

Nietzsche's Critique of Religion: A Liberationist Perspective

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Abstract

Engaging Nietzsche's genealogy of religion from a liberationist perspective, the author argues that despite Nietzsche's valuable insights on theology's potential for limiting human freedom, a Christian theological anthropology is preferable to Nietzsche's naturalistic view of humanity. The author offers a challenge to Nietzsche scholarship by demonstrating how Nietzsche's critique of Christianity as a morality of *ressentiment* is grounded in 19th-century theories of racial inequality that equate religious belief with racial identity, and are opposed to the political liberation of all people.

Keywords

Nietzsche studies, liberation theology, theological anthropology, genealogy of religion, theories of race, nineteenth-century biologism

“The most serious Christians have always been well disposed toward me.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*¹

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989) 233.

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The so-called “new atheism” espoused by academics and public intellectuals who see religion as the cause of political violence seeks to remove religious perspectives from the public discourse in the post-9/11 world. The leading figures of this movement—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett—can claim Friedrich Nietzsche as an ideological forefather (though Nietzsche might not warmly embrace his stepchildren) insofar as they accept the same basic premise: the religious impulse can be explained by appeal to some underlying neurosis or pathology, implying that the religious person needs a cure. The current investigation presumes that such perspectives are inadequate responses to the realities of religiously motivated political violence because they are reductionist and culturally imperialistic. The majority of the world’s population professes strong theological beliefs and grounds its political choices in these beliefs, so by excluding religion as a dialogue partner the new atheism would marginalize hundreds of millions of people on the naïve assumption that political violence will end when human cultures leave religion behind. Given the ubiquity of religion throughout history, scholars ought to question any analysis that reduces the world’s many religions to reactionary expressions of resentment.

At the same time, history also demonstrates that a deepening of theological commitment follows serious engagement with Christianity’s harshest atheistic critics: Karl Barth’s critique of religion in light of Ludwig Feuerbach’s claim that all theology is really anthropology, Paul Tillich’s encounter with the existentialists, Karl Rahner’s and Rudolf Bultmann’s fascination with Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Moltmann’s appropriation of Ernst Bloch’s principle of hope, and Gustavo Gutiérrez’s use of Karl Marx’s social analysis. Though most often linked to Marxist theory, liberation theologians are indirectly indebted to Nietzsche for developing a genealogical approach to the study of religion in which a hermeneutics of suspicion is employed to uncover the complex web of power relations underlying religious practices. Even Cornel West’s seminal work, *Prophesy Deliverance!* (1982), embraces Nietzsche’s insight that Christianity is “a religion especially fitted to the oppressed.”² Despite West’s ironic appraisal of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity as a slave morality grounded in *ressentiment*, liberation theologians ought to question any uncritical use of a genealogical method that reduces religious behavior to other categories (resentment, wish fulfillment, childhood neuroses, class struggle, etc.) since such an approach can undermine the ontological claims of religion.

On first glance, Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity seems particularly devastating to the theology of liberation,³ like that articulated by Peruvian priest and theologian

2. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 35.

3. See Patrick H. Byrne, “*Ressentiment* and the Preferential Option for the Poor,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 213–41. Byrne evaluates Nietzsche’s critique of Christian charity, especially those ministries of compassion targeting the lowliest and most powerless in society, as “*ressentiment* against the rich, the successful, and the powerful,” in order to argue that “a specifically preferential option for the poor, over and above Christian love of the poor along with all of God’s creatures, is called for” (214).

Gustavo Gutiérrez, who argues on theological grounds for political and cultural revolution, because “only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society.”⁴ According to Gutiérrez, the Bible “presents the work of Christ as a liberation” and identifies the root of oppression as sin

insofar as it represents a selfish turning in upon oneself. To sin is to refuse to love one's neighbors and, therefore, the Lord himself. Sin—a breach of friendship with God and others—is according to the Bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which persons live.⁵

This perspective from the underside of history leads to the preferential option for the poor, which for Gutiérrez means that it is “to the oppressed that the Church should address itself and not so much to the oppressors; furthermore, this action will give true meaning to the Church's witness to poverty.”⁶ By first embracing a view of history as class conflict, then by choosing to side with the oppressed over against the oppressor, liberation theology opens itself up to Nietzsche's critique that underlying its core beliefs are deep-seated feelings of envy and resentment. In Nietzsche's own words, the morality of resentment arises when “the oppressed, the downtrodden, the violated say to each other with the vindictive cunning of powerlessness: ‘Let us be different from evil people, let us be good!’”⁷ This leads slaves, driven by “an instinct of self-preservation and self-affirmation in which every lie is sanctified,” to reevaluate their master's morality, in order that they might find comfort and hope in their oppressive situation.⁸ Therefore, what liberation theology professes as a cry for justice and liberation is, according to Nietzsche, a thinly veiled lust for revenge. What liberationists call justice Nietzsche simply terms resentment; what liberationists call freedom Nietzsche labels cultural degeneration; and what liberationists call God's action in the world, Nietzsche dismisses as the mass delusions of an oppressed (and inherently inferior) class.

My article argues that Nietzsche's interpretation of Christianity succeeds *only* if one accepts both that God does not exist and that human behavior is reducible to biological impulses and drives. Ultimately, what separates a Christian account of the human condition from Nietzsche's genealogical approach is a matter of anthropology: does one understand humanity from a solely natural, positivist perspective, or does one's worldview allow for human interaction with the divine? Nietzsche's perspectivalism rejects theistic metaphysics by affirming that all claims to “truth” and “knowledge” are merely

4. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, rev. ed., ed. and trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 17.

5. *Ibid.* 23–24.

6. *Ibid.* 70.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, rev. student ed., ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University, 1994, 2007) 26.

8. *Ibid.* 27.

interpretation. Yet, throughout his works the concept of “will to power” appears as the fundamental drive of life governing all human physiological processes that regulate consciousness and in turn create morality and culture. Nietzsche’s valuation of the “master morality” as the virtues of an inherently biologically and culturally superior class presumes a pristine natural state from which humanity has degenerated: a secularized—and intentionally ironic—echo of the fall of Adam in Christian belief. Yet, in spite of Nietzsche’s use of irony, his 19th-century worldview sometimes idealized the “natural” human state in contrast to what he viewed as the degeneration of the species. Thus, Nietzsche’s genealogical critique of metaphysical religion does not mark the end of metaphysics, but merely signals the eclipsing of one metanarrative by another.

In the end, even though Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity accurately describes some of its worse excesses, the Christian religion not only survives, but it has been strengthened by the interaction. Not only does Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity offer a reductionist reading of the faith by assuming that religion is a manifestation of morality—in this case a morality of resentment that, while offering insights into certain religious types, does not capture the full depth of religious experience; but it cannot argue that a religious interpretation of historical events is any less plausible than a natural explanation without contradicting the historicity of the genealogical method. In Karl Barth’s estimation,

the fact that Nietzsche will have nothing to do with God is so self-evident that it plays no part at all in his arguments against Christianity. . . . Nietzsche’s heart was not in contesting the existence of God. . . . His central attack, into which he flung himself with all his force, was upon what he called Christian morality.⁹

In other words, Nietzsche’s genealogical critique, by focusing on the physiological and psychological factors underlying slave morality, does not disprove the existence of God. From the perspective of Christian theology, Nietzsche’s genealogy of religion fails to evaluate the Christian religion on its own terms, as divine revelation, but rather proceeds by empirical observation to attack its truth claims. Although this epistemological impasse is typical of 19th-century debates between theology and the natural sciences—each discipline is asking different questions—contemporary interdisciplinary conversations view science and theology as distinct, yet complementary, discourses.¹⁰ This suggests that an approach that treats religions as a discrete phenomena within the spectrum of human experience—that is, an approach that acknowledges religion as a fundamental hermeneutical perspective capable of generating its own distinct explanatory insights into the human condition—is more desirable than a genealogical critique that explains religious experience by appeal to other phenomena.

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960) 238.

10. Fraser Watts, “Science and Theology as Complementary Perspectives,” in *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Discussion*, ed. Niels Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Locating Nietzsche's Thought in Its 19th-Century German Context

Despite self-aggrandizing claims about the originality and vitality of Nietzsche's philosophy, various studies have demonstrated that Nietzsche is a man of his time when it comes to the critique and appropriation of evolutionary theory in conversation with his German contemporaries.¹¹ Recent scholarship interprets Nietzsche's will to power as an alternative evolutionary mechanism to Darwinian natural selection, while still locating Nietzsche within the movement of 19th-century "biologism." This biologism included the search for natural explanations in ethics, psychology, aesthetics, and other traditional areas of philosophical inquiry. While a direct motivation for Nietzsche's writing *On the Genealogy of Morality* was his one-time friend Paul Rée's book, *The Origin of Moral Sensations* (1877), in which Rée applies Darwin's theory of evolution to morality,¹² it was zoologist Ernst Haeckel, a pioneer of biogenetics and arguably the most influential social Darwinist in 19th-century Germany, whose ideas most greatly impacted German racial biology. Admittedly, Nietzsche sought to distance himself from Darwinism, especially Haeckel's brand of social Darwinism, because it sought a naturalistic explanation and justification for Christian morality without rejecting its values.¹³ Still, Nietzsche embraced the fundamental premise of biologism, that all "values have their genesis in a biological substratum underlying human experience."¹⁴

Perhaps no topic crystallizes the biological underpinnings of Nietzsche's critique of religion more than his obsession with racial and cultural degeneration, elaborated in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where he diagnoses the spiritual malaise afflicting Europe in the 19th century as a "physiological feeling of obstruction" caused by miscegenation:

Such a feeling of obstruction can be of the most diverse descent: for example, as a result of crossing races that are too heterogeneous (or estates—estates always indicate differences in descent and race as well: the European "*Weltschmerz*," the pessimism of the nineteenth century, is essentially the result of a foolishly sudden mixing of estates); or it could be brought about by unsound emigration—a race ending up in a climate for which its powers of adaptation are inadequate (the case of the Indians in India); or by the after-effects of a race's

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11. See Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (New York: Cambridge University, 2002); Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Dirk R. Johnson, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* (New York: Cambridge University, 2010). For studies on Nietzsche's relation to modern German thought on a broad range of topics, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed., *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought* (London: Routledge, 1991).
 12. See Michael Allen Gillespie and Keegan F. Callanan, "Chapter 9: *On the Genealogy of Morals*," in *A Companion to Friedrich Nietzsche: Life and Works*, ed. Paul Bishop (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012) 258–59.
 13. Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler* 24–25.
 14. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* 13.

age and fatigue (Parisian pessimism from 1850 on); or by a faulty diet (alcoholism of the Middle Ages; the nonsense of the vegetarians who at least have the authority of Sir Christopher in Shakespeare on their side); or by corruption of the blood, malaria, syphilis and such like (German depression after the Thirty Years' War, which infected half of Germany with ruinous diseases and thus prepared the ground for German servility, German faintheartedness).¹⁵

While the theme of cultural degeneration is present in Nietzsche's earlier works, it becomes a major concern at the same time as he was developing his explicit rejection of Christianity in the 1880s, suggesting a strong link between both themes.

If the diagnosis for 19th-century Europe is decadence—an "age of disintegration" in which aristocracy has been supplanted by democracy ("the democratic movement is not only a form of the decay of political organization but a form of the decay, namely the diminution, of man")¹⁶—then the cause of cultural degeneration is (at least in part) racial mixing: "Our Europe today, being the arena of an absurdly sudden attempt at a radical mixture of classes, and hence races, is therefore skeptical in all its heights and depths . . . and often mortally sick of its will."¹⁷ Nietzsche is not unique in his diagnosis that Europe in the 19th century is in a state of cultural decline—he shared the fears of many of his contemporaries that this degeneration is biological in origin. Thus, Nietzsche's numerous, often contradictory, statements about race need to be read in the context of 19th-century racial biology and the work of Arthur comte de Gobineau, the father of modern racism, whose work, *The Inequality of Human Races* (French original, 1852–1855), Nietzsche had encountered through his early mentor, composer Richard Wagner. Particularly relevant to Nietzsche's philosophy is Gobineau's use of the term "degenerate" to speak about a permanent cultural decline in which a people "has no longer the same intrinsic values as it had before, because it no longer has the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of the blood."¹⁸

Like Nietzsche, Gobineau speaks as an aristocrat bemoaning Europe's democratization leading to greater cultural mediocrity as the result of intermarriage between the various European "races." Like Gobineau, Nietzsche employs essentialist categories to describe and differentiate the various peoples of Europe, categories containing implied value judgments about the superiority and inferiority of each "race." In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche even grounds his analysis and critique of religion in these essentialist racial categories:

It seems that Catholicism is much more intimately related to the Latin races than all of Christianity in general is to us northerners—and unbelief therefore means something

15. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 96.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989) 117.

17. *Ibid.* 130.

18. Arthur de Gobineau, *The Inequality of the Human Races*, trans. Adrian Collins, intro. Oscar Levy (London: Heinemann, 1915) 25.

altogether different in Catholic and Protestant countries: among *them*, a kind of rebellion against the spirit of the race, while among us it is rather a return to the spirit (or anti-spirit) of the race. We northerners are undoubtedly descended from barbarian races, which also shows in our talent for religion: we have *little* talent for it.¹⁹

One finds such racialized language throughout Nietzsche's works when he discusses a variety of cultures—for example, the Chinese, whom Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* mockingly equates with bourgeois contentment and cultural stagnation and, of greater relevance for this study, the Jews as founders of both Judaism and Christianity.²⁰

Even though Nietzsche recognizes both cultural and biological factors in his conceptualization of nations and races, African-American philosopher and Nietzsche scholar Jacqueline Scott argues that for Nietzsche there exists a "close connection between the problem of decadence and the breeding of races . . . as an important component of his call for cultural revitalization."²¹ In other words, however else one describes Nietzsche's solutions for the cultural crisis confronting Western Europe—a crisis whose ultimate source is, for Nietzsche, the Christian religion—human breeding, on some level, is part of his solution. "A breeding of Germans with stronger races," Scott observes, "was the only hope that he saw for halting the German decline into weak decadence and the inevitable nihilism that had been brought about by the breeding of mediocre types."²² Contrary to the anti-Semitic views of many of his contemporaries, Nietzsche valued Jewish culture and argued that breeding with Jews was "needed for the culture."²³ Recognizing that Nietzsche did not set out to articulate a comprehensive theory of race, it is nonetheless necessary to make sense of his *primarily* biological understanding of race in order to understand his diagnosis of and prescription for Europe's decaying culture.

While Nietzsche's conceptualization of race "is a mixture of the biological and the sociological," his persistent use of biological terms and his methodological commitment to uncovering the physiological underlying causes of social behavior strongly suggest that, however else Nietzsche views "race," within his understanding of human differentiation are certain inborn and biologically determined traits. One such trait is the religious instinct, which in his genealogical analysis he describes as "the religious neurosis," compares to an "epidemic outbreak," and links to "three dangerous dietary demands: solitude, fasting, and sexual abstinence."²⁴ This persistent appeal to physiological language in his explanatory narratives—as demonstrated by the work of both Gregory Moore and Jacqueline Scott—suggests that even if for Nietzsche there are

19. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 62–63.

20. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* 330.

21. Jacqueline Scott, "On the Use and Abuse of Race in Philosophy: Nietzsche, Jews, and Race," in *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Robert Bernasconi with Sybol Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2003) 67.

22. *Ibid.* 67.

23. *Ibid.* 68.

24. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 61–62.

both physiological and societal/cultural factors for understanding race, the “prime catalyst for racial evolution . . . is race mixing, which is generally brought about by blood.”²⁵

From a liberationist perspective, the most troubling dimension of Nietzsche’s genealogical critique is the introduction of racial categories as part of his broader argument against religion. Scholars do not exist in a vacuum, so their ideas need to be interpreted in their proper cultural and historical context—an insight learned from Nietzsche himself. The same level of scrutiny, however, is not always consistently directed at his work. Within Nietzsche’s genealogical critique of religion is a persistent racial essentializing that cannot be divorced from his analysis of Christianity as a form of slave morality, and without which his judgments about Christianity begin to falter: Are we or are we not genetically one human race? If we are, then Nietzsche’s argument about some peoples being “naturally” suited for religion and others not crumbles and goes away. If we are not, then we reopen the Pandora’s box of 19th-century racial biology and resume categorizing and ranking one another according to the pseudo-science of racism.

Admittedly, Nietzsche’s racial essentialism sets him apart from racist ideologues like Gobineau, insofar as Nietzsche does not use the concept of race to identify separate ethnicities on the basis of physiognomy. Yet, he exhibits a persistent pattern of essentializing peoples and categorizing them as distinct “races” (a term Nietzsche often used synonymously with socioeconomic class) according to intellectual, physiological, and cultural superiority. In other words, while Nietzsche’s racial biology does not follow the same pattern prescribed by Gobineau’s racial phylogeny, it nevertheless ranks human beings into distinct, albeit nebulous, racial groups. Thus, though it is unfair to label Nietzsche a racist, he is an elitist whose aristocratic tendencies place him at odds with the democratic and egalitarian ends of liberation theology, and at the very least call into question the accuracy of his genealogy of religion.

The Racialized Tenor of Nietzsche’s Attack on Religion

Much ink has been spilled debating whether or not Nietzsche is an anti-Semite and on the misuse of his philosophy by Germany’s Third Reich, so it is necessary to carefully qualify any statements about Nietzsche’s views on the Jews (and, by implication, on the early Christians). Walter Kaufmann, noted translator and interpreter of Nietzsche, raises the question as to why “Nietzsche’s comments on slave morality and the slave rebellion in morals have so often been considered highly offensive and tinged by anti-Semitism.”²⁶ Kaufmann’s response has become the dominant discourse defending Nietzsche against anti-Semitism, namely, that Nietzsche is in fact an *anti*-anti-Semite, given the various comments critical of anti-Semitism found throughout his published works. The consensus in Nietzsche studies is that while Nietzsche demonstrates some

25. Scott, “On the Use and Abuse of Race in Philosophy” 63.

26. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* 9.

“anti-Judaic” tendencies in his critique of Christianity, he was not an anti-Semite insofar as he supported the Jews of his time. A more nuanced reading of Nietzsche’s relationship to the Jewish Question confronting Europe in the 19th century is offered by Yirmiyahu Yovel, who differentiates between Nietzsche’s views and attitudes toward his Jewish contemporaries (whom he strongly defended against anti-Semitic attacks), and ancient priestly Judaism, the progenitors of the Christian culture whom Nietzsche so vehemently opposed and identified as the primary cause of European degeneration (and whom he attacked by means of anti-Judaic stereotypes).²⁷ It cannot be denied that Nietzsche opposed both German nationalism and the widespread anti-Semitism of his day.²⁸ The fact remains, however, that within his critique of religion there is an essentializing of Jewishness that, in spite of Nietzsche’s noblest intentions, can easily contribute to religious intolerance.

Yovel and Santaniello each demonstrate that Nietzsche held original Judaism, especially the Old Testament, in high regard. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche praises the Jewish Old Testament as surpassing the classics of ancient Greco-Roman and Indian (Hindi) literature, calling it a “sin against the spirit” to join it with the Christian New Testament, thereby forming a single “Bible.”²⁹ They also convincingly argue that while Nietzsche was opposed to priestly Judaism (and its offspring Christianity) as harboring the prototypical morality of *ressentiment*, he defended 19th-century Jews and their culture against Christian anti-Semitism, as evidenced, for example, by his break with Wagner.³⁰ Nevertheless, whether or not Nietzsche (or his philosophical project) is anti-Semitic or racist is irrelevant to my investigation. What is at stake is whether Nietzsche’s conceptualization of “being human” contributes to a potentially racist hierarchization of distinct human groups.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is universally acknowledged that Nietzsche’s philosophy was co-opted by the Nazi movement (with the help of his sister Elisabeth), and that Nietzsche himself did not espouse the genocidal eugenics policies of the Third Reich, in his notebooks he proposed a number of state-sanctioned policies to promote “racial hygiene,” including legalizing polygamy and polyandry among the cultural and intellectual elite in order that they might produce as many offspring as possible in order to improve the race: “Individual exceptional men ought to have the opportunity to reproduce with a number of women; and individual women, with particularly favorable conditions, also ought not to be bound to the fortune of a single man.”³¹

27. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Sublimity and *Ressentiment*: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews,” in *Jewish Social Studies* 3.3 (July 31, 1997) 1–25.

28. See Weaver Santaniello, *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews: His Critique of Judeo-Christianity in Relation to the Nazi Myth* (Albany: SUNY, 1994).

29. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 65–66.

30. Santaniello, *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews* 104–5; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1998) 152–53.

31. Friedrich Nietzsche, from his notebooks [*Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967–) V.2.11], cited and translated by Gregory Moore in *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* 137.

More troubling, from a liberationist perspective, are his remarks about the extinction of humans who genetically weaken the race—"The *extinction* of many kinds of human beings is just as *desirable* as any reproduction"³²—leading to the "extinction of bad races" and the "breeding of better ones."³³ Despite such rhetoric, however, Nietzsche is not literally proposing a eugenics program for building a better race. Rather, he is advocating on behalf of a culturally elite minority—Nietzsche's ideal "free spirits"—whose innovation and creative genius will lead European culture and, by extension, all humanity into the future:

The philosopher as *we* understand him, we free spirits—as the man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the over-all development of man—this philosopher will make use of religions for his project of cultivation and education, just as he will make use of whatever political and economic states are at hand. . . . For the strong and independent who are prepared and predestined to command and in whom the reason and art of a governing race become incarnate, religion is one more means for overcoming resistances.³⁴

Nevertheless, even if what Nietzsche conceives is a program of societal transformation through the "cultivation" of an elite class—primarily through educational reform and not some "breeding" program as his language sometimes suggests—the advancement and well-being of such "free spirits" comes at the expense and suffering of the lower classes (as I will demonstrate below), and the end result, while not literally "racism," is a troubling categorization and valuation of human life according to the values and norms of this ruling elite.

Admittedly, neither of these provocative statements about "racial hygiene" and eugenics was published during Nietzsche's lifetime. Though many scholars limit their analysis of Nietzsche's comments on Jews and race to his published works because of his anti-Semitic sister's tampering with his unpublished notebooks (*Nachlass*), others have carefully compared and contrasted Nietzsche's public and private statements and found them sufficiently consistent to provide insights into his development as a writer and thinker. Martin Heidegger even argued that Nietzsche's published works represent the material Nietzsche decided was publicly presentable, while his private unpublished notes actually contain his more authentic views.³⁵ Regardless, despite his own personal rejection of anti-Semitism, the fact remains that Nietzsche's use of 19th-century racial biology contributed and lent credence to the development of racist ideologies in Germany. More to the point, the fact that so much of Nietzsche's philosophy

32. Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* V.1.5.

33. *Ibid.* IV.2.19.

34. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 72.

35. See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, *The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David F. Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 154; and Alan D. Schrift, "Nietzsche's *Nachlass*," in *A Companion to Friedrich Nietzsche: Life and Works*, ed. Paul Bishop (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012) 405–28. My investigation, despite focusing primarily on his published works, occasionally interprets Nietzsche's public statements by appealing to unpublished remarks when these are viewed as supplementing or clarifying published material.

is informed by outdated and discredited views of racial biology, demands a reevaluation of Nietzsche's attack on religion, given that his genealogical method appears intertwined with racially essentializing categories.

Nietzsche's genealogical method begins with a major biological assumption: human behavior can be traced to underlying biological and physiological processes. Concerning religion, his argument defines religious perspectives and behaviors as pathological—going so far as to diagnose Jesus as a feeble-minded idiot—which nonetheless over time asserted cultural hegemony over Europe in the form of Christian values. Of Jesus in the Gospels Nietzsche writes:

To make a *hero* of Jesus! And even more, what a misunderstanding is the word 'genius'! Our whole concept, of 'spirit' has no meaning whatever in the world in which Jesus lives. Spoken with the precision of a physiologist, even an entirely different word would still be more fitting here—the word *idiot*.³⁶

To be fair to Nietzsche, his views on Jesus of Nazareth ought to be understood in the context of his polemical attack against Christianity, with some effort made to differentiate between his muted respect for the historical Jesus and his all-out attack against the "life-denying" Christian religion. Eventually, however, "the criticism inflicted upon Christianity penetrates through to its founder,"³⁷ with Nietzsche ultimately condemning Jesus for not only inspiring but also participating in "a form of moral enmity against reality that has never yet been surpassed."³⁸ Nietzsche then characterizes Jesus' earthly ministry and eventual execution in terms that echo the work of Latin American liberation theologians:

That holy anarchist who summoned the people at the bottom, the outcasts and "sinners," the chandalas within Judaism, to opposition against the dominant order—using language, if the Gospels were to be trusted, which would lead to Siberia today too—was a political criminal. . . . This brought him to the cross: the proof for this is the inscription on the cross. He died for *his* guilt. All evidence is lacking, however often it has been claimed, that he died for the guilt of others.³⁹

Thus, Nietzsche's attack against the Christian religion as the morality of *ressentiment* par excellence cannot be separated from his evaluation of its founder, Jesus, who embodied the rebellion

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968) 601.

37. Eugen Biser, "The Critical Imitator of Jesus: A Contribution to the Interpretation of Nietzsche on the Basis of a Comparison," in *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. James C. O'Flaherty, Timothy F. Sellner, and Robert M. Helm, trans. Timothy F. Sellner (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985) 95.

38. Nietzsche, "The Antichrist" 598.

39. *Ibid.* 599.

against the hierarchy of society—not against its corruption, but against caste, privilege, order, and formula; it was the *disbelief* in the “higher man.” . . . An attack on this was an attack on the deepest instinct of a people, on the toughest life-will which has ever existed in any people on earth.⁴⁰

Jesus, a marginalized Jewish prophet, in rebellion against both the Jewish religion and the Roman state, decrying their injustice and oppression, is in fact manifesting an “instinctive hatred of reality” and in its place positing the “eternal” kingdom of God, not as a material reality, but “as an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere”—as a flight from the world.⁴¹

Writing in the late 19th-century context and informed by the medical and biological knowledge of his day, Nietzsche categorizes the Jewish and Christian religions as “neuroses” in the original use of the term, that is, as a primarily *physiological* affliction of the nervous system rather than in our modern understanding of neurosis as a merely mental disturbance. Consequently, the Christian religion is diagnosed as a physiological disorder akin to epilepsy, a disease that demands treatment. Given Nietzsche’s assumption that some “races” are better suited to the religious impulse (e.g., the Latin peoples with their Mediterranean temperament), while other “races” (e.g., the Nordic peoples) are free from the religious impulse in their natural state; and given Christianity’s causal role in Nietzsche’s analysis of the decline of European culture, his genealogy of religion proves particularly problematic for theological discourse.

Scholars have gone to great lengths to defend Nietzsche from the Nazis’ misuse of his philosophy. Certainly, German racial policies predated the rise of Nazism and were reflective of the mainstream scientific discourse in the late 19th century, demonstrating a cultural racial and religious bias within that discourse that in hindsight undermines its value as medical diagnoses. Accordingly, as part of the 19th-century intellectual conversation on racial and cultural degeneration in Germany, Nietzsche’s own views contain elements of racial stratification, at one time considering (though eventually rejecting) eugenics as a potential solution to European decadence. Moreover, Nietzsche’s use of Jewish racial stereotypes to describe the Christian religion he so despised inevitably contributed to German racial and religious intolerance, a fact evidenced by the pliability with which the Nazis later adapted Nietzsche’s philosophy.⁴² While Nietzsche himself was vocal in his opposition to European anti-Semitism in the 19th century, he employed the language and cultural essentialism of anti-Semitism in his critique of Christianity by applying typically negative Jewish traits to his Christian opponents. In other words, Nietzsche subverted the language of anti-Semitism in his attack on Christianity, describing the Christian faith with the same negative stereotypes German anti-Semites employed, but now applied to them. It is the Christians, not the Jews, who are now described as hysterical, feminine, duplicitous, sexually corrupt, and diseased. But if his intentions were to expose the stupidity of

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.* 602, 608.

42. See Yvonne Sherratt, *Hitler’s Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2013).

anti-Semitism by subverting anti-Semitic stereotypes, why continue to use the label “Jew” to speak about Christianity? In *The Antichrist*, for example, we find several troubling passages about Jews and their religion: “the god of ‘the great numbers,’ the democrat among the gods, did not become a proud pagan god: he remained a Jew, he remained a god of the nooks, the god of all the dark corners and places, of all the unhealthy quarters the world over!”⁴³ Or this comment on reading and understanding the world of the Bible:

One is among Jews: *first* consideration to keep from losing the thread completely. The simulation of “holiness” which has really become genius here, never even approximated elsewhere in books or among men, this counterfeit of words and gestures as an *art*, is not the accident of some individual talent or other or of some exceptional character. This requires *race*. In Christianity all of Judaism, a several-century-old Jewish preparatory training and technique of the most serious kind, attains its ultimate mastery as the art of lying in a holy manner. The Christian, this *ultima ratio* of the lie, is the Jew once more—even *three* times more.⁴⁴

For Nietzsche, religion is a *congenital* condition, more prevalent in some races than others, which in turn justifies preconceptions and judgments about certain races: “We would no more choose the ‘first Christians’ to associate with than Polish Jews—not that one even required any objection to them: they both do not smell good.”⁴⁵ Granting that Nietzsche did not advocate a breeding program to improve the European “race,” it is nonetheless disturbing to encounter Nietzsche’s view of religion as a treatable pathology side-by-side and shrouded in the language of 19th-century theories of racial inequality.

Genealogical Critique as Antireligious Polemic

Despite fundamental disagreements with Nietzsche’s interpretation of religion, many liberation theologians find him an astute observer and interpreter of the Christian tradition. Liberationists, with their emphasis on praxis, regard many of Nietzsche’s comments particularly accurate and relevant to their critique of dominant theological traditions:

I go back, I tell the *genuine* history of Christianity. The very word “Christianity” is a misunderstanding: in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross. The “evangel” *died* on the cross. What has been called “evangel” from that moment was actually the opposite of that which *he* had lived: “*ill* tidings,” a *dysangel*. It is false to the point of nonsense to find the mark of the Christian in a “faith,” for instance, in the faith in redemption through Christ: only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian.⁴⁶

43. Nietzsche, “The Antichrist” 585.

44. *Ibid.* 620.

45. *Ibid.* 625.

46. *Ibid.* 612.

Central to Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is its mistaken emphasis on doctrine. In fact, Nietzsche never completely rejects Jesus; he even praises him at one point as an example of the Dionysian hero. But he aims his venom at the priestly architects of the Christian religion who replace Christ-like praxis with "faith" understood as rational assent to doctrinal claims: "To reduce being a Christian, Christianity, to a matter of considering something true, to a mere phenomenon of consciousness, is to negate Christianity."⁴⁷ Such views are consonant with the critique of orthodoxy by Latin American liberation theology through the lens of orthopraxis:

The goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation.⁴⁸

It is not surprising, then, that Nietzsche's genealogical method has been adapted by some liberationists—often mediated through the work of Michel Foucault—in their struggle to identify the root causes of unjust social realities, but it is troubling that many have done so uncritically, ignoring the fact that Nietzsche's methodological approach denies the verity of religious experience *as* religious experience.⁴⁹

Nietzsche's genealogical method seeks to identify the *natural* origin and development of various phenomena in order to better understand them. His views on religion and morality thus fall under the broad rubric of positivism, insofar as he limits human knowledge to what can be empirically verified by science. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* he applies this method to religion and morality, systematically arguing that religious phenomena are grounded in feelings of resentment by a ruled class toward their superior rulers. Implied in this argument is the assumption that the masters are representative of a naturally superior class of people, and that slaves are perversely inverting the *natural* order. Accordingly, Christianity is the cultural manifestation of

47. Ibid. 613.

48. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 8.

49. Among first-generation Latin American liberation theologians, Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves has most consistently engaged Nietzsche's critique of the Christian religion; see Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey, 1972); *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); and *Protestantism and Repression: A Brazilian Case Study* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985). In the North American context, aside from Cornel West's aforementioned positive appraisal of Nietzsche's labeling of Christianity as "a religion especially fitted to the oppressed," Nietzsche's genealogical method—refracted through the lens of Michel Foucault—is most evident in feminist liberation theology, especially in the work of Sharon D. Welch. See her *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982); and *A Feminist Ethic of RISK*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). However, even when unacknowledged, there is within liberation theology's discourse an implied genealogical critique of dominant religious traditions in advocating for oppressed and marginalized perspectives.

this process of psychological projection, popularizing the idea of a universal morality by using the language of sin, guilt, punishment, repentance, compassion, and love of one's neighbor to create a narrative in which the meek and weak are "good" and deserving of salvation, while the strong and powerful are "evil"—the cause of suffering and enslavement—and therefore deserving of eternal damnation:

The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, that of deeds, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying "yes" to itself, slave morality says "no" on principle to everything that is "outside," "other," "non-self": and *this* "no" is its creative deed. This reversal of the evaluating glance—this *essential* orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself—is a feature of *ressentiment*: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is basically a reaction.⁵⁰

Nietzsche's critique of Christianity exposes the ugly truth underlying its teachings on compassion and mercy: the impotent rage of the weak whose desire for revenge against the strong leads to the creation of a "slave morality" that over time becomes imposed on the masters to the point of becoming interiorized by them, allowing the naturally inferior class to eventually subjugate their naturally superior masters. Nietzsche identifies this feeling of resentment—which he finds embodied in the Christian religion (or secularized forms of Christian morality)—as the underlying cause of Europe's cultural decay and as representing values that need to be eclipsed before Europe can experience cultural regeneration and genuine progress. In this analysis, the religion of the Jews is just as guilty of duplicity as the religion of the Christians: "It was their revenge to elevate Jesus extravagantly, to sever him from themselves—precisely as the Jews had formerly, out of revenge against their enemies, severed their God from themselves and elevated him. The one God and the one Son of God—both products of *ressentiment*."⁵¹

Just as Nietzsche's critique of religion is part of a general critique of the Western intellectual tradition, so his attacks on democracy, universal suffrage, political equality, and socialism ought to be interpreted in light of his evolutionary argument that such egalitarian values deny life and suppress a higher type of humanity (*Übermensch*). In attacking the foundational assumptions of Western philosophy and science that gave moral theories—especially Christian morality—their authoritative status, Nietzsche affirmed a view of biological evolution as mindless constant change lacking overarching design or purpose in order to assert that humanity lives in a godless and meaningless universe in explicit rejection of theism.

Nietzsche, however, is not a nihilist, insofar as he affirms that human existence is instinctively a will to power. So, while there is no *ultimate* foundational value, the

50. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 20.

51. Nietzsche, "The Antichrist" 615–16.

central biological drive is the human trait to *create and impose* values on the world. In other words, there are no “gods” beyond the ones created by human consciousness in its struggle to impose order on a chaotic universe. By this account the human condition is not a contest for survival, but a struggle in which the exercise and increase of power is the governing motivation.

At the same time, Nietzsche’s extreme dislike for democratization cannot be understood without some accounting of the rapid social changes taking place in 19th-century Germany, in which the nation under Bismarck shifted from a loose confederation of principalities with a handful of independent city-states to a reassertion of empire. Following a move toward urbanization facilitated by the creation and expansion of a national railway system, Germany joined Great Britain and the United States as a world leader in industrialization, a transition that contributed to the revolutions of 1848. The failure of the revolutions to unite the German-speaking states into a single nation allowed the old aristocracy to reassert itself and impede further democratization by overturning the “Basic Rights for the German People” (published by the National Assembly in 1848), which proclaimed equal rights for all citizens before the law, despite popular yearnings for increased political freedoms. Accordingly, Nietzsche’s family background—Lutheran, clerical, and royalist—likely played a formative role in his own political development: he was descended from Lutheran pastors; he was named after the reigning king of Prussia; and even though he had become a Swiss citizen, he volunteered for the Prussian Army in 1870 (serving as a medical orderly), evidence that he still valued his national identity despite the cosmopolitan, antinationalist character of his philosophical works.

Nietzsche, writing in the tradition of modern political philosophy, his *On the Genealogy of Morality* provides a hypothetical—not historical—reconstruction of the emergence of human civilization. Here he envisions two different groups of “proto-humans” (*Vormenschen*) living in a state of animal consciousness, acting according to instinct, motivated by impulses and drives. He describes the conqueror master race as “the beast of prey, the magnificent *blond beast* avidly prowling round for spoil and victory,”⁵² and the other race as their natural prey who, once enslaved, can no longer act according to their natural impulses but are forced to submit to their masters’ will. This inferior race, “the man of *ressentiment*” who is dominated by the master, develops evolutionary survival techniques characterized by duplicity and deceit: “His soul *squints*; his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being *his* world, *his* security, *his* comfort; he knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself.”⁵³ The

52. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 23. Kaufmann has convincingly argued that the term “blond beast” is not a racial concept referring to the “Nordic race,” but is in fact a metaphor for describing the dominant ethnicity or ruling class—referring to a beast of prey, perhaps a yellow-maned lion. However, even with such racial undertones removed, it remains a metaphor for cultural domination and control on the basis of a perceived superiority of one group of people over and against the other.

53. *Ibid.* 21.

underlying assumption in Nietzsche's critique of religion is that religion is not a phenomenal reality, but an epiphenomenon of physiological processes. In effect, religion arises from a feeling of impotency that turns to resentment; this feeling is then projected outward toward the source of the impotence—the master. Ironically, a

race of such men of *ressentiment* will eventually end up *cleverer* than any noble race, and will respect cleverness to a quite different degree as well: namely, as a condition of existence of the first rank, whilst the cleverness of noble men can easily have a subtle aftertaste of luxury and refinement about it.⁵⁴

The implication for human evolution—specifically for understanding the rise of human consciousness—is that the weaker race is necessary for the emergence of human culture. At the same time, however, Nietzsche does not view slave morality as the vehicle for cultural advancement. Rather, he speaks about the necessity of intermarriage between the races for the advancement of the master race (in this regard his racial essentialism differs greatly from the racism of Gobineau or Wagner) while nonetheless upholding the natural superiority of the master races, even tolerating periods in human history when these natural predators are loosed upon civilization to impose their will upon the culture:

Such beings cannot be reckoned with, they come like fate, without cause, reason, consideration or pretext, they appear just like lightning appears, too terrible, sudden, convincing and “other” even to be hated. What they do is create and imprint forms instinctively, unconscious artists there are:—where they appear, soon something new arises, a structure of domination [*Herrschafts—Gebilde*] that *lives*.⁵⁵

Accordingly, while the slave creates culture in reaction to the dominance of the master, it is the masters that bring about genuinely creative and lasting cultural advancement by an imposition of their will-to-power upon history.

The impotence of the slave race—its inability to act because of the physical domination of a superior other—leads to the sublimation of the slaves' natural (physiological) drives. This resentment in the weaker, inferior slave arises in reaction to the natural superiority and dominance of the master. Unable to act, the slave creates an explanatory narrative that compensates for this powerlessness by positing values that invert the natural order. “It is just as absurd,” Nietzsche writes, “to ask strength not to express itself as strength, not to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength.”⁵⁶ Thus, belief in God is a form of cultural wish fulfillment by an oppressed class seeking to restructure society to benefit itself and punish its oppressors. Eventually, there arose among the slave class a priestly caste—those whose powerlessness was transformed

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid. 58–59.

56. Ibid. 26.

into action in the realm of the imagination, that then created a morality based on resentment, and whose sermonizing proclaimed an inversion of the existing social order:

Let us be different from evil people, let us be good! And a good person is anyone who does not rape, does not harm anyone, who does not attack, does not retaliate, who leaves the taking of revenge to God, who keeps hidden as we do, avoids all evil and asks little from life in general, like us who are patient, humble and upright.⁵⁷

Though Nietzsche rejects this morality of resentment in all its forms, he reserves his harshest venom for the priests whose efforts turned a slave morality into a culturally hegemonic force:

As we know, priests make the most *evil enemies*—but why? Because they are the most powerless. Out of this powerlessness, their hate swells into something huge and uncanny to a most intellectual and poisonous level. The greatest haters in world history, and the most intelligent [*die geistreichsten Hassler*], have always been priests.⁵⁸

It is tempting to speculate how Nietzsche's own break with Christianity fueled the ire directed toward "priestly" figures, since he himself was once a practicing Christian, whose family expected him to become an ordained minister in the Lutheran tradition. Yet Nietzsche recognizes that in spite of subverting the natural order, priests have also contributed positively to the evolution of culture: "Human history would be altogether too stupid a thing without the spirit that the impotent have introduced into it," and no culture embodies this spirit of reactionary impotence more than that of "the Jews, that priestly people, which in the last resort was able to gain satisfaction from its enemies and conquerors only through a radical reevaluation of their values, that is, through an act of *the most deliberate revenge* [*durch einen Akt der geistigsten Rache*]."⁵⁹ Therefore, we cannot read Nietzsche's anticlericalism as just part of the post-Enlightenment rejection of church and tradition; rather, we need to understand this critique of "priestly" figures as integral to the genealogy of morality and religion he is developing. Just as there are great figures in history who embody the master morality and bring about great cultural change (free spirits), so there are figures in history who embody the weak-willed morality of the slaves (priests), whose very existence and words are dangerous to the natural development and evolution of the human race.

Although Nietzsche plays with the language of positivism, employing a biological framework for understanding the roots of morality and religion (i.e., the language of physiological response to external stimuli), he is more properly understood as a cultural critic. As natural science, his genealogy of morals provides some interesting insights about the unconscious and instinctual drives behind human behaviors, but in the end his arguments make too many unwarranted assumptions about human behavior that cannot

57. Ibid. 26–27.

58. Ibid. 17.

59. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 17.

be substantiated empirically. Later works like *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and *The Antichrist* exhibit Nietzsche's preoccupation with the cultural and biological degeneration of Europeans traceable to the Judeo-Christian slave morality. This leads Moore to conclude, "Nietzsche's anti-Christianism is thus inextricably linked with his degenerationism, with the way in which he deploys the prevailing biological discourse of his day."⁶⁰ Yet, as cultural criticism, Nietzsche's genealogical approach becomes a valuable tool for unmasking the hidden motivations behind certain human behaviors. So long as Nietzsche's critique of religion is read as one of several viable interpretations (which, while not fully capturing the depth and breadth of religious experience, can nevertheless shed light on religious behavior), Christian theology is correct in engaging and even appropriating aspects of his criticism. However, when genealogical critique becomes the metaphysical foundation for the categorical rejection of religion—as in the new atheism—theologians need to proceed with caution.

Resentment or Justice?

Without question, Friedrich Nietzsche is a philosopher of human liberation. Despite apprehensions one might have about his use of an evolutionary anthropology grounded in a biological explanation for human cultural stagnation, Nietzsche's ultimate goal is the advancement of the human race—and human culture—by overcoming what he views as an obstacle to human flourishing: Christian morality. It is not surprising, therefore, to see a first-generation Latin American theologian of liberation like Rubem Alves intrigued by the possibilities for human liberation—especially from oppressive ecclesial structures—found in Nietzsche's thought.

Writing in the late 1960s, Alves recognizes that the language and culture of the church is out of step with the language of political humanism and its historical project of criticizing the world in order to re-create it more justly: "This is one of the reasons why a growing number of people are leaving the churches and opting for a totally secular humanism."⁶¹ Alves embraces political humanism's view of humankind as the creators of history, while recognizing that this language is at odds with the future-directed spirituality prevalent in much of Christianity. Therefore, "in order to be free for history and for the transformation of society one has to unlearn the language of theology."⁶² For this task of unlearning—or deconstructing—the language of theology, Alves commends Nietzsche's genealogical critique of religion.

Alves wrestles with Nietzsche's philosophy, aware that for Nietzsche Christianity is the enemy, yet optimistic that this encounter with his virulent atheism will "become the occasion for radical self-criticism on both sides . . . which could make man freer than he was before. A true dialogue thus requires full awareness of the radical opposition."⁶³ Other first-generation Latin American liberation theologians—Leonardo Boff,

60. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* 140.

61. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* 29.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.* 30.

for example—refer to Nietzsche’s critique of Western culture and Christianity most often in diagnosing the materialist and imperialist excesses of Christendom: “Nietzsche said it well, The will to power-domination characterizes human beings in modern societies.”⁶⁴ Yet what Alves proposes is a deep engagement of Nietzsche’s genealogical critique of Christianity: “It seems to me that this opposition is nowhere indicated in a more forcible and passionate manner than in the writings of Nietzsche. He welcomed the death of God—and with it the end of theological language—as a joyful liberating reality.”⁶⁵ In critiquing the dominant and, by implication, repressive discourse of theology, Alves cites Nietzsche’s joyful and optimistic language about a world without the limitations imposed on it by doctrinal orthodoxy:

We philosophers and “free spirits” feel as if a new dawn were shining on us when we receive the tidings that “the old god is dead”; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, anticipation, expectation. At last the horizon appears free again to us, even granted that it is not bright; at last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, our sea, lies open again.⁶⁶

Nietzsche’s critique has a liberating dimension, for it exposes the historical reality that all too often “the life of God implies the bondage of man.”⁶⁷ By portraying traditional theological language as “anti-human, and those who speak that language as those who perpetuate inhumanity,” Nietzsche is “pointing out that the Christian language of transcendence expressed an experience that emptied the body, the senses, freedom, creativity, of their validity and beauty and denied them in the name of another world. Therefore the glorification of God corresponded to the suffering and annihilation of man.”⁶⁸ Nietzsche is a prophet of human liberation insofar as he provides theology with the language for critiquing and overcoming the world-denying spirituality that has, for much of Western history, characterized Christianity as a spirituality that preaches “hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material.”⁶⁹

Nietzsche’s concern for the well-being of humanity, however, is neither egalitarian nor democratic. He is not concerned with improving all humanity’s situation, but with improving the situation of a select few whose strengths signal the potential future of humanity. In other words, Nietzsche’s philosophy of liberation seeks the liberation of the species from unnatural forces that impede human potential, but has little patience for the political liberation of the great majority of humankind here and now. His

64. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 69.

65. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* 30.

66. Friedrich Nietzsche, “From The Gay Science: Book V,” in *The Portable Nietzsche* 447–49, at 448.

67. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* 30–31.

68. *Ibid.* 31.

69. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 120.

concern is for those few, like himself, whose biological breeding and cultural training have prepared them to be the spiritual leaders of a post-Christian future, who cynically use religion as one of several tools available for controlling and directing the masses. The free spirit, who “will make use of religions for his project of cultivation and education, just as he will make use of whatever political and economic states are at hand,”⁷⁰ is the product of generations of good breeding, who is entitled to govern by virtue of his inherent cultural and intellectual superiority:

For every high world one must be born; or to speak more clearly, one must be *cultivated* for it: a right to philosophy—taking that word in its great sense—one has only by virtue of one’s origins; one’s ancestors, one’s “blood” decide here, too. Many generations must have labored to prepare the origin of the philosopher; every one of his virtues must have been acquired, nurtured, inherited, and digested singly, and not only the bold, light, delicate gait and course of his thoughts but above all the readiness for great responsibilities, the loftiness of glances that dominate and look down, feeling separated from the crowd and its duties and virtues.⁷¹

Julian Young suggests that Nietzsche views himself as “John the Baptist, the herald—or maybe the midwife—of the new leaders. . . . Nietzsche writes not for everyone but for a very special target audience.”⁷² Nonetheless, despite the fact that Nietzsche the political philosopher comes across sounding like an aristocratic individualist, Young argues that Nietzsche’s overall philosophical project seeks a new kind of social project that will result in greater freedom and advancement for humankind as a whole.

Still, this thesis is difficult to maintain in light of Nietzsche’s many remarks about the stratification of different types of humans—the “free spirits” he is writing to and for, the “ruled” who have some hope of rising to the ranks of the higher types (“those slowly ascending classes”), and “ordinary” human beings, “the vast majority who exist for service and the general advantage, and who *may* exist only for that”⁷³—along with his willingness to sacrifice the great masses of humanity for the sake of producing a cultivated, elite ruling class that embodies the next stage of human evolution.

The essential characteristic of a good and healthy aristocracy, however, is that it experiences itself *not* as a function (whether of the monarchy or the commonwealth) but as their *meaning* and highest justification—that it therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifices of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments. Their fundamental faith simply has to be that society must *not* exist for society’s sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of being.⁷⁴

70. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 72.

71. *Ibid.* 140.

72. Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University, 2007) 127.

73. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 72–73.

74. *Ibid.* 202.

A Christian theological anthropology questions and challenges Nietzsche's position that society should be organized to maximize the flourishing of this exceptional minority at the expense of the rest of humankind.

In attempting to construct a theological account of justice, liberationists need to engage Nietzsche's critique of Christianity lest their call for a revolutionary transformation of society be misinterpreted as an inversion of the social order grounded in feelings of resentment and envy. Nietzsche's genealogy is interested in the emergence (*Entstehung*) of ideas and how they come to have social power. In other words, religion is by definition an ideology—a comprehensive vision, a way of seeing and interpreting the world that reflects the interests, desires, goals, and actions of a particular group. Unfortunately, even though a genealogical approach can be instructive in analyzing how one class or race rises to dominance over another, when the genealogical approach is applied to religion, it undermines belief itself insofar as the foundational (for theology) concept "God" becomes just another idea to be manipulated when asserting social power.

The liberationist account of justice is revolutionary, not in terms of violent upheaval, but insofar as it seeks to replace, not reform, the existing social order by subverting and overcoming sinful structures and relationships of domination. A cornerstone belief of the Christian faith is that all are sinners; thus a liberationist call for justice desires the salvation of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Real, concrete liberation occurs only when both the oppressor and the oppressed confront and overcome their sinfulness, guilt, and complicity in perpetuating relationships of oppression. Jon Sobrino, concerning the conversion of the oppressor, writes: "We must free him from this evil . . . and this is what forgiveness tries to do: convert and re-create the sinner."⁷⁵

This radical transformation occurs only in and through Christ. Unlike a political understanding of revolution in which the party in power is ousted (usually by violence), stripped of power, and replaced by a revolutionary party whose new *raison d'être* becomes maintaining its hard-won power, the Christian conception of revolution (grounded in the doctrines of grace and forgiveness) recognizes that both the oppressor and the oppressed need liberation from the oppressive worldview and sinful social structures that facilitate relationships of oppression. This by no means implies that the victims of repression are in some way responsible for their victimization. Rather, it is merely a recognition of the fact that the only way to overcome the historical vicious circle of revolution in which the oppressed becomes the oppressor is by overcoming and rejecting the values that rationalize relationships of domination and exploitation.

Nietzsche's positivistic narrative cannot contain the theological concept of grace and forgiveness; it necessarily views human relationships as a competitive struggle for power; a zero-sum game in which there are clear winners and losers, and in which pity and compassion are dangerous illusions (from an evolutionary standpoint) perpetuated by the losers. According to Nietzsche's jaded narrative of *ressentiment*, the

75. Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 63.

revolutionary struggles against repression because he or she wants what the oppressor has—power, wealth, status—but does not seek to transform inherently exploitative social structures; he or she merely wants to change his or her social location within a given set of exploitative relationships for his or her own benefit.

In contrast, the liberationist account of justice is not only revolutionary; it is also explicitly Christocentric, meaning that its understanding of liberation and salvation is inseparable from its understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what he does for humankind. God became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. If we take seriously every aspect of the humanity of God—his death included—it is in the history of this particular Jesus of Nazareth, a marginalized Galilean who transgressed social boundaries to bring good news to the poor and oppressed, that God is most fully known. This gospel message is embodied in Mary's Magnificat, a passage often cited by Latin American liberation theologians,⁷⁶ in which Mary humbly accepts God's call to be the mother of the Christ while proclaiming a politically dangerous word from God:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever. (Lk 1:46–55, NRSV)

Another passage frequently cited by liberationists focuses Jesus' earthly ministry on matters of temporal justice and marks the beginning of his preaching career in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth, when he reads from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

76. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 179–86.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18–19, NRSV)

Then Jesus remarks, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4: 21), and the people of his hometown—his friends and neighbors—attempt to hurl him off a cliff in order to kill him.

Both these texts speak to the revolutionary dimension of Christian faith and seem to reflect a simple reversal of the temporal order with the coming of God's kingdom, echoing Nietzsche's critique of slave morality. However, within this faith narrative, Jesus' crucifixion is a direct result of the life he lived, not because he was a criminal, but due to the fact that as the Christ of God Jesus of Nazareth refuted the dominant values of the religious and governing authorities of his day.⁷⁷ They in turn executed him for sedition. In other words, a Christocentric, praxis-oriented worldview understands the work of Christ as adversarial politics: God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed of history demands that the church, as the body of Christ, side with the poor over against those who exploit them—not from resentment, but because it is the will of God *for all humankind* as revealed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ of God.

In light of the centrality liberationist thought gives to Christ's praxis, it is appropriate to look to Jesus' teachings for guidance in the realm of politics. At the same time, a Christology promising historical liberation without also overcoming sin and death is as vacant as a Christology that promises eternal life without addressing human suffering here and now. Though the New Testament presents a range of ethical instruction, liberationists argue for a consistent unifying narrative in the Gospels: only Jesus Christ brings genuine liberation from every kind of bondage.⁷⁸ Temporal powers led Jesus to the criminal's cross, but God's power raised him from death and glorified him at the right hand of the Father; temporal powers took the life of the early church martyrs, yet God raised them to eternal life and preserved the church against persecution; temporal powers continue to legislate life and death without considering preservation of basic human dignity, but Jesus' teachings and actions still stand as an unwavering counter-cultural example.

During Jesus' time many Jews expected a political messiah, yet Jesus superseded their expectations by rejecting nationalistic patterns in his own self-understanding as the Messiah of God, interpreting his mission through the lens of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Granted, by choosing to follow the paradigm of Isaiah's Messiah—the King (Isa 1–37), the Suffering Servant (Isa 38–55), and the Anointed Conqueror (Isa

77. For a historically grounded Christology that emphasizes the transformation and re-creation of human societies in history see Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 67–104, 195–232.

78. Gutiérrez, *God of Life* 118–39.

56–66)—Jesus still understands his ministry in political terms, embracing the calling and anointing of God to bring justice and liberation to the poor and oppressed (Lk 4:16–30). Yet by interpreting kingship in terms of the Suffering Servant, Jesus subverts dominant views that expected God's anointed leader to bring about change through political rule. Jesus discards the false god of the state in recognition of the absolute sovereignty of God over all nations and empires through a radical revaluation of values in which divine rule is embodied in the Suffering Servant who was oppressed and afflicted "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Isa 53:7, NRSV).

Accordingly, Jesus' life and ministry only provide broad guidelines for our political life together under the Word of God—not the specificity of a particular political agenda, but more of a general orientation toward what any temporal government needs to be and do in order to be a just and righteous government in the eyes of God: "A concern for where the poor are to sleep will make us realize that it is in fact not possible to separate love of God and love of neighbor; that is, we must live both aspects as intertwined with each other."⁷⁹

In contrast, Nietzsche's accounting of the human condition presupposes that all human relationships are conflictual, that all human relationships are reducible to a struggle for domination. The Christian understanding of the human condition acknowledges the reality of relationships of domination but refuses to accept this as the natural order, arguing instead that humans are responsible for creating relationships of domination (sin), and that divine action is needed to overcome such domination (grace). A proper accounting of the human condition, therefore, is grounded in the gift of divine forgiveness. In an extended meditation on innocent suffering depicted in the book of Job, Gutiérrez writes,

What is it that Job has understood? That justice does not reign in the world that God has created? No. The truth that he has grasped and that has lifted him to the level of contemplation is that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God. *Only when we have come to realize that God's love is freely bestowed do we enter fully and definitively into the presence of the God of faith.* Grace is not opposed to the quest of justice, nor does it play it down; on the contrary, it gives it its full meaning.⁸⁰

Theologically, liberationists define injustice and oppression as a breach of communion with the Creator and with one another; this presumes that humanity is created for communion. Whatever fractures the fundamental community of humanity in and with God is sin. Conversely, restoration of community brought about by divine forgiveness cannot exist without justice. In other words, the church cannot enact forgiveness by ignoring sin, since genuine repentance and transformation are demanded by and result from divine forgiveness. While the gospel cannot be reduced to justice, there is no understanding of the gospel that does not include justice. Therefore, to recast the

79. Ibid. 138.

80. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) 87, emphasis added.

liberationists' call for justice as feelings of resentment masking a desire for revenge is to completely misunderstand the Christian theological accounting of the human condition.

Conclusion

Presented as a hypothesis, a Christian theological anthropology states that if God exists, and humanity is created in the image of God, then human relationships cannot be reduced to competition and domination. The biblical witness understands creation as an act of divine grace, and values humanity by virtue of the fact that humans are created to live in covenant with God. As an act of grace, the gift of life is unmerited; the value of humanity as God's creatures is thus independent of our merit, physical and mental abilities, or current social status. Theologically speaking, the value and dignity given is a gift originating in the act of creation that can never be either lost or taken away. Granted, the *imago Dei* is distorted by human sin, yet our faith rests on the promise that through Jesus Christ God redeems humankind. Therefore, humanity's inherent dignity as creatures in the image of God does not depend on individual moral worth; this foundational fact prescribes how Christians must treat others. Nietzsche, of course, rejects this core belief of the Christian faith, viewing the Christian advocacy of universal human dignity as a sign of weakness, a literary fiction conjured by the weak in their frustration and impotence as dominated people.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity as a slave morality—a religion of *ressentiment*—stands over us as a cautionary tale. For even great saints can be tempted to less than holy thoughts and actions by those ever-present human motivations, envy and resentment. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche directs his critical eye toward the Christian hope for an afterlife and interprets it under the rubric of *ressentiment*. Citing Aquinas, he writes:

It seems to me that Dante made a gross error when, with awe-inspiring naïvety he placed the inscription over the gateway to his hell: "Eternal love created me as well":—at any rate, this inscription would have a better claim to stand over the gateway to Christian Paradise and its "eternal bliss": "Eternal *hate* created me as well"—assuming that a true statement can be placed above the gateway to a lie! For *what* is the bliss of this Paradise? . . . We might have guessed already; but it is better to be expressly shown it by no less an authority in such matters than Thomas Aquinas, the great teacher and saint. "Beati in regno coelesti," he says as meekly as a lamb, "videbunt poenas damnatorum, ut beatitudo illis magis complacet" ["The blessed in the heavenly kingdom will see the torment of the damned *so that they may even more thoroughly enjoy their blessedness*"].⁸¹

The great truth in Nietzsche's critique concerning the underlying motivations behind religious convictions is that as human beings—whether saints, theologians, or laypersons—we are always subject to the complex system of physiological and

81. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* 29.

psychological motivations characteristic of our animal natures. Nietzsche misses the mark, however, in presuming that an other-directed morality, especially one that prioritizes the needs of the powerless and oppressed, could arise only from weakness and is merely resentment disguised as virtue.

Christianity offers a paradox to the world: at the moment Jesus felt most abandoned by God, while still nailed to the cross, an instrument of torture and death, he prayed to God, asking forgiveness for the ones responsible for his death: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a, NRSV). Herein lies, exposed for all to see, the motivation behind all genuinely Christian ethics: as forgiven sinners united by grace in the mystical body of Christ, we are able to transcend our all-too-human motivations and act in accord with the will of God. For as Roberto Goizueta observes, this "experience of God's presence with us, especially in our struggles, is what makes God's love believable, Christ's message credible, and life livable."⁸²

Liberation theology stands on the conviction that a "direct, intimate relationship . . . exists between the struggle for social justice and the possibility of authentic Christian worship, the expression of gratitude for a life that is not ours but pure gift."⁸³ The act of solidarity in which we stand with the powerless over against the tyrannical is not an act of powerlessness; it is an eruption into the human realm of what true, divine power is: "the crucified Christ reveals that life is good no matter what, this life is no mere abstraction; it is life as defined and constituted by Love, that is, by relationships."⁸⁴ Ironically, the God of Life, whom liberation theologians encounter in the sacred Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, better fits the mold of Nietzsche's life-affirming, Dionysian spirituality than the world-negating religion of *ressentiment* to which Nietzsche has reduced all of Christianity.

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82. Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009) 11.

83. *Ibid.* 18.

84. *Ibid.* 9.