

# GOD IS THE FUTURE

## DEUS É O FUTURO

**Dr. Tadeusz Bartoś O.P.**

Professor do Thomas Institute, Varsóvia

e-mail: tadeusz.bartos@dominikanie.pl

**Resumo:** A perspectiva apresentada aqui, da realidade do ser humano e a maneira de expressão da experiência humana, pode estimular várias áreas da teologia. Experiência humana do tempo modifica fundamentalmente a compreensão da tradição, dos sacramentos e da ortodoxia. Aqui estão questões sobre as quais vale a pena refletir. Isto pode resultar num laço mais forte entre experiência humana e fé. Ademais, esta tarefa deixa uma promessa, uma esperançosa promessa, um anúncio de alegria.

**Palavras chave:** Experiência humana, Tempo, Fé, Teologia.

**Abstract:** The perspective hereby presented, of seeing human reality and the way of expressing human experience, can stimulate various areas of theology. Human experience of time fundamentally modifies the understanding of tradition, sacraments and orthodoxy. Here are questions worth dealing with. It may result in a closer bond between human experience and faith. Also, this task remains a promise, a hopeful promise, a herald of joy.

**Key-words:** Human experience, Time, Faith, Theology.

## The Immersion in Passing

**H**uman experience of the time is a good starting point for theology because it defines a horizon of thinking that formulates a religious message within the process of its maturation in the life story of an individual human being. It allows to look towards God from within human experience. Being between something that has already been and something that is to be, a way of experiencing this peculiar immersion in passing, may be the most important way theologians can place themselves on the side of humans: in their drama and beauty, sadness and joy.

### Three Processes in Theology

First, theology looks into the past<sup>1</sup>. The past seems to it as a noble museum of cultural and religious heritage. God, who is the object of theology, gazes at us from the past, from the testimonies written in the annals of history. Attaching importance to such God means attaching importance to past tradition, its maintenance and continuation.

Another theological process is born at the moment of confrontation with critics of that “museum”. When novelty of the world shows the old-fashionedness of theology, the latter wants to leave the building of the venerable past and go to meet contemporary times. In this way, theology passes from the museum to the gallery of modern art. It wants to be in a dialogue, to keep pace with the present: what constitutes the theology of the second process is “today”.

There is also a third process, the most mysterious one. It speaks neither of what was, nor of what is, but of something that has not been yet – that is, the future. The future does not yet exist, and God is the future. God’s name is Future. This metaphor is very significant. The future does not exist before it

---

<sup>1</sup> In the context of Polish theology this way of thinking was initiated by Tomasz Weclawski, a professor of fundamental theology of the Theological Faculty at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, in numerous articles published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a Krakow-based Catholic weekly magazine.

becomes our present. Thus, God does not exist yet – for us – before He becomes our present. God only WILL BE. He is the One who comes (Revelation 22:20). If God is the object of theology, and God's name is Future, then God who comes to a man from Himself, comes from the future. He does not come to us from the past, He does not come from tradition, from Scriptures or rituals established centuries ago.

It may be precisely that forgetting God, the name of whom is future, causes theology to be perceived as a finished discipline, in which nothing new can be said, and only the same things are expressed in new ways. Theology understood as such is only an analysis of the past, a modification of understanding tradition (the Scripture), for the sake of adaptation. It is not open to novelty, especially to the novelty which is God, but is closed in the restored past. It is situated in a world of possibilities already defined in advance. It is not God, but a refreshed past that is its object.

But is it true that Balthasar, Rahner and other great characters of 21<sup>st</sup> theology have not invented anything new? Does their novelty lie only in showing in a new light and explaining in a new way something that we already know?

### **The End of Post-platonic Christianity?**

The neo-platonic vision of reality has been for ages a dominating image, a specific metaphysical foundation of Christian theology. According to this vision of the cosmos, the created emerges from the divine in a process in which the divine finds its image in the created. Thus, in the beginning, in the very source of everything, in the most distant past, there was a Fullness of Reality. And through the act of creation it became dispersed in a certain way. This is how for centuries, within the frames of the dominating neo-platonic emanational cosmogonic vision, there have been attempts to understand the biblical act of creation by means of appropriate adaptations (“*emanatio ut creatio*”): the world flows or emanates from the divine source and history begins. God was and is the Past (“*Principium*”), and He comes into the present of the created world from the past. Thus we, immersed in time, wanting to turn our minds towards God, turn them towards the past, towards the primal source, that once became the beginning of what we have today.

However, now, instead of calling Him the Past (“Principium”), we say that He is the Future. If God is the Future, and the destiny of human beings, their future, is an absolute novelty (something that has never been before), if it is not only repetition of events existing fully in the past (“in principio” – in the divine creative mind), one can think of a situation where in God the past is always future. Divine “I was” is identical with divine “I will be”. The circularity of this structure becomes clear to us, and biblical associations support this direction of thinking: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13). As a result, God is the Future for Himself.

The paradoxicality of these formulas should not be upsetting, for even Thomas Aquinas used to indulge in the language of paradox when he talked, for example, about divine omnipresence: “God is not only in things that are, but also in things imagined, past and future” (Quodl. XI, q. 1). The extraordinariness of divine presence is of this kind, that it expresses itself simultaneously in what is fictional, in something that has already gone, and in something that has not come yet. This metaphysical point of view reminds one of the special super-substantial existence of divine reality, that allows no limitation.

Yet the metaphysical background should not change the basic perspective of using the metaphor of “future” in relation to God. In God “to be” always means I WILL BE. This way of translating the Tetragrammaton (I will be that I will be” instead of the traditional “I am that I am”, Exodus 3:14) is close to the explanations of exegetes who say that these words express divine promise given to a human: I will always be with you, I WILL BE by your side. This feature is divine in its roots: “To be with” – “To stay by the beloved one”. In our context it means divine confession: “Always from myself, i.e. from the Future, I will come to you, so I will stand in the middle of your present”.

Taking God as a herald and a promise suppresses the neo-platonic/thomistic concept of creation as participation in the world of divine ideas. It establishes a new situation in which a fundamental relation is a relation to what is absolutely NEW. Thus, no “nothing new under the sun”, but “everything new under the sun” becomes dominant. Again, one can repeat the words of the Revelation: “I am making everything new” (Revelation 21:5). We are not the product of a perennial project (God’s plan made “for ages past” as St. Paul writes,

should be understood in a non-platonic way, see First Epistle to the Corinthians 2:7, Epistle to the Romans 8:2), but we ourselves are, along with the perennial project, a constant novelty.

It suppresses a neo-platonic scheme of re-creating something that has already existed in a new form. Dialectics of future and present replace dialectics of the ideal world, perennially existing ( $\rightarrow$ future) with its participations ( $\rightarrow$ present). Hermeneutics takes on the role that used to be performed by metaphysics, rooted in ancient cosmology.

When, taking these assumptions, we try to think of medieval theology of God's traces, it turns out that the present is a reflection (similarity), and actually a trace of divinity understood as future. For everything that is present comes from the future, thus from what is new and what has not yet been. Thus, God is what has not yet been, and what is becoming for us. Today's "to be" is an image of what does not exist yet. The existence of the world is an image of divine "Non-Existence".

People sensitive to attempts at modernizing traditional theological theses may find these opinions alarming, because what emerges, vaguely but explicitly, from them is another image of God: the One who is a Novelty for Himself, who is the Future for Himself. It implies, as one may suppose, the enunciation that God [not "is" but] somehow becomes. Max Scheler expressed similar thoughts in the second part of his intellectual biography; the problem was perceived analogously, although in a different context, by Alfred North Whitehead, and in Poland by Bishop Jozef Zycinski, Whitehead's follower. However, the classical Catholic ontology of God objects to this. For the alarmed, it is worth mentioning that just as with all divine names, divine "becoming" and "novelty" are metaphors, analogies, similarities rather than the expression of our access to divine definitiveness. And if we say for example that "God Himself has no access to divine definitiveness", all elements of the formula are also analogies – metaphors.

Such way of speaking about God has a long tradition in the writings of, among others, Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that it is acceptable to say, for example, that God is "small" – "parvus" (*In Dion. de div. nom.*, IX, 1). Thus, the tradition is long and noble.

## Change of Perspective

The above analyses outline a specific ontology of the world without past. If hitherto the real was what was at the beginning, now what is real is what is at the end (but let us not forget that it is real in a special way, as a promise). Thus, what takes place is an inversion of the order that philosophical and theological traditions have accustomed us to. The classical question about “aitia” – Greek for “cause” – is no longer a question about what was “before”, not a question about the origins of what we have here and now, but it is a question about what will happen later. Inexisting “not yet” is “aitia” for existing “already now”.

One must learn to live in such a perspective, because it is a sort of new life, such as re-gaining sight after blindness (metaphysical sight). Everything that traditional reflection on humanity was immersed in must be put now in a different way. However, one should not forget that there are some vestiges of the past in the novelty of this perspective, as already for Aristotle among all kinds of causes, the first one was final cause, by Thomas Aquinas called “causa causarum”, the cause of causes. It was only the modern age, with its technical attitude to the world, that put efficient cause as a basic form of causality first, before others.

When we think about God as the Future, other religious categories also are reinterpreted in a certain way. We are facing hope, which does not seek comfort/conciliation in the past. It is a hope that does not return to primal time (Eliade’s “illud tempus”). Thus, it does not think that the promised future is only a return to the marvel of the past, but it sees in it novelty intertwining with everything that has happened hitherto.

## Deposit of Faith and Understanding

The category of God-Future is of similarly fundamental meaning for understanding the theory of the development of dogma. Traditionally it used to be described in a platonic manner. The deposit of faith, analogously to the world of ideas, included in a sort of primal constitutive Past, incarnates in different ways in various historical periods of the Church. Thus, the past participates in the present. Whereas in the new model of “God-Future” we do not deal with a

perennially given (and in this way closed, existing in an ideal world) deposit of faith, divine collection of perennial truths. And even though the future is not a denial of the present becoming the past (thus also traditionally understood as a deposit of faith), yet the future is not only a repetition of the past. We approach something that has never been before, and we do not return to that which has already pre-existed since the beginning, fixed in advance. Accordance of the present (including the deposit of faith) with the future is of sequent, not casual character. Neither the present nor the past define the future, but just the opposite. This is of fundamental meaning for understanding dogma. Today it functions as a theological thesis of the present deciding about the future, i.e., determining the religious question for good. Yet it is just the opposite, it is that the non-existing future determines the present of the dogma. It is that the present and the past participate in the “Future” while the “Future” does not participate in the present or past.

Wiktor Stoczkowski writes: “To understand is to find the cause... It should be, first of all, simple and gifted with epic magnitude, situated in the empireum of ultimate things, distant from the everyday character of trivial, accidental events” (“Ludzie, bogowie i przybysze z kosmosu”, p. 22). Thus, to understand means to join something just discovered with what has already been known before. In this sense, the process of understanding is primarily an act of relating to the past and connecting it with the present. The whole process takes part in the present becoming the past.

Yet we want to turn to God, who is the Future, so he is not given, he is unconditioned novelty. Would it be that understanding as a relation to the past is impossible? Here is “*crux hermeneuticorum*”! The future is available for us only as a thought of the future, like God – in Himself – for us today is only a thought about God: He is intention. Classical theology would say that we cannot create the concept of God. Understanding becomes impossible.

Here the power of the metaphor of “Future” as God’s name reveals itself. It expresses explicitly the central divine attribute - indistinguishability. And if the Bible says that knowing the future is the “*proprium*” of God, it means also that penetrating it is something like penetrating God. But this is impossible. God is unknown to us, just like the future is unknown, yet the present (as well as the

past) somehow points to the future, they are a herald of it, just like in classical metaphysics of creation the existing world (still present) is an image of the hidden God.

### **The Present – the Presence**

God Himself remains the Future. Turning to Him we also turn to Novelty, which exceeds all possibilities of understanding. Fullness yet shall be. Thus, the present is not the moment of fullness, it is rather a moment in which Divinity-Future stops being Itself, and becomes the present-creation. The present is thus the name of “no-God”, “not-God-yet”, “not-God-already”. Yet at the same time the world created in its present is “God for us”.

The present of humans, their “today”, is a place of what is not fully real. Such an experience, told either in the language of neo-platonic emanation making the being unreal, or (what today is much better) in the language of Heidegger’s hermeneutics of forgetting of being, expresses the fundamental question of human existence: impermanence and finiteness, about which we do not want to think about.

Sometimes religion is also used not to remember, but to forget. It may happen that it does not serve remembering – “anamnesis” (“aletheia”), but forgetting about being – “amnesia” (“letheia”). It is also able, as Heidegger would say, to sink a man into a noisy world of beings (“Seiende”), obstructing a deeper sense of being [“Sein”]. Yet forgetting one’s being means also forgetting one’s “being towards death” (“Sein zum Tode”). In this way death is hackneyed, either by a fairytale-like/mythically taken doctrine of reincarnation, or by a trivialised image of resurrection, presented as a “non-dramatic” passage to life-after-life. Religion – how awful! – may thus not lead to existential experience but the opposite, discourage from it, and instead provide an authoritative set of answers that make all further questions idle. Then personal experience becomes replaced with an authoritative system of feeling and thinking, interiorised, accepted totally as one’s own internal world. Faith becomes ideology.



## **Liberation**

Yet when we consistently take the category of “future”, then the anamnestic (aletheic) function of religion in its fundamental sense can be restored. In this way a specific purification of religious concepts takes place resembling methods of apophatic (“negative”) theology. However, turning towards the future allows a human being (through it might be better to speak, after Heidegger, not of a human, but of “Dasein”) for disclosure of being (being always towards death): it restores existential authenticity and genuineness. It opens up a question about “Nothing”, that is the future. It does not lose the connection between the future and death. If we can equalize God and the future, we can also equalize them with death: God=Death=Future. A human being (“Dasein”) in this way fundamentally and primarily faces the question of whether this future, blissful and hopeful, is not just non-existence, one’s own non-existence, analogous to non-existence before birth. Only the reality of this question makes human existence authentic and genuine.

However, the non-existing future brings more than liberation from existential alienation. It not only helps “Dasein” to disclose its being, but also to function in this context as a separate extra-ontological religious category: as a message being a promise. We deal with the promise of something that does not exist, but that non-existence is a necessary condition of the novelty of the promise. A religious message understood as a promise recognizes that a human home is only a herald of being. Paradoxically, it is a promise of being that does not exist, but which at the same time is not an alienation, nor “being towards death”: it is a promise despite doubtless mortality. Today the model contradiction “credo quia absurdum” acquires new meaning. Death meets life, penetrating and not eliminating one another. It is life despite death, life that does not cancel death, but which is not stopped by death (“noli me tangere”). In this way we can interpret the evangelical image of Jesus resurrected, a dead one who is alive (Revelation 1:18).

## **Faith**

Future, as the name of God, keeps us questioning. And the more persistent the questioning, the more it becomes expectation, hope and acceptance.

Outlined in such a way, the existential situation of human beings meets the requirements of the classical definition of faith, called by Thomas Aquinas “a consent to what is invisible” (“assentire non apparentibus”, defining the very act of faith as “Thinking with consent to what one is thinking about” (“cum assentione cogitare”). “Consent” (“assensus”) is present in questioning that continues despite there being no answer. Not without the influence of will (that according to classical theology comes from grace), faith persistently asks a question, and “consent” expresses openness of mind, its direction towards this, what it asks. If faith is not knowledge, but only this consent of reason (“cum assentione cogitare”) to what does not show its obviousness, what is not present (“assentire non apparentibus”), one thus equate faith and constant questioning. Certainty of faith does not stem from obviousness (the truths of faith rather hide than reveal themselves), but it is this decision to ask: a persistent spiritual disposition of constant questioning.

Let us return to the problem of understanding. Only those who continue to question really understand, because they are constantly inclined towards a future that does not exist. And those who turn towards the past, who see understanding as providing causes coming from what was before, remain trapped in the technical attitude toward the world described by Heidegger. It does not allow one to see adequately and it makes contemplation impossible, because it treats everything as a material, a product, an object of possible operations. We operate on what is already given, what comes to us from the past – what we can manipulate. The future, as not yet given, does not submit to these procedures, and can be only an object of questioning. It is worthy of questioning (“Fragwürdig”), worthy of being an object of contemplation. The future inclines human experience towards the unlimited, infinite, boundless, transcendental.

### **Human Peculiarity**

We can associate the category of “future” with a specific human peculiarity. Thomas Aquinas described it by saying, among other things, that a person is “capax Dei” – open to God – a being that knows there is a sort of full and limitless goodness and wants to possess it. Analogously, human beings learn about the existence of the future (which an animal cannot do) and they want it. Only in the future (not in the past, which is left behind, closed, finished, caught up in

concepts – it is gone and will never be back) it is possible to experience full and limitless goodness. The present allows us only to think about such goodness; we have at our disposal only the idea of full goodness, which is merely a possibility, a promise.

Thus we can analogise accordingly a formula of God-Future and the thomistic theory of “general goodness” together with an assumption that the human will strives towards it out of necessity. This special opening up of a person, expressed by Aquinas through the Aristotelian formula: “The soul is in a sense everything”, formulated in other word would run: “The soul opens up to a limitless future, novelty without borders”.

### **Meeting the Other and an Object of Faith**

An unknown future can be only promised, or predicted. The future is a promise, as God is. Thus, we can also associate the category of “future” with Levinas’s category of the “Other”. Future is – just like the Other, God, or human – different, non-identical; it cannot be a function of my thinking, a result of my understanding. I call Another Human Being “the Other”, because he/she slips away from my categories, and I cannot enclose him/her within the world of my images, intentions, and concepts. The Other is transcendent, he/she always goes beyond my present. He/she comes from the future (Future) and somehow remains in it. He/she remains in the Future while entering my present: known, yet hidden in the wholeness of his/her existence.

Every stranger, every VISITOR comes from the Future. God, who comes to a person from the pages of the Scripture, talking to Abraham and Moses, comes from a Future that has never been in this world. Just like another man, when we accept him into our home, when we face Him – His Face (it is another of Levinas’s categories) is a messenger of the Future. “A guest coming into one’s house – God coming into one’s house”.

An element of experience that demands one to pay attention to the possibility of the third process is the realization that life is not happening now, that “now is not life” but that real life occurs in the future. Today – present, definite, specified – is not a mystery, nor a riddle. It does not refer to anything. It becomes

the past. This “today” is closer to the past, to non-existence, than to the future. Being comes from the future; hope and meaning travel together with them. The past disappears, becomes non-being, retained only in memory. Memory of the past, if it is a sort of reality, also comes from the future. The non-existence of the past is a necessary condition of the meaningfulness of the present contemplation of the God-Future.

If only the future can be a promise – because one cannot promise anything that has passed, and one cannot expect anything that has passed – one also cannot believe in anything that has passed. The object of faith is only something that we expect: the future, not the past. Therefore, what is the function of great events of faith from the past, the faith of Abraham, the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, the birth of Jesus, and His death? If something that happened in the past has been preserved in memory, it exists only in memory. Once it has happened, it has passed, never to return, and no longer exists. What is the meaning of the past, of religious tradition, if it exists only in words, message, memory? Referring the word “sacrament” to the past becomes unobvious and we seek its references rather in the future. What does this word mean now? The understanding of the Eucharist was once immersed in the world of neo-platonic metaphysics, with Eliade’s idea of the primary moment of constitution (mythical time). Now this primary event constituting it is supposed to come to us from the Future – from God, who, just like the world, has no past, and is in Himself a herald of novelty. What is the meaning of the Eucharist then?

The past appears only as a signpost, pointing to the future, directing us towards God. Thus, in Christianity the central experiences of faith, if we believe in them, are experienced by us as a promise, a herald: they cannot be only a memory of the past. It is a paradox that the past of the faith that appears as the future expected by us is the future which becomes our today, while it never stops being the Future, non-identical with what constitutes a human today. Dialectics of the Future with the present of human experience is a place of anchorage, an essential point of reference of this theology.

*Recebido em outubro de 2006*  
*Aprovado em novembro de 2006*