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Nietzsche Said, "God Is Dead"

ALTHOUGH INFAMOUS for his rejection of the Christian religion, Nietzsche writes about Christianity as an insider. Beginning life in a parsonage, Nietzsche was immersed in Christian sermonizing from his earliest years. In his childhood his demeanor was so much in keeping with this environment that other children called him "the little minister." His childhood prose (such as we find in his journal and an autobiography written when he was thirteen) is full of sentimental pieties. When he entered the university, he planned to study theology as well as classical philology.

It was during his student years that Nietzsche broke with his religious upbringing. One of his influences was Schopenhauer, the pessimistic German philosopher whose nontheistic metaphysical views Nietzsche first encountered as a college student. Another cause of his religious disaffection was his growing sense that the values of the ancients—the focus of his philologi-

cal studies—were not entirely consistent with those promoted by Christianity. Pride, for example, while a virtue for the ancient Greeks, was considered the deadliest of sins in Christianity. Perhaps most crucial for Nietzsche's decision was his exposure to historical theology, which sought to construct a historically accurate account of the development of Christianity and its Scripture. Such studies tended to naturalize stories that had traditionally been approached as miraculous or as having supernatural significance. Nietzsche, like many others, came to see this approach as undermining the very faith that motivated theological study in the first place.

Nietzsche's early adherence to the faith that he later rejected is important for our understanding of his anti-Christian writings. Although one might complain that what he attacks is a caricature of Christianity, one certainly could not attribute this to Nietzsche's ignorance of the religion. He was very well informed as to Scriptural detail, historical theology, and doctrinal subtleties.

Nietzsche's account of Christian psychology is similarly affected by his own life experiences. He sometimes presents his psychological portraits of the typical priest, the believer, and important figures in Christian history as if these were objective analyses, but mostly he criticizes Christianity for its effects on the individual believer. We might reasonably question whether the effects Nietzsche blames on Christianity are as widespread as he suggests. Perhaps, at least some of the time, he tells us more about himself than about "Christians" in general.

Finally, Nietzsche's background makes sense of his conviction that the loss of faith in God is a calamitous cultural crisis. Although writing as one who has lost faith and who sees his own

religious tradition as having many pernicious effects on its adherents, he experienced the loss of faith as a personal trauma. He was shocked that others seemed to throw off their religious backgrounds so casually, and he eventually concluded that many of his contemporaries had not really shed their religion but instead continued their old habits in disguised forms. Because he was convinced that the Christian worldview had harmful psychological effects, he endeavored to show how such damage continued to affect his contemporaries who maintained the habits of the old worldview, even though they no longer endorsed it.

We see Nietzsche not as the "atheist by instinct" he claims to be in his autobiography but as a religious *desperado.* If one understands by "religious" the effort to integrate one's life with what is larger than oneself, Nietzsche rejects Christianity for religious reasons. His many complaints about the ideology that the Christian Church has foisted on its members express his conviction that it harms our ability to love and to be responsive to others in the world and to nature. If a critic, he is also a seeker, and he believed that his society was in desperate need of a new spiritual focus. He advances some positive suggestions for helping to construct this new focus and to restore harmony to our sense of ourselves in the world.

Why Nietzsche Condemns Christianity

One of the texts that Nietzsche studied closely while a student of theology was Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity.* Feuerbach, an outspoken atheist, argued that God is the projection of human characteristics onto something external, outside the self. In particular, human beings dissociate themselves from their own powers to think, to take action, and to love, attributing these powers to God instead of to themselves. Fear is the motivation for this projection. By projecting and exaggerating human abilities onto a supernatural personage, believers can imagine themselves as protected by a power that far exceeds that of any threatening person or natural force.

The problem with this human creation of God is that it depends on human self-denigration. Attributing human traits to God, human beings have disowned their own powers and accordingly have lost awareness of how to use them. Human beings have become estranged from themselves. Feuerbach urges that we rediscover our own capacities and reinternalize our projected powers. Until we do so, we will continue to be victims of our own conviction that we ourselves are powerless and utterly dependent.

Although Nietzsche rarely writes about Feuerbach directly, he often employs Feuerbachian statements and images. He urges us to imagine our transformed situation should we cease "to *flow out* into a god."[1] He compares the Judeo-Christian projection of human powers onto a supreme God to a self-sabotaging political maneuver.

> The Jews' enjoyment of their divine monarch and saint is similar to that which the French nobility derived from Louis XIV. This nobility had surrendered all of its power and sovereignty and had become contemptible. In order not to feel this, in order to be able to forget this, one required royal splendor, royal authority and plenitude of power without equal to which

only the nobility had access. By virtue of this privilege, one rose to the height of the court, and from that vantage point one saw everything beneath oneself and found it contemptible. . . . Thus the tower of the royal power was built ever higher into the clouds, and one did not hold back even the last remaining stones of one's own power.[2]

Nietzsche's case against Christianity depends in large part on his basic acceptance of Feuerbach's view that human beings invented God by divesting themselves of any sense of their own powers. Through this operation, Nietzsche insists, believers exchange an active stance toward their environment for the reactive stance of a pet or a victim. Instead of actively engaging with their problems, they treat their lived experiences like hieroglyphics whose real significance is decipherable only on a different—supernatural—plane. Nietzsche contends that this shift of focus amounts to a complete falsification of our actual circumstances.

In Christianity neither morality nor religion has even a single point of contact with reality. Nothing but imaginary *causes*, "God," "soul," "ego," "spirit," "free will"—for that matter "unfree will," nothing but imaginary *effects* ("sin," "redemption," "grace," "punishment," "forgiveness of sins").[3]

For Nietzsche, this outlook is damaging to one's ability to function and flourish in one's life. It obstructs one's view of the real world, addles one's ability to see the real forces at work in one's life, and destroys one's ability to recognize how best to address them. The imaginary scheme implicit in the Christian worldview is also dangerous for another reason. It interprets

suffering as punishment. Suffering allegedly entered the world as God's retaliation for Adam and Eve's sin. Nietzsche complains in *Daybreak* that "Only in Christendom did everything become punishment, well-deserved punishment: it also makes the sufferer's imagination suffer, so that with every misfortune he feels himself morally reprehensible and cast out."[4]

With its supernatural scheme as the real determinant of the success or failure of one's life, Christianity encourages believers to feel that mistakes they have made have catastrophic effects. If one has ever seriously erred, one deserves eternal damnation. One's only hope is that God will be merciful and disregard what one truly deserves.

And yet Christianity provides mixed messages about God's mercy. God is supposed to be a loving father, but also a wrathful judge. God's tendency to retaliate for sins, which he takes as insults to his honor, is evident in the doctrine of atonement: that God could only be appeased if a divine human being were brutally tortured and killed on the cross. The supremacy of God and his insistence on homage strikes Nietzsche as a projection of some of humanity's own less admirable traits.

The Christian presupposes a powerful, overpowering being who enjoys revenge. His power is so great that nobody could possibly harm him, except for his honor. Every sin is a slight to his honor . . . and no more. Contrition, degradation, rolling in the dust—all this is the first and last condition of his grace: in sum, the restoration of his divine honor. . . . Sin is an offense against him, not against humanity. Those who are granted his grace are also granted this carelessness regarding the natural consequences of sin. God and humanity are separated so completely that a sin against humanity is really unthinkable: every

> deed is to be considered *solely with respect to its supernatural consequences* without regard for its natural consequences; . . . whatever is natural is considered ignoble.[5]

Christianity's repudiation of nature, particularly human nature, is a further target of Nietzsche's attack. According to Nietzsche, Christianity interprets our natural appetites as dangerous temptations. The body is viewed as a source of sin that must be subdued, even if this requires harming it. Fasting is a slow method for undercutting one's health and thereby diminishing the force of one's drives. Christian moralizers are willing to urge even more aggressive measures for silencing the instincts.

> The most famous formula for this is to be found in the New Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount, where, incidentally, things are by no means looked at from a height. There it is said, for example, with particular reference to sexuality: "If thy eye offend thee, pluck it out." Fortunately, no Christian acts in accordance with this precept.[6]

Nietzsche believes that, in addition to encouraging the believer to despise the body's demands, the Christian worldview encourages the idea that our psychological makeup, which naturally seeks self-assertion and self-enhancement, is pernicious. The hostility of Christianity to our physical and psychological natures is evident in the list of sins that it considers most "deadly"—pride, envy, greed, gluttony, sloth, lust, and anger. These sins are all expressions of natural instincts, presented in their ugliest form. Instead of providing techniques for developing self-control in the expression of these urges, Christian morality urges their obliteration.

One cannot destroy one's instincts, however, without destroying oneself. Nietzsche anticipates that most people will be unable to eliminate their instincts and passions—a natural result, but in the Christian worldview a failure. The upshot of Nietzsche's analysis is that Christianity encourages self-hatred. If we vilify the essential urges and instincts that underlie our physical and psychic health, we cannot regard ourselves with satisfaction; instead, we feel we should be at war with fundamental components of our being and we consider ourselves failures for having human constitutions. The war between the flesh and the spirit, of which Luther makes so much, strikes Nietzsche as an indication of the degree to which Christianity promotes inner conflict and makes unfulfillable demands. The person who seriously accepts the Christian vision of the human being is bound, in Nietzsche's view, to develop a degraded vision of him- or herself.

Because Nietzsche thinks that "will to power," or the impulse to enhanced vitality, is basic to the human makeup, he does not think that our psyches will simply accept this self-denigrating vision without struggle. Indeed, Christian faith *depends* on the believer's inability to live comfortably with this account. Once one internalizes a view of oneself as having depraved impulses and as deserving damnation, one is desperate to vindicate oneself. The Church and its various practices are appealing precisely because believers seek alternatives to their damaged self-assessment and the Church stands ready to "solve" the problems it has created. The Church assures them that what it

offers will put things right on the supernatural plane. This claim is unfalsifiable (neither provable nor disprovable), but nevertheless, once it has inculcated self-disgust, the Church then claims the power to improve believers' views of themselves.

Nietzsche also criticizes Christianity for encouraging believers to see others in a negative light. In order to improve one's own self-assessment, one need only look at others with a keen eye for human flaws. Observing the small sins of others, one feels less sinful. Moreover, in the quest for moral superiority, one *seeks out* sinful behavior in others, taking mere foibles for crimes against God. In this way, then, the Christian outlook, in effect, creates a popular appetite for sensational scandals, which provide assurance that even if one is depraved, one is still clearly better than certain notorious characters.

Nietzsche does not think that Christianity's doctrine of "love of neighbor" compensates for this drive to find fault with others. Nietzsche thinks that "love of neighbor" is merely a hollow slogan to "cover" one's indifference to the particular psychologies of real people, encouraging one to treat others with an indiscriminant superficial kindness. Love of neighbor thus becomes a means of using others to improve one's impression of oneself. Not caring whether one's gestures actually help or harm another, one performs symbolic acts of kindness for one's own benefit, to convince oneself that one is virtuous after all.

What Nietzsche Admires in Christians

A corollary of Nietzsche's perspectivism is that one should not rest content with dogmatic, unscrutinized, one-dimensional

judgments, whether positive or negative, and Nietzsche is consistently perspectival in his approach to Christianity—at least until his late, polemical writings. He often complicates his critical assessment of Christian ideology by acknowledging that over its history, Christianity has nurtured admirable abilities and cultivated real heroes. We have already observed that Nietzsche admired Jesus, if not his Church-organizing disciples. Nietzsche also expresses admiration for certain individual Christians who pursued the religious life. He describes "the figures of the higher and highest Catholic priesthood" as "the most refined figures in human society that have ever yet existed"[7] and expresses admiration for the "self-overcoming every individual Jesuit imposes upon himself."[8]

Nietzsche also admits that religions of all sorts, Christianity included, offer a vision that at least superficially improves life for the believer. Religious interpretations transfigure life, making it appear as a manifestation of the highest values, and thus tremendously meaningful. In light of Nietzsche's critique of the imaginary character of the supernatural dimension, he may seem to be inconsistent. But he is considering the evolution of Christianity over time and suggests that its impact on believers changed as it became a powerful institution. As we will see in the discussion of master and slave morality in the following chapter, Nietzsche contends that early Christianity was popular among the powerless because it represented a healthy gesture of self-assertion, if only inwardly. However, this improvement developed potentially dangerous psychological mechanisms that flourished when Christianity itself became a pervasive and powerful social institution, undermining the healthy self-assertion that earlier it had promoted.

Nietzsche consistently encourages modern society to move beyond the Christian worldview, but he acknowledges that Christianity historically nurtured and promoted some valuable human abilities. Nietzsche credits even the turning of aggressive instincts inward and the potential for inner conflict, which Christianity has fostered, to have been "something so new, profound, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and *pregnant with a future* that the aspect of the earth was essentially altered."[9]

One of Christianity's great virtues, from Nietzsche's point of view, is its commitment to honesty. In this respect, Christian values made way, however unintentionally, for the development of knowledge.

> Christianity, too, has made a great contribution to the enlightenment, and taught moral skepticism very trenchantly and effectively, accusing and embittering men, yet with untiring patience and subtlety; it destroyed the faith in his "virtues" in every single individual. . . . In the end, however, we have applied this same skepticism also to all religious states and processes. . . .[10]

Christianity's encouragement of honesty as a virtue promoted, ultimately, an alternative, more scientific way of seeing the world, according to Nietzsche. It also led ultimately to its own demise. Eventually, those trained in the Christian virtue of honesty felt the demand for truthfulness even in those cases where it personally pained them. They directed their inquiry at Christianity itself, and discovered that they could not honestly sustain their belief.

> You see what it was that really triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor's refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price.[11]

Confronting the Shadows of God

Nietzsche's striking and ambivalent report of the death of God tells of a madman who appears in the marketplace and cries, "I seek God! I seek God!" The crowd mocks him, apparently considering themselves too "modern" to have any thought of God. The madman challenges them.

> "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all sun? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? . . . How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

His audience remains unresponsive, and the madman concludes that he has come too early. The awareness of the great deed of killing God has not yet dawned on those who have perpetrated it. Still, he himself feels the need to honor both the dead God and the event of his passing. Nietzsche continues:

> It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo.* Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"[12]

This story reflects an aspect of Nietzsche's view of the death of God that is often ignored. Nietzsche is far more concerned about spirituality than most of his educated contemporaries, who do not consider religion to be very important. Nietzsche presents the madman as sincerely religious and concerned for the modern world's spiritual condition. The madman's audience, his contemporaries, who pride themselves on having renounced religious superstition, are out of touch with the brewing crisis. They do not imagine that they have lost anything by arranging their lives around entirely secular goals. They do not notice, in part because they have maintained the habits that religion fostered, particularly the habit of faith. They have replaced faith in God with faith in science.

This new faith, Nietzsche thinks, is no improvement over the old. Nietzsche couples his statement that "God is dead" with a critique of modern faith in scientific materialism. Intellectuals imagine that they have replaced fables with facts, but Nietzsche

sees the dominance of scientific accounts as substituting one self-denigrating myth for another. If anything, the scientific myth is worse. Faith in God eroded confidence in our own human powers, but at least encouraged belief that we had dignity as creations of God whom God took seriously. The myth of science, by contrast, posits that our existence is an accident and that we are organisms on an obscure planet on the periphery of a universe of mostly dead matter. This vision builds on and reinforces the sense of worthlessness that grew from our projection of our powers onto God. Worse yet, in the light of a religious worldview that sees the goal of life as a blissful afterlife, the absence of any "beyond" in the scientific account is bound to frustrate our inherited expectations about what would make life meaningful. Unless we seek meaning from a different source, science is only going to promote nihilism, the sense that our world lacks value. Thus Nietzsche encourages his contemporaries to attack the "shadows of God," our residual religious expectations that are bound to be frustrated by a scientific-materialist outlook.

Nietzsche's Spiritual Alternative

Nietzsche hopes for a rebirth of spirituality. Crucial to this transformation would be a renewed appreciation of earthly life and nature. Nietzsche hints that he advocates a sense of sacredness in nature when he describes himself as a "disciple" of Dionysus and has Zarathustra preach "the meaning of the earth." The West's shift from a Christian to a secular culture came about in part because the Christian account became too

abstract, too divorced from embodied experience. Indeed, it declared war on the body, denouncing the passions and appetites as sources of sin. Nietzsche calls upon us to "rechristen our evil as what is best in us."[13] Specifically, we should consider our bodies and instincts positively, as promising capacities and sources of meaning that are sometimes more subtle than the rather thin track provided by our intellectual consciousness. "I counsel the innocence of the senses," declares Nietzsche's Zarathustra.[14]

Nietzsche charges that one of the more unfortunate legacies of the Christian outlook is that we are dis-integrated beings. We experience our natural existence as inherently deficient, and we are driven to take revenge on ourselves and the world for own inabilities, real or imagined. Nietzsche urges a reexamination of our inner lives and a reassessment of our natures. "When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to 'naturalize' humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?"[15]

Seeking an alternative to the Christian outlook on nature, Nietzsche finds inspiration in the ancient Athenians. In the god Dionysus, the Athenians worshiped the lusty and wild side of our nature that Christianity denounces. Nietzsche stresses the contrast between Dionysus and Christ ("the annointed one" as interpreted by Saint Paul). The Pauline doctrine of sin and atonement is what Nietzsche sees as the vicious core of Christian ideology. This doctrine claims that human beings are so defective, so worthy of damnation, and that God is so cruel and vindictive, that the only way of redeeming our situation is for God to take human form and be tortured to death. As Nietzsche

sees it, this account regards our very existence as natural beings as being cosmically objectionable.

Dionysus, by contrast, confers value on our natural characteristics by *living* them, rejoicing in them. Dionysus also represents a very different way of understanding human limitations. According to one version of the myth, Dionysus, like Christ, was a suffering god. Dionysus suffered dismemberment when, as a boy, he was torn to bits by the Titans. But whereas Christianity goes on to celebrate the individual soul, Nietzsche uses the Dionysus story to suggest that suffering comes about because we take our individual existence too seriously and usually fail to recognize our participation in the whole. Nietzsche describes the rebirth of Dionysus as the end of individuation. This "rebirth" contrasts with the Christian conception, in which the just will be "reborn" as embodied individuals, their personality made eternal.

"Have I been understood?" Nietzsche asks at the close of his autobiography—"*Dionysus versus the Crucified.*"[16] This formula conveys the focus of Nietzsche's attack on Christianity.

Nietzsche's vitriolic case against Christian doctrine is more famous than his recommendations for mending the spirit. Because he encourages experimenting with life and reasserting our individual virtues and powers, he offers hints, not formulas. Among Nietzsche's hints are images that might help us to contemplate the natural world in fresh ways. "I counsel the innocence of the senses," says Zarathustra. The "innocence of the senses" would involve delighting in our experiences of the world, approaching the world without the resentful project of trying to improve one's wounded sense of adequacy, but learn-

ing to love ourselves and the world on its own terms. A loving contemplation of all natural things *as natural* is a primary source of meaning in life.

Some of Nietzsche's images draw attention to time as being cyclical—as opposed to linear, like the Christian tightrope to salvation, from which we might fall before reaching our goal. If time is a cycle, it has no ultimate endpoint, nor do the successive moments of our lives lead to any goal that lies outside of time. Each moment has its own validity. Indeed, there is no time like the present: the present moment is uniquely significant, for it is the only moment of our personal trajectories in which we can assert our aliveness, take action, engage in our projects or change our direction.

Seeing our lives as limited to a finite span in this life need not be seen as an indication of life's ultimate worthlessness. We can find tremendous meaning and satisfaction in the finite endeavors in which we engage. In *The Gay Science,* Nietzsche compares the goal-directedness of ocean waves with that of human projects. Both have a kind of profundity.

> How greedily this wave approaches, as if it were after something! How it crawls with terrifying haste into the inmost nooks of this labyrinthine cliff! It seems that it is trying to anticipate someone; it seems that something of value, high value, must be hidden there.—And now it comes back, a little more slowly but still quite white with excitement; is it disappointed? Has it found what it looked for? Does it pretend to be disappointed?—But already another wave is approaching, still more greedily and savagely than the first, and its soul, too, seems to be full of secrets and the lust to dig up treasures. Thus

> live waves—thus live we who will. . . . You and I—do we not have *one secret?*[17]

Nietzsche urges us to throw ourselves into life. We can take satisfaction in our undertakings much as we do in the sight of waves. We achieve something admirable when we pursue our endeavors with intensity and strive to give the process a well-wrought shape. Particular efforts may not always succeed, but failed undertakings allow one to learn and do better. Again, Nietzsche counters the formula of sin and Christ's atonement, suggesting that we can refine our abilities and redeem past failures through growing mastery. Zarathustra counsels us to forgive ourselves our pasts and engage in ongoing life. He also counsels us to take inspiration in the beauty of the natural world, the things we so easily take for granted and that Christianity too quickly demeans as "worldly." "Place little good perfect things around you. . . . What is perfect teaches hope."[18]

Nietzsche encourages a sense of gradual development, cultivation, and transformation. He suggests that our projects are provisional and revisable, and that many involve developing practices that are refined only through many repetitions. Countering the Christian notion that any serious past failure can earn one infinite torment, Nietzsche suggests that one can turn failure to one's advantage and enhance one's life by moving forward. He describes this through the metaphor of music and compares it to the subtle growth of love over time.

> This is what happens to us in music: First one has to *learn to hear* a figure and melody at all, to detect and distinguish it, to isolate it and delimit it as a separate life. Then it requires some

exertion and good will to *tolerate* it in spite of its strangeness, to be patient with its appearance and expression, and kind-hearted about its oddity. Finally there comes a moment when we are *used* to it, when we wait for it, when we sense that we should miss it if it were missing; and now it continues to compel and enchant us relentlessly until we have become its humble and enraptured lovers who desire nothing better from the world than it and only it.

But that is what happens to us not only in music. That is how we have *learned to love* all things that we now love. . . . Even those who love themselves will have learned it in this way; for there is no other way. Love, too, has to be learned.[19]

Nietzsche contends that the Christian worldview and the scientific materialism that has in many quarters replaced it have both harmed our capacity for self-love, and therefore our capacity to love beyond ourselves. Nevertheless, he believes we can recover true love and with it the spirituality that was cultivated and promoted by Christianity (and other world religions). This means going beyond Christianity, but without thereby rejecting its inner truth, that the meaning of life is to be found in the enchantment of the world—but this world, our world, and not a heaven or a host beyond.