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## Nietzsche and Christ

by Terry Eagleton

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God... Whither is God?', he cried. 'I will tell you. **We have killed him** – you and I. All of us are his murderers... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him... There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.'

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last.

Luke 23: 44-46

Everyone knows that Nietzsche said 'God is dead', just as everyone knows that Marie Antoinette said 'Let them eat cake' and Humphrey Bogart said 'Play it again, Sam' (except that apparently neither of them did). But if God really is dead, then, for a start, whodunnit? Not, let's be clear, a lot of hairy left-wing atheists, but a lot of short-haired bankers. In Nietzsche's view, God was done in by those who believe in him, not by those who don't. He was murdered by a bunch of impeccably respectably churchgoing suburban bourgeois, not by rationalists, anarchists, militant humanists and other such disreputable moral louts.

How is this so? Capitalist society still needs to legitimate itself by appealing to certain religious and metaphysical values; the problem is that *it itself* keeps undermining and discrediting these values – undermining them by its native pragmatism, rationalism and secularism. Capitalism is an inherently

*secular*, agnostic, skeptical, disenchanted form of life, whatever they may tell you in Texas – one which, as Marx pointed out, strips the halo of the sacred from human existence. The market doesn't believe in God because it doesn't believe in anything – or at least in anything it can't sell or sub-let or snort. This unlovely civilization still needs to draw on religious and metaphysical values in order to lend itself some ideological legitimacy; but it does this, ironically enough, at the very moment that its own everyday activity is busy relativising the eternal, pragmatizing the absolute and secularising the transcendent.

Capitalism, one might claim, is caught in a performative contradiction between what it does and what it says it does – between church and transnational corporation, domestic hearth and strip joint, base and superstructure. Nietzsche's point is that this brazenly materialist system has killed God but needs, ideologically speaking, to pretend that he's still alive. And so it has piously to disavow its own parricidal deed. It has stashed away the corpse, or (better perhaps) keeps it on a life support machine. It wears a kind of 'it wasn't me, gov' expression of bogus innocence. Bourgeois society has butchered the Almighty at the level of the deed, but still needs his august presence at the level of the word.

In Nietzsche's view, such a civilization can't rid itself of the craven illusion that it still has need of metaphysics. It has no time for God in practice, but can't come clean in theory. If only it could accept the terrible, shattering, traumatic good news that it doesn't need metaphysical fictions, absolute foundations, transcendent guarantees or indubitable grounds to its existence, Nietzsche believes, then indeed it would be free. Then it could really *live*, as St Paul thinks that you only can truly live (a form of existence he knows as grace) once you can get out from under the curse of the Law. It's a bit like an alcoholic giving up the booze. To abandon this crutch appears unthinkable, and a life without it seems utterly precarious and impoverished; whereas in fact to

give it up is to discover that you never really needed it in the first place, and that your life is all the richer.

In the mean time, Nietzsche claims, humanism won't plug the gap. All humanism does is substitute one useless form of transcendence (Man) for another (God). The death of God therefore has to herald the death of Man as well. You can't just swap one fetish for another. This is why the *Übermensch* signifies the kind of transformed humanity which would flow from genuinely accepting the death of God. It's the reckless, exuberant, self-delighting existence of those who are able to celebrate a life without foundations – the cavalier insouciance of those spiritual aristocrats who have the courage to risk a life without guarantees. The Overman or Meta-Man is the one who can peer into the fathomless pit of the nothingness of God without being turned to stone. He (never a she, for Nietzsche) is the ecstatic creature who sings and dances at the very thought that his existence is every bit as mortal, fragile, ungrounded, arbitrary and contingent as a modernist work of art.

The only problem is that all this sounds rather like Christianity, which isn't quite what Nietzsche had in mind. For the New Testament, as for *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the only good God is a dead one. For Christianity as for Nietzsche, the death of God in the figure of a tortured political criminal known as Jesus means not replacing God with humanity, but the advent of a transfigured humanity. For Christianity too, God is an abyss of sheer nothingness, absolutely no kind of entity at all, a groundless ground; and to say that we are created is to say that our existence is absolutely non-essential, that we might perfectly well have never been. Such existence is pure gift, sheer gratuity and contingency, a radical end in itself, a supreme *acte gratuite* – self-founding, self-grounding and self-delighting. Just as God exists for absolutely no purpose beyond himself, so human beings are fashioned to live in this way too, to be at their best when they are as gloriously pointless as a work of art. A

just social order is one which would allow men and women to be in this sense ends in themselves, not means to another's power or profit. God, as Aquinas sees, is the power that allows us to be autonomous. Thinking that faith in God puts firm foundations beneath your feet, rather than shattering them, is the delusion of fundamentalists. It's not that Nietzsche holds that people should be a law unto themselves whereas Christians teach that they should obey the law of God. For Aquinas, it's rather that obeying the law of God *means* being free to be wholly oneself.

So Nietzsche and Christianity, those supposedly sworn antagonists, actually agree on an embarrassing amount. (Embarrassing for Nietzsche, anyway). Nietzsche believes that we can't be free unless we can get out from under the patriarchal Nobodaddy (as William Blake calls him) known as God. But of course the New Testament believes just the same. Seeing God as judge, patriarch and accuser is what is meant in scripture by Satan – the Satanic image of God, the God who will beat the shit out of us. And since we're all inveterate masochists, cravenly in thrall to the Law, or to what Freud knows as the death drive, this is exactly what we secretly hanker for. We'll gladly tear ourselves apart as long as there's enough gratification in it for us. This is the terrible, lethal nexus of law and desire – which is also, as it happens, the chief subject-matter of psychoanalysis. Those who are eternally trapped in this closed circuit, in which law and desire feed endlessly, fruitlessly off one another, are traditionally said to be in hell. The figure of the tortured and executed Jesus is the overthrowing of the Satanic image of God, for God as friend, lover, victim, counsel for the defence, fellow accused and flayed flesh and blood. It replaces the Satanic God not with humanity at its most triumphant, as rationalist humanism does, but with humanity at its most torn and vulnerable.

And this is what Nietzsche can't stomach. It's here, not over the death of God, that he and the Gospel part company most decisively. Because weakness,

suffering and mortality for him are simply part of a ghoulish, morbid religious conspiracy to bring low the noble, heroic and life-affirming. He forgets that Jesus never once counsels the sick to reconcile themselves to their afflictions. On the contrary, he seems to regard such suffering as evil, and is out to abolish it. Nietzsche forgets, too, that any power which is not rooted in a solidarity with human creatureliness and fragility, with the raw fact of our bodily finitude, will never prove durable or effective enough. That this is so is one of the lessons of tragedy, an art-form which fascinated Nietzsche himself for quite different reasons.

And so in the end Nietzsche is less revolutionary than the New Testament. Like some demented health-club proprietor, he can't stop worshipping vigour, robustness and virility, or seeing failure as sickly and shameful. Like those Americans who hate a loser, he doesn't see that what matters is failure, not success – that Jesus is a sick joke of a Saviour, that in every human sense his mission is an embarrassing, abysmal failure, that the notion of a crucified Messiah would have been a horrendous, unspeakable scandal and blasphemy to the pious Jews of his day. In the end, Nietzsche disowns the deepest insight of tragedy – that, as W.B. Yeats puts it, 'nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent'.