

NIETZSCHE, GOD AND THE GOOD LIFE

Greg Restall

*School of History, Philosophy and Politics
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia*

Greg.Restall@mq.edu.au

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**you take the words i say and make them mean / everything they don't baby you're obscene
you don't listen you don't hear / you're blinded by the fear that surrounds you
i know you say love when you mean control / you buy the truth and your heart is cold / so you live in shadows
you try to tell the world how it should spin / but you live in terror with the hollow men
who stun you with their lies / with fever in their eyes as they drown you**

Sam Phillips, *Baby I Can't Please You*, 1994

☞ INTRODUCTION

First, a few words of introduction, setting the scene. I'm not a Nietzsche scholar. I'm not even an historian of philosophy of *any* stripe. I am one of the fortunate few who are paid to 'do philosophy', but the areas I tend to do most of my work in are logic, philosophy of language and some philosophy of religion. So why am I presenting a paper on *Nietzsche*? Well, there are at least two reasons. Firstly, I teach philosophy of religion, and in the course I have a section about distinctively modern critics of religious belief. Nietzsche, together with Freud, Feuerbach and Marx present important criticisms which form a part of the fabric of contemporary philosophy of religion, and any student of the area needs to know something about it. So, what better way for *me* to learn about it than to force myself to write a paper on it? However, my reasons are not just selfish — I do believe that the way that Christians (and other religious believers) respond to these contemporary critics of religion is very important. So, my aim in this paper is not only to give a short introduction to what Nietzsche has to say about Christian faith, but also to examine what an appropriate response for believers might be. This then has consequences for what we take the task of 'Christian Philosophy' to be.

I will start with an all-too-short introduction to Nietzsche's thought, with our attention placed on what he had to say about Christianity. Then I will attempt to show that treating Nietzsche's criticisms as arguments to be 'proved wrong' and then forgotten is inadequate, and in fact, dangerous. Once I dispatch that sort of response, I shall examine two particular problems Nietzsche has with Christian belief and practice, and I hope to model a more constructive response to these criticisms.

☞ NIETZSCHE'S THOUGHT

Nietzsche lived from 1844 to 1900. He was born a Prussian, the son of a Lutheran minister. He was educated at the University of Bonn, studying in theology and classical philology. In 1865 he gave up theology and moved to Leipzig, where he was influenced by Schopenhauer. Called to the University of Basel at the early age of 24, despite not receiving his doctorate, he taught there from 1869 to 1879, retiring due to ill-health. He kept writing until 1889, when his condition deteriorated further. He did not regain his sanity, and he died in 1900.

In his writings, Nietzsche launched a devastating critique of *traditional morality* and *traditional religion*. Running through Nietzsche's work from beginning to end is his own clear *ethic*, involving intellectual integrity, self-fulfilment or of human flourishing. It's on the fulcrum of this sort of ethic that Nietzsche

leverages his critique of traditional morality and traditional religion. (Some take Nietzsche to be a rather simple-minded relativist, but I agree with Berkowitz [1995] that this is mistaken. Admittedly, Nietzsche talks of the *transvaluation of all values*, and it is clear that he is aware of the relativity of moral systems. Different moralities give different answers to the question ‘what is good?’. However, Nietzsche goes on to *judge* different moralities on the basis of particular criteria. Nietzsche is not the simple-minded relativist for whom *anything goes* in the area of morality or epistemology. Much more can and should be said about this, but I won’t be addressing it in this paper.)

So, what does Nietzsche say about morality? From his early work, including *On the Genealogy of Morals*, to the end of his life, with *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche distinguishes two forms of morality. Master morality involves the distinction between *good* and *bad*. Slave morality uses the distinction between *good* and *evil*. *Good* functions differently in either form of morality, depending on whether its opposite is *bad* or *evil*. For master morality, good is defined in terms of *excellence*, or human flourishing. Strength, power and proficiency are all aspects of what is good. Then the *bad* is the lack of this sort of good. It is the weak, the deprived, the lazy, and those who don’t measure up.



The man who has the power to requite goodness with goodness, evil with evil, and really does practice requital by being grateful and vengeful, is called “good.” The man who is unpowerful and cannot requite is taken for bad ... Good and bad are for a time equivalent to noble and base, master and slave. [Human, All Too Human 45]



Slave morality is quite different. For Nietzsche, slave morality is a construction of the weak and the powerless, it begins by defining the *other* as evil, as the *other* is seen to be the cause of the weakness and powerlessness of the slave.



Then, in the souls of the oppressed, powerless men, every *other* man is taken for hostile, inconsiderate, exploitative, cruel, sly, whether he be noble or base. Evil is an epithet for man, indeed for every possible living being, even, for example, for a god ... [Human, All Too Human 45]



And since the others are so *evil*, we, the weak and powerless must be seen as good. Nietzsche gives a fitting illustration using the imagery of powerful birds of prey and the helpless lambs on which they feed.



... if the lambs say among themselves: “these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb — would he not be good?” there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it ironically and say: “*we* don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb.” [The Genealogy of Morals I 13]



At this point, Nietzsche is being quite understanding — there is no need to find fault with the slave’s evaluation of the situation. It is manifestly understandable:

in a position of adversity you are bound to look for someone to blame for your plight. However, not all is well and good with slave morality. If slave morality is instituted, and becomes dominant over master morality, as Nietzsche thinks it has, then it becomes a form of “*spiritual revenge*” [GM I 7]. It is a way of the weak dominating and restricting the flourishing of the strong. It is like the child who goes to the parent to ‘dob in’ the stronger sibling. Of course the motivation is not for *justice* or *well-being*. It is for *revenge*. And this is where slave morality goes sour.

But isn’t Nietzsche inconsistent at devaluing the revenge of the weak while he valorises the revenge of the strong? No, he isn’t. For the revenge of the strong is shameless and honest. It is honest about what it is doing. The revenge of the weak, by contrast, is shameful and dishonest. It utilises a morality which preaches integrity and forgiveness, but its underlying motivation is one of revenge. It is both unforgiving and dishonest — it is inconsistent, it is a lie. So, Nietzsche rails against the revenge of the weak.

There is a lot more we could profitably examine in Nietzsche’s analysis of morality, but this is enough for now. Nietzsche thought that it was not just morality which was used for cramping the flourishing of the *good*. Christianity as a whole religious system is in his sights. *The Antichrist* is a forthright tract explaining the evils of Christianity. He starts at his favourite starting point — the conditions for human flourishing. Power and proficiency.



What is good? — All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.

What is bad? — All that proceeds from weakness.

What is happiness? — The feeling that power *increases* — that a resistance is overcome.

Not contentment, but more power; *not* peace at all, but war; *not* virtue, but proficiency (virtue in the Renaissance style, *virtù*, virtue free of moralic acid).

The weak and ill-constituted shall perish: first principle of *our* philanthropy. And one shall help them to do so.

What is more harmful than any vice? — Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak — Christianity ... [Antichrist 2]



How are we to interpret this? One could be quite uncharitable and say that Nietzsche has gone off the rails at once. For if he is sanctioning *moral cleansing* by the wide-scaled elimination of the weak and ill-constituted, and the rule of crass *power* then this is just obviously repulsive. However, there is no need to be so uncharitable in our interpretation. Nietzsche has given us no reason to interpret him as talking of military might or raw strength as power any more than interpreting power as something more positive, like *self control*, or *excellence in courage*. When Nietzsche says ‘war’, he might mean a domination of all that is lazy and weak in ourselves; war against all that would make us less than we could be. To try to fend off his criticism by saying “this is the man who inspired the Nazis” just won’t do. (After all, Jesus of Nazerath ‘inspired’ the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition in exactly the same sense.) Now, how has Christianity worked against human flourishing? Nietzsche goes on to explain.



One should not embellish or dress up Christianity: it has waged a *war to the death* against this *higher* type of man, it has excommunicated all the fundamental instincts of this type, it has distilled evil, the *Evil One*, out of these instincts — the strong human being as the type of reprehensibility, as the ‘outcast’. Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of *opposition* to the preservative instincts of strong life; it has depraved the reason even of the intellectually strongest natures by teaching men to feel the supreme values of intellectuality as sinful, as misleading, as *temptations*. The most deplorable example: the depraving of Pascal, who believed his reason had been depraved by original sin while it had only been depraved by his Christianity! — [Antichrist 5]



It is clear that Nietzsche is deeply *suspicious*. He claims to see the hidden motives of moralities and religious practices. And it is not enough for us to say “people don’t do things for *those* reasons”. “It isn’t *revenge* which motivates morality.” “Christian belief doesn’t *intentionally* cramp the well-being of others.” None of that will do. Nietzsche is intentionally being suspicious. He is attempting to bring to light the way morality and religion actually function. According to Nietzsche, “Actions are *never* what they appear to us to be!” [Daybreak, 116]. The philosopher, for Nietzsche “has a *duty* to suspicion today, to squint maliciously out of every abyss of suspicion.” [Beyond Good and Evil, 34]. We can never just read actions or beliefs at face value. They have functions which go beyond what we might *consciously* take them to be. And if an action or a belief performs a particular function, and this function is somehow negative, then this is an argument against that action or belief, no matter how it is *consciously* regarded. This is an important technique for modern critics. Freud, Feuerbach and Marx also wielded it in their critiques of Christianity, Capitalism and false Consciousness. This method is quite powerful, and it is not enough for us to respond by saying “we don’t see things like that”, unless we can come up with a good reason to think that things are always as they seem.

None of this is should be foreign to the Christian. After all, according to Jeremiah: “the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?” [Jeremiah 17:6]. We of all people should not be surprised when religious practices are perverted and used for selfish ends. This is the content of the prophetic denunciation of Israelite and Jewish practice before the exile, and of Jesus’ denunciation of Pharisaic religious practice during the Roman occupation. Nietzsche purports to show that Christian beliefs and practices are also used for selfish purposes, and also lead to immoral ends. We cannot merely dismiss this kind of criticism out of court. This kind of criticism is a part of our own heritage as Christians.

Of course Nietzsche works with a *caricature* of Christianity. Not all Christians exhibit all of the features he will go on to describe. But the question remains: does the caricature reveal what is *essentially* Christian? Are those who deviate from the type less Christian to the extent to which they don’t measure up to Nietzsche’s portrait? Or is Nietzsche wrong, and are *no* Christians like this? Is Christianity *never* practiced for those ends? Is this *never* a temptation to which individual Christians or Christian structures succumb? Or is there another response? Can Nietzsche show us the functions that Christian belief and practice perform in many cases, and how this function is inconsistent with the content of Christian faith?

These, I take it, are Nietzsche’s claims which have vital importance for Christians. There are two generally discernible sorts of criticisms in Nietzsche’s

body of work. One is that Christianity involves a form of slave morality, that it works against human flourishing instead of working towards it. Another, related issue, it is that Christianity subverts people's *reason*, it is *intellectually* irresponsible. We will address these two criticisms in the second half of this paper.

Note that I have not considered Nietzsche's famous claim that *God is Dead*. Of course this is also interesting, and is the topic of much discussion. However, I think it's obvious that Nietzsche did not use this as a claim that God no longer exists (but once did). But rather, that the concept 'God' no longer has the kind of purchase, or *need* have the kind of purchase that it once had. This is an interesting sociological fact about living in what is becoming more and more a post-Christian society. However, it doesn't present as many problems for a Christian as do his specific criticisms of Christian thought and practice, so again, this is one of those things I will *not* examine directly in the rest of this paper.

Why is Nietzsche interesting? Why should we consider the writings of someone who wrote nearly a hundred years ago, to a community very different from ours? There are a number of reasons: Firstly, there is a revival of interest in him from a number of quarters. Postmodern and post-structuralist theorists take Nietzsche to be a forerunner of many of their concerns. Nietzsche is a precursor to other important modern theorists like Michel Foucault. Furthermore, Nietzsche was aware that the 'death of God' had many important consequences, which were *not* realised at the time he was writing.¹ He could see that societal and intellectual changes made it possible to re-evaluate the place of traditional morality and traditional Christian belief. Now, society obviously mirrors these changes he was talking about. Many are making the same sorts of judgements as Nietzsche. Nietzsche's ethic is one which many people share. Nietzsche was not a *moralist* of the kind that many despise, but his feeling for integrity and honesty are obviously mirrored by many today. If we have nothing to say to Nietzsche, then we have precious little to say to many in today's world.

☞ OTHER APPROACHES

Christian approaches to Nietzsche have, by and large, been critical. This is understandable, as his thought is radically opposed to Christian faith. Many have thought that the task of the Christian apologist is to *demolish* the criticisms. This has the function of bolstering the faith of the Christians who are worried by the criticism (this might be a worthwhile task) and it is hoped to also see to it that the nasty heathens who bring such criticisms are converted when they see the error of their ways. This might also be a worthwhile task — however, there seems to be no chance of converting Nietzsche now that he's dead, and I have yet to see anyone converted when they have been proved wrong at the end of a philosophical argument.

How might such a demolition job go? Well, we could say "all of this suspicion applied to Christians and to morality? Why not apply it to atheists like Nietzsche?" We can wield suspicion in just the same sort of way as Nietzsche. He says Christians invent the notion of God to get revenge against those in power? Well, atheists like Nietzsche reject the notion of God because they have an ingrained hate for authority figures, or they never liked their own fathers, or any of a number of reasons. Or, you could say that Nietzschean concerns naturally lead too the Nazism and the extermination of the Jews. So, the message is tainted because of these sorts of consequences. You could try to show that Nietzsche's own position is self-defeating because of the more 'relativist' sorts of

¹In the foreword to *The Antichrist* he writes "This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them is even living yet."

things he says, so he has no foundation on which to base his own criticism. Or of course you could just point out that Nietzsche went mad, and hope that this would encourage others to not go down that path because of the dreaded consequences.

This is all just *too easy*. Cheap shots are there to be made, but a Nietzschean critic will rightly point out that this looks a lot like we're being defensive and we are not willing to address his actual concerns. And this is right. None of those *demolition jobs* actually address his concerns. That kind of *ad hominem* attack (basically, playing the 'man' and not the 'ball') will not do, because it leaves the ideas unaddressed. Just because there may (or may not) be problems with Nietzsche's own beliefs, it doesn't follow that there's nothing of worth in his ideas. The problem for us as Christians is that his criticisms can be mounted on *our* ground. Nietzsche alleges that Christian belief and practice is inconsistent by its own lights. Christianity itself thinks that human flourishing is a worthwhile end. If Christianity is inconsistent with human flourishing, then this is extremely problematic. Nietzsche claims that Christian morality is used for selfish purposes, and has its roots in revenge. As Christianity takes selfishness and revenge to be *Bad Things*, if that claim is right, then Christianity itself is a *Bad Thing*. This is a problem, whether or not Nietzsche went mad, or motivates Nazis, or whatever else. We can't fend him off by name-calling.

What about positive Christian responses to Nietzsche? Firstly, there has been precious little *appropriation* of Nietzsche by Christians. Marx was just as violent an opponent of Christianity, but he has been appropriated by liberation theologians and others for particular ends. Nietzsche hasn't seemed to be as susceptible to this kind of appropriation. Perhaps one reason for this is that masters of suspicion like Marx and Freud constructed *systems* of belief which can be appropriated and given a Christian gloss. Nietzsche was not a systematist. There is no systematic body of theory or practice which can be baptised into the Christian community. However, some have tried.

The *Death of God* movement in the 1960s, championed by William Hamilton and Thomas J. J. Altizer tried to reconceptualise Christian theology in the absence of God. Hamilton [1966] writes "... we do not know, do not adore, do not possess, do not believe in God. It is not just that a capacity has dried up within us; we do not take all this as merely a statement about our frail psyches we take it as a statement about the nature of the world and we try to convince others. God is dead. We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God." It is unclear to what extent this is properly called a movement of Christian theology — perhaps it is appropriately called a Christian a-theology. However you describe it, it doesn't appear to address Nietzsche's concerns. Nietzsche's criticism doesn't point to the need for a reconceptualised *theology*. Theology is not Nietzsche's first line of criticism. And it's not clear that the atheology of the death of God movement, with its "standing with Jesus on the side of the poor and oppressed against the oppressive, dominating concept 'God'" will particularly impress Nietzsche or address his concerns. The death of God movement seems to be a way to get rid of the thought-to-be-problematic concept "God" without taking away the moral concerns which come with it. Unfortunately, for Nietzsche, it is the *morality* and the *practice* which is the primary problem, not the concept "God".

The only real example I can find of a prominent mainstream *theology* which takes on Nietzschean concerns about morality and Christian practice is the later work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Anthony Thistleton [1995] shows that Bonhoeffer's later thinking, involving the notions of *cheap grace*, the *anonymous Christian* and *living without God*, was influenced by his reading of Nietzsche. For Bonhoeffer, the

questions raised by Nietzsche were a motivation to reconceive what it is to live as a Christian. For Bonhoeffer, whenever I use Christian faith or practice as a means to establish my *own* position, then I am not truly worshipping or serving God — I am practicing idolatry. “If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a God who in some way corresponds to me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says where He will be ... that place is the cross of Christ.” [1986]

Now much more can be said here about Bonhoeffer’s response to Nietzsche, but that would take us too far afield. Bonhoeffer focussed primarily on the ethical problems raised in a Nietzschean critique. However, as I hope to show, there are problems also when it comes to the *epistemology* or *rationality* of Christian faith, which Bonhoeffer did consider so much. So, in the rest of this paper I will not so much be simply reiterating Bonhoeffer’s later theology, but developing similar kind of response to a wider range of Nietzschean criticisms.

To sum up this section: What I plan to do is to not to appropriate Nietzsche for my own use (in the way the death-of-God theologians tried), nor to simply treat him as an opponent to *defeat*. but instead, to treat him as a partner in dialogue. He is someone who raises concerns which deserve to be thought about and deserve a response. It is this kind of response which I will attempt to give in the rest of this paper.

☞ MORALITY FOR THE WEAK

Nietzsche’s first criticism is that Christianity’s morality is corrupt and inconsistent. This is manifest in the Christian conception of God, which is perverted so that it does not enhance life, instead, it *contradicts life*.



The Christian conception of God — God as God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit — is one of the most corrupt conceptions of God arrived at on earth: perhaps it even represents the low-water mark in the descending development of the God type. God degenerated to the *contradiction of life*, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal *Yes!* In God a declaration of hostility towards life, nature, and the will to life! God the formula for every calumny of ‘this world’, for every lie about ‘the next world’! In God nothingness deified, the will to nothingness sanctified! ... [Antichrist 18]



Note that he does not argue against the concept of God *as such*, but simply the Christian concept of God. What is wrong with this notion of God? It amounts to a declaration of hostility towards life. If God and all things good are ‘otherworldly’ then of course the world in which we live is devalued. Now of course Nietzsche is aware that this is not the *only* thread in Christianity. There is also the doctrine of creation. Christians believe that the world is good, it is a creation of God. However, it is just as clear that Christianity *as practiced* does not always function in a way that observes those consequences of the doctrine of creation. Nietzsche explains why.



When misfortune strikes us, we can overcome it either by removing its cause or else by changing the effect it has on our feelings, that is, by reinterpreting the misfortune as a good, whose benefit may only later become clear. Religion and art (as well as metaphysical philosophy) strive to effect a change in our feeling, in part by changing the way we

judge experiences (for example, with the aid of the tenet, “Whom the Lord loves, he chastens”) and in part by awakening a pleasure in pain, in emotion generally (which is where tragic art has its starting point). The more a person tends to reinterpret and justify, the less will he confront the causes of the misfortune and eliminate them; a momentary palliation and narcotization (as used, for example, for a toothache) is also enough for him in more serious suffering. The more the rule of religions and all narcotic arts decreases, the more squarely do men confront the real elimination of the misfortune ...

[*Human, All Too Human* 108]



According to Nietzsche, real life is devalued because religious beliefs insulate us from the real problems of life. Judgements about suffering are filtered through a religious scheme, and so, they misread the true nature of suffering. Religion has a *narcotic* effect. Nietzsche’s critique is quite similar to that of Feuerbach and Marx here. It was Marx who said that religions are the “opiate of the people”, though this claim would not be out of place in Nietzsche’s body of work. Why is this a problem? After all, if someone is in real pain, then relief, of any kind, is welcome. The problem, for Nietzsche, is that the narcotization of religious belief makes believers *acquiesce* in the face of suffering. The religious account of evil, that it’s permitted by God, and hence, there’s nothing we should do but grin (or pray) and bear it, drowns out any other voices which tell us to actually *do something* in the face of the suffering.

This critique of religious behaviour should be recognisable to Christians. Consider the story of the Good Samaritan: When Jesus was asked to explain what it was to love your neighbour, he told a story in which religious beliefs prevented people from helping someone in need. It was a Samaritan, who did not hold orthodox Jewish beliefs, who was able to see suffering for what it was and do something about it.

Many more examples can be given to show that religious belief can function in this way. The acquiescence of the Church in the south of the United States in the face of the sufferings of African Americans who were slaves; the church’s establishment and maintenance of apartheid in South Africa despite the manifest suffering of the black community; and I’m sure examples closer to home can be found quite readily.

Why does religious belief function in the way that Nietzsche describes? One reason is the way that religious believers conceptualise good and evil. If God is wholly good, and wholly powerful, and if God allows such manifest suffering, then why shouldn’t *I* allow such suffering? If God isn’t doing anything about it, then what can *I* do? And after all, God has ensured that I’m looked after (I have my religious life-insurance package paid up) so the most I ought to do is to ensure that others have their salvation assured as well. Nothing else is so important. Theodicy is a tricky business for believers. It is quite difficult to maintain that there is a wholly good God who is sovereign over the world, without somehow down playing the real *evil* of evil. And, in practice, that is what many religious believers do. We are drugged to the real presence of evil, as it doesn’t really fit within the stories we tell ourselves.

This is not the only negative aspect of Christianity according to Nietzsche:



If one shifts the centre of gravity of life *out* of life into the ‘Beyond’ — into *nothingness* — one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity.

The great lie of personal immortality destroys all rationality, all naturalness of instinct — all that is salutary, all that is life-furthering, all that holds a guarantee of the future in the instincts henceforth excites mistrust. So to live that there is no longer any *meaning* in living: *that* now becomes the ‘meaning’ of life ... So many ‘temptations’, so many diversions from the ‘right road’ — ‘*one thing* is needful’ ... That, as an ‘immortal soul’, everybody is equal to everybody else, that in the totality of beings the ‘salvation’ of *every* single one is permitted to claim to be of everlasting moment, that little bigots and three-quarters madmen are permitted to imagine that for their sakes the laws of nature are continually being *broken* — such a raising of every sort of egoism to infinity, to *impudence*, cannot be branded with sufficient contempt ... ‘Salvation of the soul’ — in plain words: ‘The world revolves around *me*’ ...

[*Antichrist* 43]



Not only does religious belief function as a drug. It is also used for selfish purposes. If I’m on the side of God, then I’m the one in the *right* and the outsiders are not. If we use religious belief in this way, then we again fall foul of Nietzschean criticism. As Westphal [1993, page 224] writes “my greatest moral enthusiasm will be for principles that constrain others. Thus for example, preachers, who have been overwhelmingly men, can have much to say about Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord,” but very little to say about the preceding verse, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” ” Religious stories are powerful stories. And they can be wielded in both positive and negative ways. If I have a story which explains how I stand in relationship to God, then this is quite dangerous. I can use this in all sorts of ways to promote myself and harm others. This is doubly true for those who control the stories.

Let me make a conjecture: something like this process is operative when it comes the debate about women’s ordination. (Let me underline that I do not think that this is the *only* thing which is operative in this debate.) Women’s ordination is an obvious threat to the power structure which places men in a privileged position in church hierarchies. Once women ask to be included in this structure, men are, naturally, defensive. The rhetoric of Paul’s “I permit no woman to teach ...” [1 Timothy 2:12] is used in this debate to prevent women from entering particular positions of responsibility, despite the fact that women are allowed to teach in positions which have less status and power (for example, teaching as missionaries in cross-cultural situations, or teaching children in Sunday Schools). Why is this treated inconsistently? After all, this is a situation of teaching and exercising leadership responsibilities. Those who are on the side of restricting women’s access to power must be *very* careful that they are not doing this merely to entrench their own position. Otherwise, Nietzsche will have a field day pointing out our own inconsistency.

We must watch out that we do not use *morality* as a constraint on others without *first* applying the lessons to ourselves. This is the only consistent way, according to Nietzsche. This is also, according to Jesus, the only way we can be *moral*. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged ... Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.” [Luke 6:37,41–42]

Nietzsche and Jeremiah would add to this that it is not enough to give yourself a cursory glance to see whether you're carrying any logs around.

☞ EPISTEMOLOGY ADRIFT

We have already seen that for Nietzsche, Christianity has destructive effects on one's rationality. He writes "the great lie of personal immortality destroys all rationality" [A 43]. In this section I wish to explore what else Nietzsche says about the negative consequences of religious belief for epistemology.



From a psychological point of view, 'sins' are indispensable in any society organized by priests; they are the actual levers of power, the priest *lives* on sins, he needs 'the commission of sins' ... Supreme law: 'God forgives him who repents' — in plain language: *who submits himself to the priest.* [Antichrist 26]



The first point at which the rationality of a religious believer is subverted is that she or he submits it to another. Believers abdicate their responsibility to make reasoned decisions to the religious authorities, who tell them what to believe. This is quite rife in Christian circles, and it's quite simple to understand. For Christians, belief is a particularly important thing. It's so important it's hardly to be left to everyone — we appoint experts who find out what we are to believe, they tell us, and we believe it. This is, in rough outline, how many churches operate. Unfortunately, it leaves the people in the pews epistemically naïve. They abdicate their own responsibility to rationality to another. This is seen in the ways people treat questioning and uncertainty. If I question a particular interpretation of some text (say, Genesis 1 and 2, or Romans 8) or some reasonably core belief (like the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Virgin Birth) then likely as not some discussion will emerge in which the goal is to get me to believe the proposition in question. Once I assent to it, the purpose is achieved, and the discussion can stop, irrespective of how I come to it or whether my belief was responsibly formed or not. The aim is to ensure that my beliefs fall within the prescribed boundaries.

A particularly chilling example of this was given in a series of interviews given on a late night program on 2BL one Sunday night, called *Losing My Religion*. On this program ex-Christians described their experiences on leaving the church. One described the process as being "born again". She had to start to make up her own mind on issues. She had to start to think for herself, for there was no-one who could tell her what to do. She was growing from being epistemically infantile to being a mature adult who is able to decide issues for herself. This experience is quite common, and to be expected, given the way that many churches function.

This is a problem for Christian faith, for it is a central tenet of the Christian religion that people are to grow up into maturity, to be rational, to make our own decisions, and so on. However, Christianity as practiced does not always encourage this. Why? One reason is the way that we conceptualise our faith. If the object is for us to believe certain things, then of course it doesn't matter how we come to believe those things, as long as we believe them. And if the beliefs are a matter of eternal significance then of course it is reasonable to abdicate your responsibility to make up your mind to someone who is much more expert than you. However, problems strike if you start to question those beliefs. What can you do then? You can no longer listen to the person who was telling you them, because they don't encourage you to question these things. No-one has given you

any particularly good reasons to keep believing these things, so it is simplest to simply stop believing them altogether. At least that way you make up your own mind.

As bad as this is, for Nietzsche this is not the only problem with rationality. If it were, then there would be some hope for those in power to be rational. For Nietzsche, there is no such hope.



I make war on this theologian instinct: I have found traces of it everywhere. Whoever has theologian blood in his veins has a wrong and dishonest attitude towards all things from the very first. The pathos that develops out of this is called *faith*: closing one's eyes with respect to oneself for good and all so as not to suffer from the sight of incurable falsity. Out of this erroneous perspective on all things one makes a morality, a virtue, a holiness for oneself, one unites the good conscience with seeing *falsely* — one demands that no *other* perspective shall be accorded any value after one has rendered one's own sacrosanct with the names 'God', 'redemption', 'eternity'. I have dug out the theologian instinct everywhere: it is the most widespread, peculiarly *subterranean* form of falsity that exists on earth. What a theologian feels to be true *must* be false: this provides almost a criterion of truth. It is his deepest instinct of self-preservation which forbids any part of reality whatever to be held in esteem or even spoken of... [Antichrist 9]



Nietzsche is very perceptive when he talks of the "deepest instinct of self-preservation", for that is part of the dynamics of much religious belief. When my security depends on my holding fast to some religious beliefs, then I will only be secure if I am sure that I will not reject those beliefs — irrespective of whether I've simply adopted them from someone else or if I've come to them myself. As a result, I retract myself from anything which might call those beliefs into question. I must be preserved from any form of "intellectual attack". This results in a completely insulated system of belief, which Nietzsche describes all too recognisably:



In Christianity, neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point. Nothing but imaginary *causes* ('God', 'soul', 'ego', 'spirit', 'free will' — or 'unfree will'); nothing but imaginary *effects* ('sin', 'redemption', 'grace', 'punishment', 'forgiveness of sins'). A traffic between imaginary *beings* ('God', 'spirits', 'souls'); and imaginary *natural* science (anthropocentric; complete lack of concept of natural causes); and imaginary *psychology* (nothing but self-misunderstandings, interpretations of pleasant or unpleasant general feelings, for example the condition of *nervus sympathicus*, with the aid of the sign-language of religio-moral idiosyncrasy — 'repentance', 'sting of conscience', 'temptation by the Devil', 'the proximity of God'); an imaginary *teleology* ('the kingdom of God', 'the Last Judgement', 'eternal life'). — This purely fictitious world is distinguished from the world of dreams, very much to its disadvantage, by the fact that the latter *mirrors* actuality, while the former falsifies, disvalues and denies actuality. Once the concept 'nature' had been devised as the concept antithetical to 'God', 'natural' had to be the word for 'reprehensible' — this entire fictional world has its roots in *hatred* of the natural (— actuality! —), it is the

expression of a profound discontent with the actual ... *But that explains everything.* Who alone has reason to *lie himself out* of actuality? He who suffers from it. [Antichrist 15]



Now of course Nietzsche is merely *stating* that the Christian concepts of *God, sin, redemption, grace* and so on are imaginary. However, Nietzsche's contention still has bite, even if Christian practice happens to have 'factual content'. It operates in an epistemic vacuum. This is extremely dangerous, for it gives Christians no language with which to speak to those outside the religious community. If I may abuse terminology somewhat, religious discourse becomes a *self-contained* language game with rules for the connections between religious concepts, but precious little which connects those concepts to anything with any purchase to those outside the community. I will not be able to communicate with others if my faith is solely expressed in 'technical' terms, like *God, sin, redemption, grace,* and so on, which have no connection to terms used in the wider community.

If I also use terms which *do* have some kind of meaningful connection, terms like *person, trust, purpose, justice, love,* and so on, then I basically have two options. First, I could redefine these terms to be technical terms too (which Christians use the term *agape* for love, to mean "perform religious duties towards", such as evangelising, praying for, and so on), or I can leave myself open to learn something from the 'world' which might challenge my own belief. For example, when the natural and social sciences tell us that people are influenced to a great degree by their conditioning and their physiology, do we use this to enrich and enhance what we know about people, or do we ignore it? The Church of the Middle Ages attempted to insulate itself from the findings of the young science of astronomy. It let its simple-minded exegesis of Scripture overrule Galileo's theories. The consequences were disastrous. If I allow religious considerations to override non-religious considerations, then I will not always get the 'right answer', as this example shows.

Nietzsche is pointing us to an alternative: to a self-critical, open, humble, listening faith, one which is open to 'revelation' from more than the obviously *religious*. This is difficult, for it means getting over our own insecurity. It means having less faith in my own *belief*, and more openness to be taught, from many different directions.

☞ CONCLUSION

All of these criticisms which Nietzsche has brought us are present within the Christian tradition itself. Nietzsche has reminded us of what we should have already known. But does this is not a cause for relaxation. We can't simply say that this is nothing new and nothing to worry about. For the conclusion could be that Christianity is inconsistent. It is a selfish faith teaching the virtue of selflessness. It preaches maturity while keeping one immature. If this is right, then so much the worse for Christianity.

The only way I can think of convincing someone that the Christian faith is consistent is to present an example. To show that it works in practice, that there is someone who is consistently Christian, and not particularly selfish. That there is someone who is consistently Christian, yet not particularly irrational. Christians, of course, will point to the example of Jesus. Nietzsche was quite aware of Jesus, and he had an interesting, ambivalent view of Jesus. He was admired, however, he was seen as an escapist, proclaiming a gospel of escape from the harshness of reality. Of course, that was the Jesus who was described by the Christians of his time. He was fit the church of his day, in the way that

the Jesus of liberation theologians is a revolutionary, and our Jesus is either a friendly sort of person, an exorcist, a theologian, or something else, depending on whatever our own interests. Perhaps if Nietzsche had known the Jesus of history, and had he known a community of followers who exhibited more of his own risky, open, selfless faith, then he would not have come to the same conclusion. I conjecture that this too is the only kind of existence proof that will be convincing for people today.

☞ USEFUL REFERENCES

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