Friedrich Nietzsche: Another Crucifixion

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> Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!". . . "Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him--you and I. All of us are his murderers . . . At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. "I came too early," he said then; "my time is not yet."[1]

In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. If considered, Nietzsche's statement has far-reaching implications. That God is dead means God must have been a human creation in the first place. Also, historically, God has been viewed as the source of value; a Godless world is then without objective value. Because he believed Christian morality suppressed life, Nietzsche welcomed the death of God as an opportunity to rid Europe of Christian morality. Nietzsche did not stop at proclaiming God's death, but developed an onslaught against the intellectual basis of Christianity itself. He aimed especially at Christianity's hypocrisy and its slave morality.[2]

The thrust of Nietzsche's attack was against the Protestant emphasis on faith to the exclusion of action. In *The Will to Power*, he argued that Christians were uniformly hypocritical:

> The Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed them; and the impudent garrulous talk about the "justification by faith" and its supreme and sole significance is only the consequence of the Church's lack of courage and will to profess the *works* Jesus demanded.[3]

Kaufmann said Nietzsche "never tires of insisting that the legacy of Jesus was essentially a practice."[4] By stressing faith over action the Church corrupted Jesus' teachings.[5]

In fact, Nietzsche was so confident that no Christian ever held true to Jesus' teaching that he wrote "In truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross. . . . What has been called 'evangel' from that moment was actually the opposite of that which *he* had lived."[6] According to Nietzsche, the Church stood for exactly what Jesus was against.

The twisting of doctrine to focus on faith over action was begun by Paul, an early Christian leader, and later affirmed by Martin Luther. According to Nietzsche, there would have been no Christianity without Paul. Kaufmann said: "Unable to fulfill even the Jewish life--not to speak of Jesus' so much more demanding way of life--he conceived of faith in Jesus as a substitute."[7] Paul and Luther could not act as Jesus demanded so they made faith the path to salvation. In his *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy*, R. J. Hollingdale explained Nietzsche's view Christians: "The life that Jesus led . . . was obviously not the life led by the everyday Christian, nor was his practice that of the church named after him."[8]

Not only did Paul create a way for himself and other believers to be saved, but he also nurtured the idea of a state of judgement in the afterlife, in which the non-believers would be punished. Here again, Nietzsche

found that Paul, by sanctioning the ideas of judgement and revenge, had betrayed a fundamental part of Jesus' message.[9] Punishment and revenge were both contrary to Jesus' message of love and forgiveness.

Nietzsche's personal beliefs about Jesus help clarify his arguments against Christianity. He saw Jesus not as a savior, but as a rebel and a human teacher with no divine purpose. He called Jesus a "political criminal," fighting against the established order: "It [Jesus's rebellion] was a rebellion against . . . caste, privilege, order, and formula. . . . He died for *his* guilt. All evidence is lacking. . . that he died for the guilt of others."[10] Kaufmann adds, "he [Jesus] had *taught--not* to 'redeem men' but to show how one must live."[11]

Along with his arguments about the corruption of Jesus' original teachings, Nietzsche also vehemently disagreed with the spirit of Christian morality. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he constructed an argument against what he considered a "herd morality." Nietzsche particularly loathed Christian morality because it attempted a levelling, or a reduction of every person to the same strength and power: "everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor is henceforth called *evil*."[12]

Christianity attempted to "Stand all valuations *on their head*"[13] and created what Nietzsche called slave morality. Slave morality's opposite, master morality, represented Nietzsche's idea of virtue: powerful, noble, fear inspiring, and value creating. Nietzsche believed that slave morality had its origin in the Jews: "the Jews have brought off that miraculous feat of an inversion of values. . . . Their prophets have fused 'rich, 'godless,' 'evil,' 'violent,' and 'sensual' into one. . . . They mark the beginning of the slave rebellion in morals."[14]

Christian morality was also a slave morality according to Nietzsche. He described this morality in *Beyond Good and Evil:*

> The slaves eye is not favorable to the virtues of the powerful . . . he would like to persuade himself that even their [the powerful's] happiness is not genuine. Conversely, those qualities are brought out and flooded with light which serve to ease existence for those who suffer. . . Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility.[15]

The result of slave morality is that the "'good' and 'stupid' [are] closer together."[16] Slave morality bred mediocrity because it subverts superiority for the sake of the utility of the weak. Through its emphasis on utility, Christianity allowed the common and weak to survive. Hollingdale elaborated on the effect of slave morality: "Those moralities which elevated the claims of the powerless to positions of honour were harmful because they thwarted the claims of power, and consequently those of life itself."[17] If everybody followed Christian morality, it "would lead to the decay of mankind."[18]

Slave morality supported pity, a sentiment which Nietzsche abhorred. Pity, he thought, had a weakening effect on humans: "Pity stands opposed to the tonic emotions which heighten our vitality: it has a depressing effect. We are deprived of strength when we feel pity."[19] Pity also allowed what was weak and inferior to survive: "they [religions] have preserved too much of *what ought to perish*."[20]

Nietzsche believed that Christianity had outdated itself. As the madman said, the people themselves had killed God; they just had not yet realized it:

> The greatest recent event--that "god is dead," that the belief in the Christian God has ceased to be believable--is even now beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. . . . however this may be said: the event itself is much too great, too distant, too far from the comprehension of the many for the tidings of it to be thought of as having arrived yet.[21]

Nietzsche believed that "God has been thoroughly refuted."[22] However, not only had the masses not yet realized that they had killed God, but they did not yet know the implication: the collapse of the "whole European morality."[23] Without the Christian God, Western morality lost its justification.

Nietzsche found God's death good because the Christian morality of slavery would eventually die as well. Humanity would improve because the powerful would no longer be bound by the weak. What does it mean if Nietzsche was right? Even he did not pretend to know. Almost a century after his death Christianity still has a large Western following. Perhaps, as the madman in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche also prophesied before his time.

Endnotes

1. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 96-97.
2. Although Nietzsche did focus his argument on Christian morality and hypocrisy, he also argued that the Christian faith was irrational. Kaufmann notes that this argument was important because it showed that Nietzsche was not, as was commonly believed, totally removed from the Enlightenment tradition. Ibid., 350.
3. Kaufmann, 343. (*The Will to Power*, #191) Herafter any quotation of Nietzsche taken from Kaufmann will be cited as Kaufmann, followed by the actual Nietzschean work with a section or volume number when appropriate. Likewise, any citation of an actual Nietzschean work will include the title and section number when appropriate.
4. Kaufmann, 353.
5. *Church* refers to "Protestantism no less than Catholicism." Kaufmann, 343.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 612. (*The Antichrist*, #39)
7. Kaufmann, 344.
8. R. J. Hollingsdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy* (Louisiana State UP: Baton Rouge, 1956), 249.
9. Kaufmann, 345.
10. Kaufmann, 399. (*The Antichrist*, #27)
11. Ibid., 341. (*The Antichrist*, #35)
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 115 (#201).
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., *Beyond Good and Evil*, 18 (#195). Because of a common misunderstanding of Nietzsche as a forerunner of Nazi anti-Semitism, it should be noted that Nietzsche's comment about the Jews in no way reflects this attitude. For example, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he says "it might be useful and fair to expel the anti-Semitic screamers from the country." Ibid., 188 (#251).
15. Ibid., 207 (#260)
16. Ibid.
17. Hollingdale, 221.
18. Ibid., 249.
19. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 573-574. (The Antichrist, #7)
20. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 74-75 (#62).

21. Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, 477.
22. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 66 (#53).
23, Ibid.