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NIETZSCHE AS INTERPRETER: AGAINST THE RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR APPROPRIATIONS

by

JOHN DAVID RIVENBARK

Under the direction of Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Best known if not equally understood for having a madman proclaim the demise of God, Friedrich Nietzsche's thought has served as a fecund resource for disparate groups advancing diverse agendas. This paper critically examines the phenomenon of invoking Nietzsche as the final word. This paper argues that, far from being a conversation-stopper, Nietzsche can be understood as enhancing dialogue, across disciplines and between groups such as philosophers and theologians more prone to militant rhetoric than fruitful dialogue. In order to validate this claim it will be necessary to examine in detail the two aspects of Nietzsche's thought most often invoked as conversation stoppers: the madman's proclamation of the death of God; and Nietzsche's devastating critique of Christian morality. Ultimately, this thesis will conclude that when properly understood Nietzsche serves as a unique interpreter locating himself between modernity and postmodernity, as well as between philosophy and religious thought.

INDEX WORDS: Nietzsche, Postmodernism, Christian morality, Death of God, Eden, Theology, Idolatry

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in the

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Georgia State University

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2008

NIETZSCHE AS INTERPRETER: AGAINST THE RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR APPROPRIATIONS

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family in recognition of their support and encouragement. To say that this project would never have begun, much less reached completion, without their help is not a mere platitude. To my wife, Tammy, thank you for believing in me - in spite of prevailing opinion and all of the evidence to the contrary. To my oldest daughter, Grace, thanks for going to school with Dad and for being so interested in my project. I look forward to reading your doctoral dissertation one of these days soon. To my son, Ian, Nietzsche would have loved your style. Keep saying yes to the right things. To my youngest daughter, Leah, who would have thought that you would share a birthday with a thinker that Dad has obsessed with so much? You would have brought a needed warmth and light to Nietzsche's later years.

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I would like to acknowledge the support, encouragement, and collaboration of Dr. Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. in shepherding this project from birth to completion. This project began as a conversation about Schweitzer but kept returning to Nietzsche. Lou, thank you for saying yes!

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Introduction

Ever since Tertullian famously raised the issue, the relationship between philosophy and Christian theology has remained an open question. Theological and philosophical thinking have existed in a dynamic, often troubled, relationship. One would like to say that it has been a dialogue, but too often the situation has devolved into a shouting match at best or a Cold War impasse of guard towers and checkpoints at worst. Questions of final authority have been raised, philosophers have criticized theologians and vice versa, and yet theologians have felt free to appropriate certain aspects of philosophy. One way of telling a modern history would be to tell the story of the dethronement of theology as the queen of the sciences. One might quibble whether science or philosophy now reigns supreme, but theology no longer reigns having been relegated to a more subservient role. This essay represents an attempt at fostering dialogue between philosophy – specifically postmodern philosophical impulses – and Euro-American religious thought. Cognizant that such a dialogue might require skillful interpretation, we will seek to rehabilitate and employ a controversial thinker more often invoked as the final word by both sides.

Some point to a late religious turn in postmodernism as clearing the way for theology to once again have a voice in the conversation. Whether one agrees with that particular claim or not, clearly the space between theology and philosophy remains disputed territory. One might wish it could be a de-militarized zone, but the level of rhetoric exhibits a strong militancy on all sides. In our time, the loci may have shifted from Jerusalem and Athens to points north and west, yet the relationship remains in tension. For many current scholars, the dispute now lies between

Jerusalem (maybe Grand Rapids as the intellectual center of American evangelicalism?)[1] and Paris due to the rise of postmodern thought typically associated with French Continental philosophy. In considering the relationship between Christianity and postmodernism, James K.A. Smith contends that at least some Christian thinkers have demonized postmodern thinking as the "devil from Paris."[2] While Smith has in mind what he calls the "unholy Trinity of postmodern thinkers: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Michel Foucault,"[3] a larger presence looms behind these more current thinkers: the self-proclaimed antichrist from Germany.

In the disputed borderland between theology and philosophy, perhaps no thinker casts a larger shadow than Friedrich Nietzsche. The content of Nietzsche's thought and the particular style he employed give rise to numerous, and as yet unresolved, questions. Was Nietzsche atheistic or religious (if not pious)?[4] Are the categories of theism and atheism mutually exclusive? If one must draw clear lines of demarcation, then Nietzsche must be either atheistic or religious, especially if one holds to a particular conception of divinity. Such a marked distinction probably serves the various appropriations of Nietzsche – both religious and non-religious – more than it represents a careful classification. To the supposedly secular barbarian horde, Nietzsche serves as the ultimate gate-crasher pounding down the doors of the decaying cathedral to reveal the moldy remains of a long-dead God. Employed by the militant Christians manning the bulwarks of the faith, Nietzsche's hammer gets appropriated to smash the godless catapults

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[1] This comment is made somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but no one really associates Jerusalem with the center of Christian thought anymore. While many Catholics would certainly still look towards Rome, one could safely argue that Protestants, especially evangelicals, would look somewhere within the geographic United States.

[2] James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pg. 15. It should be noted that Smith is saying that Christian theologians opposed to postmodern thought characterize Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault in this highly polemical way. Smith's engagement represents a much more charitable view.

[3] Ibid., 21.

[4] For recent scholarship seeking to rehabilitate some form of piety within Nietzsche see Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief,* London: Routledge, 2002, and Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

of pagan philosophy. However, if one can entertain a certain blurring of the boundary lines then perhaps Nietzsche could be considered as not necessarily either/or but a little of both/and - piously atheistic at times and piously religious, if not Christian, at other times. In that case, Nietzsche serves as a liminal figure able to interpret and foster dialogue between modernity and postmodernity and between philosophy and theology.

While Nietzsche's importance can hardly be overstated, several key issues are immediately apparent. First, Nietzsche's thought cannot be reduced to the simple binary opposition between theology and philosophy. While this claim will have to be investigated in further detail, we can begin by noting that Nietzsche seems to feel the personal freedom to address both philosophical and theological issues, to do so in either/or and both/and terms, and to do so as a philosopher and a theologian (and arguably as an amateur psychologist) – notwithstanding the fact that his formal training was philological. Secondly, moving beyond Nietzsche's thought itself; we must also note the phenomena of the various appropriations of Nietzsche. Beginning with his sister's efforts, appropriating Nietzsche to some end or another has become a sort of cottage industry. While many Christian theologians have vociferously opposed Nietzsche and his thought and created Nietzschean strawmen upon which to focus their attacks, many secular thinkers have been quick to appropriate him as a - if not the - proto-atheist. Both of these camps tend to rely on overly simplistic readings of Nietzsche's famous proclamation of the "death of God passage" in *The Gay Science*.[5] We will return to this point in depth in order to problematize these simplistic readings and to complicate the question of appropriating Nietzsche as a theological, non-theological, or atheistic resource. Finally, as if these disputed questions were not enough, some postmodern thinkers look to Nietzsche as *the*

[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann , New York: Vintage Books, 1974, III, 125.

proto-postmodern. In at least one instance, Richard Rorty refers to Nietzsche as "the great forerunner of 'postmodernism.'"[6]

Thus, we arrive at the difficulty of fixing Nietzsche's position. We seem to be facing at least two open questions: was Nietzsche secular or religious, and was he modern or postmodern? Surely, it would be much too simplistic to argue that Nietzsche was simply a modern atheist or a modern religious thinker, on the one hand, or merely a postmodern thinker on the other. This would necessarily entail the assumption that modernity itself was either secular or religious. Clearly, to draw the line of separation in such a way risks over-simplification. Modernity was not entirely secular just as the classical period was not entirely religious. Only if one must tell history as a straight-line progression ever upward must one revert to such a simplistic model. On such a view, the destruction of the Berlin Wall would mark the end of the Cold War while a more nuanced read might see the beginning of the end of the Cold War in Reagan's decision to deploy Pershing II missile systems in West Germany or even argue that given the current situation we run the risk of a continued period of Cold War conflict. Our symbols and our symbolic events are important to us, but they are not perfect markers delineating one thing from another. Viewing Nietzsche as a thinker who, while firmly situated in modernity, nevertheless criticized modernity does not necessarily entail a postmodern Nietzsche. Viewing Nietzsche as a religious thinker who eviscerates Christianity does not necessarily entail an atheistic Nietzsche. Instead, Nietzsche was a personally, psychologically, and rhetorically complicated writer whose thought was multi-layered and nuanced. We shall see this problem of imprecise terminology

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[6] Richard Rorty, "The Enlightenment and Postmodernism" in *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*, Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, eds., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, pg. 30. It should be noted that Rorty is referring to a specific type of postmodernism which he had earlier defined as a "philosophical initiative [represented by] philosophers like me, who think that the Enlightenment philosophers were on the right track, but did not go far enough. We hope to do to Nature, Reason, and Truth what the eighteenth century did to God," pg. 19.

again when we examine Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality. While Nietzsche dares to call himself an "immoralist," it is not altogether clear that he uses the term in the same way some of his critics might employ it.

This essay represents the beginning of a larger project intended to explore the current conversation between postmodern philosophy and Christian thought. In order to facilitate that larger project, some care must be given to exploring the shadow still cast by Nietzsche over both the landscape and the conversation. Is that shadow the "shadow of the antichrist,"[7] or that of someone who represents a theological and philosophical resource for Christian thinkers? Stated even more simply, was Nietzsche a friend or a foe of Christianity? Of course, how one phrases the question runs the risk of pre-determining the answer. Reducing Nietzsche to the simple status of friend or foe of Christianity might entail constructing a false dichotomy, although there is more evidence for the latter than the former. Resisting the urge to arrive at *the* definitive reading of Nietzsche - surely that has been attempted often enough already - this essay will argue that Nietzsche was a deeply religious (while not necessarily Christian) thinker whose work could prove fruitful for both theology and philosophy in ways much more useful than in simply grounding criticism of one another. In order to validate this claim of Nietzsche as promoting dialogue instead of ending conversations, it will be necessary to examine and accurately understand both the madman's proclamation and Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality.

I will proceed with a brief, albeit necessary, overview of postmodernism and how I understand and employ the concept in order to situate Nietzsche. I will then move on to a quick survey of some of the major appropriations of Nietzsche's thought. This step will be necessary in

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[7] See the following: Stephen N. Williams. *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006 and Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith,* New York: Fordham University Press, 2001. Westphal would represent another thinker who appropriates Nietzsche as a "proto-postmodern."

order to support the claim that Nietzsche was in fact a religious thinker in addition to being a deeply philosophical thinker. Having established the legitimacy of claiming some religious impulses within Nietzsche's thought, we will then move to an in-depth examination of the "death of God" passage in order to demonstrate the subtlety of Nietzsche's thought over against the simplistic appropriations of him by both Christians and atheists. Finally, we will move to a careful reading of Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality and seek to rehabilitee this discussion as a Nietzschean affirmation of life.

One note on methodology must be made and deserves repeating throughout. It is difficult to understand Nietzsche's contested relationship with Christianity apart from his relationship to Greek philosophy and literature. Williams argues that "Nietzsche's early encounters with the Greeks, Schopenhauer, and Wagner – prior to his anti-Christian writing – need to be given a reasonable amount of exposure if we want to understand his hostility to Christianity."[8] While supporting that contention, space considerations will only allow for brief gestures to those other philosophical influences and tensions present within Nietzsche. If nothing else, this point illustrates the difficulty of accurately placing Nietzsche. It is too easy to define him based on what he opposed. With that said, I am well-aware of the contentious relationship between Nietzsche and the academy of his day. Again, drawing the contrast too sharply runs the risk of portraying Nietzsche as migrating from the religion of his youth to the virulent secularity of his adult years. James O'Flaherty notes this when he writes:

> Despite the great significance for Nietzsche of the classical tradition and his own preference for the Greek over the Christian ideal in all areas of life, the overriding concern of his writings is, on the one hand, to unmask what he conceived to be the

[8] Williams,16.

decadence of both Judaism and Christianity – especially the latter – and, on the other hand, to supplant those faiths with the doctrines proclaimed in *Also sprach Zarathustra*.[9] As will become clear, one of the key contentions of this essay will be that Nietzsche remained a deeply religious thinker. To think otherwise might be a result of thinking that Athens was overly secular and not religious in its later decadence.[10] With these preliminary remarks as introduction, we will move to a brief discussion of postmodernism in order to situate Nietzsche on the threshold between modernism and postmodernism.

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[9] James C. O'Flaherty, Introduction, *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, pg. 3.

[10] See Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., *Was Greek Thought Religious On the Use and Abuse of Hellenism, from Rome to Romanticism*, New York: Palgrave, 2002. See especially the Preface, xvii – xxiv. Ruprecht's book explores the paradox between "the ways in which we have been blinded to the Greeks' vast difference from us [and] they ways in which we have been blinded to the Greeks' enduring religiosity," pg. xxiii.

I – Postmodernism, Postmodernisms, and Nietzsche

Those who attempt to define or analyze the concept of postmodernity do so at their own peril.[11]

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Postmodernism, the word, is causing more trouble than its worth.[12]

Richard Rorty

Perhaps it is overly ambitious to attempt even a limited account of both Nietzsche's thought and postmodernism in the same project, but just as there are varieties of Nietzschean appropriations, so there are varieties of postmodernism. However, some clarification seems necessary because too often postmodernism and modernism are viewed as a simple opposition. Beginning the conversation in this way necessitates labeling Nietzsche as either a modernist or a postmodernist. Clearly, Nietzsche resists such a simple classification. The matter is further complicated by the use and abuse of the term "postmodernism." Clarity dictates that we attempt to be as concise as possible in defining which particular postmodernism we are considering.

Postmodernism is a notoriously slippery term used across a variety of disciplines by friends and foes of the concept alike and may very well have outlived its usefulness in any descriptive sense. In a very loose way, postmodernism can be understood as the critique of modernity and of the Enlightenment project.[13] It is not difficult to demonstrate the claim that at least part of Nietzsche's overall project included a critique of modernity, or at least of the nineteenth century in Europe. Nietzsche described *Beyond Good and Evil* as "in all essentials a

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[11] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pg. 3.

[12] "Postmodernism." 101 *Key Terms in Philosophy and their importance for Theology*. Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, James K.A. Smith, eds. Lousiville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pg. 73.

[13] For a contrary view, see *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*, Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, eds. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. Baker and Reill argue that "the many varieties of thinking commonly grouped together under the rubric of 'postmodernism' share at least one salient characteristic: they all depend upon a stereotyped, even caricatural, account of the Enlightenment," pg. 1 of Introduction.

critique of modernity, the modern sciences, the modern arts, not even excluding modern politics, together with signposts to an antithetical type who is as little modern as possible, a noble, an affirmative type."[14] In an attempt at clarity, some find it helpful to distinguish between postmodernity and postmodernism, with the latter used to refer to specifically theoretical or academic impulses while the former refers to the broader cultural phenomenon associated with this particular period of human history. No matter the usage, Kevin Vanhoozer claims that "in the past twenty years or so postmodernity has become a concept that is indispensable for understanding contemporary Western thought and culture as modernity has been for understanding the past three hundred years."[15] Starting primarily with a few Continental philosophers and literary critics, a new movement loosely called postmodernism emerged that began to criticize what it viewed as the excesses and dangers inherent in the thought-systems and truth-claims of modernity. While Christian thought has been one of the last areas to feel the effects of postmodernism, the engagement has accelerated in the last decade. Carl Raschke notes that "while postmodernism has altered the face of academic culture, particularly in the arts…it has only recently begun to pound at the door of evangelical thought and faith."[16] Smith sees the encounter in similar terms:

> According to many published reports, the devil is from Paris. In the circles of Christian theologians and philosophers, the dreaded enemy of 'secular humanism' has been supplanted by a more terrifying creature: "postmodernism" – a label that functions as a kind of blob that absorbs anything contemporary that is considered antithetical to

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[14] EH, pg. 82.
[15] Vanhoozer, xii.
[16] Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, pg. 11. It should be noted that Raschke's claim has to do with the late engagement between *evangelical* theologians and postmodern thought. Non-evangelical theologians have fruitfully engaged postmodern thought. See also Walter J. Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, and Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

> Christian faith. And almost invariably the provenance of postmodernism is traced to France, as if postmodernism were a kind of Frankenstein created in the laboratories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Many Christian scholars have spent the past decade shoring up the front lines against the Parisian threat.[17]

If Jacques Derrida is a proponent of postmodernism, MTV and the rise of the Internet would be symptoms of postmodernity.[18] In its more academic and philosophical impulses, postmodernism is characterized by a suspicion of metanarratives as famously expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard,[19] an emphasis on the uncertain character of human knowing, and a tendency to analyze various intellectual claims, including Enlightenment claims about the universal character of reason and science, in a way seeing them as being a mask for oppression and domination. This last impulse often gets labeled the "hermeneutics of suspicion." For Vanhoozer, most attempts at defining postmodernism have tended to focus either on its "growth and trajectory in a single domain (for example, architecture, literature); [while] others seek to give a theoretical account across a number of domains."[20] Such attempts have tended to produce varying degrees of clarity depending on the domain. Vanhoozer sees benefit in moving beyond trying to define postmodernism "in either conceptual or cultural terms alone,"[21] finding it more helpful to understand postmodernism in terms of a condition:

> A condition is something altogether different than a position. A position refers to one's location in space or, alternately, to one's opinion on a certain issue. The point is that a position, whether geographical or argumentative, can be plotted and specified more or

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[17] Smith, 13.
[18] Ibid., 23.
[19] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, French original, 1979; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
[20] Vanhoozer, 3.
[21] Ibid., 4.

> less accurately. Positions are determinate – fixed, definite. A condition is altogether more diffuse, an environment in which one lives and moves and, in some sense, has one's being.[22]

On one view, modernity seems to be about the business of drawing lines of separation – whether lines on a map delineating one nation-state from another nation-state even while splitting ethnic people groups in two, or lines separating academic fields of discipline from another such as philosophy from theology and later religious studies from theology and philosophy. The modern partitioning of India – not to mention the lines on the map of British-invented Palestine – serve as clear examples of the difficulty of such a project. If modernism consists of drawing lines of separation, then it might be said that the postmodern turn consists of blurring those lines. Some might point to the demolition of the Berlin Wall as a marking point for this transition from modernity to postmodernity. Almost overnight, the lines of demarcation which had served to define almost five decades of the Cold War were blurred by the feet of people moving east and west to meet each other, much as Nietzsche blurred modern boundaries separating theology and philosophy. The postmodern turn seems to consist in large part of a blurring of such neatly drawn lines. So in our current condition, the nation-states that once were part of the Warsaw Pact are now members of NATO. Who could have imagined such a thing? A personal example might illustrate this blurring of formerly rigid lines.

In January of 1989 while serving in the US Army as a Russian linguist, I was assigned to a team escorting ten inspectors from the Soviet Union as they observed the destruction of Pershing II missiles at the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant near Marshall, Texas. Under the terms of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in 1988, entire weapons systems were slated for destruction. Our days consisted of driving out to the

[22] Ibid.

ammunition plant and watching the civilian personnel strap rocket stages into stands, ignite the fuel, and then crush the empty stages thereby fulfilling the terms of the treaty. My duties as a linguist consisted mainly in getting the daily lunch order correct and then interpreting overly long speeches at the formal closing ceremony at the end of the month, in addition to assisting with numerous shopping excursions to Wal-Mart. In addition to our formal treaty obligations, we attempted to expose our Soviet guests to as much of the local culture as possible – including the annual Fire Ant Festival and the cult of Texas high school football. Our local, cultural connections resulted in an invitation for our Soviet guests to play a basketball game against an all-star team from the local church league, complete with coverage on the local nightly news. The decision was made to field a joint US/USSR team composed of both Soviet inspectors and American escorts to oppose the local team. So, our "mixed" team of Russians and Americans played the local team and won going away. (While I would like to take a majority share of the credit, my role consisted mainly of rebounding and throwing outlet passes to one of our Soviet guests who happened to have played on the Soviet junior Olympic team!) While I am not claiming to have invented "postmodern basketball," surely this exemplifies a blurring of categories that would have been unthinkable at one time.[23]

However, we must resist the urge to over-simplify by claiming that the modern has gone and the postmodern has come. No such clear demarcation exists. Smith puts this well:

> We have not emerged into a radically new postmodern world; rather, our modern world is disrupted and haunted by postmodern suspicions and critique. Our time is a bit like downtown Los Angeles, where architecture reflects both epochs. *It is not that the*

[23] This example also highlights the polemical use of labels. We came to think of our foreign teammates as Russians – not Soviets. My roommate and fellow linguist, Steve Wagner, was the first to draw my attention to a distinction between "Soviets" and "Russians" when he corrected a visiting American general who had referred to the "f-ing Russians." Steve responded, "You mean, f-ing Soviets, don't you, sir?"

> *postmodern has come in and flattened the modern*; rather, the curvaceous lines and eclectic ensembles of Frank Gehry's postmodern architecture assert themselves alongside the modernist glass boxes and crumbling "projects" inspired by Le Corbusier.[24]

In addition to the difficulty of defining a term crossing fields, an element of subjectivity exists even in the definition of the term. Again, Vanhoozer is helpful:

> A definition of postmodernity is as likely to say more about the person offering the definition than it is of the "postmodern." Second, postmoderns resist closed, tightly bounded "totalizing" accounts of such things as the "essence" of the postmodern. And third, according to David Tracy "there is no such phenomenon as postmodernity." There are only postmodernities.[25]

One of the more prolific authors engaged in the debate between postmodernism and Christianity is the evangelical scholar, Brian McLaren. [26] Although accused of blindly embracing all aspects of postmodern thought by some of his more heavy-handed critics, McLaren positions himself neither as anti-modern nor simply as postmodern. This is an important distinction to draw because too often *post-* is read as *anti-* when a more careful reading would show the clear genealogy in which postmodernism precedes from modernism. Modernism and postmodernism are related in some way. Vanhoozer notes this fact when he argues that "the term 'postmodern' signals some kind of relation to modernity, containing as it does the very word. Which part of the term is most significant: post or modern?"[27]

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[24] Smith, 63, emphasis mine.
[25] Vanhoozer, 3.
[26] In some ways, McLaren might be seen as a rather Nietzschean figure. McLaren holds an M.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Maryland and taught courses in the English department there. However, he is best known as a pastor, speaker, and author on philosophical and theological topics.
[27] Vanhoozer, 6.

Further complicating this discussion is the fact that the most blurred line of all would be the one we might attempt to draw between modernism and postmodernism. There is no clear line of demarcation separating the two. The boundary relationship is one of overlap and contestation. Again, one cannot even say that modernism is over and we now dwell in postmodernism, although this has certainly been said. Thus, Stan Grenz claims that "postmodernism was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 pm."[28] Once more, we should underscore the point that this is an ongoing transition. Late medievalists could not predict what the modern period would look like, and we late moderns/early postmoderns must be equally circumspect about what our future looks like. In attempting to bring clarity to the confusing dialogue surrounding postmodernism, McLaren finds it helpful to think of three different kinds of postmodernism.

The first type of postmodernism is "the one that modern people talk about a lot … it's a big scary monster of nihilism and relativism and self-destruction that seeks to undo all that is good in Western civilization."[29] McLaren argues that this type of postmodernism exists primarily in the imaginations of "frightened modern people and those who seek to intimidate them" and is useful "to scare people so they'll stay loyal to their modern institutions, which, they are told, are the last bulwark against the chaos at the gate."[30] Here, McLaren self-consciously draws a parallel to Augustine's non-metaphorical barbarians at the gate – a rhetorical device that has found much

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[28] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, pg. 11. Grenz refers to the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis which had been viewed as the epitome of the modern architectural project. Grenz references Charles Jencks who argues that "this event symbolizes the death of modernity and the birth of postmodernity," at least architecturally. My use of Grenz here implies nothing about his larger project of engaging postmodernism which displayed much defter nuance than my quote might imply. I simply use Grenz to illustrate the larger tendency of attempting to mark the transition from one period to the next by pointing to a specific time or event.

[29] Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Or+thodoxy: Why I Am a Missional +evangelical +post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/Calvinist + Anabaptist/Anglica + Methodist + catholic + green + incarnational +depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian,* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, pg. 12. One might presume that McLaren's title won the annual contest for most convoluted, but one can also sense the element of play in juxtaposing seemingly mutually exclusive labels.

[30] Ibid., 10.

use among Christians for many years. For McLaren, this caricature of postmodernism cannot be critically engaged because it does not really exist.

The second type of postmodernism is what McLaren describes as "a kind of adolescent postmodernism."[31] While acknowledging that some might call this second type extreme or deconstructive postmodernism, McLaren prefers the term "adolescent" because it suggests an early phase that must necessarily give way to other phases. According to McLaren, this second type can be characterized as being associated with relative pluralism (in addition to other minor themes).[32] While not the "phantasm" represented by the first type, McLaren claims that this second type can be dangerous.[33]

McLaren labels the third type "emerging postmodernism" and admits that while it resists full definition at this time because it may be decades away from maturity, it at least shows the promise of moving beyond the relativist pluralism of adolescent postmodernism:

> [Emerging postmodernism] sees relativist pluralism (the irrational idea that all opinions or views are equally valid) as a kind of chemotherapy intended to stop the growth of modern reductionistic rationalism (the oppressive idea that all reality can be reduced to mechanisms that the mind can understand by the five senses). In order to kill the malignancy, the patient has to take dangerous medicine that would prove poisonous if taken in too high doses or for too long. Emerging postmodernism agrees that modern reductionistic rationalism needed to be stopped or "deconstructed," and sees that relativist pluralism "worked" as a chemotherapeutic agent, but it doesn't mistake this dangerous short-term medical necessity as a long-term regimen for health. It seeks to move beyond

[31] McLaren, 12.
[32] Ibid. 10.
[33] Ibid. 10.

> relativistic pluralism, and sees "emergent thinking" and "integralism" as better alternatives to both modern reductionistic rationalism and relativist pluralism.[34]

In making the point that only extreme postmodernism is anti-modern, McLaren speaks directly to the role of reason and rationality and the question of epistemology. According to McLaren, "a lot of people seem to think that since modernity was rationalistic, postmodernity will have to be anti-rationalistic or irrational."[35] Instead of a binary opposition between modernity and postmodernity, McLaren argues for a synthesis and hopes that postmodernity will "more likely seek to integrate rationality with things beyond rationality, things like imagination, intuition, even faith" going so far as to expect that "if the medieval era (the thesis, in a Hegelian progression) was seen as an era of faith, and the modern era (the antithesis, in the Hegelian sense) as an era of reason, we could expect the postmodern era to be a synthesis of faith and reason."[36] In what could be an anticipation of his critics, McLaren deftly transposes the opposition of modernity versus postmodernity to an opposition of medieval versus modern with postmodernity as a mediating position between the two. Such a synthesizing move seems beneficial to me instead of the more polarizing move of being forced to choose between opposites.

Concerning the epistemological question raised by the postmodern critique, Vanhoozer sees a connection between the postmodern turn and an iconoclastic purge. Rooted in Lyotard's dictum, "Thou shalt not believe in absolutes," and in his claim that metanarratives are "crimes against humanity," Vanhoozer argues that metanarratives produce multiple forms of

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[34] Ibid., 12. McLaren acknowledges the influence of Ken Wilbur on his thought. For a representation of Wilbur's work, see *Eye to Eye: The Quest for a New Paradigm*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

totalitarianism.[37] Ultimately, this leads Vanhoozer to define the postmodern condition as the following:

> What is going on today – in religion, art, philosophy, and thinking in general – is a cleansing of the temples of knowledge of the last vestiges of conceptual idolatry. The postmodern condition is one of life among the ruins of cast-down idols, especially in the ruins of cast down –isms (for example, existentialism, structuralism, Marxism). For postmodern iconoclasts do not abandon reason; they merely remove it from its pedestal and *situate* it. To locate an ideology or conceptual system in the rough and tumble of human history, culture and politics is, of course, to demystify it. Henceforth, there are only '*human, all too human*' –isms. Iconoclastic suspicion is a radicalization of Kant's attempt to determine the limits of reason. The result: a postmodern critique of *impure* reason."[38]

Surely, one does not have to struggle very hard to hear the echoes of a very Nietzschean hammer sounding out the idols of modernity – including the religiously inspired ones. Vanhoozer's definition of the postmodern condition finds its genesis in the Nietzschean critique of the gods of Christianity, Judaism, and modernity. This point must be emphasized. For Vanhoozer, the postmodern turn bears a genetic relationship to the Nietzschean critique of modern idols. Grenz agrees on this point by claiming that "Modernity has been under attack at least since Friedrich Nietzsche lobbed the first volley against it late in the nineteenth century."[39] The key for Vanhoozer and others is that the postmodern outgrowth of Nietzsche's critique allows for "the recovery of two neglected forms of religious discourse – the prophetic and the mystical – that

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[37] Vanhoozer, 15.
[38] Vanhoozer, 15, emphasis mine.
[39] Grenz, 5.

seek, in different ways, to invoke the beyond: justice, the gift."[40] How ironic that the Nietzschean critique of Christianity might ultimately enhance dialogue. Perhaps a recovery of dialogue as envisioned by Vanhoozer and Nietzsche might allow for alternative readings of religious texts themselves – and of the interpretations of those central texts. Of course, such a reading would require a genuine dialogue between philosophy and theology as opposed to the often violent appropriation of one by the other.

The Biblical account in Genesis could be understood as a metaphor for how one relates to knowledge. According to the text, two trees in the garden were named by God – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. One could read this account as a metaphor for how knowledge is acquired. According to the text, God forbade eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and of evil - not from the tree of life. A certain reading of this story might suggest that knowledge abstracted from relationship is ultimately destructive. Robert Greer in his book, *Mapping Postmodernism*,[41] presents a theological critique of the Enlightenment project. On his view, knowledge, which he calls absolute truth, is "an encyclopedic collection of abstracted principles that are understood to be timelessly valid and therefore immutable...existing independently from any given historical moment, these principles are transcultural and ahistorical."[42] Greer goes on to argue that such a view of knowledge is itself idolatrous and represents "the dark side of absolute truth" because "the person who has access to this encyclopedic collection of truths is understood to possess God's eye, enabled to see and assess

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[40] Vanhoozer, 17.
[41] Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003.
[42] Ibid., 5.

reality with the precision and exactitude of God himself."[43] In his explicitly theological history of modernity, Greer argues:

> Absolute truth has become a Trojan horse to the church. In was offered as a gift by Enlightenment scholars and left outside the church walls. Revered as something intrinsically good, it was later wheeled through the church's heavily guarded theological gates by its own leadership and afforded a prominent place inside the walls for all to see and admire. Within its bowels, however, was hidden a pernicious enemy to the Christian faith.[44]

For Greer, this hidden enemy was modernism's scientific hermeneutic which ultimately led to unalterable and static principles becoming more fundamental than personal, revealed truth. As a Christian theologian, Greer characterizes modernism as the turn to the subject as the beginning of knowledge and postmodernism as the turn to language as the beginning of knowledge. Greer sees a need for yet another turn – a relational turn to embodied, incarnational truth to counteract the disembodied, overly abstract truth of modernism. Greer's less than useful term for his version of the relational turn is post-postmodernism. Whether one agrees or not with Greer's particular theological response, he seems to at least identify the question at stake. Greer makes epistemological claims about the nature of human knowing, what constitutes the truth, and perhaps even who is privileged to interpret reality. Greer employs a finely-tuned Nietzschean philosophical hammer to sound out the philosophical idol of Absolute Truth.

Returning to the Genesis story, Vanhoozer draws a connection to the text when he claims that "eating from the postmodern tree of knowledge occasions a new 'fall' and loss of

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 2.

innocence"[45] just as the original fall did. Vanhoozer seems to have in mind here a new "fall" from the unrealistic promises of absolute certainty offered by the most extreme forms of modern thought. On this view, this new fall represents something both good and necessary to free knowledge from the confining categories of modernism, while clearing the way for a turn towards a view of knowledge that allows room for the turn to language in addition to the relational turn. As we will see later, the madman represents the only figure in dialogue with both the *agora* and the cathedral.

[45] Vanhoozer, 10.

II – The Ever Resource-Full Nietzsche

… there is nothing in me of a founder of religion – religions are affairs of the rabble, I have need of washing my hands after contact with religious people … I do not want 'believers', I think I am too malicious to believe in myself, I never speak to the masses … I have a terrible fear I shall one day be pronounced holy: one will guess why I bring out this book beforehand; it is intended to prevent people from making mischief of me … I do not want to be a saint, rather even a buffoon … Perhaps I am a buffoon … and none the less, or rather not none the less – for there has hitherto been nothing more mendacious than saints – the truth speaks out of me.[46]

Nietzsche

May your name be holy to future generations.[47]

Peter Gast

Seemingly irreconcilable groups have tended to agree on at least one thing: if you want to stop a conversation it is only necessary to invoke Nietzsche's powerful rhetoric. Christians have tended to view as folly any attempt to engage a thinker who supposedly proclaimed the death of their deity, while secular thinkers have invoked the very same claim as proof that religionists have no further role in the dialogue. I contend that both sides are misunderstanding Nietzsche. It only distorts Nietzsche to attempt to situate him firmly in one camp or another. Certainly, Nietzsche was not a Christian thinker but that does not necessarily imply that Nietzsche was exclusively a secular or atheistic thinker either. Instead, I will contend that Nietzsche must be understood as a liminal figure – a non-Christian, religious thinker comfortable in dialogue with both secular philosophical thought and religious thought.

Before we can examine the religious appropriations of Nietzsche, we must first address the larger claim of *any* religious content in Nietzsche's work. Although Giles Fraser's recent book examines "the residual theologian in the most vociferous of atheists,"[48] such treatments seem to be in the minority. As was stated earlier, some modern scholarship has suffered from the

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[46] EH, pg. 96, emphasis original.
[47] Ibid, xvi.
[48] Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief,* London: Routledge, 2002, Preface.

assumption that Nietzsche's trajectory can be traced from the Christianity of his youth to the secular atheism of his adulthood, mediated perhaps by the classics. Framing Nietzsche's intellectual progression in such a way would necessarily lead to the conclusion that Nietzsche was a secular thinker and should be appropriated for secular ends. In his very recent book on Nietzsche, Bruce Benson claims that "one need only peruse the Nietzsche scholarship that has proliferated in the past few decades to see that it is overwhelmingly secular in nature and that Nietzsche has largely been appropriated for decidedly secular purposes."[49] Alistair Kee argues that "scholars who are not personally interested in religion have decided that it is entirely possible to expound Nietzsche or dialogue with Nietzsche without reference to his views on religion."[50] As we saw with Vanhoozer's concern about the subjective impulses surrounding an attempt to define postmodernism, Kee sees a certain subjectivity surrounding Nietzschean scholarship. Certainly, one would not want to push Kee's claim too far, but because of Nietzsche's virulent attacks against Christianity and religion, it is often easy to overlook the blatantly religious tone present in many of his books, not to mention the religious themes of redemption, life, and his "new gospel" of Zarathustra. At the risk of over-generalizing a bit, the danger seems to arise from assuming that since Nietzsche was anti-Christian, he was necessarily totally non-religious. Admittedly, this is not an easy issue to navigate, but simply to dismiss any religious impulse in Nietzsche seems overly drastic. In order to substantiate the claim of a religious impulse present within Nietzsche, this section will briefly recount some the historical support, highlight direct textual support, and draw on the recent scholarship of two more overtly theological engagements with Nietzsche.

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[49] Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, pg. 6.
[50] Alistair Kee, *Nietzsche against the Crucified*, London: SCM, 1999, pg. 7.

To refute the claim that there are no religious impulses or content in the mature Nietzsche, Jerry Clegg draws on a historical source while noting the complicated nature of Nietzsche and his thought:

> No less a witness than Lou Salome said of Nietzsche that he should be read as a religious writer. Since that is advice about an author noted for such impious remarks as that piety is nothing but fear of the truth, and that Christianity has worked for the preservation of everything sick and suffering – and so for the corruption of the European race – it may seem merely curious, but it is actually astute. Nietzsche lived and wrote, so he admitted, *by the light of a flame ignited by the ancient fire of Christian faith.* Our gods may now be dead – as dead as he pronounced at least one of them to be, as dead as the quite human priests of our racial history, as dead as Siddhartha, Jesus, and Luther – but the shadelike shadows of all these figures, Nietzsche insisted, linger in the form of their effects on our evolution from *homo natura* into *homines religiosi*.[51]

In addition to the historical support, it is not difficult to find textual support for the claim of a religious sensibility present in Nietzsche. A couple of quick examples should suffice without running the risk of proof-texting. In describing *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche closes the section with an astounding statement. He writes:

> Speaking theologically – pay heed, for I rarely speak as a theologian – it was God Himself who at the end of his labour lay down as a serpent under the Tree of Knowledge: it was thus he recuperated from being God … He had made everything too beautiful … The Devil is merely the idleness of God on that seventh day …[52]

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[51] Jerry S. Clegg, "Life in the Shadow of Christ, Nietzsche on *Pistis* versus *Gnosis*," in *Nietzsche and the Gods*, Weaver Santaniello, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, pg. 159, emphasis mine.
[52] EH, pg. 83.

Having highlighted the historical and textual support for the claim of a religious sensibility within Nietzsche's writings, we now move to a brief consideration of two recent scholars and the way in which they have not only highlighted the religious impulse in Nietzsche but have appropriated that impulse to specifically theological ends. Among recent scholars, Fraser represents one thinker who sees religious impulses in Nietzsche's thought. Fraser is interesting partly because situating him is also problematic. Fraser lectures in philosophy in addition to serving as an Anglican theologian. While highlighting the religious aspect of Nietzsche's work, Fraser shifts the discussion purely to soteriology and argues that Nietzsche was "obsessed with the idea of human salvation."[53] Without fully explicating Fraser's thesis here, it is enough to note that, for Fraser, Nietzsche's entire project can be understood as "experiments to design a form of redemption that would work for a post-theistic age."[54] While other scholars would surely question the specific claim Fraser makes, for our purposes it is enough to note that Fraser clearly sees religious thinking in Nietzsche even after his celebrated "death of God" pronouncements. Obviously, for Fraser "post-theistic" does not necessarily mean non-religious. Fraser evidences awareness of the attempts by multiple constituencies to construct a holy Nietzsche but sees the greatest danger "not [from] 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."[55] Fraser's brief overview of the history of religious appropriations of Nietzsche is actually quite helpful, even if one disagrees with his ultimate thesis about the soteriological impulse within the Nietzschean project. I would simply add that virtually all religious appropriations of Nietzsche begin with Christianity (one would have to say with a "Christianity" or "Christianities") and then come to the Nietzschean corpus in an attempt to reconcile the two.

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[53] Fraser, 2.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, 3.

This seems to be the major weakness in Fraser's work. Fraser begins with the assumption that in order to understand Nietzsche, one must first refute Nietzsche's attack against Christianity. It is not clear that Fraser sees a distinction between his twentieth century Anglicanism and the nineteenth century German Lutheranism imbibed by Nietzsche. Unfortunately, Fraser includes both under the rubric of orthodox Christianity.[56] We should also make clear that Fraser makes little room for postmodern appropriations of Nietzsche. Fraser notes the irony that Nietzsche, who wanted neither 'believers' nor 'followers,' has nonetheless seen just that occur "from the development of the various Nietzsche cults at the turn of the twentieth century to his becoming a *fetish of post-modern credibility*."[57]

Bruce Ellis Benson's newest book, *Pious Nietzsche*, builds on his earlier work, *Graven Ideologies*.[58] Benson's work revolves around "the deeply religious nature of Nietzsche's thought and his attempts to overcome his early religiosity in order to move to a *new* religiosity" as it relates to Nietzsche's move from his pietistic childhood to a "new" Dionysian Pietism, that, while different in form, still retains on emphasis on the heart.[59] Clearly, for Benson, Nietzsche's trajectory consisted of a move from one religiosity to another – not a move from religion to atheism or secularism. *Contra* Fraser, Benson argues "that Nietzsche – far from seeking a new soteriology – is seeking to overcome the perceived notion that we *need* some sort of salvation. Not only does he wish to be free from the God of Christianity, he also wishes to be free from the very idea of redemption."[60] On Benson's view, Nietzsche never stopped being pious – rather the object of his piety shifted from the Christianity of his youth to the Dionysian cult of his

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[56] This is not to say that Fraser's work is totally without merit. His discussion of Nietzsche's search for authenticity in art is especially helpful. See especially the provocative chapter 6, "Salvation, kitsch and the denial of shit," pp. 122 – 140.
[57] Fraser, 3, emphasis mine.
[58] Benson, Bruce, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* , Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002.
[59] Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 3.
[60] Ibid., 7.

adulthood. The key for Benson is that Nietzsche's engagement with both was a matter of the heart – not of salvation.

In this section, we have sought to support the claim that Nietzsche was a deeply religious – if not necessarily Christian or orthodox - thinker. The textual evidence from Nietzsche's own work and the weight of historic and more recent scholarship seem to support this claim. Having established the validity of claiming a religious impulse within Nietzsche, we moved to a brief examination of two recent scholars explicitly seeking to engage the religious aspects of Nietzsche's thought. While Fraser ultimately focuses on the redemptive impulse within Nietzsche and Benson on the pietistic impulse, both note the continuation of religious themes in Nietzsche's thought. In the final section, we will return to this foundational claim in our discussion of Nietzsche's specific critique of Christian morality. Having established the fruitfulness of considering religious impulses in Nietzsche, it will now be helpful to re-examine the central passage of Nietzsche's screed against Christianity – the famous "death of God" passage in *The Gay Science*.

III – God is Dead – Nietzsche, Nietzsche is Dead – God

God is dead – Nietzsche.
Nietzsche is dead – God.
(Popular bumper sticker)

Perhaps even Nietzsche himself would note the irony of a scholar given to philosophizing in aphorisms being reduced to bumper sticker sloganeering, but the popular bumper sticker runs the risk of totally missing what Nietzsche was trying to say and, more importantly, misconstrues his primary audience. Many adherents of Christianity have long taken Nietzsche's pronouncement in the mouth of the madman as a direct assault against the very basis of their religion, while many critics of religion in general and Christianity in particular have taken the madman's proclamation as a launching point for an all-out assault on all things religious, but Nietzsche is much more subtle than either of those extremes allow. John Stuhr makes this point well:

> On the bathroom stalls, generation after generation of college students, supposing themselves disciples who are full of truth and dangerous, scrawl: God is dead – Nietzsche. In turn, their fundamentalist Christian counterparts, apparently discovering no commandment against graffiti and equally supposing themselves disciples who are full of truth and vindicated, scribble in reply: Nietzsche is dead – God. This is as deafening as it is simple-minded.[61]

In this section, we will demonstrate that Nietzsche's famous declaration was not directed primarily to the *cathedral* at all, but instead to the *agora* and should not be viewed as the foundation for Nietzsche's overall critique of religion. We will proceed by demonstrating that the

[61] John J. Stuhr, Foreword, *Nietzsche and the Gods*, Weaver Santaniello, ed. Albany: State University of New York, 2001, pg. xi.

madman's primary audience consisted of the secular leaders and will then briefly examine the significance of this audience for Nietzsche.

As a preliminary, it must be noted that many Christian thinkers who excoriate Nietzsche have never bothered to stop and read him in anything other than a cursory manner. On our view, this knee-jerk reaction against a perceived threat says more about the psychology of some Christians than it does about the critique's validity. Here again, we see an example of Christianity's embattled, siege mentality in operation. Much of the modern reaction to Nietzsche's claim about the death of God seems more the result of this persistent defensive psychology than of an authentic interaction with the substance of his claim.[62] One might see a connection between the hostile reactions towards postmodern thought evidenced by some Christian thinkers as an implicit tie to the Nietzschean foundations of that thought. While somewhat tenuous, I see a genealogical link in the polemical move to lump Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud together as the "masters of suspicion" bent on destroying all things holy with the equally polemical, more recent move to group Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault under a broadly construed postmodernism as the new "unholy trinity." Just to be clear, this polemical move probably says more about those doing the grouping than it does about the individual thinkers. Of interest to my discussion of Nietzsche is the underlying assumption that Nietzsche was avowedly atheistic and anti-religious.[63] While not entirely explaining how Nietzsche has been misread, this defensive psychology doubtlessly plays a role in obscuring the key issue of audience in Nietzsche's passage about the madman.

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[62] This is the phenomenon we noted in Fraser who begins with the assumption that, as a Christian, one must refute Nietzsche before one can engage him in any way.

[63] Of course, Derrida's late religious turn would further complicate such an overly simplistic characterization. My point is not that the characterization is right, but that it might be fruitful to trace the genealogy of the polemical move which frames the conversation as "us" versus "them," as the defenders of the faith versus the barbarians at the gate.

The key lies in Nietzsche's very first sentence in the passage about the death of God. Nietzsche begins by asking his audience if they "ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the *marketplace* calling out unceasingly: 'I seek God! I seek God!'"[64] Immediately, Nietzsche's stylistic choices strike the reader as both perplexing and important. This one, seemingly simple sentence raises multiple questions and introduces the irony of the madman who "on a bright morning lighted a lantern."[65] While it may not be fully possible to decipher Nietzsche's particular meaning, this formulation in the very beginning of this passage should key the reader in to the fact that irony, in the Socratic tradition, is at work here. With this Socratic irony as a backdrop, the reader must pay particular attention to the fact that the madman begins his project in the marketplace – not in the cathedral. Not only does the madman begin in the *agora*, but the bulk of the passage occurs there with the madman moving his venue to the cathedral only after his proclamation falls on deaf ears in the marketplace, resulting in the madman "throwing his lantern on the ground, so that it broke in pieces and was extinguished."[66] Nietzsche simply states that after his initial failure in the marketplace, "the madman made his way into different churches on the same day, and there intoned his *Requiem aeternam deo*."[67] Clearly, the various churches did not receive the madman any more favorably than the *agora* had because the change of venue results in the madman being "led out and called to account."[68] However, this particular claim calls into question, not the success of the madman's project, but the chronological sequence of his choice of audience.

It would not be overly ambitious to claim that in this passage Nietzsche, the trained classicist, makes a nod to the ancient Greek *agora* as the place of assembly for the societal

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[64] GS, Book III, aphorism 125.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

leaders – and for Socratic philosophy and democratic harangue. This point should not be under-appreciated or easily dismissed. Nietzsche's supposed broadside against the very foundation of Christianity in the person of a divine being begins with the secular leaders - not the religious leaders. It seems easy to read Nietzsche's speech as a diatribe against the church or organized religion but doing so necessitates ignoring the fact that the madman's primary audience is thoroughly secular. If we are correct about the importance of the madman beginning in the *agora*, then the audience shifts from believers and religious thinkers to philosophers and perhaps even scientists. This might be proven out by the fact that in his discussion in the *agora*, the madman states that "We have killed" God.[69] Nietzsche's use of the first person plural seems to indicate identification between the madman and his audience in the *agora* that is not present in the churches. This is further demonstrated in the very end of the passage where Nietzsche refers to the churches in the third person plural when he has the madman ask, "What are these churches now, if *they* are not the tombs and monuments of God?"[70] In conversation with his audience in the *agora*, the madman identifies with them in first person while distancing himself from the audience in the churches by utilizing third person.

Of course, my claim about the importance of audience in this passage could be objected to on the grounds that what Nietzsche is really arguing is that "we" secular leaders – societal, democratic, and philosophical – have killed God and those poor blokes in the musty, old cathedrals just have not figured it out yet. Without attempting to resolve this objection here, let me just reiterate that for my argument the question of audience in the "death of God" passage revolves more around how this text has been employed than around what Nietzsche may or may not have meant. For those scholars intent on appropriating Nietzsche towards atheistic ends this

[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

passage gets re-directed towards the church, as if the church was Nietzsche's primary audience. I am simply arguing that to read the "death of God" passage as fundamentally anti-Christian or anti-religious runs the risk of mischaracterizing both Nietzsche's specific argument in this passage and his overall project. On my view, a proper understanding of the importance of audience in this passage prevents one from using the passage as the basis for arguing that Nietzsche's overall project was inherently atheistic or anti-religious.

Having noted the significance of the madman's primary audience, it becomes more difficult to interpret that significance. Surely, on some level the madman's conversation in the *agora* reflects Nietzsche's own biography. Given his less-than-stellar reception from the academy in his day, Nietzsche had a generally negative view of his fellow academics - especially contemporary philosophers.[71] At the same time, as a classicist, Nietzsche was fully aware of the importance of the *agora* for the work of Greek philosophy. Here, it becomes much more difficult to determine whether Nietzsche is targeting contemporary philosophers or laying a charge against the early Greeks and the entire philosophical project. Nietzsche even makes veiled references to the rise of modern science by having the madman talk about planetary motion and an unhinged world where the sun is no longer tethered to the earth.[72] Further work might be warranted to explore the preliminary thesis that this passage could represent the charge that modern science, broadly construed to include the Western philosophical project, bears the responsibility for the death of God.[73]

In this section, we have seen that Nietzsche's famous (and, in many Christian circles, infamous) passage where the madman declares the death of God should not be misread as *the*

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[71] See especially William Arrowsmith's introduction to "We Classicists" in *Unmodern Observations*, William Arrowsmith, Gen. Ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. See also "We Scholars" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra.*
[72] Ibid.
[73] See "How the 'Real World" at last Became a Myth: History of an Error" in *TI*. Positivism is the last stage.

basis of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity because this particular passage was directed primarily at the *agora* – not the cathedral. This is not to argue that Nietzsche was not a critic of Christianity in particular and Western religion more broadly; he certainly was. However, to argue that this particular passage about the madman and his proclamation of the death of God was directed at religious believers, or that it constitutes the foundation of Nietzsche's overall project, runs the risk of obscuring the importance of the madman's primary audience. Because Nietzsche's madman chooses to begin with and to expend the bulk of his energy in the *agora*, one might conclude that Nietzsche's primary aim in this particular passage was directed at the secular – not the sacred. Here again, I see a blurring of the lines. No longer is it necessarily the case that God is a topic of conversation proper only for the cathedral. Nietzsche appropriates the freedom to philosophize in the cathedral and theologize in the *agora*.

The Life-Affirming Ethic of An Immoralist

Our religion, morality and philosophy are decadent forms of man. The countermovement: art."[74]

Nietzsche

The disappointed man speaks – I sought great human beings, I never found anything but the apes of their ideals.[75]

Nietzsche

In this section, I move to an examination of Nietzsche's critique of morality, specifically of Christian morality. This engagement with morality seems central to an attempt to locate Nietzsche because it is the point of tension – in conjunction with the "death of God" passage - most often seized upon by Nietzsche's Christian foes as emblematic of his hostility to Christianity. I will proceed by briefly examining Nietzsche's iconoclastic instinct and then apply that impulse to Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality including his lament over the quality of human beings produced by Christianity. Finally, I will conclude by arguing that on at least one reading Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality can be understood as actually furthering a dialogue with at least some Christian thinkers.

Much of my thought in this section is based on *Beyond Good and Evil* in which Nietzsche clearly desires to move beyond the "slave" morality of Christianity as he described it in his *Genealogy of Morals* to a more life-affirming and noble spirit. Nietzsche begins his preface quite provocatively:

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[74] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1968, aphorism 794.
[75] TI, Maxims and Arrows, aphorism 39.

> Supposing truth is a woman – what then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women? That the gruesome seriousness, the clumsy obtrusiveness with which they have usually approached truth so far have been awkward and very improper methods for winning woman's heart? What is certain is that she has not allowed herself to be won – and today every kind of dogmatism is left standing dispirited and discouraged.[76]

Nietzsche begins this particular book with the figure of a woman and ends it with a naked Dionysus philosophizing in the presence of Ariadne, but one does not have to read far to realize that Ariadne is not the primary female figure looming over this work – one notes the presence of Eve as well. It should be noted that Ariadne only appears at the end while Eve seems implicitly omnipresent. In his foray into the prejudices of philosophers and the nature of religious man including the natural history of morals in order to arrive at what is truly noble, Nietzsche seems to write with "Eden on his mind."[77] Nietzsche is careful not to conflate the philosopher's search for truth with the modern quest for knowledge and is equally careful to distinguish Ariadne from Eve. This is important to note because Nietzsche exhibits great skill in noting the inappropriate conflations committed by other scholars – after all, Rome is not Greece and Athens, especially as conceptualized by nineteenth century claccisists, is not Greece. This is the phenomenon noted by Nietzsche which he terms "the extraordinary impurity and confusion of human affairs."[78] Modern man tended to conflate ancient cultures in a "sloppy philology which insists on speaking of Greek and Latin antiquity in a single breath, of Athens and Rome as if they were of a piece."[79] In his critique of Christian morality, Nietzsche seems to argue that Christian theologians are

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[76] BGE, 1.
[77] I owe this phrase to a conversation with Louis Ruprecht.
[78] Qtd. in Ruprecht, *Afterwords*, 33, from the unpublished notes for "We Classicists."
[79] Ibid. Ruprecht goes on to point out the further Nietzschean insight that not only was 'Rome' not 'Athens', 'Athens' was not even 'Greece' until comparatively late, pg. 34.

equally guilty of conflation: in their case they have conflated Christianity and morality and in doing so have produced a decadent Christian. To the ears of some Christian theologians even the title, *Beyond Good and Evil,* sounds a discordant note, after all the clear distinction between the two would seem to represent the *telos* of their religion. Here, one sees Nietzsche's philological skills brilliantly displayed. Morality as a system may be about the contrast between good and evil, but the contrast in the Fall story is between life and death – not good and evil. To say it in a more Nietzschean style – there is no knowledge of good and evil that is not already decadent. We will return to this point when after briefly examining Nietzsche's overall critique of Christian morality as idolatrous.

One of the aspects of Nietzsche that seems to present a problem for Christian thinkers today is that he portrays Christianity's obsession with morality as idolatrous on the part of Christianity. In his foreword to *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche leaves little doubt that he is on the attack. In an oft-quoted phrase, Nietzsche declares war:

> This little book is a *grand declaration of war*, and as regards the sounding-out of idols, this time they are not idols of the age but *eternal* idols, which are here touched with the hammer as with a tuning fork – there are no more ancient idols in existence…. Also none more hollow…. That does not prevent their being the *most believed in*, and they are not, especially in the most eminent case, called idols…[80]

For Nietzsche's project, the "sounding-out" of idols does not necessarily entail their destruction. Nietzsche has in mind here not material idols of bronze, marble, or clay, but "eternal idols" of ideology. By sounding them out Nietzsche means "to pose questions here with a hammer and perhaps to receive for an answer that famous hollow sound which speaks of inflated bowels."[81]

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[80] TI, pg. 32, emphasis original.
[81] Ibid.

Clearly, Nietzsche's metaphorical hammer gets employed in a non-destructive sense. In fact, construction – not destruction – represents the primary design for a hammer. As we have already noted, the defensive reaction by Christianity to Nietzsche's project may say something more about Christianity than it does about Nietzsche. The dominant motif from Augustine's time, if not earlier, has been the barbarians at the gate seeking to overthrow all that is holy and civilized. To be sure, as Nietzsche approaches the gate with hammer in hand, the inhabitants of the holy city are inclined to close and bar the gates before even hearing him speak. Unfortunately, such a move prevents any dialogue and never allows for an understanding of Nietzsche's hammer as a tuning fork instead of a sledgehammer. This defensive propensity within Christianity, whether with respect to the barbarians without or to heretics within, seems indicative of a fundamental insecurity inherent in the Christian edifice. Nietzsche describes this as "the Church [having] at all times desired the destruction of its enemies."[82] Having established that Nietzsche's project consists of sounding out "eternal idols," let us move to the specific idol of morality that Nietzsche addresses.

While space constraints limit our discussion to Nietzsche and his critique of Christian morality, certainly he has both theological and philosophical idols in his sights. According to Benson, "Nietzsche thinks that the whole history of philosophy has been more or less one idol after the next."[83] Nietzsche spares no criticism either for Christianity or for the moral citizens it produces. Obviously, in attacking morality Nietzsche leaves himself open to the charge of immorality. Christianity can only respond that the one seeking to justify his or her own immorality must question morality. Such a move on the part of Christian theologians actually reveals the mythic basis of their morality. This counter-charge underscores the system of

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[82] Ibid, 53.
[83] Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 29.

morality that can only see immorality as its opposite, after all the opposite of good must be evil. Again, this would represent a superficial and incorrect reading of Nietzsche's project. To be opposed to Christianity's specific version of morality does not necessarily entail that one is immoral – although Nietzsche freely uses the term for want of a better one. Nietzsche criticizes Christianity's obsession with morality on the grounds that it is fundamentally opposed to life:

> The Church combats the passions with excision in every sense of the word: its practice, its "cure" is castration. It never asks: "How can one spiritualize, beautify, deify a desire?" – it has at all times laid the emphasis of its discipline on extirpation (of sensuality, of pride, of lust for power, of avarice, of revengefulness). But to attack the passions at their roots: the practice of the Church is *hostile to life*…[84]

On Nietzsche's view, Christianity does not have the spirit of life and does not have the capacity to foster life in its adherents. Instead, Christianity seems to outlaw desire because it does not know how to control it or channel it towards a livelier *telos*. Opposed to the false morality of the church, Nietzsche calls for a "natural morality."[85] This morality would be "dominated by an instinct of life"[86] In contrast, Nietzsche calls Christian morality an "anti-natural morality, that is virtually every morality that has hitherto been taught, reverenced and preached, turns on the contrary precisely against the instincts of life – it is a now secret, now loud and impudent condemnation of these instincts."[87] As damaging as this opposition to life can be, even more destructive is the fact that Christianity's morality has been codified into a system. Nietzsche mistrusts "all systematizers and avoid[s] them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity."[88] On

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[84] GM, 52, emphasis original.
[85] Ibid, 55.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid, 35.

Nietzsche's view this system of morality "takes God for the enemy of life,"[89] and excludes all other systems. This systematizing results in "the entire realm of morality and religion [falling] under [the] concept of imaginary causes."[90] This results in "morality and religion [falling] entirely under the psychology of error" because ultimately morality consists of a "misinterpretation of certain phenomena."[91]

For Nietzsche, the goal of Christianity's morality throughout all ages has been to improve men, but he remains unimpressed with the results. On his view, the moral men produced by Christianity "are weakened, they are made less harmful, they become sickly beasts through the depressive emotion of fear, through pain, through injuries, through hunger."[92] In vain, Nietzsche looks for signs of life among Christians, but finds none. To summarize, Nietzsche sees little or no value in the church's attempts at moralizing or the types of human beings produced by such a system.

If one keeps in mind Nietzsche's impulse – however ill-defined it might be - towards life, one can understand how Nietzsche's critique can be understood in a positive sense. Ruprecht sees this as well: "[Nietzsche] is unmasking the sorts of false and distorting theological ideas that are better left for dead on the ash-heap of failed philosophies. He is postulating the death of a set of ideas about God that once held currency and hold currency no longer." [93] Recognizing the historic, human propensity for idol creation, Benson argues that "not only are we capable of creating idols and worshipping them, we are likewise capable of being almost or completely blind to their existence."[94] Benson makes the claim that modern man exhibits historical snobbery

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[89] Ibid, 55.
[90] Ibid, 63.
[91] Ibid, 66.
[92] Ibid, 67.
[93] Ruprecht, *Nietzsche, The Death of God, and Truth, or Why I Still like Reading Nietzsche*, 578.
[94] Benson, *Graven Ideology*, 19.

by claiming to be idol-free as if only primitives have idols. Too sophisticated to worship mere creations of earth and clay, instead moderns have substituted images and concepts. The god of the cathedral is dead, long live the gods of the marketplace! Benson calls this "conceptual idolatry."[95] For Benson, such conceptual idolatry is "either the creation or the adoption of a concept or idea that we take to be equivalent *to* God and thus worship *as* God. Although it might seem that so-called intellectuals such as philosophers and theologians would be most likely to fall into such idolatry, it should become clear that in conceptual idolatry there is equal opportunity for all. Creating conceptual idols requires no formal training and no theological sophistication."[96]

Benson agrees with Nietzsche on the human propensity for systematizing. He calls this "graven ideology." It is not that ideology is always wrong. He argues that ideology "refers to an attempt to provide a coherent set of ideas or else to the study of such ideas. The suffix –ology (which comes for the Greek *logos*, meaning "structure" or "reason" or "order") denotes not merely an attempt to make sense of something but the putting of that thing into a kind of logical order."[97]

Here, Benson draws parallels between Jesus and Nietzsche. On my view, Benson's thesis that Christian morality as a system represents an idolatrous ideology actually helps one understand how Nietzsche could be so drawn to Jesus while so repulsed by moralistic, religious Christians. Benson characterizes Nietzsche as being "more anti-Christ than anti-Jesus" and notes that when Nietzsche "rails against Christianity, he usually does not appear to have Jesus in mind."[98] According to Benson, "Nietzsche considers Jesus to be something of a 'free spirit' who

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid, 23.
[98] Ibid, 95.

turns the 'whole of Jewish ecclesiastical teaching' upside down."[99] Jesus stands over against the Jewish moral system of his day. "According to Nietzsche, Jesus thinks life cannot be reduced to any formula or dogma"[100] – whether Jewish or Christian. Like Nietzsche, Benson sees an important distinction between Jesus and his religious environment and those who later invoke the name of Jesus towards all kinds of ends:

> Here we come to an important disagreement between Jesus and "morality." Whereas morality is the attempt to codify moral action into a system that can be mastered and controlled, Jesus' teaching resists such attempts. Perhaps we should say that Jesus is not against morality, but Morality.[101]

Of course, neither Benson nor I would argue that Nietzsche and Jesus are fully compatible. The goal here is not strict coherence of thought and not necessarily agreement; it is enough to note that Nietzsche considered Jesus to be a figure worthy of dialogue. Nietzsche opposed the "Crucified" as the negation of life with Dionysus as the affirmation of life. Bernard Reginster argues that "Nietzsche regards the affirmation of life as his defining philosophical achievement [and] we truly 'understand' him, he warns us, only insofar as we understand what the affirmation of life amounts to."[102] Nietzsche correctly intuits that Christianity has conflated its version of morality and God and has appropriated Jesus as a Pauline Christ, but his answer is to posit a risen Dionysus over against a crucified Christ.

If Nietzsche is correct about the idolatrous impulse towards morality present within Christianity, and I think he is, that necessarily raises the question of accounting for that particular moralizing impulse which Nietzsche does in his *Genealogy of Morals*. At least some Christian

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[99] Ibid, 96.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid, 97.
[102] Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pg. 2.

theologians agree with Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality even though they might differ in starting premises and methodology. On this point, I owe a debt to a relatively obscure little book by Rick Joyner entitled, *There Were Two Trees in the Garden*,[103] for first drawing my attention to an alternative reading of the Fall story. Joyner's thesis is exquisitely simple. Despite being people of 'the book" even to the point of reading the Creation story literally instead of mythically, most Christian theologians have not performed a close reading of the story. Christianity has placed the vast majority of the emphasis in the story on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil while virtually ignoring the other named tree in the story – the Tree of Life. In the Christian read of the Fall story, the competing values are those of good and evil which Nietzsche rejects out of hand as slave morality. Nietzsche wants to break free from the theological concepts of sin and redemption and move towards an affirmation and embrace of life. The rhetoric of good and evil, whoever happens to be in the position of power at the moment to do the naming, only produces death. Speaking metaphorically (pay attention, I don't speak thus often) one cannot get to the Tree of Life by attempting to move from the branch of evil on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to the branch of good on the same tree. Movement in either direction never succeeds in affirming life.

To be fair, some Christian theologians have taken notice of the problem caused by the dominant Christian interpretation of the Fall story. Fraser correctly notes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's affinity for Nietzsche because 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."[104] As another example, the German theologian, DeVerne

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[103] Rick Joyner, *There Were Two Trees in the Garden*, Charlotte, NC: Morningstar Press, 1991.
[104] Fraser, 4.

Fromke,[105] uses a form of narrative criticism to argue that where one begins a story has a determinative effect on the conclusion of the story. In simple terms, Fromke's thesis is that Christianity has consistently begun the story with Adam and Eve in the Garden and with the story of the Fall. Setting aside Fromke's self-avowed theological agenda, he makes a compelling case that this has the potential to distort the overall narrative arc of the story. Beginning with Adam and Eve and the Fall results in a story that must be characterized as a *tragedy*[106] with sin as the problem that must be solved, and on Fromke's view runs the risk of making humanity the protagonist of the story while reducing the Christian God to the role of supporting actor. The various specific theological responses are not in question here. Rather, I would simply draw attention to those responses. Obviously, a tension or problem exists. Nietzsche intuits this problem as well. Christian morality is flawed because of its origin, the fact that it has been systematized as theology, and the quality of human beings it produces.

This point is most evident in Nietzsche's discussion of the specific brand of Christian morality he sees among the English. Nietzsche argues that "they have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality."[107] I am not sure that Nietzsche accuses English Christians of conflating God and morality, surely that phenomenon predated them; but Nietzsche is saying that in the wake of the death of God the English are most adamant about fanatically clinging to morality. This addiction to morality produces a less than beautiful human being. I will quote Nietzsche at length on this point:

> It is characteristic of such an unphilosophical race that it clings firmly to Christianity: they need its discipline to become "moralized" and somewhat humanized. The English,

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[105] DeVern Fromke, *The Ulimate Intention*, Cloverdale, IN: Sure Foundation Publishers, 1962.
[106] The Nietzschean conception of tragedy as heroic overcoming bears little resemblance to the common use of tragedy as the horrible ending of a story or tale. Fromke uses tragedy in the latter sense.
[107] TI, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," aphorism 5.

> being gloomier, more sensual, stronger in will, and more brutal than the Germans, are precisely for that reason more vulgar, also more pious than the Germans: they stand more in need of Christianity. For more sensitive nostrils even this English Christianity still has the typically English odor of spleen and alcoholic dissipation against which it is needed for good reasons as a remedy – the subtler poison against the coarser: a subtler poisoning is indeed for clumsy peoples some progress, a step toward spiritualization. English clumsiness and peasant seriousness is still disguised most tolerably – or rather elucidated and reinterpreted – by the language of Christian gestures and singing of psalms. And for those brutes of sots and rakes who formerly learned how to grunt morally under the sway of Methodism and more recently again as a "Salvation Army," a penitential spasm may really be the relatively highest achievement of "humanity" to which they can be raised: that much may be conceded in all fairness. But what is offensive even in the most humane Englishman is his lack of music, speaking metaphorically (but not only metaphorically): in the movements of his soul and body he has no rhythm and dance, indeed not even the desire for rhythm and dance, for "music."[108]

For Nietzsche, the real problem at the crux of the system of Christian morality is the ugly apes it produces. On this point, I think Nietzsche gets it absolutely right. Under a system where morality is conflated with a dead God, neither a life-affirming ethic nor an aesthetic turn are possible.[109] Perhaps someone might raise the objection that in agreeing with Nietzsche's normative claim about the quality of human beings produced by modern Christianity, I have left objectivity behind and have crossed over into "doing theology." I do not think this is the case. I am attempting to employ Nietzsche as a starting point for a postmodern philosophy of religion in

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[108] BGE, 252.
[109] See James J. Winchester, *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche after Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

dialogue with classical, modern and postmodern religious and philosophical thinking. If such a normative claim appears prophetic, I would argue instead that it is actually Nietzschean. Perhaps, at times – but never always – they are one and the same.

Conclusion

If the primary apologetic in modernism was absolute truth, what will be the primary apologetic in postmodernism? Beauty, perhaps?[110]

Brian McLaren

Our discussion of Nietzsche began by noting his shadow looming over the disputed territory between philosophy and theology and looming over the indistinct border between modernity and postmodernity. Nietzsche, ever the untimely thinker, criticizes modernity while situated within it, yet looking forward to something else as well. We briefly examined a few of the diverse appropriations of Nietzsche to both theological and atheistic ends, demonstrating the importance of a correct understanding of the madman's famous "death of God" passage. Having established the basis for some religious impulse in Nietzsche's writings, we then examined Nietzsche's intuition that Christian morality ultimately produces death instead of life.

The larger claim looming behind my contention about the religious nature of Nietzsche's project and his critique of Christian morality is Nietzsche's importance as a communicator and initiator of dialogue. Granted this claim is initially hard to recognize, but I would argue that this is the case more because of the varied, violent and often destructive appropriations of Nietzsche than because of Nietzsche himself. As I have already argued, one way of telling the story of modernity would be to characterize it as an exercise in drawing lines of separation – lines on a map to distinguish one nation-state from another, or one academic discipline from another, and especially philosophy from theology. As we have seen, such exercises in line-drawing are limiting and sometimes fall prey to the law of unintended consequences, but in a larger sense,

[110] Brian McLaren, personal conversation with author, September 25, 2004.

arbitrary lines are at least a step forward from the very real walls of the medieval and classical periods. Walls tend to inhibit dialogue. Again, we must be careful in how we tell the story even in this way. It is not as if walls disappear completely in the postmodern period – they just have different levels of effectiveness (one thinks of the Maginot Line in relationship to the Iron Curtain). It might be interesting to play out the argument that walls are ultimately regressive – the Iron Curtain was not a modernization move although it employed the latest technology. The larger issue in considering walls versus lines is the question of dialogue. Lines on the map may not necessarily promote dialogue, but they clearly are not as restrictive as walls. It is my contention that Nietzsche was a blurrer of lines, but ultimately in the promotion of dialogue – of moving forward, an exercise in life-affirmation. As a classically trained philologist, he dared to write philosophy and, as I have argued, to dabble in theology; and now his importance lies in serving as an interpreter between theology and philosophy, and perhaps even more boldly between antiquity, modernity, and postmodernity.

Perhaps it is methodologically suspect to wait until the end to put forth a normative claim, but I will do so anyway, in narrative form. During my four years as an interpreter in the arms-control arena, I experienced a profound shift in how I viewed the other: the Soviet Union. It would be very difficult to point to the one factor most responsible for that shift; instead I would note several factors with one perhaps as primary. Obviously, the travel demanded by my position served to broaden my horizons. I travelled officially to the former Soviet Union – visiting Moscow, Minsk, and various smaller places near military bases – in addition to escorting Soviet inspection teams all over facilities in the United States and Western Europe. However, as important and transformational as the travel was, I do not consider it the primary catalyst. I

contend that the primary reason for transformation was the very nature of my duties; I was actually talking to the Soviets.

Not only did I interpret at official functions such as dinners, closing ceremonies, etc., but I went with them to Wal-Mart as they tried to translate European sizes into American sizes in order to buy nice things for their wives, children and grandchildren back home. I interpreted for doctors and nurses when the Soviet team members were sick or injured – everything from toothaches to chest pains. I learned to play (badly) speed chess and that Smirnoff vodka was made in two types, one for export and one for import. I came to realize that many of the Russians detested their team members who worked for the KGB or GRU[111] as much as many of us Americans who were made uncomfortable by the representatives from our own "alphabet-soup" agencies.[112] I would characterize the transformation in this way: over time I came to view some of the "Soviets" as "Russians" and some of the Americans with whom I worked as "Soviets."

Obviously, I am using the term "Soviet" as a placeholder to represent a certain type of individual, a bureaucrat or an overly rigid, unfeeling automaton of the State. To say it more pedantically, the transformation for me consisted of realizing that "we" were not simply the good guys[113] while "they" were the bad guys. I came to realize that our side had good and bad guys at the same time their side had good and bad guys. I realize that I am still making a value judgment in arguing that to be Russian is preferable to being Soviet, but I would contend that the value judgment is not between good and evil but between a life-affirming value and a value that does not affirm life. Perhaps I might say that given multiple conversations, I began to see what

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[111] The KGB is the acronym for the Committee for State Security, while the GRU is the acronym for Soviet military intelligence.
[112] Here I have in mind particularly the CIA, the FBI, and the NSA.
[113] I should note that we had female team members on many of our teams, both military and civilian. To my knowledge, the Soviet teams had only one female team member, an interpreter, in the four years I was assigned to the agency.

Nietzsche would term a certain nobility of spirit in some of the Soviets which caused me to begin to view them differently – as Russians.

Here at last we come to what I consider to be Nietzsche's primary and enduring importance. Nietzsche has many things to say both to philosophers and theologians, to moderns and postmoderns. The key is that Nietzsche's dialogue is not regressive or backward-looking, but instead hopeful and forward-looking. Nietzsche does not attempt to convert the theologians to philosophy nor the philosophers to theology. He is quite happy to reveal the shortcomings of both, but in service of the larger aim of a life-affirming "yes." Surely, we do not need more self-serving appropriations of Nietzsche, nor more philosophers, nor more theologians. Instead, we return to the importance of a dialogue between theology and philosophy, modernity and postmodernity, even if the initiator and interpreter of that dialogue is the hammer-toting antichrist from Germany.

In a journey somewhat the reverse of mine, Elizabeth Samet earned a B.A. at Harvard and a Ph.D. from Yale in English literature before accepting a teaching position at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where she has taught for the last ten years. In describing her surprise at realizing that she had come to find herself "at home" at West Point after Yale, she writes:

> When I told my friends and acquaintances at Yale that I was going to West Point, I got a range of responses. "You'll humanize them," said one well-meaning professor, leaving me puzzled. They had seemed pretty human to me. In fact, they may even have done a little in the years since to humanize me. One of the oddest things about an army is that when it isn't trying to get you killed it works with enormous zeal to take care of you. At West Point, a tendency to cosset cadets coexists with the imperative to toughen them up.

> The cynical observer is likely to perceive hypocrisy in such contradictory impulses, but I am no cynic – well, at least not anymore. For if my undergraduate years launched me into skepticism and graduate school took me deeper into waters of doubt and disenchantment, West Point won me back to a kind of idealism. Having been coached by professionals to cultivate ironic detachment, I allowed myself to be seduced by *esprit de corps* – by the worth of community and commitment, and by the prospect of surrendering myself to a shared mission.[114]

May the theologians and the philosophers, and the moderns and the postmoderns likewise be so seduced by a Nietzschean affirmation of life.

[114] Elizabeth Samet, *Soldier's Heart: Reading Literature Through Peace and War at West Point*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007, pg. 55.

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A *The Anti-Christ* (Hollingdale trans.), Penguin, 1968
BGE *Beyond Good and Evil* (Hollingdale trans.), Penguin, 1973.
D *Daybreak* (Hollingdale trans.), Random House, 1967.
EH *Ecce Homo* (Hollingdale trans.), Penguin, 1992.
GM *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Diethe trans.), Cambridge University Press, 1994.
GS *The Gay Science* (Kaufmann trans.), Random House, 1974.
TI *Twilight of the Idols* (Hollingdale trans.), Penguin, 1968.
UM *Untimely Meditations* (Hollingdale trans.), Cambridge University Press, 1983.
WP *The Will to Power* (Kaufmann and Hollingdale trans.), Random House, 1967.

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