



## Christmas and the re-spiritualisation of Christianity

### Description

*'God became man so that we might be deified'* [1, PG 36, 265], says the church father Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 325–390 AD) in his first Christmas address, which he gave as Bishop of Constantinople in 380. This was not a one-off observation. In his famous theological speech, he says essentially the same thing: *'... until he made me God by virtue of his incarnation'* [2, 4, 14, 12f.].

Gregory of Nazianzus was one of the great Greek Fathers of the consolidation period of Christian theology, venerably titled 'Theologos – the Theologian' by the Orthodox Church. He thus conveys one of the essential theological insights of the Christian tradition: the goal of the entire history of salvation, which begins with the birth of Jesus, is the deification of man. In other words, we are called upon to let ourselves be deified. For that is what one could call the 'redemptive impulse' of Christ and Christian tradition.

### Interiority and mysticism

What exactly does that mean? Basically, this has often and repeatedly been said since the words of the historical Jesus, but rarely understood. Because it is essentially about a transformation from within, in the depths of the soul or consciousness. Because that is exactly where the son is born. The medieval scholar and mystic Meister Eckhart emphasised this again and again. There, in the depths of the soul, God gives birth to his son, just as he gives birth to him in himself:

*"The soul that stands in a present Now, into which the Father gives birth to his only Son, and in the same birth the soul is born again into God."* [3, Sermon 11, p.206,7)] *"There is no difference between the only-begotten Son and the soul."* [Sermon 11, p. 205, 10]

Eckhart makes it clear in his sermons that the soul must withdraw into itself, leaving behind all concepts and 'truths of faith', all cognitive content, thoughts and opinions, in order to realign itself from within with this inner compass, to let itself be permeated by this divine presence within.

Meister Eckhart took up some of the suggestions of Hugo de Balma, who lived and taught about a generation before him. I recently republished his text [4]. Hugo, around 1270, when Eckhart was 10 years old, tried to point out the importance of this inner experience to theology and hoped that such an inwardness would lead to a reform of theological knowledge, but also of the knowledge of all other things. It would be easy, he said. Children, the

uneducated, the old and the young, men and women, theologians and laymen, all can do it, *'a hundred, a thousand times a day and night'*. You just have to stop thinking, let go of all images and... do nothing. *'Don't think – breathe – quod solum aspirabit, non cogibabit'* [4; V.46]

The impulse of medieval mysticism was to make this loving devotion of the divine within us a daily, everlasting, tangible reality. As we know, this has not been successful. Instead, Christian denominations and Christian religions have fought each other to the death. Always in the name of the 'right' faith. Today, this warfare continues, currently and since the end of the Cold War, in the name of 'Western values'. Cognitive constructs are always at the centre of this, beliefs, ideas and concepts of the right political way of life. They all have nothing to do with the original insights of the Christian-Jesuanic experience, that the absolute reality – for which tradition has coined the name 'God' – is always there for us in loving devotion if we want to open ourselves to it.

The historical Jesus speaks of *'pistis'*, faith, in the Greek text of the Gospels. This means something like existential trust, confidence, belief. One could say: trust in the fundamental goodness of this absolute reality, trust that it turns to us in caring and loving, provided that we allow this devotion to happen in us. When the historical Jesus says at the beginning of his mission: *'The time is fulfilled. Repent and believe in the gospel'* (Mk 1:15), he means: 'With me and my experience of the absolute Being as loving devotion to us, a new era begins. Change the way you think about it and trust this truly good message'. It is not about believing in certain sentences and concepts. It is about experiencing this loving presence of the absolute reality in ourselves, again and again, 'a hundred, a thousand times a day and in the night,' as Hugo says. 'Believing' means trusting that this reality is always at work in us, even when we don't feel or see it.

## Christmas in practice

Christmas means: reminding ourselves of this fact and reflecting on it each year anew. Angelus Silesius, a baroque mystic, puts it this way: *'If Christ is born a thousand times in Bethlehem and not in you, you are still eternally lost.'*

Unfortunately, the mystics have left us with few practical and concrete instructions on how to do this. Medieval monks had a comparatively distraction-free environment and were not plagued by WhatsApp messages, emails and push notifications. They were probably quickly in that thought-free space of consciousness that Eckhart sometimes calls 'annihilation', where there is nothing, no thought, no image, no stirring of consciousness. Because that is, so to speak, the inner manger in which this experience takes place. When we gather in this inner space of silence of ours, every day anew, again and again, as a daily mental fitness exercise, so to speak, then exactly what these mystical writers express in different words and images happens: then God is born in us and our divine nature comes to light, then we are *'made into God'*, in the words of Gregory. In practice? *'Don't think, breathe!'* (says Hugo).

That would be to dwell in the present moment, free of thoughts. You have to practice it for a few weeks, every day. Then you get there and gain an anchor, and the practice becomes self-reliant. I believe that Christianity only has a chance in the long term if it reflects on this mystical tradition and makes it a daily practice. This insight comes from the theologian Karl Rahner, who once said: *'The Christianity of the future will be a mystical one, or it will no longer be at all.'*

What used to be the privilege of a select few in sheltered spaces behind monastery walls, and of which Hugo as early as the 13th century thought everyone should do it, this contemplation would probably have to become common property so that the basic Christian message of the goodness and philanthropy of absolute reality would find its way into as many hearts as possible.

For this to succeed, it would be good if as many people as possible made their contribution and did not wait for 'the church' or 'those at the top' or whoever to change something. 'Ekklesia – church', that means everyone. And it begins where we take this message of the inner birth of our divinity seriously, for example, by withdrawing from the many distractions, the feeling of having to be informed about everything, even in the early morning; if we allow ourselves the daily inner reflection, no matter how busy we are (then even more so! and no talk shows).

## Respiritualisation or substitute religions

This would lead to a respiritualisation of Christianity, to a new spiritualisation, which at the same time is probably the only chance to save our Christian culture. Our culture will not be saved by walls, fences, laws and political correctness, but only by an internalisation that comes from daily, faithful practice. For then, we can also learn again, individually and collectively, to distinguish between what is good for us and what is not.

If we do not promote this respiritualisation, then transhumanism, with its technocratic promises as a new substitute religion, will ship us off to a reality that will probably be dystopian and fascist-like. The last four years have given us a taste of this. I have just completed a representative survey in which I placed nine questions on transhumanist attitudes (I will report on this soon). The most radical of these sentences is: '*God is dead. We are God.*' 20% of all Germans agree with this sentence. This shows how far the rejection of such a tradition of inwardness has already progressed.

We humans apparently cannot exist without a framework of belief that gives us security and orientation. If the established religious offerings are implausible, then substitute religions will spread. Faith in science and transhumanism are such substitute religions, promising their followers what used to be the privilege of religions: eternal life, bliss, life in abundance, 'flourishing' in Newspeak. Religions have failed to make it clear to people that these fruits arise from a cultivation of inwardness, right now, here and today, and not only in an afterlife (maybe there too, but that's not the point). And that they are the fruit of experience and not of some religious dogma. Religions have few convincing means of showing people what they need to do in order to cultivate this divinity within themselves through contemplation, from which life, bliss and abundance flow. It is therefore easy for the substitute religions of our time to suggest that this can be done in the material world. We will have to decide: do we want a deification from within or a material perversion of this deification in technical implants and superintelligence. Perhaps the latter could even be put to good use if it were used in the right way.

Christmas reminds us that the real reality, the deep fulfilment, is within ourselves, so to speak in the soul's crèche, where the divine is born as soon as we open ourselves to it in silence. That is the real abundance and eternal life, not the extension of physical life into infinity thanks to medical technology.

In this sense, I wish all my readers a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year 2025.

## Sources and further reading

1. Nazianz Gv. Orationes. Migne JP, editor. Paris: Cerf; 1996.
2. Nazianz Gv. Orationes theologicae – Theologische Reden; übersetzt und eingeleitet von H.J. Sieben. Freiburg: Herder; 1996.
3. Eckhart M. Deutsche Predigten und Traktate; hrsg. und übersetzt v. J. Quint. München: Hanser; 1963.
4. Hugo de Balma. Die Wege nach Sion trauern: Viae Sion lugent, auch überliefert unter dem Titel

“Mystische Theologie”. Übersetzt, eingeleitet und erläutert von Harald Walach. Münsterschwarzach: Vier Türme Verlag; 2017.

5. Merki H. Homoiosis Theo. Von der Platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa. Freiburg/Schweiz: Paulusdruckerei.; 1952.

**Date Created**

27.12.2024