



Nietzsche and Christianity Crane Brinton

[Friedrich Nietzsche believed that his predecessors in] philosophy had gone astray in three ways. Materialistic or empirical rationalists, taking their cue from Socrates, had falsified and suppressed full human experience by erecting the dream-world we now call science. Idealistic rationalists, taking their cue also from Socrates, had achieved a similar falsification and suppression by erecting the even more fantastic dream-world of idealism, a world especially familiar to Germans, who had produced Kant and Hegel. Finally, gross men miscalled artists, hardly obliged to appeal to Greek masters, though Epicurus and others were there if needed, had tried to do without these intellectual dream-worlds, and had fallen back on their “doggish lusts” and sentimental memories as guides to conduct and exhaustive descriptions of reality. For Nietzsche, all these errors were combined in Christianity, the historic form in which philosophical speculation had been brought within the capacities of ordinary men brought deliberately by designing thinkers, weaklings perversely turned men of action: that is, by priests. All Nietzsche’s more general and abstract hatreds were focussed in his hatred for what he called Christianity. He found there the idealist, hardly at all disguised; the sensualist, his simpler lusts suppressed only to crop up in subtler and more tortured forms; even the empirical rationalist did not the English call themselves Christian?

Nietzsche’s most famous attack on Christianity is *The Antichrist*, written at top speed in the last few months before he was shut up as a madman, and charged with the full energy of his hatred, his literary gifts, and his tautened nerves about to break. If only because of its intensity and skill in invective, it makes conventional anti-Christian literature seem pale and lifeless. It has become a kind of handbook for lustier anti-Christians like Mr. H. L. Mencken and for Nazis, though it is meat much too strong for the mild, vegetarian radicals who want to keep Christian ethics while discarding Christian “superstitions.” Hardly any of Nietzsche’s writings is without passages directed against the Christian religion; but in *The Antichrist* his hatreds, magnificently, madly, indecently gathered together, burst in a final explosion. The book ends with a passage which reveals the overwhelming ambition of the prophet. The Nietzsche who signed himself in his madness The Crucified One would supplant Jesus with Nietzsche:

And time is reckoned from the dies nejustus upon which this fatality came into being from the first day of Christianity! why not rather from its last day? From today? Transvaluation of all Values! (*The Antichrist*, § 62)

The base from which Nietzsche works, he had already clearly laid down in earlier writings. What we call morality among men, if studied as the natural historian studies the behavior of other organisms (Nietzsche, by the way, was willing to adopt “scientific” methods when he found them convenient), this morality is seen to be no divine command, no thing-in-itself, but an instrument by which a few men control for their own benefit the activities of

their fellows. The distinction between “good” and “bad” is wholly man-made; Nature, the universe revealed to us by our sense-experience and by our desires, knows nothing of such a distinction. “There are no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of phenomena; the origin of this interpretation lies beyond the pale of morality.” (*The Will to Power*, §258)

All men *want*. And since we must give names, we shall, writes Nietzsche, call this wanting, this fundamental attitude of human consciousness, which uses the intellect as a tool, but is hardly ever guided by the intellect though it may be corrupted and weakened by the intellect we shall call this wanting The Will to Power. Now some men are stronger in body, more alert in mind, more *driven* by this Will, than others. Very early, among peoples we call primitive or savage, this fact became clear. Nietzsche is uncertain whether this differentiation took place *within* all those groups of men we call races, or whether whole races, in respect to other races, possessed these superior powers. He inclines to accept *both* descriptions as true. Within any group, a few men possess such powers, and become masters; but *au fond* the northern peoples of Europe do possess them in greater strength than the southern peoples. Whatever their origins and Nietzsche is emphatic that they are not at all as simple as innocent theorists of German racial “purity” make out Nordics, Teutons, “blond beasts,” do in fact possess this superiority. There are purified races, if no pure ones. And these races, these groups of superior men, if you prefer, have set up those potent abstractions we call “good” and “bad.” “The pathos of nobility and distance, the chronic and despotic *esprit de corps* and fundamental instinct of a higher dominant race coming into association with a meaner race, an ‘under-race,’ this is the origin of the antithesis of good and bad.” (*The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, § 2)

There are, then, a minority of “masters” and a majority of “herd.” This means that there are two moralities, master-morality and herd-morality. They are different, indeed antithetical. “Good” for the masters is the pure exertion of the Will to Power, which in our decadent times we cannot even name without using words of ill-repute, like fighting, cruelty, greed, lying, voluptuousness. “Good” for the herd we herd-men and Christians can describe in nice words, like peace, compassion, obedience, self-restraint. And similarly, of course, with “bad.”

Already it should be clear, from the terms used above, that Nietzsche is facing the ineluctable and insoluble problem of the origin of evil. He has decided that somehow, sometime, somewhere perhaps in Greece before Socrates men behaved as he liked to think of them as behaving. This is his Garden of Eden, a place extraordinarily like Valhalla, where heroes fought and cheated all day, and, their wounds miraculously no wounds, feasted all night. Once the distinction between master-morality and slave-morality had been as clear on earth and in reality as it was in Nietzsche’s mind. But no longer. There had been a Fall of Man, and the slaves had come to rule the masters. Good had somehow become evil, evil good. Inexplicably? Not quite, unfortunately. History, aided by Nietzsche, was equal to the explanation.

Christianity is for him the key. Christ, and even more the apostle Paul, inspired by Jewish malevolence and Greek philosophy, undid the work of Nature, and set slaves over masters. What they did was indeed no more than priests everywhere have tried with varying success to do. But they did it more completely and more disastrously than it has ever been done more so even than in India. There Buddha, a natural if somewhat gentle aristocrat, came to the rescue of the victims of “super-spiritualization.” Buddha was primarily a “hygienist,” “He understands goodness as being good as promoting health. *Prayer* is out of the question, as is also *asceticism*” (*The Antichrist*, § 20) But Christianity, as finally established, was the work of herd-men who loved their own weaknesses, who strove to

further *disease*. “Christian is the hatred of the intellect, of pride, of courage, freedom, intellectual *libertinage*; Christian is the hatred of the senses, of the joys of the *senses*, of joy in general.” (*The Antichrist*, § 21)

How can anything so unnatural as the victory of the slaves over the masters take place? As easily, surely, as the regrettable elevation of the Lower Law above the Higher Law noted by moralists more orthodox than Nietzsche. The slaves are always vastly more numerous than the masters. Normally they remain quiet, content with their slave-morality. Indeed, Christianity, if it were limited to the masses, and used, as it was used during the best days of the Renaissance, to keep them quiet, might be a natural and a useful thing. But perversely some of the slaves are born intelligent, or at least crafty, and they become priests. Even more perversely, some of the masters are born weaklings, but intelligent; or at any rate catch the mysterious disease called moral idealism. They too become priests Christian, Jacobin, or socialist. Now the priest in this broad sense is a man with a very strong Will to Power, but without the great gifts of bodily strength, without the capacity for masculine joy in its disciplined exercise, without the reverent attachment for this earth so essential to the true aristocrat the old Prussian Junker, for instance. The priest’s Will to Power drives him to seek a way to rule, and his craft finds this way; he invents a religion of pity, of softness, of equality, and rallies the slaves to the overthrow of the masters.

Especially when he is dealing with the origins of primitive religions and of Christianity, Nietzsche leans rather heavily on this somewhat outmoded “priest-hypocrite-villain” theory. But he is far too subtle a psychologist, too good a child of the late nineteenth century, to repeat here the simplicities of French anti-clericals of the eighteenth century. Nietzsche’s priest is no plain hypocrite. This priest believes, perhaps from the very first, the pious fictions he invents. He really believes the meek are blessed; he even believes that he himself is meek, and that he ought to inherit the earth. His hatred he thinks is love. He takes joy in his disease, in his weakness. And since joy is one of the primal sources of strength in men, the priest achieves the extraordinary and very Christian feat of turning his weakness into a kind of personal strength, not consciously, not hypo-critically, but unconsciously. That is the full and paradoxical horror of religion, and especially of Christianity; it seems regrettably *natural*. When he comes to modern exponents of the religion of humanity, Nietzsche is sure that no hypocrisy is involved. Men like Condorcet and Tolstoy have not the intelligence to be hypocrites.

Among all religions of gentleness that is, among social diseases Christianity is for Nietzsche by all odds the worst, partly because it has succeeded in corrupting the most manly and capable of the human race, the peoples of Northern Europe, partly because it is so perfectly tailored to meet the desires of the groveling herd. “Faith, hope and charity” make a complete charter for the domination of the masters by the slaves. Christian morals are consistently, coherently, the expression of the basic instincts of low men, instincts that make them try to *avoid real living* that is, to try to perpetuate existence at the lowest possible level. Christianity fouls life at its very source, in the relations of the sexes. “How can one possibly place in the hands of children and women, a book that contains those vile words: ‘it is better to marry than to burn.’ And is it decent to be a Christian so long as the very origin of man is Christianized, that is to say, befouled by the idea of the *immaculata conception*? (*The Antichrist*, § 56) Christianity is thus the perfect form of decadence, the denial of life, the use of instinct against itself. Jesus and Paul finished the deadly work of Socrates’s daemon. “Let us not underestimate the Christians: the Christian, false to the *point of innocence in falsity*, is far above the apes, with regard to the Christians a certain well-known theory of Descent becomes a mere good-natured compliment.” (*The Antichrist*,

§ 39)

Nietzsche recognizes many historical reasons for the peculiar virulence of Christianity: the importance of Paul, whom he makes the arch-villain of the piece, an insane, vengeful Jew, a destroyer, a hater; the skill with which Greek idealism was woven into Christian theology, giving it a specious intellectual respectability; the perverted discipline of Church organization; the existence of a great proletariat of slaves, thirsting for salvation and revenge. But he puts particular emphasis on two broad considerations, the Christian doctrine of personal immortality and the Jewish origin of Christianity.

The doctrine of immortality as it appears in Christianity is for Nietzsche one of the most diabolical of priestly inventions. Believers are not promised that pity, self-abnegation, chastity, asceticism will bring them success in this world. They do not turn the other cheek to get caresses, but blows. By the ingenious device of the Kingdom of Heaven, however, they are promised complete fulfillment of their crudest desires in an after-life. Without this promise, even herd-men might come to realize that the Christian virtues failed to pay dividends on this earth. The Christian doctrine of personal immortality provides an almost unbelievably effective way of getting men to accept the degenerate life in which the priest is supreme. The more unnatural, the more diseased, the more hopeless the lot of the believer here below, the more certain his eternal bliss above. And this is not the worst. Hell is even more effective than Heaven in preventing men from becoming what they might become. The more natural, healthy, and hopeful the lot of a believer here below, the more certain his eternal punishment in a still lower region. The hope of Heaven and the fear of Hell combine to botch existence for all men, save for the tiny minority is it a minority of one? of free spirits (*freie Geister*) beyond Heaven and Hell, beyond good and evil. The real horror of Christianity for Nietzsche is not so much that it coddles the weak as that it suppresses and cows the strong. Indeed, he is willing at times to welcome Christianity as a means by which, in better times, a minority of masters, free spirits, might keep in useful contentment a majority of slaves, herd-men. At other times, however, he will have nothing less than a new race of Supermen, an earth untainted even by the memory of Christianity, with no men as we now know them left. He was no Utopian, however, neither a Morris nor a Bellamy. He does not bother to ask what these Supermen will do about the mean little routine tasks. Perhaps there will be no such tasks? Nietzsche-Zarathustra was a very exalted fellow, who rose above Nirvana as well as above Heaven.

A second element in the triumph of Christianity, according to Nietzsche, was its Jewish origin. In *The Antichrist*, at least, Nietzsche can write as crudely as any Nazi Jew-baiter. (*The Antichrist*, § 24 & 25) The Jews first invented the lie of monotheism. Their Jehovah was originally, in the days of Israel's prevailing, a God of dignity and justice; with the Captivity he became a monstrous god of jealousy and philosophy, a figure on whom the disappointed Jewish intellectuals spilled out their wounded pride, their unrealized ambitions. Jehovah became their revenge on the world, their flight from the world. But he was still a mere tribal God, at whose threats the Gentiles could and did laugh. There remained the final step, which Jewish intellectuals like Paul took. This tribal God could, by a gigantic conspiracy, be foisted on ignorant Gentiles. As the Christian God, he would sap the strength and confidence of the enemies of Israel. Jerusalem would be revenged, and the Jews would rule over a world corrupted by Jewish poison. It would be a dark, womanish rule over a world sunk in weakness and despair, but a world of which Jerusalem would once more be the center.

This was the most fatal kind of megalomania that had ever yet existed on earth:

insignificant little abortions of bigots and liars began to lay sole claim to the concepts “God,” “Truth,” “Light,” “Spirit,” “Love,” “Wisdom,” “Life,” as if these things were, so to speak, synonyms of themselves, in order to fence themselves off from “the world”; little ultra-Jews, ripe for every kind of madhouse, twisted values round in order to suit themselves just as if the Christian, alone, were the meaning, the salt, the standard and even the “ultimate tribunal” of all the rest of mankind. (*The Antichrist*, § 44)

But another God is coining may we not say invented? and Nietzsche is his prophet. Another megalomania? Has another people, scorned and humiliated, produced a new and successful gospel of revenge? We can only hope that Nietzsche is as bad a prophet as he is a historian.

For his account of the origins of Christianity is certainly not good history. The notion that Christianity began as a Jewish conspiracy is melodramatic nonsense.. Conspirators, even in very recent times, are rarely philosophers of history. Saint John, and certainly Saint Paul, were not quite innocent enough for conspiracy. Even the major thesis of Nietzsche’s attack on Christianity contains a paradox that strains the limits of logic. Christianity, according to him, is the victory of the weak over the strong. But if the weak are victorious, are they not then really the strong? Have not they carried out successfully the supreme demands of the Will to Power? There is certainly an obvious reply here. The Will to Power of the Christians is not the right kind of Will to Power, not a good one. But if there are good and bad kinds of power, or success, then there are standards of judgment with which we can criticize the results of the struggle for power. There is a “higher” power than the Will to Power. We are back in the company of Kant and Socrates. Perhaps Nietzsche too had his daemon?

An analysis of Nietzsche’s attitude towards Christianity would be incomplete without some mention of his attitude towards what he regarded as the final, and most decadent, form of Christianity—the contemporary movement towards democracy and socialism. Nietzsche hated all forms of Western parliamentary governments, lumping together in his hatred English liberalism and continental socialism. In his opinion, the great popular movements of modern times, the English, American, and French revolutions, represent the herd-men’s attempt to bring the unlovely and impossible Christian heaven down to earth. No longer content with the vicarious other-worldly realization of his low desires for comfort and self-indulgence which the success of the Jewish conspiracy brought him, the democrat or the socialist is trying to be comfortable and self-indulgent here and now, trying to remake this earth in his own image. And the result? A mad scramble for the cheap wares of the factory, for the pleasures of a vulgarized art, for the satisfactions of that base form of envy called patriotism.

An absolute uprooting of culture in the increasing rush and hurry of life, and the decay of all reflection and simplicity. The waters of religion are ebbing, and leaving swamps and stagnant pools; the nations are drawing away in enmity again, and long to tear each other to pieces. The sciences, blindly driving on according to a system of laissez-faire, are splitting up. ... The educated classes are swept along in the contemptible struggle for wealth. Never was the world more worldly, never poorer in goodness and love. Everything bows before the coming barbarism, art and science included. (*Thoughts out of Season*, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” chap. iv.)

We are ripe for the final disintegration, for universal nihilism. The one saving factor in the older Christianity, the postponement of its deadly egalitarianism to an after-world, which still permitted a fruitful inequality in this world, is lost. The equality of souls before God was a doctrine that might have been made harmless, but the equality of men before Society is a fatal lure, a final decadence; it is nihilism.

The protraction of Christianity through the French Revolution. The seducer is Rousseau, he once again liberates woman, who thenceforward is always represented as ever more interesting *suffering*. Then come the slaves and Mrs. Beecher Stowe. Then the poor and the workmen. Then the vicious and the sick. . . . Then comes the cursing of all voluptuousness (Baudelaire and Schopenhauer): the most decided conviction that the lust for power is the greatest vice; absolute certainty that morality and disinterestedness are identical things: that the "happiness of all" is a goal worth striving after (i.e. Christ's Kingdom of Heaven). We are on the best road to it: the Kingdom of Heaven of the poor in spirit has begun. (*The Will to Power*, § 94)

Crane Brinton. *Nietzsche* (pp. 96-108). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948. This text is in the public domain.

© SophiaOmni, 2014. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.