

Article

Value Architecture and Salvation Technology—The Sacred in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra

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Abstract: This article approaches the religious phenomenon from a perspective that combines the anthropology of the sacred and the science of religions and from which religion can be interpreted as an “architecture of value”, that is, as a technique for constructing values and, at the same time, as a “technology of salvation”, that is, as a mechanism for individual and group healing. On this theoretical basis, certain aspects of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra are analysed not as mere rhetorical or polemical devices but as the backbone of a work of a religious nature. The result is a religious interpretation of Nietzsche’s great work and, at the same time, a reflection on religious life itself and the scope of post-metaphysical religiosity.

Keywords: religion; Nietzsche; Zarathustra; value; wisdom; technology; salvation

1. Introduction

This article deals with the meaning of Nietzsche’s greatest work, emphasising the prophetic and visionary facet of this author rather than his post-theistic and post-humanist dimension, that is, looking for the intimate and pious Nietzsche as opposed to the current image, no less true, on the other hand, of the enfant terrible who philosophises with a hammer. At the same time, this text is the result of an approach that brings together heterogeneous fields, such as the science of religions or anthropology, which, when they converge, seem to situate the problem addressed in that place that the Koran calls barzaj: an intermediate land between what is no longer *the one*, but not yet *the other*—a border zone between the sacred, power, emotions, value, and, in short, everything that makes up what has always been at the centre of Nietzsche’s thought: life.

¹While there is a significant amount of secondary literature on the religious dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy, much of it is based on an incomplete understanding of what constitutes the religious, as I will explain shortly. Even Karl Löwith, who is knowledgeable about contemporary trends in Abrahamic eschatology, fails to interpret the philosophy of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra as a genuinely religious practice. Although there are some subtle differences, I will not delve into the ideas of Peter Sloterdijk in this regard, who has devoted several essays to the question, among which I would highlight *On the Improvement of the Good News: Nietzsche’s Fifth Gospel* (Sloterdijk [2000] 2005). Indeed, there are some monographs (I am thinking of older studies such as Fouillée’s or recent ones such as Medrano Ezquerro’s (2014, 2016)) that do not limit themselves to posing the relationship between Nietzsche and religion in exclusively critical terms but also dare to address its problematic aspects, aspects that have to do with the fact that, on the Nietzschean battlefield against traditional religion and morality, the flowers of an unforeseen spirituality sprout from time to time: a spirituality that rises precisely against the sacrilegious temptation of the transmundane, and which, on closer inspection, illuminates surprising aspects of the very tradition it claims to combat.

Another aspect that needs to be clarified at the outset is the need to distinguish carefully between two types of religious readings of Nietzsche’s work based on two absolutely



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opposite conceptions of religion itself. The first of these is based on a concept of religion as a *cognitive fact*, whose origins can be traced back to early evolutionary anthropologists, such as Tylor, and who understand religion first and foremost as a form of knowledge or as a set of speech acts. In other words, religion would fundamentally consist of a certain stance towards reality and the very corpus of affirmations that would derive from this stance. Thus, for example, when Vattimo makes his *aggiornamento* of Christianity as a religion of the emptying of God in order to make it coincide with his vindication of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian legacy (Vattimo 1996), he is resolutely situated in this reading. The first concept understands religion as a set of theses about the divine. This is also the context for the important analyses of Andreas Urs Sommer, who sees in the slogan “Dionysus against the crucified” an attempt to establish “Nietzsche’s religious alternatives to Christianity” (Sommer 2006, p. 47).

The second approach, however, is based on a concept of religion as a *liturgical event*, i.e., as a set of practices aimed at dealing with the sacred. In this case, religion is understood as a praxis of valuing, preserving and realising the divine. This is the framework for the studies of Valero Sánchez, who distinguishes “religiosity” as humankind’s admiration for that which amazes it as opposed to religion as a dogmatic and doctrinal body, a distinction he finally dispenses with in order to speak of “Nietzschean religion” (Valero Sánchez 2019, p. 209). Similarly, Martin Chicolino has ventured to look for the “numinous” aspect of the experience of power in Zarathustra (Chicolino 2012). Particularly important are the contributions of Valadier (2006), who recognises the presence of the divine in Nietzsche’s thought: the unnamable sacred, evocable through images, of erotic madness, of celebration (Ávila 2001), of the beauty and sublimity of the world, purely contemplated. Hence the importance of: “not clinging to Dionysus as such, nor researching in erudite encyclopaedias. One could say, therefore, ‘dear chance’, personal providence that plays with us, beautiful chaos of the world, infinite fire, abysmal and unfathomable depth, Will to power identified with life and the real, to cite the various names found throughout the texts and thrown as if carelessly, like someone throwing stones on a path, but here rather to confuse than to lead to a sure term” (Valadier 2010, p. 229). This is also the starting point of the present study.

First of all, it is worth remembering, once again, that Nietzsche himself has declared his magnum opus to be a “fifth Gospel” and a “sacred book” (Letters to Ernst Schmeitzner and Malvida von Meysenburg, in Sloterdijk [2000] 2005, pp. 29–30)². From this statement, it is possible to focus the discourse in the following pages on three questions: firstly, the possibility of reading Nietzsche as a religious thinker, that is, as a thinker in whom the old therapeutic concern of traditional wisdom, in which knowledge is linked to personal salvation and to the construction of an emotional and axiological edifice, takes centre stage; secondly, the reflection on what a religion is, what is *specifically religious* in that tangle of activities that we call “religion”; and thirdly, what Nietzsche, from the pages of his *Zarathustra*, intends to say to the humanity of the future, that is, to elucidate the message itself, the untimely “good news” that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra brings, this last part being merely sketched, pending further development.

2. Value Architecture

Understanding any cultural fact is a titanic undertaking, an endeavour reminiscent of the character played by Ron Perlman in Annapurna’s film *Quest for Fire*: a man whose harvested fruits are falling off as he strives to gather new ones. The intricacy of this subject arises from the fact that cultural phenomena often operate on multiple significant levels that can vary greatly. That is to say: a cultural fact is a phenomenon of individual consciousness as well as a social reality and a historical moment of human rationality. Of all cultural facts, religion is perhaps the one that moves in the most confusing way between spheres that go beyond its boundaries, that overflow it and call it into question again and again. All this becomes even more problematic if we stop to think about the difficulty of comparing religious forms that are distant from each other in space and time. We call “religion”, then, political structures such as the churches, magical practices such as shamanism, moral and

civic prescriptions such as those contained in the Talmud, literary manifestations such as mysticism, practices of bodily sacrifice such as those of the *sadhus* or Hindu ascetics, ecstatic dances such as the Sufi *hadra*, and so on. This is the well-known reproach made to classical anthropologists such as Tylor and Frazer: how could one call “religion”, without more, a variety of events that could be considered—with equal justice—law, cultural exchange, art, or simple symbolic expressions of sociability?

Additionally peculiar to the complexity of the religious phenomenon is that many of the best reflections on it have come either from the realm of theological proselytism or from the realm of philosophical criticism. Peculiar and, to some extent, arbitrary because if it is true that *truth* is an essential issue in religious rhetoric, it is no less true that religion itself cannot be reduced to a simple set of statements about reality. It is not the affirmation or denial of certain facts that constitutes the essence of religious life. In this sense, much of Nietzsche’s thought is an example of a polemical approach to religion. It is on these margins that the long tradition moves, on the critical side, from Lucretius to Dawkins, and on the apologetic side, from St. Justin to Francis S. Collins. Perhaps this observation—that of being a phenomenon always imprisoned by polemical passion—gives us a clue about the peculiarity of the religious fact: that it is always and at all times linked to the question of value, that in religion everything that has value for humanity, including itself, is compromised.

Moreover, in this matter, as in so many others, the old polemic of nominalism is repeated. In fact, the rhetoric of much contemporary religious polemicism is permeated by a repeated *nominalist dispute*. We find, on the one hand, the old universalists: they ask what a religion is, answer with a general characterisation and from there disregard, applying Procrusteanism, all possible religious manifestations that do not meet their definition. On the other hand, and opposite to these, the old nominalists insist on pointing out that each thing is each thing, that the individual is essentially different from any other, and, from such useless obviousness, they make all science impossible. The reality, however, is that there are trees because the roots, trunks and leaves are repeated; there is green because there is something between blue and yellow; there are religions because men do and say things which are distinct from philosophy and wisdom; all this is as real as that certain bushes look like trees, that there is blue-green and yellow-green and that certain religions look like philosophies or wisdom. Understanding is only possible in a lucid movement within this confusion. This is a truism, and perhaps, for this reason, it is often overlooked. There is religion where there is a community that believes in certain supernatural entities and practices certain rites. However, there is also religion in the hermit who turns away from all Church, in the Buddhist who seeks a path of purification, and in the mystic who places himself above or beyond particular beliefs and dogmas. There is a philological religion of the Book or of books, just as there is a religion of those who write only in the sand.

Therefore, rational, dogmatic and even liturgical contents differ to the extent that—speaking ontologically, not historically—they are *derived* contents. Religion is not primarily a discourse on divinity but an evaluation of the divine. In English, as in other languages, the word “believer” is used to designate one who practices a religion, which confuses the problem tremendously because the religious life itself, which is given in this “believer” as an emotional and evaluative state, is not reduced to “holding certain judgments to be true”. This would be a very restrictive interpretation of religious life, which would put it on the same level as any other belief, mistaken or not, and which, by the way, comes from that 19th-century anthropology of religion that wanted to interpret religion as a (failed) mode of knowledge. Max Scheler said that values are not but are worth. The same could be said of divinity since it is the very source of value and is configured in the very act of valuing. It is the *imaginary place* where the highest (the sacred) is arranged as a support for the lowest (the profane). What emerges between religious differences is, then, a certain emotional disposition, a vertebration of human emotions with respect to the value of things. Valuation is emotional: it is in itself the determination of what provokes admiration, fear, veneration, and power. Religion is, in short, an emotional architecture within which human beings

construct the meaning of the world and the value of things. How that architecture takes shape will depend on many factors, but what is clear is that it will inevitably determine people's self-consciousness: the specific way in which human beings have understood themselves as members of a totemic clan, as followers of a moral decalogue, as "children of God" or as seekers of a sacred intimacy.

Of course, the attempt to define religion in terms of belief in God or gods has long since been abandoned, although the reason for this abandonment has usually been that such a definition was theologically biased, rationalising or too restrictive (Pals 2006). However, there is, as we noted earlier, a further reason for abandoning a theological-theoretical definition of religion: belief, that is, the affirmation of certain judgements about human or divine nature, does not in itself constitute the fundamental practice of religious life, not even in those religions with a highly developed dogmatic body. Nietzsche himself states this about Christ: "The whole life of the Redeemer was nothing else but this *practice*" (Nietzsche [1888] 2016, p. 733), not the belief in an *afterlife* but the practice of a life free of guilt and resentment. To be religious is not to assert a set of theses, not to issue propositions about a supernatural reality. To be religious is an emotional state from which a specific mode of evaluation is articulated. It is not the reality of the world that is at stake, but something much more important: the structure of value, the configuration of what is to be valuable for humankind. Because there is an architecture of value, an awareness of "us" and "them", an image of belonging, as well as a world view in which up and down, high and low, heaven and hell, angels and demons, and good and evil are drawn.

This interpretation of religion as an architecture of value is not alien to certain contemporary approaches to the problem. Thus, for example, Jim Stone sees religion as "a system of practices rationalised by beliefs according to which the practices situate the practitioner in a relation of value to the supramundane reality" (Stone 2001, p. 183). Nevertheless, even if we go back to the classical theorists of religion, we find the same idea, perhaps not always explicitly developed. Durkheim's explanation of the totem as a symbolisation of the "we" is well known, for example. However, the "we" is totemised in a context in which the collectivity must be strongly protected as a guarantee of life. It is its value that totemises collectivity. Such a characteristic cannot simply be extrapolated to contexts of social dissolution such as late Hellenism, the late Middle Ages in Central Europe or the present day, where it is common to find expressions of religious life that are rather inward-looking, if not openly anti-social. For his part—to continue with the classics—Mircea Eliade made famous the idea that religion was, above all, the erection of a sacred time and space (Eliade [1957] 1998), and Rudolf Otto interpreted it dispensing with moral and rational categories, focusing on what he called "the numinous" (Otto [1925] 1985).

Indeed, it was Eliade himself who began his famous work on *The Myth of the Eternal Return* by taking this very fact into consideration, namely that religion stands in the context of the symbolic activity of men who try to give value to a reality devoid of value (Eliade 2001, p. 7). If we combine both definitions, religion would constitute a valuational division of space and time by means of an experience of that which "overwhelms". In the first act of veneration is thus the recognition of the hierarchical nature of things. Therefore, the opposite of religion is not unbelief but indifference. What both Eliade and Otto are saying is that religion establishes a boundary between value and disvalue: space and time are rationalised only insofar as they erect boundaries beyond which there is neither space nor time but nature, darkness, chaos or divinity. The origin of value places us at its frontier, at its margins: on the other side is the jungle, that is, what is not yet language, not yet reason, not yet humanity. Human beings know what they are; they reach their place in the cosmos by means of this symbolic construction of value. Berger and Luckmann say something interesting in this respect: "Identity is definitively legitimised by placing it in the context of a symbolic universe. Mythologically speaking, the "real" name of the individual is the one given to him by his God. In this way, he can know that he "is himself", subjecting his own identity to a cosmic reality, protected both from the contingencies of socialisation and from the maleficent self-transformations of marginal experience. Even if his neighbour does not

know who he is, and even if he himself ignores himself in his anxieties, the individual can be sure that his ‘real self’ is a real entity in a definitely real universe” (Berger and Luckman [1968] 2003, p. 128).

The religious architecture of value is the backbone of the gigantic scheme of human emotions. Religion is where values are moulded, and consequently, it shapes the particular way in which individuals and societies come to embrace or reject love and hate. Thus, at the core of religious life are three mutually dependent realities: love, identity, and value. To be religious is to respect the sacred: this is what piety is all about. The sacred is, at the same time, that which deserves to be loved and that which makes us what we are. As Max Scheler says, “He who possesses the *ordo amoris* of a man possesses the man” (Scheler [1933] 1996, p. 27).

If religion is an architecture of value, in what sense can Zarathustra’s philosophy be said to be “religious”? Is it an arbitrary technique or rather a discovery? Indeed, Nietzsche’s thought seems to oscillate between an uncompromising vindication of *true-life* values and a relativisation of them that would derive from the very correlation between knowledge and the will to power. Thus, Scarlett Marton argues that values are a construction and, as such, have a history: “Understanding the transvaluation of all values as a work analogous to that of lawgivers, [Nietzsche] thinks that, in order to do so, it will be necessary to conceive of man in another way” (Marton 2016, p. 132). However, in this reading, it gives the impression that transvaluation operates in a vacuum, that it is an artistic creation made in thin air. In other words, in the interpretations of Nietzsche where the relativism of this author is accentuated, it gives the impression that the transvaluation had no other foundation than the mere will to overcome values perceived as outdated and that the new values had no greater *raison d’être* than the old ones (Sánchez Meca 2013). This reading is evidently possible if we stick to a large number of Nietzsche’s texts, and it is, in fact, the usual one among the great scholars of Nietzsche. However, if we go deeper into this ambiguity, we could nevertheless return to the perplexity already shown by Max Scheler and note that if “the error” of Western morality has been to oppose nature and culture, then “the right thing” would be a morality where they do not oppose each other. In other words, there is a healthy relationship between human beings and reality, a relationship that must be reflected in culture. Therefore, there are true values—or, if the adjective is too metaphysical—“more adequate” than others, closer to the Earth and to health.

According to this reading, there is a very specific motive for transvaluation: “religious” respect for a life that is perceived as violated. Without such respect, transvaluation would effectively be an exercise in pure arbitrariness. In fact, Marton further explains that: “It is necessary to combat these values in order to bring forth others. As a creature and creator for himself, the superman will cherish values that will be in consonance with the Earth, with life, with the body” (Marton 2016, p. 133). However, precisely from this reasoning, it should be deduced that these values are the “authentic” values, which had been devalued by a resentful *distortion* of reality. Therefore, the transvaluation could not be conceived, without further ado, “as a work analogous to that of legislators”, but rather to that of the founders of religious systems on the basis of a valuational experience of *the real*.

3. Salvation Technology

Religion, in effect, constructs values, and there is nothing strange about the fact that, in this exercise, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish it from other forms of spiritual life. The human being needs to know what is worthy of esteem: within himself and outside himself. The question of religious demarcation thus involves problematising the differences between religion and other expressions of spirituality, and there is nothing special about this: every universal reality has fuzzy margins. Religion is contaminated by sociability, art, wisdom and science, and it is not difficult to think that the great dogmatic systems we know today are but the complex development of an originally simple feature: the human creation of value. Valuing allows us to organise the itinerary of our own existence, pointing to what is important and what is not, what is worth pursuing and what is to be

avoided at all costs, what distinguishes us from beasts and demons and ensures our health. The question of value is the religious question par excellence. It is also the philosophical question par excellence, the one that stirred the spirit of the old pre-Socratics, the one that made Anaximander conceive of existence as the repayment of an original debt. For if there is a question of value, it is because there is also an experience of disvalue, of discontent, of degradation, and it is here that religion is configured as a way of restoring lost value. Asceticism is the technology of the restoration of value, just as ritual is the technology of its preservation. The architecture of value is, in any case, linked to a technology of salvation.

To elaborate on this point, I would like to explore some concepts put forward by Foucault when he set out to investigate the conditions in which the genesis and development of *epimeleia heautou* ("self-care") takes place in the archaic Greek world because they illuminate this relationship between religion, wisdom and value. Religious life—at least in historical religions—is hardly comprehensible without the emergence of the subject as a problem for himself: the human being perceives himself in a state of fallenness in relation to which religion becomes a salvific technique. The human being is, in his present condition, degraded, sick, lost, fallen, and far from value; therefore, the memory of a sacred value also demands its restoration, its return. This is why religious myths are often the narration of an exodus and a journey.

Foucault recalls how this concept of *epimeleia heautou* is linked to that of *gnothi seauton* (know thyself) in the character of Socrates. Socrates is basically telling the Athenian citizens that they are concerned with many things but not with themselves (Foucault [1982] 2005, pp. 18–21), and this is so because the majority of humanity is numb, blind, and alienated from itself. Man finds himself in that state to describe which Plato had to create the fabulous allegory of the cave. Indeed, man's starting point is in the darkness and chains of an underworld. In Epicurus, we also find the term *therapeuein*, a verb that refers to medical care, but also to the service provided by a servant to his master, and even to the divine service proper to religious worship (Foucault [1982] 2005, pp. 22–23). It is also the verb used by Luke (Lk. 9:1–6) to refer to Christ's healing power, together with authority over demons. Healing power and subduing demonic evil are two aspects of the same divine power (*dynamis*) and authority (*exousia*). There is indeed something of this, in that self-care must be a technique of repairing something sick or damaged, but also a service to oneself that has a religious character, as a worship of the true divine being that dwells within man. I will come back to this. The point is that Foucault argues that this religious or spiritual dimension of self-care was eclipsed by what he calls—very much in quotation marks—the "Cartesian moment", that is, the progressive replacement of a living, emotional, religious subject by a pure subject of rational knowledge, or what we could already call in a Nietzschean way—also with all the inverted commas—the "triumph of the Apollonian dimension of existence".

This practice of self-care, which we find in religions, also forms the axis of philosophical practice as a mode of access to truth. "Spirituality", in the sense that Foucault gives to this word, postulates that access to truth is impossible for the subject unless he goes through a series of practices whose aim is, so to speak, his self-dissolution, or at least his reconversion. Man must change his being in order to become a possible receptacle of truth. Another term from the Gospel illuminates this idea: *metanoia*. It is the word usually translated as "repentance" or "conversion", but what its root teaches us is unequivocal: it is necessary to change one's thinking, to go beyond what we have believed up to now, in order to attain salvation.

It is only after some time that academic "philosophy" transforms this practice, making the conditions of access to truth have more to do with logical rules, procedures, methods, and extrinsic conditions, than with the internal conditions of the subject. We could say that philosophy truly separates itself from religion when it abandons self-care to become a method of aseptic knowledge, which has nothing to do with the transformation of the person and his or her salvation. In fact, Foucault sees in 19th-century philosophy an attempt to recover spirituality in the face of theology, that is, a type of thought that assumes

the question of self-care as a condition of the possibility of truth. Thus, for example, in psychoanalysis, where the belief reappears that access to truth demands a transformation of the subject and that, conversely, this access to truth gives rise, in a just correspondence, to a modification of the subject's being (Foucault [1982] 2005, pp. 40–41). This is certainly true of Nietzsche's work, and it is in line with this that we can make the aim of the present essay somewhat more concrete: to approach Nietzsche's philosophy, especially that contained in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as an attempt to reconstruct wisdom as self-care, that is, as religion.

Evidently, this religious wisdom, this self-care that we find in Nietzsche's philosophy, is not the same as what we find in traditional ascetic expressions. Its fundamental inspiration lies in the Greek world, in archaic spiritual forms, from which Pauline ascetic morality would be a degeneration. Specifically, the process of transformation experienced and preached by Nietzsche's Zarathustra would be inspired by the *katharmoi* of Empedocles (Babich 2020). In detailing the characteristics of Greek philosophical asceticism, Foucault expressly points out the differences with respect to Christian asceticism: "First, in this philosophical asceticism (. . .) the ultimate goal is obviously not the renunciation of self. On the contrary, the aim is to postulate oneself, and in the most explicit, strongest, most continuous, and most obstinate way possible, as the end of one's own existence. Second (. . .) it is a matter of constituting for oneself an equipment, a defence equipment for the possible events of life. And this is what the Greeks called *paraskeue*. The function of asceticism is to constitute a *paraskeue* [so that] the subject constitutes itself. Thirdly, it seems to me that this philosophical asceticism, this asceticism of the practice of the self, does not have as its principle the subjection of the individual to the law. Its principle is to bind the individual to the truth" (Foucault [1982] 2005, p. 310).

However, these differences, while real, are not as marked as Foucault and Nietzsche themselves believe, for Nietzsche's struggle against religious tradition often turns into an unsuspected re-encounter with it. Nietzsche's (otherwise obvious) anti-religious character is often emphasised in the context of the genealogical nature of his thought. Thus, for example, in order to underline the difference between his philosophy and that of Levinas, William Large (2004) insists on the more genealogical texts and underlines Nietzsche's critique of religion as an expression of a sociohistorical way of valuing, which places him in contrast to Levinas's ethical reduction to immanence. However, this exposition omits precisely those texts of *Zarathustra* in which valuation takes on a religious slant, such as the episode of the Feast of the ass, where the superior men rediscover a post-metaphysical liturgy and make Zarathustra himself see the meaning of the rite that has as its object the "kingdom of the earth" and in which the boundaries between the individual and the community are blurred (Buñuel Fanconi 2019, p. 112)³.

The human being is a problem for himself because he does not know his value and his position in the world. He requires an emotional reference system that can also serve as a framework for his beliefs because that which has value is also that which provokes love, in the same way, that disvalue has hate as its emotional expression. Learning to value is learning to love and to hate. That which is of value will be the object of veneration and adoration. The most holy and numinous is thus erected as the symbolic reference of that which man, in an arbitrary way, delimits as liturgical: the sacred animal versus the rest of nature, ceremony versus everyday life, the space of the temple versus the space of the city, festive time versus natural time, the priestly caste versus the people. Religion is the construction of value and, with it, of hierarchy. Paul Claudel used to say that "He who admires is always right". He is right who contemplates the order of things in an affirmative way. Life, meaning, and reality come from contact with what is "above" in the privileged position: the imaginary place where the gods dwell or the vital force (*wakan*) that orders the cosmos. For this reason, philosophy was originally understood as a liturgical, sacred and sacrificial effort, as an ascetic system of approaching the privileged order, the Platonic sunlight. In Foucault's words: "This is what constitutes the very practice of philosophy and its reality: that the philosopher has to cohabit with it. *Synousia*: cohabitation. *Syzén*: to live with. And, Plato goes on to say, by dint of *synousia*, by dint of *syzen*, what will happen?

The soul will be illuminated, a little in the way a light is lit (*phos*; the translation says “a flash of lightning”), that is to say, as a lamp is lit in contact with fire, until the lamp of the soul is lit or until the lamp is lit as a soul: in that aspect, and in that way, philosophy will effectively find its reality. (. . .) Philosophy will live in this way, in the form of cohabitation, of the light that is transmitted and kindled, of the light that is nourished by the soul itself” (Foucault [1983] 2008, p. 218).

For ancient thinkers, access to truth was inextricably intertwined with certain internal conditions of the subject, so science and asceticism were two aspects of the same process. Sensible reality points to an intelligible world on the condition that the mind has been freed from the blindness of cavernous darkness. The *katharmoi*, the purifications, are the beginning of wisdom and piety at the same time. The eyes have to hurt in order to see the light for the first time. Plato does not simply speak of the theoretical difficulty of science but of the suffering it generates in terms of self-esteem, social esteem, and shock. Nietzsche receives—or, rather, rescues—this vision of knowledge as a state that is *conquered by dint of suffering*. In his philosophy, suffering has to do with the assumption of emptiness, a desert of value that our philosopher, as the privileged depositary of a historical destiny (that of nihilism), will feel compelled to inhabit. “We are of the opinion,” said Nietzsche in 1886, “that harshness, violence, slavery, dangers in the street and in the heart, concealment, stoicism, the art of temptation and devilry of every kind, that everything that is evil, terrible, tyrannical, everything that is animalistic and serpentine in the human being serves the species “man” as well as its opposite” (Nietzsche [1886] 2016, p. 327). By taking on suffering, loneliness, and incomprehension, Nietzsche feels himself to be the bearer of a message that he receives from history and that he must pass on to a future that *is yet to come*. As Dorian Astor says, “Man has no chance to overcome the anxiety of the present in the horizontality of de-spiritualised asceticism” (Astor 2018, p. 485). Delving into this surprising verticality, Hadot expressly states that Nietzsche has practised philosophy according to the ancient model of philosophical life as a quest for a “cosmic consciousness” that goes beyond the “self-care” highlighted by Foucault (Hadot 2006).

So far, I have tried to elaborate a tentative definition of religion that includes ritual as a technique of “value preservation” and asceticism as a technique of “value recovery”. This definition brings together concepts from a long tradition in the anthropology of religion, starting with Durkheim and leading to the work of some contemporary authors, such as Jim Stone, via the classics Eliade and Otto. According to this tradition, the specificity of religious life has less to do with linguistically and conceptually formulable beliefs than with the experience of a sacred reality that is precisely defined by its relation of value to the profane. Accordingly, if the ascetic attempts to purify his inner self of a “fallen” state, he does so because he perceives his present state as “disvaluable”. For its part, ritual, in its repetitive symbolic action, would serve to keep the religious man in a “state of grace”, i.e., in connection with the sacred or with the valuable dimension of his own being. In the following section, I would like to suggest, through these ideas and against the background of his own cultural tradition, a specifically religious reading of Nietzsche’s great work. Nietzsche’s philosophy can be described as a technology of salvation that involves the restoration of lost values, the recovery of an original message lost to history, a prophetic mission, the reevaluation of all values, the proclamation of good news, the reconstruction of inner health, and a contemplative view of the world.

4. “A Savage Wisdom”: From Romantic Mythology to Zarathustra’s Religion

Paul Loeb, a noted specialist in Nietzsche’s work, alerts us to an obvious chronological anomaly in Nietzsche’s thought: while late works are usually presented by their authors as additions, nuances or culmination of earlier works, the fact is that our philosopher insists time and again that his fundamental work is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (written between 1883 and 1885) while books such as *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche [1886] 2016) or *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche [1887] 2016) should be understood as preparatory texts for his great work (Loeb 2010). It is, therefore, necessary to take very seriously the evidence that *Zarathustra*

goes beyond anything Nietzsche has been able to say before (and since!). It is more profound in its depths, more far-reaching, because it seeks to place itself in the history of the spirit, on the same level as the Gospels or the Vedas. The wisdom that *Zarathustra* teaches in its pages is, in his own words, *a savage wisdom*. As self-care, as a religion that seeks salvation (i.e., inner health as an agreement of the self with the value of reality), *Zarathustra's* good news is announced as “wild”. What does this expression mean? Not, of course, what Eugenio Trías limits to the archaic age of religions as the personification of the telluric powers of nature (Trías 1996, pp. 880–81). The term here refers to a polemic that took place in the last years of the eighteenth century, which was to permeate all the thought of the following century, and which occupies an important place in the origins of the crisis of modernity. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Schiller [1795] 2004), Schiller famously distinguished between two types of human beings: the *barbarian*, permanently subjected to the criterion of reason, incapable of being guided by impulses which he strives to repress, logical, inflexible, absorbed by the cultural dimension of existence; and in contrast, the *savage*, unaware of rationality, rules, standards of conduct, moral norms, in short: culture. It is not difficult to see here a distant antecedent of the Nietzschean division between an Apollonian and a Dionysian dimension of existence. Modern culture is a culture that enshrines barbarism, that is, the despotic predominance of reason over any other dimension of existence.

Indeed, there are numerous attempts to link Nietzsche to early German Romanticism and, more generally, to the various cultural movements that emerged in late 18th-century Central Europe in reaction to an excessively rationalising and moralistic Enlightenment. As Ansgar Maria Hoff—and, before him, Ernst Behler—have shown, it is clear that early Romanticism is not affected, without further qualification, by Nietzsche's constant polemic against what he calls “Romanticism” (Hoff 2002). However, this linkage is usually made—and Hoff himself does so—only in terms of its aesthetic *pathos*: the use of the fragment and the aphorism, the role of art as a healer of culture, and so on, sometimes, as Valero Sánchez (2019) does, to refer us to the idealised relationship of both with Greek morality. In reality, the link is deeper: what is glimpsed in German thought at the end of the 18th century is the evidence that European history has led to a disintegrated, split culture in which the forces of man are pitted against each other and where the necessary link between man and nature is fatally broken, how such a split is expressly thematised in Schiller but also in Novalis and Schlegel, who conceive of their own intellectual activity as an attempt to reconnect man with nature and to think of him as part of it. It is interesting, in this respect, that the Romantic approach to nature takes place in the context of the controversy about pantheism that arose in Germany around Lessing's and Jacobi's reading of Spinoza. Spinoza is indeed the inspirer of an attempt to think the totality of the real in a non-dualistic way, and Nietzsche himself acknowledges his legacy when in a letter of 30 July 1881, he confesses to Franz Overbeck to have discovered in Spinoza an enormous precursor of his own doctrine (quoted by Gawoll 2001, p. 44).

The Romantic—and Nietzschean—approach to nature is animated by the conscious desire not to let human cultural constructions have the last word and to make room for the unfathomable, amoral, unpredictable and violent dimension of existence. It is the yearning for truth in ruins, a clearing in the thicket of human meaning, for a primordial force before which all discourse reveals itself to be superstition and vanity. Surely the two artists who best reflect this spirit are Turner and Caspar D. Friedrich. The German, because of the collection of Romantic themes that run through his paintings: the ruins of old temples in the middle of the forest, the walker standing on a rock in the mist, the stillness of the sea and the monk who contemplates it; *The Englishman*, because of that Dionysian fury that envelops and destroys all human work, that fury that goes beyond themes (the theme, for example, of the tempest) and becomes a trace, the very form of reality. In Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, there is something of Turner and Friedrich: something of the silent contemplation of nature alongside the violent stroke of time and fate.

The most visible religious aspect of the Romantic spirit is precisely this determination not to give in to the idolatrous temptation of culture. The liturgical, ritual praxis of religion

is—as we saw earlier—a mode of restitution and conservation of value, and it is true that Nietzsche says that this is not an objective or metaphysical reality but that “it is by valuing that value appears” (Nietzsche [1891] 2016, p. 105). It is also true that, when analysing the way in which different axiological systems have historically been forged, Nietzsche’s idea that there is a healthy way of valuing versus an unhealthy way emerges. That is to say; there is what deserves to be valued and what does not. What deserves it is life; what does not deserve it is every form of negation of life, every substitute for it, every illusion created by the force of affirming characteristics contrary to life. It is good and valuable to remain faithful to the earth and to the meaning of the earth (Nietzsche [1891] 2016, p. 73). Good is that which increases human being’s natural forces, that which awakens in him a deep desire to live, to be more of what he is, to exist more intensely, to set obstacles to overcome, to grow, to conquer and to dominate. “What is good? -you ask. Good is to be brave” (Nietzsche [1891] 2016, p. 65). Life is the savage unfolding of a struggle for survival, understanding this word in a non-biological way: super-living, living above life, living upwards. Life is the only real thing, and its law is the only law. The heart of the Earth, *Zarathustra* says, is made of gold. That is where the value and the measure of all values lie.

In short, Nietzsche shares with early German Romanticism the observation of a broken spiritual order in history. The link between man and the Earth is an original state in relation to which what follows is a *fall*. The rupture of this bond takes place in the transition from archaic Greece to classical Greece, and Nietzsche describes it, as is well known, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche [1872] 2011). The Apollonian, the ordered and rational dimension of existence, becomes—at the hand of Socrates and Plato—its guiding principle, while the Dionysian, the inebriated, impulsive, contradictory dimension of life, undergoes a process of devaluation. *Zarathustra*’s wild wisdom implies, then, the re-encounter with the divinity of Dionysus, which disappeared—the *flight of the gods*, another Romantic cliché—from the history of Europe by the fatal Socratic-Christian event. This reunion runs through Nietzsche’s work from beginning to end, for it appears expressly in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Tragedy stands in the midst of this superabundance of life, suffering and pleasure, in sublime ecstasy, and listens to a distant melancholy song—it speaks of the mothers of being, whose names are: illusion, will and sorrow. -Yes, my friends, believe with me in the Dionysian life and in the rebirth of tragedy. The time of the Socratic human being has passed” (Nietzsche [1872] 2011, p. 421). Nietzsche thus knocks at the door of the conscience of modernity, where the destructive fire of a culture that insists on not recognising itself in nature, that forces individuals to prioritise within themselves the demands of an antivital morality and that vainly believes in the superiority of the ethical order over instinct, the body and desire, lives on.

True piety, then, consists in restoring the truly sacred to its place. The place of the sacred is the highest, and the highest is the bottom of the Earth: there from where man’s natural forces, his creative power, emanate. The sacred must be elevated from the valley of the heavens and the underworld to the highest mountains of the earth, where the footsteps of the prophet *Zarathustra* are lost. Nietzsche’s rejection of religion is thus a moment of his own religiosity, of the veneration of the sanctity of life. This is also a common gesture in religion: Christianity conceives itself as the authentic message of the Abrahamic faith eclipsed by Pharisaism. Protestantism, on the other hand, presents itself as a return to the spirit of Christianity hidden under idolatry and immorality. However, pietism also understands that the religion of the heart must be reborn in the face of the desert of faith which is the Protestant reduction of faith to philology. The same is true of Islam and of any historical religion. In this sense, Nietzsche only advances the religious reunion with a non-idolatrous veneration, a piety of love and truth. This ambivalence of his philosophy—the materialistic critique of religion, linked to the idealised exaltation of a lost spiritual paradise—also appears very early on in a text as uncompromising as *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*. The return of Dionysus, the god of the Earth and earthly drives, configures the eschatological *pathos* of *Zarathustra*’s message: the reunion with life, promised by the glorious coming of a dancing god.

5. Conclusions

If piety can be understood as respect for the rightful place of the sacred and, at the same time, as a challenge to the idolatrous character of all that seeks to usurp that place, then it is easy to perceive in *Zarathustra* how that piety is clothed in the motifs of the Judeo-Christian tradition: resentment would come to constitute the original sin against which the prophet's preaching rises; Greek morality would constitute the lost paradise from which humanity has been cast out; the doctrine of the *Übermensch* would not be a transhumanist prefiguration (García-Granero 2020, p. 42), but the response to the eschatological need for a future object for hope; and the "sense of the earth" would come to occupy the role of the sacred itself, that which has been neglected by the erratic march of a humanity that must be brought back to its centre. It is beyond the scope of this study to develop each of these aspects. Suffice it to point out that the architecture of value that Nietzsche conceives beyond the act of transvaluation—that is, the erection of a profane/sacred division with respect to the value of reality—is, here too, accompanied by a technology of salvation that brings Nietzsche's philosophical thought back into that tradition, masterfully described by Foucault, which makes thinking itself a form of restoration of value, that is, of religion.

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Notes

- ¹ Another great connoisseur of Nietzsche's work, Andreas Urs Sommer, speaks of the characters in the work as "literary artifices" that allow the philosopher a certain distance that "dispenses him as the author from taking ultimate positions" (Sommer 2006, p. 50), which would prevent a simple identification between Nietzsche and the protagonist of his great work. In contrast to this position, it seems that *Zarathustra* becomes the spokesman for a series of ideas (criticism of resentment, antivital morality, the "transmundane", the vindication of the overman, the revelation of the eternal return, etc.) that are defended by Nietzsche himself in other works (before and after this one), so that it is not risky to conclude that *Zarathustra* pre-eminently embodies the role of Nietzsche's spokesman, in a prophetic and mythical context that projects him beyond his role as a "mere" thinker. This does not, of course, prevent this role from being fulfilled, eventually and with respect to certain specific aspects, by other characters in the work.
- ² In this respect, Volker Gerhardt's interpretation is complex, for, on the one hand, he mentions Nietzsche's claim to make *Zarathustra* a New Gospel or a Bible of the future. Furthermore, he refers to the fact that Nietzsche himself describes the inspiration of his work within the genre of Revelation. After this acknowledgement, however, the analysis immediately shifts its focus from an interpretation of *Zarathustra's* religion as a liturgical fact to an interpretation of it as a cognitive fact (Gerhardt 2002, p. 34 ff.).
- ³ Sánchez Meca notes that the basis of a transvaluation is to be found in a construction that necessarily passes as sacred for the community. "Only by virtue of the reference to the sacred (narratively created by the myth), the value or custom is socially justified" (Sánchez Meca 2005, p. 132). It is precisely this necessity that explains the rediscovery of liturgy in the Feast of the ass and, indeed, the entire mythological character of *Zarathustra*.

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