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Title: Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion - recenzja

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Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, New York 2006, Cambridge University Press, 230 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-68104-9

The author of the reviewed book is Julian Young, professor of the University of Auckland, a well-known expert in writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Polish readers have already had an opportunity to become familiar with Young's original analyses, as his book concerning relations between the author of *Being and Time* and fascism (*Heidegger, filozofia, nazizm*, Warszawa - Wrocław 2000) was published a few years ago. Young proves in the book that Heidegger's thought stands in overt opposition to the ideology of national socialism, although at the same time the German philosopher clearly affirmed and supported the criminal Nazi system.

The main thesis of *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* is also not trivial. Young decidedly rejects the conventional opinion of the individualistic character of anthropology of the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. However, is it possible to interpret the following threads, so typical of Nietzsche's philosophy, in a different manner than the individualistic one: the criticism of narrow-mindedness, Masters' and slaves' morality, appeals to "free spirits" and especially the idea of the superman? Young argues that it is both possible and necessary. According to him, German philosopher's views are close to communitarianism, the politic and ethic conception that is nowadays intensely discussed in books of Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Robert Putnam. Additionally, Nietzsche's communitarianism is conservative and gives religion a central place in the organization of social life. Again, it is incompatible with his previous image of a destructor, exposé, uncompromising critic of Christianity, a fierce atheist and the antichrist.

Young's analysis hardly refers to classic interpretations of Nietzsche's thought. Instead, the author relies in his research on direct reference to the German thinker's works. It is a risky method – it can lead to "rediscovering America" or result in preoccupation with the obvious. On the other hand, unless we are satisfied only with cautious remarks on someone's interpretation and we are not looking for an appropriate way of understanding important texts, it is difficult to study philosophy in a different way.

The book begins with the presentation of Schopenhauer's view on religion. Nietzsche's "first and only educator" maintained that every religion – which by the way was contemptuously described by him as "popular metaphysics" or "metaphysics for children" – has three essential functions: it alleviates the fear of death, explains the meaning of suffering and creates social bonds. According to Young, the author of *Zarathustra* fully accepted and creatively developed this point of view.

Each of the eleven successive chapters of the monograph relates to one of the main Nietzsche's books. The analysis proceeds chronologically – from *The Birth of Tragedy* through, among others, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals* to *Ecce Homo*. In each case Young presents the central issue of the given book and then shows everything that is connected with society and religion.

Young maintains that the essence of Nietzsche's social, political and religious opinions was already expressed in his first weighty book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. The fascination for ancient Greece – with its social structure, religion, drama – never left the German philosopher, although underwent certain evolution. It could be noticed, for example, in the way he describes the relation between two culture-forming elements, Apollonian and Dionysian.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche admires their harmony in ancient tragedies and in religiousness based on mythology. His later works rather emphasize Apollonianism, and the last ones proclaim the return of Dionysus.

The most important aim of all Nietzsche's writings, as Young persuades the reader, was the opposition to modern nihilism through building healthy foundations for social life. It requires forming hierarchically organized society, in which every member will know and accept his or her appropriate way of life. Nietzsche's project is similar in some respects to Plato's idea of republic. In both conceptions philosophers are of great importance – they govern and legislate. However, while the author of *Republic* opts *de facto* for totalitarianism, Nietzsche allows only for certain forms of paternalism. In his vision of society, as Young argues, everyone could find optimal possibilities for his or her development without the discriminating division into slaves and Masters. The author of the reviewed book does not even hesitate to call Nietzsche's views a "compassionate communitarianism". It is a very provocative thesis, if we take into consideration how vehemently the German thinker criticized the attitudes of pity, mercy, compassion.

According to Nietzsche, social life in its highest form takes the shape of a nation (*Volk*). But religious rituals guarantee its cohesion and durability better than anything else, especially festivals similar to the cult of the ancient Dionysus. Additionally, it helps an individual to solve the "problem of pain and death". Young argues that the German thinker finally opted for pantheism and saw a remedy for existential problems of an individual in ecstatic unity with the Universe. Christianity does not perform those functions, thus – in Nietzsche's opinion – wastes the potential connected with religion. The announcement of God's death (*Gott ist tot*) was by no means the declaration of atheism. Young cites evidently anti-atheistic statements of *Zarathustra's* author. Nietzsche proclaims the necessity of the rejection of discredited Christian God, but he also proclaims the need for new, healthy and noble gods.

Many digressions to recent cultural and civilization phenomena, which are included in the book, should be appraised positively. Young skillfully intersperses the text with short remarks on the Second Gulf War, the Internet, the revolution of the 1960s, market economy, pop culture etc. By this he emphasizes the fact that the problems addressed by Nietzsche, are still topical. It is possible that now, in our chaotic postmodern world, we should discuss them even more intensively than it was necessary at the decadent end of the 19th century, which was so criticized by the German thinker.

It is worth noticing that the book's title is not fully adequate to its content. After all, the subject of the analysis is not the religious views of Nietzsche but rather the socio-political ones. Forms of religion approved by the philosopher, according to Young's interpretation, fulfil only the instrumental function in his conception – they should strengthen and save healthy society. Probably, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Society* or *Nietzsche's Social Thought* could be more apt titles in this matter.

Summing up, Young's monograph contains a lot of original, well-grounded theses. Will they revolutionize the common way of understanding Nietzsche's philosophy? Personally, I doubt it. However, it is clear that after reading *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, one-sided presentation of the German thinker as an extreme individualist and uncompromising adversary of religion is simply an incorrect interpretation of his philosophy.