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Nihilisme op de grens van filosofie en theologie. Een onderzoek naar de reflektie op het praktisch nihilisme bij Weischedel, Tillich en Barth
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SUMMARY

This study focuses on questions about the nature and range of 'nihil', as implicated in the term nihilism. If nihilism can be seen as a still contemporary attitude of mind and as an attitude which has physical implications as well -the annihilation of man and all life on earth- then it is important to search for the epistemological, ontological and anthropological aspects, which are related to nihilism as a European tendency. Within the scope of the extensive literature on nihilism, this study wants to concentrate on both philosophical and theological questions on the aspects mentioned earlier. Two choices have been made, which, in our opinion, characterize the specific nature of this study. In the first place we formulate a heuristic distinction between theoretical and practical nihilism, the first of which is a form of systematic 'radicalization' of negation and doubt, the latter an exceptional non-ontological, existential threat. Secondly, we analyse the way in which this distinction is reflected in the negative way of thinking of the philosopher Weischedel, and in what way two European theologians, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, reacted to crises, viz. through their studies 'De moed om te zijn' in 1955 ('The courage to be', 1952) and 'Der Römerbrief' from the early twenties. Despite all the changes in the relation of theology and philosophy, a thorough reflection is found in both studies analysed here, which is also found in the 'Systematic Theology' and the 'Kirchliche Dogmatik' respectively. In these we also find a rational accentuation of the problem, beside the theological interpretation. Through the systematic analysis of these works it can be demonstrated that, in their theology, Tillich and Barth are acquainted with the problem of nihilism of the modern age.

Weischedel, Tillich and Barth characterize theoretical nihilism (analysed in chapters 2, 3 (3.1) and 4 (4.1)) by the via negativa, i.e. the systematic radicalization of negation or doubt. The nihil of nihilism evokes a negative method of this way of thinking. The systematic negation forms the reflection on the 'nihilization' or possible annihilation by Nothingness. The via negativa is applied to thought and knowledge, particularly by Weischedel and Barth. For them the negative way that leads to Nothingness signifies the categorical negation of all theoretical, metaphysical or religious certainties. Confronted with the nihilization by 'Vonwoher' (Weischedel) or the No of God (Barth), metaphysical knowing must end in not-knowing through the methodical sceptis.
Man facing the Nothingness of 'annihilation' (thereby reflecting on the epistomological problem) has then completed the nihilization of thinking. The philosophical experience of Nothingness, the reflection on the contemporary experience of meaninglessness, is also part of theoretical nihilism. We see that this via negativa is developed by Weischedel and Tillich in particular. In their method the radicalization of doubt (Weischedel) or anxiety (Tillich) signifies the endurance of extreme despair. For them the ultimate negation is the reflection on the experience of Nothingness which threatens to annihilate existence. Then, the being of man is no longer self-evident (the anthropological question) and existence seems to have become meaningless (the question of meaning). The only way out is then the willingness to endure the experience of Nothingness (Weischedel) or to bear the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness (Tillich) and to persevere therein.

So the theoretical nihilism implicates the via negativa in which negation is passed into Nothingness. Although in this case the final character of nihilism is taken more seriously than in any other negative method, it does not signify the definite end. It is true that Nothingness implies the complete negation of the former situation, but it is also a turning-point, a passage through or a transition into a new situation. Then Weischedel, Tillich and Barth, too, consider nihilism as the 'death' that must be overcome. Scepsis and ambiguity remain essential to thinking and living, with which nihil is eventually 'endured', and so the sting of the definite end is removed.

In chapter 5 we come to a final conclusion concerning this philosophical question. Having analysed Weischedel, we must conclude primarily that practical nihilism is not reflected in his way of thinking. Human annihilation cannot be explained by his radical method of questioning and his radical ambivalence of reality. He thinks he can endure nihilistic existence and relativize it in this radical method. Secondly, the ultimate negation of his basic experience is the moment Nothingness itself appears. Tillich, on the other hand, distances himself emphatically from this 'identification'. His radical scepsis focuses on the threat of non-being-and facing it, he does radicalize scepsis-but he does not identify himself with nihilism in his thinking, neither does he believe he can experience Nothingness immediately. Thus Tillich acknowledges that practical nihilism is a threat which surpasses thinking or philosophical experience.

There is another important aspect in Weischedel’s, Tillich’s and Barth’s reflection on nihilism that can be criticized, namely the problem of metaphysical nihilism. The negative method of the authors has to a greater or less extent been determined by a metaphysical way of thinking (this counts for Barth too). The question is, though, whether this way practical nihilism is adequately
reflected in a sceptics focusing on ‘all-comprising Nothingness’. The ultimate
eagination of theoretical nihilism then forms the greatest distance to this
metaphysical Nothingness, which the autors basically consider to be the negative
moment of true being or God. In addition, this antithesis is also the condition
for the dialectical turn in the victory over nihilism. Our conclusion is, though,
that human destruction cannot possibly be relativized nor metaphysically or
theologically be founded this way. What it is about here is destructive
Nothingness, which cannot be related to being whatsoever, dialectically nor
ontologically. The via negativa in which practical nihilism is reflected -to a
certain extent we find a confirmation of it in Tillich’s work- is the philosophical
method which exclusively concerns itself with a phenomenon which cannot
be explained as metaphysical being nor as the category of finite reality.
The radicalization of negation does not only signify the perseverance in the
attitude of the not-knowing of nihilism, but also the endurance of existential
powerlessness as opposed by estrangement and human annihilation. A dialectical
relation or turn is consistently rejected in this negative method. The only
‘opening’ left is, via sceptics, to point at the direction from where an answer
has to come (Tillich’s method of correlation) and to indicate the required quality
of the answer (Barth’s radicalization of the ethical and anthropological
question). Thus philosophy acknowledges its limits and it calls for a method
which allows further questioning of practical nihilism.

In the discussion of the theological works of Tillich and Barth (3.2 and 4.2)
some aspects similar to the via negativa of theoretical nihilism can be
distinguished. These aspects do not primarily unfold a method or purely abstract
thinking about practical nihilism though. In terms of biblical-theology the ideas
of Tillich and Barth offer a description and interpretation of the process of
nihilism and its theological answer.

To start with, Barth has given an excellent analysis of the term ‘Nothingness’.
In his analysis he succeeds in distinguishing nihil sharply from God and
creational being. Tillich has made such a distinction in relation to the immanent
relation of essential finitude and existential estrangement. Both of them have
found it possible to refer to practical nihilism, and the nihil it implies, as an
exceptional and non-ontological problem.
It is in the theological analysis and interpretation of the process of estrangement
and nihilization that we recognise practical nihilism most evidently. Radicalizing
ethical and anthropological questions, Tillich and Barth have, furthermore,
succeeded in making it acceptable that practical nihilism calls for an exceptional
answer. That answer lies in Christ’s death and resurrection, the negative way
in which nihil has been exposed and surrendered to annihilation (‘theological
nihilism’). In addition to this objective side, they have also indicated the
significance of the subjective side of the victory.

In the first part of chapter 6 we discuss some methodological questions in view of the relation of philosophy and theology. We defend the thesis stating that practical nihilism and its answer can only be fully developed in theological reflection. Furthermore, we conclude that philosophical thinking à la Tillich does not focus on the possible answer of theology. These two conclusions do not necessarily mean that philosophy and theology have nothing more to say to each other in the discussion of nihilism. First of all we see that Tillich and Barth have acquainted themselves with the philosophical question and interpretation of practical nihilism. Secondly, the ethical and anthropological aspects of theological questioning can contribute to a further accentuation and deepening of the question as a whole. Tillich’s and Barth’s positions deserve interdisciplinary acknowledgment here. We have argued that the approach of the philosophy of religion is, in all this, an appropriate method to mediate between philosophy and theology.

In the second part of chapter 6 Tillich en Barth have been compared on points they complement or implicitly criticize each other. The most important are: Barth has shown better than Tillich that a rigorous distinction must be made between philosophical or philosophical-religious Nothingness and a theological nihil nihilans. On the other hand Tillich has brought out better than Barth that practical nihilism is a unique phenomenon in two respects: it cannot be associated with finite reality, but it, nevertheless, belongs to and must be explained in terms of modern West-European culture.

In the third part of chapter 6 we make a few critical comments on fundamental aspects in the theological ideas of Tillich and Barth. These concern the problematic relation of objective and subjective answering (the question of antinomy). In regard to the contemporary question of existence and meaning, this relation focuses on the ultimate question of God and human responsibility in the process of nihilism as a whole. If the problem of the final character of nihilism arises, we conclude that for Tillich man has a decisive voice in it. It is not the judgment of God (as for Barth), but man who constitutes the complete threat to himself, to his fellow-man and to society. As for the subjective side of victory, Tillich still thinks there are possibilities left for the estranged man. The question is, though, whether he has sufficiently discerns the absolute character of dehumanization and nihilistical powerlessness. Therefore, the limits of Tillich’s ‘answering theology’ have been reached with this nihilistical powerlessness.

With respect to Barth’s views questions arise as well, which have reference to his one-sided emphasis on the ‘objective’ answer. In his interpretation human
annihilation has been fully defined by and dialectically implicated in the surpassing Yes of God. In that case nihilism is indirectly the unequivocal omen of God's redemption. Dissociated from this theological postulate, practical nihilism must be regarded as a contemporary and unique phenomenon however, which can only be understood from God's absolute and definite No. This implicates that, as a dialectically necessary condition, the destruction of and by man cannot possibly be incorporated in God's plan of redemption. Yet, the 'phenomenal' character of nihilism is limited in Barth's view: its specific nature can only be understood in the religious knowledge.

In Chapter 7 the return to a sceptical theology is advocated, which means that the negative method is maintained until the end, also in regard to the contemporary answering of the problem of nihilism. The via negativa of radical scepticism is the appropriate theological method in which nihilism is recognised as a contemporary phenomenon which makes the existence of man as well as the actualization of God's love and mercy very questionable. In Christ nihilism has been answered objectively, but a sceptical theology also perseveres in the question why the absence of this victorious power is so prevalent in our time. It perseveres, then, in the ultimate negation of unanswered questioning, without articulating an anticipating intuition in a so-called 'Theologie der Frage'. Questioning rather focuses 'answerlessly' on the longing that the nihilistic catastrophe will end some day.

Although sceptical theology refrains from giving final statements, it feels obliged out of human responsibility to indicate the ways in which nihilism can be opposed gradually. The scepticism about God's revelation should not mean, as far as man is concerned, that he 'too' is silent and not acting. Scepticism is not resignation, but self-restriction in one with deeds of resistance. While sceptically awaiting the Yes of God, man resists on account of the No of God and the victory gained in Christ. If he perseveres in his radical questioning and opposes the nihilistic behaviour of the inhuman man in word and action, the doubt about God's love and mercy will possibly be overcome, because God's presence is being experienced. It is not the Nietzschean courage of definite parting but the courage persevering in the ultimate question of God that is rewarded here.