

Redeeming Nietzsche

On the piety of unbelief

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1 Holy Nietzsche

I condemn Christianity, I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible charge any prosecutor has ever uttered. To me it is the extremest thinkable form of corruption . . . Wherever there are walls I shall inscribe this eternal accusation against Christianity upon them – I can write in letters which make even the blind see . . . I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, petty – I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind.

Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 62

In search of God?

In the last few months before his final mental breakdown Nietzsche wrote of his fear that some day he would be pronounced 'holy'. One could be forgiven for thinking this a strange fear from one who is remembered most of all for having broken the news of God's death and then for proceeding to dance at His wake. Nonetheless, there have been a considerable number of thinkers who have seen in this dance patterns of movement that remind them of the religion whose demise is being celebrated. Heidegger called Nietzsche 'that passionate seeker after God and the last German philosopher'¹ – a reference, no doubt, to the fact that the madman who proclaims God's death enters the market place crying out 'I seek God! I seek God!' Julian Young has gone as far as to suggest that Nietzsche's intellectual quest can be characterised as 'proving that God, after all, exists'. And yet, of course, Nietzsche was one of the most emphatic and militant of all 'atheists'. His condemnations of Christianity are, arguably, unrivalled in their ferocity and vitriol. One of the challenges facing those who seek to come to grips with Nietzsche's work is finding a way of making sense of these seemingly conflicting drives. Erich Heller, for instance, suggests the following:

He is, by the very texture of his soul and mind, one of the most radically religious natures that the nineteenth century brought forth, but is endowed with an intellect which guards, with the aggressive jealousy of a watchdog, all approaches to the temple.²

2 *Holy Nietzsche*

In what follows I will be proposing an answer to why it is that Nietzsche manages to come across simultaneously as both atheistic and pious. My basic argument will be this. Nietzsche is obsessed with the question of human salvation. It is an obsession that is formed in his childhood through the Pietistic upbringing given to him by family and teachers. And despite the fact that he becomes an atheist, he continues passionately to explore different ways in which the same basic instinct for redemption can be expressed in a world without God. He could well have had himself in mind when he wrote of European culture in general: 'it seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in vigorous growth – but that it rejects the theistic answer with profound mistrust.'³ Nietzsche's work, as I understand it, is a series of experiments in redemption. That is, Nietzsche's work is primarily soteriology: experiments to design a form of redemption that would work for a post-theistic age.

Having established the priority of soteriology in Nietzsche's thought I proceed to examine a number of his central doctrines as successive attempts to square the circle of post-theistic soteriology – that is, as experiments in redemption. First I will offer a reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* as an attempt to articulate salvation as art: 'life is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon'⁴ is the best known summary of this position. Next, I will look at Nietzsche's attack upon Christian soteriology as developed in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *The Anti-Christ*. Here we begin to see Nietzsche advance the idea of the *Übermensch* as his own version of what redeemed humanity ought to look like. This leads on into an examination of what is arguably the pinnacle of Nietzsche's soteriological experimentation, the enigmatic eternal recurrence of the same. With the development of the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche believes himself to have given birth to an idea capable of offering genuine redemption, albeit to a very few, and those not yet born. In his thought of the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche imagines a doctrine sufficient to survive the death of God and capable of replacing the soteriology of the Christian past.

As I go along, reflecting upon these different experiments, I will seek to draw attention to the extent to which Nietzsche is involved in a complex and sophisticated process of theological sampling, repeating the patterns of thought that animated his early childhood faith. Although designed to be atheistic, Nietzsche borrows a great deal from the Christian past he eschews. This will be my answer to why there is a double textured quality to Nietzsche's attitude to Christianity, why the 'conflicting drives'. Nietzsche's a-theology may reject Christian soteriology, but it borrows substantially from it nonetheless.

In the last three chapters I will turn from interpretation to assessment. There I will seek to explore why Nietzsche's experiments in redemption come to fail. Furthermore, my aim is to assess these experiments in Nietzsche's own terms. My overall point will be that Nietzsche fails to appreciate the full horror of human suffering. For although he envisions redemption as being achieved by some almost super-human act of heroic affirmation, 'Yes saying'

to life in all its horrific fullness, the truth is that Nietzsche's conception of horror, of suffering and indeed of the nihil itself are the imaginings of the comfortably off bourgeoisie. 'An armchair philosopher of human riskiness' is what Martha Nussbaum has called him, and I, for somewhat different reasons to Nussbaum, will be claiming much the same.

So much for where the argument is going. Before I get on to the main part of the argument we need to do a certain amount of stage setting. The 'theological' Nietzsche has been misread from a variety of different perspectives and these threads need to be unpicked before further progress can be made. The rest of this chapter will be concerned to review something of the theological *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Nietzsche's work with the aim of excavating the foundations of various misreadings, as well as indicating those readings which anticipate my own.

All of this, I hope, will be a long way from claiming Nietzsche himself to be 'holy'. Indeed those most in danger of constructing a holy Nietzsche are not those who claim that Nietzsche remained indebted to Christianity despite his 'atheism' but rather those who have come to construct hagiographies around his anti-Christianity. It is ironic that though Nietzsche insisted that he did not want 'believers' or 'followers', every subsequent generation has thrown them up; from the development of the various Nietzsche cults at the turn of the twentieth century to his becoming a fetish of post-modern credibility, Nietzsche is always in danger from those who most admire him. 'May your name be holy to future generations' pronounced Nietzsche's friend Peter Gast at his funeral.⁵ In challenging the ideological purity of Nietzsche's 'atheism' one is not making Nietzsche holy. One may indeed be saving him from an unwanted secular saintliness.

Early appropriations of Nietzschean 'religiosity'

Early attempts to make sense of Nietzsche's 'religiosity' often had 'a crackpot, fringe quality about them'.⁶ Though the vast majority of Christians who read Nietzsche saw a Nietzscheanised Christianity or Christianised Nietzscheanism as an impossible and monstrous idea, there were some, mostly Protestants, who sought to appropriate something of the energy of Nietzsche's philosophy as a way of re-invigorating what they perceived as a religion in decline. Albert Kalthoff (1850–1906), a reasonably well-known and influential Protestant pastor in Bremen, gave a series of what he called 'Zarathustra Sermons' in which he contrasted a Nietzschean Christianity of vitalism and will with an analysis of the sterile and life-denying theology inherent in the Church. Kalthoff's vision was of a world 'in which everything unliving, unfree, dying, weakly and sick in man is eliminated'.⁷ It cannot pass without comment that an understanding of faith that had incorporated such clearly eugenic language in the search for a Christian *völkisch* revival was systematically weakening the capacity of Christianity to resist the holocaust which was to come. Kalthoff's free-floating 'radicalism' sought to establish that

Christianity and Nietzscheanism originated in the same impulse: as Jesus was to the Pharisees, so Nietzsche is to the contemporary Church; Nietzsche has 'more morality, this antichrist, more Christianity than those who blaspheme him'.⁸

Though Nietzschean ideas were equally attractive to left wing and right wing groups (Kalthoff was himself a Marxist), it was those who sought to promote nationalist ideology who were most successful in harnessing the cultural authority of Nietzsche's image. For thinkers like Arthur Bonus writing just before the First World War, a cross-pollination of Christianity and Nietzsche was seen to produce a specifically German Christianity centred not upon guilt and weakness but on power and strength. Nietzsche's German 'religiosity' became a lens through which Christianity was refracted into nationalism. Redirecting the Christian tradition meant breaking the power of the established Church as mediator of the Gospel message and linking the emergent spirituality with the history of the Volk itself. The feasibility of this transformation was, however, only apparent to a few; more commonly, Nietzschean religiosity was understood in opposition to Christianity. According to the influential Horneffer brothers, editors at the Nietzsche Archive, Nietzschean spirituality was pagan in origin, it expressed and celebrated the explosive potential of Nordic energy and individual heroism. It believed not in God but above all in itself, and in particular (following Nietzsche's dictum 'remain true to the earth') in the blood and soil of the German people. This particular use of Nietzsche was to find its fullest expression in the infamous *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, the German Faith movement. Avowedly Nietzschean and anti-Christian, the German Faith movement saw itself as the spiritual wing of the Nazi revolution. It was, according to its founding figure Jakob Hauer, 'an eruption from the biological and spiritual depths of the nation'. Increasingly Nietzsche's language of health and weakness was used as the moral basis of a movement keen to contrast its own strength with the weakness and decadence of the Christian past. 'Can there be a higher value than the health of a Volk which unconditionally demands the extermination of bad instincts and criminal drives?' asks Hauer ominously.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

But just as Nietzsche was claimed by those who sought to provide the spiritual justification of Nazism, so too was he to have a significant influence upon one of the most celebrated Christian opponents of the Nazi regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 'Bonhoeffer', his biographer and friend Eberhard Bethge writes 'read all of Nietzsche very carefully' and was clearly indebted to his thought.⁹ In particular Bonhoeffer saw in Nietzsche's phrase 'beyond good and evil' an approach to ethics that he believed to be at the very heart of Protestant theology and central to a proper understanding of the Gospel. Thus in his Barcelona lecture of 1929 Bonhoeffer claims:

The Christian gospel stands beyond good and evil. Nor could it be otherwise; for, were the grace of God to be subordinated to human criteria of good and evil, this would establish a human claim on God incompatible with the uniqueness of God's power and honour. There is a profound significance in the Biblical attribution of the fall to humanity's eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The original – one might say childlike – community of humans stands beyond their knowing of good and evil; it rests on the knowledge of one thing alone, God's limitless love for humanity. Thus it was by no means Fr. Nietzsche who first penetrated 'beyond good and evil', even though it was on this basis that he denounced the 'moral poison' of Christianity. But, however much it may have come to be obscured, this insight belongs to the patrimony of the gospel itself.¹⁰

Nietzsche himself seems to interpret Jesus' attitude towards good and evil in these terms when he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*: 'Jesus said to his Jews: "The law was made for servants – love God as I love him, as his son! What do we sons of God have to do with morality!"'¹¹

This aphorism does seem to suggest that Nietzsche is claiming an affinity with Jesus' teaching (both denouncing 'morality') – an affinity which is the basis of Bonhoeffer's Nietzscheanism. For Bonhoeffer the freedom and free-spiritedness of the *Übermensch*, a freedom that is made possible by the capacity of the *Übermensch* to operate beyond the dictates of morality, is remarkably similar the freedom of the Christian, who is likewise able to operate beyond conventional morality because of his or her life in Christ.¹² In this Bonhoeffer is simply seeking to restate what he takes to be 'orthodox' Lutheran theology; namely, that freedom is the very essence of salvation, and salvation is only possible 'beyond good and evil', beyond, that is, the devious delusions of ethical self-righteousness. Like Nietzsche, Bonhoeffer believes all ethics, and so-called Christian ethics no less, to be dangerous corruptions. For Bonhoeffer the knowledge of good and evil takes humanity further away from our original unity with God: 'The knowledge of good and evil shows that he [humanity] is no longer one with his origin.'¹³ In a telling passage in *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche himself tells of a pre-lapsarian community 'at one' with its God and with itself.¹⁴ The 'fall' from this idyllic community is for Nietzsche co-temporal with the introduction of morality, and it is not too much of an oversimplification of Nietzsche's complex genealogy of Christianity to suggest that, for him, the transformation of Yahweh into a 'moral God' is the source of all the trouble. To this extent both Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer conceive of 'salvation' as some sort of reversal of the original 'moral' fall: both envisage salvation as looking something like the sort of life led by Adam and Eve before the fall; that is, before the introduction of good and evil. We will explore this particular 'experiment in redemption' in more detail later on.

Bonhoeffer is perhaps best known for his attempts to articulate what he calls 'Religionless Christianity'. 'We are moving towards a completely

religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.¹⁵ Bonhoeffer thinks it is both foolish and unnecessary to resist changing attitudes towards religiosity. Just as St. Paul attacks the idea of circumcision being a precondition of salvation, so likewise Bonhoeffer attacks the idea of 'religiosity' being a precondition of salvation. Thus the central theological task, the task of articulating 'who is Jesus Christ for us today?' involves asking:

How do we speak of God without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? How do we speak (or perhaps we cannot now even 'speak' as we used to) in a secular way about 'God'? In what way are we 'religionless secular' Christians, in what way are we εκ-κλησια, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world.¹⁶

Too often Bonhoeffer's talk of 'God without religion' is interpreted as something like God without Church, or God without all the ecclesiastical paraphernalia of priests and rituals and so forth. This, however, is emphatically not what Bonhoeffer is going on about here. 'What does it mean to "interpret in a religious sense"?' he writes to Bethge, attempting to clarify his theme: 'I think it means to speak on the one hand metaphysically and on the other individualistically.'¹⁷ What I want to argue is that the denominator that is common to 'metaphysics', 'inwardness', 'individualism' etc. – by which Bonhoeffer groups such phenomena together pejoratively as 'religion' – is that they are all attempts to deny or betray 'belonging to the world'. Christianity must, in the proper sense of the word, be 'secular'; that is it must be 'of the world'.

Throughout Bonhoeffer's writings the theme of 'belonging wholly to the world' is one that constantly recurs.

The profound old saga tells of the giant Antaeus, who was stronger than any man on earth; no one could overcome him until once in a fight someone lifted him from the ground; then the giant lost all his strength which had flowed into him through his contact with the earth. The man who would leave the earth, who would depart from the present distress, loses the power which still holds him by eternal, mysterious forces. The earth remains our mother, just as God remains our Father, and our mother will only lay in our Father's arms him who remains true to her. That is the Christian's song of earth and her distress.¹⁸

Of course, one could argue that passages such as these do not necessarily suggest the specific influence of Nietzsche's call to remain true to the earth but rather reflect, for instance, a passionate and lyrical commitment to incarnational theology. On one level this is indisputable. What Bonhoeffer

learns specifically from Nietzsche, however, is an acute sensitivity to the various subtle guises which disloyalty to the earth can take. That is, he learns to be on the look out for *ressentiment*.

Nietzsche's work can be read as a sustained meditation on the various forms in which, through weakness and cowardice, human beings betray their humanity, betray their body, betray the earth, etc. in the search for supposedly consoling (though, in fact, profoundly damaging) fantasies. Metaphysics is, for both Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer, the name for a particular genre of betrayal; for in as much as metaphysics attempts to locate what gives human life its ultimate value in some realm beyond the earth, it degrades and disparages earth-bound fleshly human existence. Of course, Nietzsche would insist that Christianity (with all its emphasis on heaven and eternal life) *necessarily* involves this sort of betrayal. But Bonhoeffer would argue that Nietzsche has misunderstood Christianity, in particular that he has misunderstood the Biblical attestation of 'otherness'.

It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with this world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist *for* this world; I mean that, not in the anthropological sense of liberal, mystic pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of the creation and of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Another form of betrayal Bonhoeffer explores in letters from his prison cell in Tegel is the betrayal of 'inwardness'. Like the betrayal of 'metaphysics', the betrayal of 'inwardness' shifts the focus of the Christian life out of the world, out of the public and everyday sphere of human life, but instead of shifting it, so to speak, upwards (metaphysics) it shifts it 'inside' or 'within'. The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure in the sphere of the 'personal', the 'inner' and the 'private'. That is, the emphasis on one's inner life, an emphasis encouraged by 'existentialist philosophy and psychology', represents a retreat from 'belonging wholly to the world'. And Christian thinkers, in privileging the inner in this way, have become the spiritual equivalent of the gutter press, assuming that the truth is (a) always hidden and thus needs to be dug out and (b) always something shoddy and shameful – 'as if you couldn't adequately appreciate a good play till you had seen how the actors behave off-stage' as Bonhoeffer memorably puts it.²⁰

What is distinctively Nietzschean here is the way in which Bonhoeffer understands the motivation behind this retreat into interiority as issuing from *ressentiment*.

From the sociological point of view this is a revolution from below, a revolt of inferiority. Just as the vulgar mind is not satisfied till it has seen some highly placed personage 'in his bath', or in other embarrassing

situations, so it is here. There is a kind of evil satisfaction in knowing that everyone has his failings and weak spots. In my contacts with the 'outcasts' of society, its 'pariahs', I've noticed repeatedly that mistrust is the dominant motive in their judgement of other people . . . Anything clothed, veiled, pure, and chaste is presumed to be deceitful, disguised, and impure; people here simply show their own impurity. A basic anti-social attitude of mistrust and suspicion is the revolt of inferiority.²¹

The 'revolt of inferiority' is, for Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer, precisely what gives rise to slave-morality – the attempt to redefine what is of value from the perspective of those who cannot cope with the reality of 'belonging wholly to the world'. Bonhoeffer learns from Nietzsche that the Church is particularly prone to *ressentiment* and, through his theology, seeks to provide a basis upon which Christianity can affirm and celebrate a faith which does not originate in failure – the failure to affirm the human-ness of human life. The sort of faith Bonhoeffer seeks to portray is one that issues from 'strength' (the necessary strength to resist the Nazis effectively). And like Nietzsche, Bonhoeffer sees a magnificent example of this spiritual strength exhibited in the religion of the ancient Greeks:

I am at present reading the quite outstanding book by W.F. Otto, the classics man at Königsberg, *The Gods of Greece*. To quote from his closing, it's about 'this world of faith, which sprang from the wealth and depth of human existence, not from its cares and longings'. Can you understand my finding something very attractive in this theme and its treatment, and also – *horribile dictu* – my finding these gods, when they are so treated, less offensive than certain brands of Christianity? In fact, that I almost think I could claim these gods for Christ.²²

Karl Barth

The preoccupation of early twentieth-century German theologians with the idea of rejecting 'religion' is more commonly seen as a theological response to the crisis of faith articulated by Nietzsche as the death of God. Though clearly not prepared to admit that God is actually *dead*, many acknowledged that 'the death of God' did name a certain sort of death, the death of a certain way of doing theology, the death of a certain conception of the theological project. Perhaps the foremost representative of this approach was Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that 'Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion'²³ and he has surely been among the most influential. Indeed the impact of Barth's theological revolution could be said to have determined much of the agenda of subsequent theology in the century. Barth's revolution, articulated in the second edition of his *Roemerbrief* (1921), was founded upon a wholesale rejection of the possibility of human

knowledge of God. It is this possibility which is the very foundation of 'religion'. According to Barth, God is so wholly other, our relatedness so emphatically disjunctive, that we can know nothing whatsoever about God – nothing, that is, unless that 'knowledge' originates in God and impacts on us as grace. Knowledge of God is, in a sense, impossible. It is made possible only by a miracle; only, that is, by and through the workings of God; hence what Barth calls the 'impossible possibility of faith'. And, strange to say, it is a precondition of this faith that we acknowledge first our God-forsakenness.

The proximity of 'God is dead' to Barth's dialectical theology is, for some theologians, quite unmistakable. Von Balthasar, for instance, puts it thus:

In the fire of Overbeck, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard (and the Reformers, who by now in this light look a bit strange), the gunpowder has been ignited . . . The second edition is like 'dynamite', coming dangerously close to Nietzsche; it 'revolutionises religion', it is the 'cry and the silence'. We have now truly fallen into the 'hell' of religion. We must smell 'the stench of death to the point of death that is wafted from the summits of religion'.²⁴

Such is the extent of Barth's re-think of theological presuppositions that he is prepared to recognise and affirm a number of the instincts that make up unbelief: 'Indeed, a certain perception is betrayed when we begin to reject the non-God of unbelief.'²⁵ Genuine faith, therefore, must face the evaporation of meaning that Nietzsche called nihilism. It must renounce the comfort of human constructions and give up any residual assurance inherent within faith. Neither must it – nor indeed can it – seek out any other supposedly sound theological platform on which to ground itself.

Just as surely as the recognition of the sovereignty of God overthrows all confidence in human righteousness, it sets erect no other ground of confidence. Men are not deprived of one security, in order that they may immediately discover for themselves another. No man can shelter himself behind the triumphant will of God; rather, when it is once perceived, he comes under judgement and enters a situation of shattering confusion – from which he can never escape.²⁶

In seeking to draw out continuities between Nietzsche and Barth, Karen Carr has argued that through Barth 'Nihilism was made holy as a part of the gracious act of God. Thus Nietzsche's uncanniest of guests became, for a brief period of time, a divinely bestowed gift.'²⁷ However fair this may be as an analysis of Barth's theology itself, it is clear that thinkers such as Barth and Bonhoeffer introduced into the theological imagination a sense that Nietzsche was not a theological road-block but, when properly understood,

could be used as an aid in the search for an authentic voice in which to speak the Christian Gospel. Later on I will look specifically at Barth's criticisms of Nietzsche and will suggest that he correctly identifies the fundamental weakness of Nietzsche's position. Indeed Barth is, I think, one of the very few thinkers who seems to understand the nature of Nietzsche's attack upon Christianity. It is, I think, no coincidence that Barth, like Nietzsche, rejects what one might call the 'philosophical' approach to the question of God.

Death of God theology

Perhaps the most enthusiastic reception Nietzsche has received in theological circles is that from the so-called 'death of God' theologians, the most widely read of whom is probably Thomas Altizer. Altizer's theology is built upon the work of three great nineteenth-century religious radicals: Hegel, Nietzsche and Blake. Altizer's work seeks to re-interpret the 'death of God' as a fundamentally Christian event and argues that the proclamation of God's death is the authentic voice of radical Christianity.

Once we recognize that radical Christianity is inseparable from an attack upon God, then we should be prepared to face the possibility that even Nietzsche was a radical Christian.²⁸

Central to Altizer's theology is the idea of the kenotic, self-emptying God; a God who transcends His transcendence by becoming wholly immanent in the person of Jesus. Altizer understands the incarnation of God in Christ as a non-reversible kenotic self-emptying; a process whereby God 'negates himself in his own revelatory and redemptive acts'.²⁹ Through Jesus the sacred dissolves itself (without remainder) into the profane, thus redefining both, and thereby overcoming the distance between God and humanity.

For Altizer this process has to be understood as, in itself, a victory over 'Satan'. Like Blake, Altizer takes the sovereign creator-God, the God who reveals Himself to Job as the wholly other, to be none other than Satan himself. This is the God who represents 'the oppressive power of every alien reality standing over against and beyond humanity'.³⁰ This is the God who denies human flourishing. In this analysis Altizer sides with Nietzsche in a condemnation of 'traditional' Christianity.

When Nietzsche understood the Christian God as the deepest embodiment of man's self-hatred and resentment, he unveiled the solitary and transcendent God of Christianity as the absolute antithesis of a total existence in history or what the new Zarathustra calls the 'body'. It is precisely because a primordial and religious deity is the antithesis of life and history that its sacred name can so naturally and spontaneously be evoked to sanction evil and injustice (e.g., The Book of Job).³¹

The 'death of God', however, represents the (self-)annihilation of this oppressive transcendent God and the birth of a reconstructed sense of God united with human beings in the person of Jesus. Altizer thinks that this 'death' should not surprise Christians, for after all the whole logic of the Christian proclamation is built around a pattern of death and resurrection.

Christianity has always celebrated death as the way to redemption, proclaiming that Christ's death inaugurated a new reality of joy and forgiveness, and calling all men to a participation in his death as the way of salvation.³²

So, likewise the 'death of God'. But how much is all of this really influenced specifically by Nietzsche? What would his theology miss if the Nietzschean element was subtracted? For surely Altizer's salvation schema, as I have described it, is explicable with reference to Blake and Hegel on their own. Simply put: from Blake Altizer derives the idea that a certain manifestation of God is evil, and from Hegel he borrows the logical machinery to reconstruct the Divine and a justification that this reconstruction is itself the defining feature of *Heilsgeschichte*. To put it another way: from both Blake and Hegel he derives his radical opposition of the true God of the gospel to the false God of the authoritarian 'unhappy consciousness'; from Blake specifically, a certain commitment to the truth-potential intrinsic to unfettered poetic creativity; from Hegel specifically, a sense of divine revelation pervading the whole of world history and climaxing in the present. What does Nietzsche add? Very little, I suggest. Indeed even the way Altizer uses the 'death of God' motif reveals that he is using it in a Hegelian rather than a Nietzschean way. For Nietzsche the 'death of God' is not a move within an overall negative theology, nor is it a part of some opposition waiting to be superseded. It may be that Gilles Deleuze overstates the difference between Nietzsche and Hegel – 'the dialectic is the natural ideology of *ressentiment* and bad conscience' (the thesis of his influential *Nietzsche and Philosophy*)³³ – nonetheless running together Nietzsche and Hegel, as Altizer is wont to do, is an unacceptable obfuscation.

Eberhard Jüngel

The influence of Nietzsche upon twentieth-century theology is not confined to radical voices that seek to instigate an intellectual revolution, a theological revaluation of all values, so to speak. Indeed it is arguable that Nietzsche's work has been just as significant, if not more so, for a whole range of much more conservative thinkers who have perceived in Nietzsche an unlikely ally in the attempt to overcome certain strains of theological thought that have their source in the Enlightenment.

Eberhard Jüngel in his *God as the Mystery of the World* seeks clearly to distance his use of Nietzsche from that of people such as Altizer.

The return to talk about the death of God to theology, which is going on currently, was prepared if not initiated in the remarks Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote down in prison. It is no accident that the proponents of God-is-dead theology in all the world appeal to him. However, a clear distinction must be made between the special intellectual achievement of Bonhoeffer and the thoughts of those who appeal to him. The chief element of this distinction is that Bonhoeffer did not take modern atheism to be a reason to remove God from contemporary thought, but rather conversely took modern atheism as an opportunity to investigate anew a Christian concept of God in critical interaction with the theological tradition.³⁴

Jüngel believes that in articulating ‘the death of God’ and in bringing to a head the subsequent theological crisis, Nietzsche has done Christian theology a great service, for, Jüngel insists, the God Nietzsche finds dead is a distinctly sub-Christian perversion of the genuine Christian God. Through Nietzsche the metaphysical/theistic concept of God is revealed as morally and intellectually bankrupt – and thus Nietzsche generates the conceptual space in which theology can ground itself solely upon the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. By appropriating Nietzsche’s critique of ‘God’, Christianity can become more authentically itself. Jüngel is not alone in seeing things this way. For instance, Helmut Thielicke in *The Evangelical Faith* remarks:

Thus Nietzsche is not just fighting decadence, he is also fighting a degenerate view of God. His arrogance in opposing God and proclaiming his death is not, to the best of our human judgment, guilty hubris but a prejudice induced by the empirical phenomena of Christianity, its institutions, its theology and its behaviour.³⁵

Theism is a degenerate theology because it posits a notion of God which is self-sufficient, theoretically separable from the other persons of the Trinity. For Jüngel the identity of the Christian God is to be understood only in and through a proper appreciation of the subsistence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in each other. There is no principal *causa sui* from which the Son and the Spirit are secondary derivations. Thus a-theism, in rejecting the idea of a God who is over and above human beings and who does not intersect with humanity at any point, is to be cautiously applauded. On Jüngel’s account Nietzsche’s atheism amounts to a rejection of the God of the metaphysicians, the God of Descartes especially, and as such is to be commended.

It is worth pointing out that Jüngel’s account of Nietzsche’s rejection of God is almost the complete opposite of Barth’s. Whereas for Jüngel Nietzsche rejects a false God, for Barth, Nietzsche rejects the real thing. Thus, for instance, Barth opines that Nietzsche ‘resolutely and passionately and necessarily rejected not a caricature of the Christian conception of humanity, but

in the form of a caricature the conception itself'.³⁶ Nietzsche is foremost among the opponents of the Christian faith because he is an atheist who understands the logic (one might say, the 'depth grammar') of the Christian faith. My sympathies are with Barth on this. In the next chapter I will argue that Nietzsche's opposition to Christianity is not founded, as is too often presumed, upon a rejection of Christian theism. I will suggest that there is a disposition within a certain sort of typically analytic philosophy which misunderstands the nature of Nietzsche's opposition to Christianity because it fails to appreciate that one can reject Christianity without being all that interested in the philosophical question of God's existence. For just as it is very unusual indeed for people to become Christians because they have had the truth-claims of the Christian faith rationally demonstrated to them, so too it is unusual for people to lose their faith on the basis of any discovered argument. Generally speaking people do not commit themselves one way or the other on the basis of philosophical proof. Also, to invoke Wittgenstein's notion of depth grammar once again, one ought to notice that the language employed to describe the coming-to-be of faith is wholly different from that appropriate to proofs or rational demonstrations. Nietzsche is among the few atheists who genuinely understands that to attack Christianity, or, to be more specific, to attack the Christian faith, one operates on an entirely different level from that of rational/philosophical demonstration. Nietzsche knows that to be an effective (evangelising) atheist one does not need to bother much with being an a-theist. That is, atheism is a variegated phenomenon and not reducible to a hostility to 'theism'. Nietzsche, as Barth rightly notes, is not against theism, he is against God.

Jüngel, however, wants to use Nietzsche to have a go at theism, thus to generate space for God. Jüngel's failure is a failure to appreciate the diversity of atheisms, so struck is he with the idea that atheism = a-theism. Jüngel's basic strategy in *God as the Mystery of the World* (and note the subtitle: *On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*) is to collapse all forms of atheism into a-theism or anti-theism, and then to condemn such approaches as failing to appreciate the properly Christocentric basis of the Christian faith. This move fails to account for, indeed it even fails to acknowledge, species of atheism which are indifferent to questions of metaphysics or philosophy (what, for instance, of Alasdair MacIntyre's comment that, following the process of European secularisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indifference is the most common form of atheism?)³⁷ Such an acknowledgement would spoil Jüngel's attempt to by-pass the atheist and the theist at the same time. Because of this Jüngel has to be very careful how he characterises the 'death of God', for if Jüngel is to use Nietzsche in the way he wants he must create a strong association between 'God is dead' and a-theism. Jüngel is therefore keen to persuade us to fit the 'death of God' into an intellectual history which begins with the Enlightenment and which marks the end point of a process of metaphysical demystification. Thus for Jüngel the important question

Nietzsche asks is whether God is conceivable, and in answering 'no' Nietzsche thereby articulates the 'death of God'.

It is important to note how theologically influential this (mis)reading of Nietzsche has become. The source of the misreading is the allocation to Nietzsche of a part in the story of intellectual history in which he is understood as blowing the whistle on a conception of God generated by the Enlightenment. Consider the story as told by Michael Buckley.

Michael Buckley in his *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* has sought to demonstrate that in deferring responsibility to the philosophers, theologians set themselves up as hostages to a philosophical debate over which, increasingly, they had little control. Buckley's focus is on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though he believes the same patterns are discernible throughout Christian history. He argues that, responding to the challenge posed by the Enlightenment, the Church tasked philosophers with the refutation of scepticism and the defence of God. Those philosophers who took up this challenge, most notably Descartes and Newton, did so within the same frame of reference of the scepticism they sought to refute. As a debate it was to be conducted wholly within the domain of natural reason. The Cartesian method in particular exemplifies the degree to which the defence of God was mounted upon the seemingly neutral ground of Enlightenment rationality. To begin from a *tabula rasa*, thence, from indubitable first principles, to proving God's existence was, it was assumed, the very ultimate in Christian apologetics. The Church, Buckley argues, made an enormous investment in the success of this whole enterprise, but in doing so conceded to a way of envisioning God which cut God off from those resources, Christological and Pneumatological, through which alone God is properly disclosed. Buckley's conclusion is a radical one: that theism, in seeking to generate a sense of God without recourse to Christian foundations, internally generated the atheism it set out to refute. That is to say, the origins of modern atheism, at least intellectually, are to be found in the abandonment by Christian thinkers of a God disclosed in and through Jesus Christ. In seeking to construct a notion of God from rational first principles alone, in separating God from his revelation through Christ or from religious experience, the question of God was posed in such a way that no answer could possibly support a properly Christian sense of God. Hence Buckley's understanding of the provenance of contemporary atheism:

Religion abandoned the justification intrinsic to its own nature and experience, and insisted that its vindication would be found in philosophy . . . Atheism is not the secret of religion, as Feuerbach would have it, but it is the secret contradiction within a religion that denies its own abilities to deal cognitively with what is central to its nature. Atheism is the secret of that religious reflection which justifies the sacred and its access to the sacred primarily through its own transmutation into another form of human knowledge or practice.³⁸

A number of influential theologians adopt a similar position with respect to the Enlightenment and its influence; Colin Gunton, Lesslie Newbiggin, as well as Jüngel, even (a very different thinker) Andrew Louth, all subscribe to this general view. I do not want to dispute the particular story told by Buckley and others (indeed I am personally quite sympathetic to its overall purpose); what I object to is placing Nietzsche and the 'death of God' at the end of this story as its conclusion, or rather, as its *reductio ad absurdum*. As Stephen Williams argues in his important book *Revelation and Reconciliation* Nietzsche's thought 'is ostensibly rooted in other, historically deeper and psychologically more fundamental strains of resistance to the Christian tradition'.³⁹ Indeed Nietzsche would surely regard himself far more as a child of the Renaissance than of the Enlightenment, far more an inheritor of the scepticism of the ancients than a spokesman for a society which finds the idea of God 'no longer conceivable'. Nietzsche claims, for instance, that 'The Italian Renaissance contained within it all the positive forces to which we owe modern culture . . . it was the golden age of the millennium.'⁴⁰ And 'there has been no more decisive interrogation than that conducted by the Renaissance – the question it asks is the question I ask – : neither has there been a form of attack *more* fundamental, more direct, and more strenuously delivered on the entire front of the enemy's centre!'⁴¹

Why then have so many Christian thinkers been persuaded to accept Nietzschean philosophy as the culmination of a specifically *Enlightenment* thought-experiment which reduced God to a certain sort of metaphysics (a tradition which then went on to dispose of metaphysics, thus finishing off God in the process)? Part of the reason Nietzsche has been so located is that many of the most influential theologians, including Jüngel himself, read their Nietzsche through Heidegger. Jüngel has spoken of meeting Heidegger when he (Jüngel) was still a young academic, and the decisive impression this meeting had upon him.⁴² G.O. Mazur, in an article examining Nietzsche's influence upon Jüngel entitled 'On Jüngel's four-fold appropriation of Friedrich Nietzsche', makes precisely this link by situating Jüngel's appropriation of Nietzsche squarely within the context of Jüngel's own appropriation of Heidegger.⁴³ Perhaps other thinkers were not so directly influenced by actually reading Heidegger's writings on Nietzsche, but such was the theological popularity of Heidegger in the mid part of the twentieth century that he came to mediate Nietzsche's philosophy for a number of generations of influential theologians. Consequently the 'theological' Nietzsche is very often the Heideggerian Nietzsche: the problem being that it is now generally accepted that Heidegger's Nietzsche, specifically the lecture series Heidegger gave in the late 1930s and the consequent four-volume work on Nietzsche, is a great deal more about Heidegger than it is about Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, according to Heidegger, was 'the last thinker of metaphysics'; that is, though he emphatically attacks metaphysics, he was nonetheless wholly embroiled within its remit. Nietzsche reveals his metaphysical base precisely in and through the very act of criticising metaphysics. Nietzsche is

upside-down Plato: if Plato is the great founding father of metaphysics, Nietzsche's work represents an inversion of that founding logic which, precisely because it is an inversion, is still governed by the original dimensions of the onto-theological tradition.

The pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The supersensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics i.e. for Nietzsche, Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end. Nietzsche understands his own philosophy as the countermovement to metaphysics, and that means for him a movement in opposition to Platonism. Nevertheless, as a mere countermovement it necessarily remains, as does everything 'anti', held fast in the essence of that over against which it moves.⁴⁴

For the purposes of my argument it is of little consequence that Heidegger's actual view of Nietzsche, or indeed of metaphysics, was much more sophisticated than this short quotation suggests. For, generally speaking, it was this *reading* of Heidegger's Nietzsche that gained popularity and came to exert so much influence over twentieth-century theologians.

What differentiates Heidegger's story from that of Buckley is that for Heidegger Nietzsche is seen as the ultimate consequence and nemesis of Platonism, for Buckley, Nietzsche's thought is a *reductio* of Cartesianism. Nonetheless, as we have already seen in Buckley's narrative – and it is a narrative shared by many – it is Descartes who is taken to be at the root of the trouble dubbed as 'metaphysical'. The following passage, for instance, would not be out of place (style aside) in Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, though in fact, it comes from Heidegger's *Nietzsche*:

Descartes' principle that man's claim to a ground of truth found and secured by man himself arises from that 'liberation' in which he disengages himself from the constraints of biblical Christian revealed truth and church doctrine. Every authentic liberation, however, is not only a breaking of chains and a casting off of bonds, it is also a new determination of the essence of freedom. To be free now means that, in place of the certitude of salvation, which was the standard for all truth, man posits the kind of certitude by virtue of which and in which he becomes certain of himself as the being which founds itself on itself.⁴⁵

This is precisely why, for many Evangelical theologians, Descartes is the enemy *par excellence*. On this account Nietzsche attacks the Cartesian self, only to reduplicate the same logic of self-founding, except not, as with Descartes, on the basis of some disengaged ego, but on the basis of a more holistic sense of the body and its conflicting drives. Nietzsche's anthropology remains an attempt to 'found itself on itself' nonetheless.

With this all the pieces are now in place for the 'contemporary Protestant theologian' to render Nietzsche's thought theologically innocuous. The great thing about Heidegger's Nietzsche, as far as the Christian theologian is concerned, is that he is like a dangerous agent employed to assassinate some foe and who, instead of staying around afterwards to cause trouble, is himself killed in the very process of finishing off his opponent. How very neat and tidy. The problem with hiring Nietzsche to assassinate the Cartesian God is that, if Heidegger's account of how the story ends turns out to be mistaken, then one is left to reckon with Nietzsche. And there can be little doubt that, released from the bonds of Heidegger's 'last metaphysician' narrative, Nietzsche will prove an embarrassment, indeed a fundamental danger, to his former employers.

The post-modern Nietzsche

Towards the latter part of the twentieth century the loose (European) consensus formed in theological circles around Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche began to break up under pressure from those who would read him as a forerunner to deconstruction. Derrida, for instance, has sought to demonstrate that Nietzsche's thought exceeds Heidegger's interpretation of it and that Nietzsche's attempt to wrestle with/against 'metaphysics' ought not to be bound to the restrictive logic of Heidegger's thesis.

It is important in this context to take Heidegger's Nietzsche and show that there are other possibilities in Nietzsche which are not programmed by a history of metaphysics, that there are moves which are stronger, which go further than what Heidegger calls the history of the completion of metaphysics; moves which actually put in question Heidegger himself: his reading of Nietzsche in particular and his philosophical orientation in general.⁴⁶

The practitioners of deconstruction tend to feel a strong affinity with Nietzsche; in particular with the strategies he adopts in seeking to combat traditions of thought within which he nonetheless recognises himself to be embroiled. Nietzsche is seen not to be attempting to reverse 'metaphysics' but to subvert it. He is a philosophical fifth columnist. As one commentator puts it:

Criticism as reversal is rejected as inadequate, since it remains within the terms of an opposition set up by metaphysics, and criticism as displacement suggested in its stead. Criticism as displacement effectively recognizes that definitive escape from metaphysics is, in fact, impossible, and attempts to frustrate the recuperative logic of opposition-reversal by locally disrupting the identity of metaphysical concepts through the disclosure of their dependence on the differences which they suppress.⁴⁷

Whereas for Heidegger, so it is argued, the internal contradictions between Nietzsche's desire to 'overcome metaphysics' and his complicity within it render Nietzsche's project ultimately unsuccessful (a failure Heidegger believes his own work manages to overcome), for Derrida these internal contradictions become the very engine of critical discourse.

This makes Derrida's methodology sound a bit too much like Hegelian dialectic: a process driven by the constant encounter and overcoming of oppositions. In fact, for both Nietzsche and Derrida, belief in binary oppositions is precisely what constitutes metaphysical thought. Thus Nietzsche claims 'The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is the faith in antithetical values.'⁴⁸ Both Nietzsche and Derrida want to expose the belief in binary logic as responsible for shaping our fundamental attitudes, and seek to go 'beyond metaphysics' by dismantling a whole succession of foundational oppositions – truth/error, good/evil, being/becoming, speech/writing, etc. – upon which the metaphysical project is founded. It is not that Nietzsche and Derrida want simply to reverse the traditional valuations attached to either side of these polarities. It is not that they want to upturn the priority attached to truth or goodness, for instance, and instead found a discourse upon the prioritisation of error and evil, though this may constitute the first phase of any particular deconstruction. Such a move, of course, would be to leave untouched the faith in antithetical values. Rather the process of dismantling is more subtle and complex; it involves, for instance, the attempt to demonstrate that supposedly fixed opposites are, in fact, asymmetrical and blurred, neither fixed nor simple opposites. This, then, is the world made soft: concepts are not locked into a matrix of oppositions which themselves build up and reinforce each other in a whole architecture of thought. Deconstruction seeks out dimensions of meaning that exceed the matrix imposed upon them; it points us to the genealogy of concepts, the context within which concepts are employed, thus disrupting the clean logic of conceptual opposition. Deconstruction is to this 'architecture' what God was to those who sought to build the tower of Babel: it disrupts in order to liberate.

One of the most sustained attempts to demonstrate the theological usefulness of this sort of thinking has been undertaken by Mark C. Taylor. Taylor describes his own work as a/theology, the '/' being a 'permeable membrane [which] forms a border where fixed boundaries disintegrate. Along this boundary the traditional polarities between which Western theology has been suspended are inverted and subverted.'⁴⁹ A/theology thus suggests the collapse of a whole cluster of (supposedly fundamental) theological oppositions: belief/unbelief, theist/atheist, sacred/secular, etc. For Taylor this style of thinking is addressed to those who are '[s]uspended between the loss of old certainties and the discovery of new beliefs, these marginal people constantly live on the border that joins and separates belief and unbelief.'⁵⁰ It could also be said to be the logic of those who pray 'Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief.' Philippa Berry, introducing a collection of essays on *Postmodernism and Religion*, comments:

It now seems plausible that the deconstructive style of thinking which was initiated a century ago, in Nietzsche's twilight, has subtly and unobtrusively dissolved the clear-cut distinction between secular and religious thinking which Kant and the Kantian tradition had carefully secured. Hence the question which was implicitly asked by the conference where most of these papers were first presented: could an apparently nihilistic tradition of thought – a thought ostensibly shaped by that darkness of angst, of meaninglessness and abjection, which shrouds the 'end' of the modern era – paradoxically have acquired a new religious or spiritual dimension?⁵¹

More cautious Christian thinkers remain suspicious of deconstruction, suspicious that it carries with it a built-in hostility to the Christian faith. And Taylor's description of deconstruction as 'the "hermeneutic" of the death of God' might serve only to deepen such fears. For some the fashionable interest in deconstruction is the academic community playing chicken with nihilism. Carl Raschke is foremost among those who would blow the whistle on the theologian's attempt to romance the 'death of God': 'Theologians who might appropriate Nietzsche's great "myth" . . . are like children who have discovered some black and treacherous abracadabra. The madman is our reminder of the "price" of deconstruction.'⁵²

A number of Christian thinkers, however, in seeking to claim that deconstruction is not a threat to Christianity (and may indeed prove some sort of unlikely friend), have wanted to claim that Nietzsche's slogan 'God is dead' has, in fact, nothing directly to do with theology or with an attack upon God. Rather the 'death of God' is Nietzsche's way of speaking of the absence of transcendental signification. Consider this passage by Graham Ward written in the introduction to his reader *The Postmodern God*:

It is not a theological claim, as it is in Hegel where the death of God is the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. For Hegel, Christ's death is God's absolute deliverance of His transcendent being to the immanent movement of history and community. This is not Nietzsche's claim. Neither is Nietzsche making the claim that 'God does not exist' – an onto-theological claim made by an atheist. 'God' in Nietzsche's assertion is used metonymically. That is, it is a name which substitutes for and sums up a way of doing philosophy in which the highest principle is sought that grounds the possibility of all things. As 'the White House' is a name substituting for and summing up the American government under its presidential head of state, so 'God' is a metonymy for 'absolute truth', 'absolute Goodness', 'absolute reality', 'absolute reason', the origin and measure of all things (Being in modernity's understanding of metaphysics).⁵³

I think this is quite wrong. It is surely clear that the phrase 'the death of God' has multiple resonances; Nietzsche speaks of many different deaths

(murder, sacrifice, suicide, neglect, etc.) and indicates that there are many different candidates that can be cast as 'God'. Part of the problem with the phrase 'the death of God' is that it is hopelessly overloaded with meaning – it has been used (by Nietzsche as well as by subsequent thinkers) to describe too many different things and with every new interpreter a new level of meaning is laid down upon the old. It is of course such a wonderfully arresting *bon mot* and therefore thinkers can't leave it alone. Ward can, if he likes, set a meaning for it (there is no Nietzschean copyright on the phrase). He can let 'the death of God' stand for a carefully circumscribed denial of metaphysics. But this is not how it is with Nietzsche. Nietzsche is much more aware of the inter-relatedness of his multiple meanings, he is promiscuous and playful in generating new perspectives by the bringing together of differing ideas. Indeed it is because of this that Nietzsche is celebrated as a precursor to deconstruction. From this perspective Ward's attempt to fence off a 'metaphysical' reading is unconvincing. Nietzsche was obsessed with Christianity and certainly intended 'God', in 'the death of God' to be thought of, on one level at least, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. How, for instance, can one substitute 'absolute reason' or 'absolute reality' for 'God' in a phrase such as: 'God died of his pity for man'?⁵⁴ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* God is said to have been murdered by the ugliest man because the ugliest man could not bear God looking at his ugliness. In explaining himself and his action the ugliest man speaks clearly of a 'personal' God and not of a category summing up a particular strain of metaphysics:

But he, he had to die: he looked with eyes that saw everything, he saw the depths and abysses of man, all man's hidden disgrace and ugliness. His pity knew no shame, he crawled into my dirtiest corners. This most curious, over-impudent, over-compassionate god had to die.⁵⁵

The God whose murder is being described here is not the G/god of 'absolute goodness' or 'absolute reason', but the God prayed to by Christians in Church; it is the same God described in the Collect for Purity of *The Book of Common Prayer* 'unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid'. Or – the same God described in Psalm 139 from whose penetrating gaze the Psalmist seeks to hide (as Paul Tillich notes in his essay 'The Escape from God').⁵⁶ This God is not the God of metaphysics but something much more recognisably Biblical.

Ward is not alone in seeking to recommend Nietzsche as an aid to theological endeavour by suppressing his vociferous anti-Christianity, subtly disguising it as anti-onto-theology. Consider the way in which the opening of this essay by Merold Westphal locates (and implicitly commends) Nietzsche's critique of Christianity to a (presumably largely) Christian audience:

Not every construal of the theological enterprise will be able to entertain the possibility of Nietzsche as a recourse, if not exactly an ally. For

example, if theology interprets itself onto-theo-logically, it will be unable to see any ambiguity or irony in his self-designations as immoralist and anti-Christ. They will simply be the literal confessions of a loathed enemy. The possibility of Nietzsche as *ancilla theologiae* presupposes at least an interruption of the interpretation of theology in onto-theological terms.⁵⁷

Nietzsche's attack upon Christianity is completely underestimated by Westphal. Indeed Nietzsche's resistance to Christianity has a lot less to do with his attitude towards metaphysics than Westphal presumes. What Nietzsche hates, above all, is the cross and the Christian story of redemption. And what is particularly galling to Nietzsche about 'metaphysics' is the way Christian theologians have managed to score the shape of the cross into the basis of the European imagination – that is, he hates the way in which corrupt Christian values have become inscribed into the fabric of our world view, indeed into our very grammar. Nietzsche does not object to metaphysics 'as a philosopher', what he objects to fundamentally is the way in which a certain picture of how the world works has been used to *evangelise* a set of corrupt and corrupting values. Christianity is, for Nietzsche, some sort of plague. The source of the disease is the cross and the carrier of the disease, or at least, one of the carriers, is called 'metaphysics'.⁵⁸ Nietzsche berates his contemporaries for thinking that the disease has been eliminated through secularisation. He recognises that through metaphysics this disease re-emerges within our cognitive and linguistic 'genes'.

Thus I want to reply to Westphal: where is the 'ambiguity' or 'irony' of which he speaks in the following?

Christianity has as its basis the rancune of the sick, the instinct directed against the healthy, against health. Everything well-constituted, proud, high-spirited, beauty above all, is hurtful to its ears and eyes. I recall again the invaluable saying of Paul: 'God has chosen the weak things of the world, the foolish things of the world, base things of the world and things which are despised': that was the formula, in hoc signo *décadence* conquered. – God on the Cross – is the fearful hidden meaning behind this meaning still understood? – Everything that suffers, everything that hangs on the cross is divine . . . We all hang on the cross, consequently we are all divine . . . We alone are divine . . . Christianity was a victory, a nobler disposition perished by it – Christianity has been up till now mankind's greatest misfortune?⁵⁹

It would thus be wholly inappropriate to invoke *Nietzsche's* use of the death of God to provide support for the idea that one can head off the protest atheist by insisting that God takes suffering and death into himself upon the cross.⁶⁰ Nietzsche does indeed think that the Christian God is the crucified God, though he does not think that this makes the Christian God any more

acceptable. On the contrary, it is precisely the crucified God that is the source of all the trouble. The popular idea that a God who suffers with and alongside humanity provides the best chance for theodicy – and one thinks here particularly of the use made by Christians of Eli Wiesel’s story of the execution of the child caught stealing bread in *Night* – cannot be employed to circumvent Nietzsche’s protest atheism. For it is exactly this sort of thinking that Nietzsche believes to be sick and sickening. Here then we see something of the significance of emphasising the important difference between an attack upon the metaphysical God and an attack upon the crucified God. For the instinct that operates in the above theodicy is that the metaphysical God is a source of genuine grievance with respect to its incapacity to engage with human suffering and that the crucified God, by taking upon itself the suffering and pain of humanity, demonstrates genuine compassion and not ‘metaphysical’ indifference. But it is the God of compassion Nietzsche is out to destroy. To use Nietzsche to undermine the ‘metaphysical’ God thus to make space for the crucified God is totally wrong-headed and promotes a wholly distorted impression of Nietzsche’s priorities.

Now we can see more clearly how absurd it is for a conservative Protestant scholar such as Thieliicke to claim that Nietzsche attacks a degenerate view of God. In *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche makes it clear that he believes the principal agent of theological corruption was not Plato, or Aristotle, or St. Thomas, but St. Paul: ‘On the heels of the “glad tidings” came the *worst of all*: those of Paul. In Paul was embodied the antithetical type to the “bringer of glad tidings”, the genius of hatred, of the vision of hatred, of the inexorable logic of hatred.’⁶¹ ‘What he [Paul] divined was that with the aid of a little sectarian movement on the edge of Judaism one could ignite a world conflagration; that with the symbol “God on the Cross” one could sum up everything down-trodden, everything in secret revolt, the entire heritage of anarchist agitation in the Empire into a tremendous power.’⁶²

One of the most extraordinary things about Nietzsche’s reception by theologians in the twentieth century is how so few of them have a bad word to say about him. Barth attacks Nietzsche (though really only in a footnote, albeit a very long one) and so does Milbank (and we shall look at this later), but apart from these two it is hard to think of a major theological voice which seeks to rebut the charges Nietzsche makes against Christianity. Christian theology is not alone in offering so warm a welcome to one so hostile to its fundamental beliefs. Nietzsche wrote that ‘When a woman has scholarly inclinations there is usually something wrong with her sexuality’⁶³ yet he has managed to become a fashionable figure in academic feminism. Nietzsche also had nothing good to say about democracy or socialism yet he has been appropriated by leftist movements from the very beginning. Nietzsche is a charismatic figure and everybody wants to be his friend.

Over the centuries Christianity has made a habit of appropriating the arguments of non-Christians and turning them to its own purposes. Given the powerful role Nietzsche has had in shaping twentieth-century thought it

is unsurprising that Christian theologians have looked to use his work as a theological resource. The way in which this has been done has been to break up Nietzsche for his parts. The aspects of Nietzsche's work that are wholly incompatible with Christian theology are fenced off and (largely) ignored, or cleverly re-interpreted. Thus Christians can join in the general applause of Nietzsche's work. I have tried to suggest in this opening chapter that though there is much to learn from Nietzsche, these fences are not very secure. If Nietzsche is to be used as a theological resource I think the Christian theologian ought first to set about the task of refuting him (best of all, on his own terms). And in order to do this we must try to understand him better.