religious traditions: the religious life itself, the example of the saint. The world is always thrilled by a Gandhi, a Bonhoeffer, a Martin Luther King, Jr., a Dorothy Day, a Mother Teresa. Even here, of course, some in the world scoff, but the admiration for these figures predominates. Religion produces lives, not dogmas. And it does so much, much more profoundly than any secular tradition, at least until now.

Nor are these *menschen* limited to great figures. Every inner-city minister and priest wrestling with young people against the sway of gang life replicates the way of thoughtful sacrifice. There are thousands, more, of such persons laboring faithfully every day, everywhere in the world.

I don't have to remind a room full of Christians of this reality—a religion that is a response to a call embedded in a human life. A religion that is not a dogma but a person. A religion that is not built on theories of law or anything else.

What is needed is an antidote for nihilism and there is not one. I don't know of any antidote more promising, however, than simply living life as a Christian. And unfortunately I don't know of any way that this possibility might translate into lives unconnected to institutional religion. In other words, what about those of us who cannot live a Christian life? Do we live a life as close to that as we can? Thus, if I were speaking to a room full of my fellow secularists, as I often do, I am not sure how I would end this talk. But that is our problem rather than yours. The challenge to Christians, as the draft unfortunately shows, is to recognize just how deep our plight goes today, and not to assume that old answers are adequate to that plight.