

## After Nietzsche

There are very few people whose name would invoke hatred amongst many “Christians” and love amongst many “atheists.” One such name is Friedrich Nietzsche. The interpretation of just one passage in his *The Gay Science* has sparked this great controversy. In it, Nietzsche states at one point that “God is dead”<sup>1</sup> and this one sentence has caused most theologians to abandon reading anything associated with Nietzsche. This one statement, taken out of its context, has supposedly created an army of atheists who see Christianity through these lenses that God is dead. There are some theologians, though, who have tried to acknowledge Nietzsche and re-appropriate things in Nietzsche (such as this death of God) into a new movement.

Acknowledging this diversity of thought, there are many questions to answer and many problems to resolve. First, what did Nietzsche mean in *The Gay Science* when his madman states that God is dead? To answer this question, it will be necessary to look at the rest of the passage to understand the phrase as well as the historical location of Nietzsche to understand his implications. The second question deals with those that have re-appropriated Nietzsche in theology: did these people understand Nietzsche's meaning or did they supply their own context and arguments for their ideology? To answer this, it will be necessary to look at their application of Nietzsche and compare it to the answer to the first question. The last question to entertain is whether or not one *can* re-appropriate Nietzsche's “death of God” into theology and if so, *how*? The full answer to this question may be beyond one single essay, but I hope that enough will be seen in the other answers to make this answer obvious.

### *II. Nietzsche's Words*

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964): 125. \*All references for this book are to section numbers, not page numbers.

As I have already noted, Nietzsche's "death of God" is possibly the most misunderstood area of Nietzsche's works and has served as the basis for misunderstanding the rest of Nietzsche's works within theological beliefs. This section of *The Gay Science*, titled "The Madman," is where any investigation should begin. The madman is very specific in naming the murderers of God. He is less specific as to how God is murdered, but that is answered when Nietzsche's historical location is understood. In the section in question, the madman first asks "Where is God gone?" before answering his own question: "*We have killed him,--you and I!*"<sup>2</sup> It seems clear that for Nietzsche, the murderers of God are the people of the madman's time. Yet, are these the same people of Nietzsche's own time or are they some other people? How should these people be described?

The most amazing description of the murderers of God are that they are related to the religious as the madman went around spreading his message among the various churches. These churches have become "the tombs and sepulchers of God."<sup>3</sup> As such, it seems logical to conclude that Nietzsche is implying that the priests and clergy are guardians of a cemetery and no longer ambassadors of some *living* (or even resurrected) God. Yet this does not bring us closer to the murderers of God. We must turn to more of Nietzsche's works to better understand this. Later in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche states that Schopenhauer first saw that belief in God was a lie.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Schopenhauer raised this as a problem with the rest of Europe; and it is this European conscience that finally ceased tolerating this lie.<sup>5</sup> This may bring us closer to discovering the murderers of God than what is first seen. Through this, it may be assumed that God's murder occurred years (if not centuries) before Schopenhauer.

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<sup>2</sup>Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 125.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 357

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

Jumping back in history, we can see when God became a tool of man for Nietzsche: the Jews and early Christians. First, the Jews begin interpreting “all happiness as a reward, all unhappiness as punishment for disobeying God, as 'sin.’”<sup>6</sup> As “sin” is introduced through the Jews, it becomes a device for the priestly class to maintain the order they want. To Nietzsche, the Jewish priests did not stop there and they began falsifying their history to further their control over others. For Nietzsche, the Jews continued to *negate* the ideals of what was natural and seen in all of the non-Jewish people. Through this, the Jews were able to form Christianity to suit their own needs:

The 'holy people,' who had retained only priestly values, only priestly words for all things and who, with awe-inspiring consistency, had distinguished all other powers on earth from themselves as 'unholy,' as 'world,' as 'sin'--this people produced an ultimate formula for its instinct that was logical to the point of self-negation: as *Christianity*, it negated even the last form of reality, the 'holy people,' the 'chosen people,' the Jewish reality itself.<sup>7</sup>

Christianity has become the ultimate form of Judaism in that it even rejects its own true self.

Nietzsche further sees the death of God being embedded in the fact that God is never found.

There is no evidence anywhere for Nietzsche in the historical, natural, and even the supernatural.

The death of God was the creation of a god. In Nietzsche's mind, this is found clearly in Paul:

“The 'God' whom Paul invented, a god who 'ruins the wisdom of the world' ... is in truth merely Paul's own resolute *determination* to...give the name of 'God' to one's own will.”<sup>8</sup>

Back to the madman, we find that individualism is what killed God as the madman asks, “Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it [killing God]?”<sup>9</sup> In

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche again critiques the priestly class by describing them: “As

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<sup>6</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Kaufmann, Walter ed. (New York: Viking 1954): 25. All references for this book are section numbers, not page numbers.

<sup>7</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 27.

<sup>8</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 47.

<sup>9</sup>Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 125.

corpses they meant to live.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, it would seem that the Judeo-Christian priestly class in Nietzsche's view has murdered God, replaced God with their own puppet, and have covered this up with a lie in the myth of the resurrected Christ. In other words, we find that the murderers of God in Nietzsche's view are the very people who claim to worship, follow, and represent God: the Christianity of Nietzsche's world. We also see that they have murdered God by the very act of creating their own god and making it the true God in place of all that is natural and even supernatural. God is dead because the priests have killed God in their secret coup in their quest for power.

### *III. Nietzsche's World*

Nietzsche's phrase “God is dead” may be understood now in terms of who and how, but it still needs to be placed in the context of Nietzsche's meaning. There still remains to be determined whether or not Nietzsche's “Christianity” was synonymous with Christianity as a whole or just in terms of a single section. Some see Nietzsche in terms of the Christian church contemporary to his day much like many see Kierkegaard in terms of the Danish church at his time. If Nietzsche was reacting primarily against the German Lutheranism of his day, how much of his critique is still applicable to theology today? If Nietzsche's criticism was also in view of Christianity as a whole, we must discover how accurate are his depictions of Christianity and how should they affect Christian theology.

It should be noted that the figure of Jesus appears to largely be excluded from his critiques of Christianity. He says in *The Antichrist*, “Jesus has been understood, or *misunderstood* as the cause of a rebellion; and I fail to see against what this rebellion was directed, if it was not the Jewish church--'church' exactly in the sense in which we use the word

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<sup>10</sup>Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*: 204.

today.”<sup>11</sup> As such, it would seem that in some ways, Nietzsche is aligning himself with Jesus *against* both Jews and Christians. Jesus was not some Redeemer/Son of God figure of salvation but rather a human who has displayed a “psychological reality of 'redemption.'”<sup>12</sup> This makes Nietzsche's attack on Christianity much different as he sees some characters in the historical development of Christianity in positive light. Nietzsche is thus very pointed in his critique and not simply being against anything labeled “Christian.” Through this, then, it should be noted that Nietzsche's “*opposition* to Christianity as a reality is inseparable from his *tie* to Christianity as a postulate.”<sup>13</sup> That is, we cannot separate how Nietzsche believes Christianity is *in theory* from what it is *in practice*.

The Christianity which Nietzsche is radically against is the Christianity of the institution, the Christianity of doctrines. Nietzsche's primary critique of Christianity is that it lies. He despises this Christianity because it flies against all of nature and makes power and the will to power *evil*. In this twisting of the slave morality and *ressentiment* into good, Christianity has made weakness a virtue and strength a vice. By doing this, the Christianity of doctrines has made faith into a matter of simple belief. This “faith,” says Nietzsche, only makes being a Christian a negation of that word. Faith *is* doing, not just believing. Mere belief is only a “cloak, a pretext, a *screen* behind which the instincts play their game.”<sup>14</sup>

So what “Christianity” is Nietzsche reacting against? It seems that he is reacting against *portions* of “historic” Christianity (namely the focus on doctrine and *ressentiment*) **and** *portions* of the contemporary German Lutheranism (namely faith as simple belief and formulas). It is therefore important to understand *which* Christianity Nietzsche is criticizing before appropriating

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<sup>11</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 27.

<sup>12</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 33.

<sup>13</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity* (Henry Regnery 1961): 6.

<sup>14</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 39.

it into any kind of theological discourse. It would seem then that at least some of Nietzsche's critiques should be seen as inapplicable to theology today as it has evolved in some ways beyond that of what he knew it to be. For instance, his abhorrence of simple, formulaic belief would have been very applicable just a few years ago with things such as “The Four Spiritual Laws,” but Christian theology appears to have moved beyond that formulaic spirituality, especially those that have begun to approach postmodern philosophy and culture. As Stanley Grenz wrote, “our goal in proclaiming the gospel should not merely be to bring others to affirm a list of correct propositions.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is also true that some of Nietzsche's critiques may still be applicable, such as the concept of *ressentiment* flowing underneath the surface of “anti-secularism” movements. This is something of which theologians should be keenly aware.

#### *IV. Nietzsche Appropriated*

Now that we have some understanding of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and the “death of God,” we should look at how it has been understood and appropriated in theology. Mark Taylor is one of the few who have appropriated Nietzsche into a working model of theology. In his *Erring*, Taylor notices in sections of Christianity something similar to Nietzsche's madman: individualism. Taylor points out that it was Luther's conception of Christ living and dying *pro nobis*--“for us”--that has radically shifted the focus of theology from God to self. This turn to the self has resulted in the slow removal of God, however defined, from the personal and public sphere. Morality, that hammer of control the Jewish priestly class used, has become nothing more than suggestion as Nietzsche sees people like Kant creating their own morals and their own categorical imperatives. There is no longer some kind of transcendent

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<sup>15</sup>Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 171.

God, even if the people have not yet acknowledged it or their participation in it. God is dead long before people realize it.

This individualism, Taylor notes, is radically linked to the Enlightenment and, more specifically, Descartes. While Descartes radicalized doubt, he also made truth something *pro nobis* as it is linked to certainty, which can only exist in the self.<sup>16</sup> As such, Taylor makes the men of the Enlightenment the ultimate murderers of God. Can this be reconciled with the above that the priestly class killed God? I believe so. Taylor consistently links the death of God with the death of the *Christian* God. As I have noted above, Nietzsche sees this God as a mythological figure created by the priestly class. It was also noted that this myth was brought to public awareness through Schopenhauer. It would then seem that we have two different deaths of God: one by the priestly class (who also made a replacement God) and one by the Enlightenment (which is really the death of this created God). Taylor is so far consistent with Nietzsche.

Taylor continues to follow Nietzsche's thought as he expands on the individualism that has killed God: "If *the* master is God and the slave man, then man's murder of God is an act of self-deification."<sup>17</sup> This is an echo of Nietzsche's sentiments from earlier: the murderers of God have attempted to become gods in order to seem worthy of this event. As such, this death of God "appears to be the birth of the sovereign self."<sup>18</sup> Taylor does not end there. Taking this further, he expands on this death of God and states that it also brings about the death of the human self. As Nietzsche has indicated in *The Antichrist*, the creation of Christianity is ultimately a perfection of Judaism by the Jews as it negates even itself.<sup>19</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that

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<sup>16</sup>Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984): 22.

<sup>17</sup>Taylor, *Erring* 25.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 27.

ultimate death of God, as it brings the birth of the sovereign self would also bring with it the *death* of the self. This is the nihilism which Nietzsche saw and embraced. Taylor writes that “Nihilism can be a sign of weakness or a mark of strength. Unable to accept loss and anxious about death, the partial nihilism of the modern humanistic atheist is a sign of weakness.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, as Nietzsche embraces this nihilism completely and to the point of acknowledging the murder of God, Nietzsche makes it a sign of strength. By accepting the death of God and entering into the act of creation, man can overcome this murder of God and return to the natural order of noble things and, possibly, beyond the notions of good and evil.

#### *V. Finding God*

It is through this fullness of nihilism that theology must pass in order to rediscover the oldest God. This God is not the self, but also not the radically Other. The path of nihilism is the one that can navigate theology safely between the rock and whirlpool that past theologies and philosophies have found. Through this path, there can be a radical *rebirth* of God in the middle place. As a measure of trust, theology should allow play in the future, not seeking to lose the pathos of the self or the ethos of the divine. Through this wandering and playing, we find the essence Taylor calls erring. It is through this purposeful drifting and transgression that theology may resurface from its own death and we can possibly find God for the first time.

The death of God, a controversial phrase, has sparked many misunderstandings: James Sire wrote of the death of God: “When God dies, both the substance and value of everything else dies with it.”<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche definitely had something else in mind and this did not include the death of valuation. It included the death of the old system of values and the creation of a new set. Through this death of God, we can be assured that if something does not begin to create, we

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<sup>20</sup>Taylor, *Erring* 33.

<sup>21</sup>James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997): 173.

are left in a weakened state. By navigating through the death of God and the subsequent nihilism, we may begin to create theology and find God.