



# Whitefield

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# BRIEFING

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## **The Importance of Nietzsche**

**Stephen Williams**

Nietzsche's name crops up everywhere. Asked in what way he is significant, most people would probably say that he proclaimed the death of God and influenced twentieth century thought in an anti-Christian direction. As far as it goes, that is true enough. But we need to explore him a little further.

### ***The case against Christianity***

Nietzsche (1844-1900) was raised in a Lutheran household; his father was a pastor and died before Nietzsche reached his fifth birthday. It was a devastating blow for young Friedrich, but in his childhood days, he apparently possessed a fervent faith in God. As the teenage years went on, he began to move away from it. Different reasons can be offered for this and the various factors involved can be weighted in alternative ways. But when he delivered his first direct sustained public attack on Christianity in print, in the late 1870s, it was the Christian understanding of humanity – its theological anthropology – that galled him most. In contrast to the outlook of the Greeks, 'Christianity...crushed and shattered man completely and buried him as though in mud: into a feeling of total depravity it then suddenly shone a beam of divine mercy, so that, surprised and stupefied by this act of grace man gave vent to a cry of rapture and for a moment believed he bore all heaven within him. It is upon this pathological excess of feeling, upon the profound corruption of head and heart that was required for it, that all the psychological sensations of Christianity operate: it desired to destroy, shatter, stupefy, intoxicate...' (*Human, All Too Human*). 'Head and heart', we note. Nietzsche believed that Christianity was intellectual foolishness, its tenets, having long been discredited by historical criticism of the Bible and critical philosophy, awaited analysis in terms of their historical development and psychological dimensions. The case against Christianity can be intellectually made, but we should be beyond the need to make it by now. 'What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons' (*The Gay Science*; 'gay' is used here in the traditional sense of light-heartedness or merriment).

The problem was that, even if Christian doctrine had been discredited, Christian morality survived. This became the target of Nietzsche's crusade. That God is dead, educated late nineteenth century Europeans should know, but they have not grasped the significance of this event. For the entire edifice

of Christian morality logically collapses with the death of God. Some try to salvage the morality without the theology; the English, like the novelist George Eliot, are particularly good at this nonsense. Or its morality pervades the secular form of ideas such as socialism or democracy, which prize human equality or dignity. These are the shabby remnants of Christian thought. It was said that Buddha's shadow remained on cave walls long after his death. Just so, the shadow of Christianity remains in the form of morality, after the death of God. The task is to vanquish Christian morality. For it celebrates enfeeblement, weakness, pity, making a virtue out of life-denial. But life is will-to-power; the tendency of living organisms is not towards self-preservation (Darwin) but towards maximalization of power. Just how metaphysical Nietzsche is at this point is a matter for debate: on the one hand, he is indebted to contemporary biological science; on the other, he is widely regarded as unwilling to subscribe to any objective, metaphysical world-view. What is clear is that he insists that we view humanity in a perspective radically opposed to what he takes to be the Christian view of things. Morality is a construct; there are no moral facts. Christian morality is a demeaning construct and it stinks.

### ***The alternative***

Many have found Nietzsche at his most persuasive when he unmaskes the pretensions of Christian faith and morality. But it is crucial to get an idea of the power of his alternative vision. This played its part – surely a very considerable part – in expelling Nietzsche's childhood faith. We are thinking here not of any ideas that Nietzsche thought up, but of the world of ancient Greece as it attracted him during his school days. That world, shorn of drama about sin and redemption, celebrating the varied forms of human beauty, fascinated and lured many of Nietzsche's and previous genera-

tions, its particular attraction for Germans being well captured in E.M. Butler's work, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: a study of the influence exercised by Greek art and poetry over the great German writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Nietzsche, a brilliant academic prospect, was appointed young to a chair in classical philology at Basel University. During his time there he was captivated by Wagner's enterprise, which was to scale the highest summits of art in an attempt to revolutionise culture, especially through music. Between Wagner and the Greeks, Nietzsche had plenty to occupy him in the way of delight at and hope for the production of a culture which exalts the highest type of human being. Nietzsche later changed his mind about Wagner, but ever remained an admirer of the Greeks.

What could he do? He could create the figure of Zarathustra named, but not really modelled, after the Iranian prophet, Zoroaster, who lent his name to a religion. So Nietzsche produced his major work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Although Nietzsche said that his following work, *Beyond Good and Evil*, took a similar line to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, no prosaic description of this non-prosaic work is possible. Zarathustra proclaims the new human being, perhaps 'man' in the gendered sense, a law unto himself, a creator of new law-tables to reverse the binding Judaeo-Christian commandments, solitary, free, joyful but enveloped in tragedy. To affirm life in its profoundly tragic quality is to attain the highest in self-command. His insistence on the fact that our dignity lies in unbridled self-definition may be what has made Nietzsche significant for many people in the twentieth and, now, twenty-first, century, but Nietzsche himself never loses sight of the tragic warp of life. His childhood experience, early work on Greek tragedy and later philosophy are united by the dominating presence of this dimension.

## *Responding to Nietzsche*

Nietzsche died in 1900, eleven years after a mental collapse. By the time he died, his reputation had taken wings and, in the following century, his thought was widely associated with Nazism, an association long challenged in Nietzsche scholarship. More recently, he has been linked with postmodernism though this business, too, is subject to contrary interpretations. It is worth responding to Nietzsche for at least two reasons. The first is the unquestionable immensity of his influence. Has any philosopher been more influential on twentieth century thought? The second is the substance of his literature. Its intellectual merit is variously judged, but his ruminations on, for example, morality in Western culture are intrinsically important.

In Christian perspective, it may seem obvious that the possibilities that Nietzsche explores are enabled by the naturalistic, atheistic world-view that he espouses and that if we reject that position, giving Christianity an intellectual defence, we undermine the first principles of this thought. Logically, that is the case and the intellectual debate over naturalism is central. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's power and attraction does not lie in any stark naturalism or atheism. It lies in its promise of human self-determination, the imaginative heights to which his conception of the new, self-overcoming, human being, soar. In his treatment of Nietzsche in *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth juxtaposed two things side by side here: Nietzsche's proud and lonely individualism and the crucified man for others whom Christians call 'Lord'. The contrast is apt. Two foundational visions of what it is to be human are set before us. Nietzsche's insistence that the Christian view of things denigrates and propels us into self-division and self-deceit has to be taken seriously, inasmuch as he picks up much of what has gone on in the churches. But he never does justice to the fact that, when Christians

talk of sin, they talk of the sin of a humanity created good, created with the highest of perfections and greatest of prerogatives. Nietzsche, while profoundly admiring Pascal, profoundly disagreed with him as well, judging him (as did Voltaire, for example) a misanthropist. But, whatever the defects in Pascal's thought, he advocated something that Nietzsche never recognizes about Christianity, namely, that if we must always speak of human wretchedness alongside human greatness, we must never speak of human wretchedness without speaking of human greatness too.

Nietzsche's work also encourages us to think about the beauty of God. In the history of Christian thought, the notions of Beauty, Truth and Goodness have sometimes been allied for purposes of reflecting on divine and created reality. Of God's truth and of His goodness, we hear quite a lot. But, in many Christian circles, we make little or nothing of His beauty. Some theologians have tried to remedy this and the attempt is important. Truth and goodness are not just qualities pertaining to God in some bare and independent fashion. They are qualities suffused with beauty, just as God's beauty is suffused with goodness and truth. The God rejected by Nietzsche has no beauty. Nor, we may be tempted to say, has the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. But the disfigured servant is the revelation of the form that beauty takes when the matter at hand is that of sin and salvation in an ugly world. It may never be eclipsed, but the beauty that is to be revealed is that of the triune God, majestic beyond imagination, who evokes creaturely delight and not abject servility, when humans embrace the reconciliation that He has provided. Prominent amongst the twentieth century Christian writers who have pointed us in that direction, is C.S. Lewis, whose work is a good antidote to Nietzsche.

In our contemporary situation, one gauntlet Nietzsche significantly throws down concerns the relation of re-

ligion to morality. Is there an objective morality? If not, what is the prognosis for a civilization that has come to realize that fact? If so, is it logically or psychologically sustainable without religious belief? At one time, one might have been mocked for suggesting that morality requires religion. Now, with the crisis of morality, people may mock less. Nietzsche thought that at least key traditional Christian values required key traditional Christian beliefs. It is a timely subject for reflection. On the level of public rhetoric, for example by politicians, objective morality survives happily. Spin and sleaze are wrong; justice and honesty are right. There are fundamental and inalienable human rights. But what warrants that talk? Tradition? Convention? Popular acceptability? Intellectual conviction? How does it sit alongside a pervasive general relativism, a dogmatic a-moralism, in our society? For all his blind spots and prejudices and for all the dangers in his philosophy, Nietzsche's literature forces us to try to come clean on those things. He lamented the populist non-intellectual culture that was thriving in his day and he may be justly accused of elitism at certain points. But in his scornful realization that we are a herd-like people, refusing to face such questions, he was very largely right. For those who do not refuse to face them, an engagement with Nietzsche's thought is of real value.

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