

WAY TO SHILOH

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God's undertaker?

The last of the nineteenth-century's most influential atheists was the German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). The son of a minister of religion - and grandson of two others - Nietzsche is renowned for his often-quoted words, 'God is dead,' but, taken at its face value, this statement hides more than it reveals. Several other thinkers, including Hegel, had already spoken about God's death, but it was Nietzsche who gave the idea the dramatic impetus that led to his being described as 'the most imaginative and articulate modern spokesman for atheism'.

Nietzsche's writing was intense, vivid, powerful and moving. For Nietzsche, the first response to God's passing was one of joyful relief. He wrote, 'We philosophers and "free spirits" feel ourselves irradiated as by a new dawn by the report that the "old God is dead"; our hearts overflow with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment and expectation. At last the horizon seems open once more ... perhaps never before did such an open sea exist.' Nietzsche was a mythological atheist; he believed that the God-myth was once alive in the sense that man believed in it, but that the myth was dead and buried and was no longer workable. In other words, like Feuerbach, he dismissed God as mere wish-fulfilment. Man feels inadequate, longs for someone to meet his needs, so 'wishes' into existence a God who has no objective reality. In Nietzsche's view, God was created by man, and not man by God.

But he was not content to leave things there; he saw himself as a prophet for the liberation of the human race. He looked on the culture of the nineteenth century as 'decadent' and in the process of losing its authentic existence. The religious call to virtues such as meekness and humility produced what he called a 'herd morality'; men huddled together to find comfort and sympathy, instead of striking out to find their own personal values and significance. He despised weakness, meekness and subservience, which he saw as indications of a 'slave morality', an attitude accepted without question even though it was based on nothing more than the conventions of society. In this approach, he was taking naturalism to its logical conclusion. If mankind is locked into a closed system, with no transcendent God in control, things like truth, morals and ethics are up for grabs; they are no more than what we decide for ourselves.

What is more, Nietzsche taught that 'herd morality' impoverished man by depriving him of natural values and ethics. Looking to God for help and to heaven as a reward robbed man of his authentic existence and identity, and should be forcibly resisted: 'I entreat you my brothers, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners, whether they know it or not.' Man's significance was to be found in biology, not theology.

Kant had argued that moral activity implies a moral dimension; Nietzsche turned the coin over and saw that once God is abandoned, morality based on his existence must be thrown out.

In establishing something to take its place (he realized that values were imperative) Nietzsche called for 'biological heroism' in re-establishing authentic human existence. What was needed was a transvaluation of 'values' and a 'will to power' (one of Nietzsche's major phrases) which would impose these new values on others, whether they wanted them or not. Traditional values tended to preserve the weak and helpless, who could make little or no contribution to society. In the new order of things, only the strong would survive. For Nietzsche, there was no point in mankind aiming for the perfection (his word was 'supernature') alleged to have been his as God's creation. 'Supernature' was a future goal, and man should be looking for an *Übermensch* (usually translated 'Superman', but more accurately 'Overman') who would refuse to submit to political or religious authority or tradition, break out of the 'herd morality' and 'go beyond good and evil' in establishing his own value-system, triumphing over all weakness and despising it when he found it in others.

It is not difficult to see why the German dictator Adolf Hitler hijacked Nietzsche's writings as his philosophical blueprint when he set about building his infamous Third Reich. Fundamental atheism, which saw the world as a closed system, fitted perfectly into Hitler's scheme of things. So did the idea of the extermination of the weak, the mentally unstable and all who could not make a worthwhile contribution to the establishment of a superior race. Still preserved in the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp in southern Poland, where at one stage during the Second World War 12,000 people a day were gassed to death as part of Hitler's demented mass-murder of over six million Jews, his words reflect the outcome of taking Nietzsche's ideas to their logical conclusion: 'I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience and morality... we will train young people before whom the world will tremble. I want young people capable of violence - imperious, relentless and cruel.'

Nietzsche had forecast that, because God had died in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century would become the bloodiest century in history. His words proved tragically and sickeningly true. As Ravi Zacharias says, 'Hitler unintentionally exposed atheism and dragged it where it was reluctantly, but logically, forced to go. The denuding of people, in every sense of the word, that took place in concentration camps, brought about the logical outworking of the demise of God and the extermination of moral law... Disregard for the sanctity of life, and its resultant corollary of estimating the value of a life by its quality, provided some of the Third Reich's metaphysical moorings. The "inferior" were to be obliterated; the "superior" were to determine destiny, and the will and power of the superman would dominate.'

Nietzsche disowned what Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx and others had said about the flow of history. Instead, he turned the clock back over 2,000 years and tried to revive the idea of history as an endless series of meaningless cycles. Tied in with this was his opposition to the then fashionable philosophy of optimistic humanism, including the idea that education would lead man to Utopia. Nietzsche was a tortured paradox. At times he wrote with life-affirming optimism, yet at other times seemed to reject every attempt to construct meaning and hope in human existence. In doing so he produced the seed-bed of nihilism a philosophy which says that man began in nothingness, has no God-given values to stabilize him and ultimately ends in oblivion.

One of those who survived Auschwitz has no doubt that nihilism lay behind what took place there: 'If we present man with a concept of man which is not true, we may well corrupt him. When we present him as an automation of reflexes, as a mind machine, as a bundle of instincts, as a pawn of drives and reactions, as a mere product of heredity and environment, we feed that nihilism to which modern man is, in any case, prone. I became acquainted with the last stage of corruption in my second concentration camp, Auschwitz. The gas chambers of Auschwitz were the ultimate consequence of the theory that man is nothing but the product of heredity and environment - or, as the Nazis like to say, of "blood and soil". I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek were ultimately prepared at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers.'

Nietzsche's tension in trying to marry this stifling pessimism to his passionate call for heroic living should not make it totally surprising to discover that this intense, tormented man 'flipped' in 1889 and spent the last years of his life in a state of madness, thought by many to have been accelerated by the venereal disease which he caught some time earlier. After a lifetime of exploring the anxiety, anger and pain of human existence, his quest for dignity ended in insanity. When he was confined to his house, his sister followed his principles and, instead of evoking pity and sympathy, exercised her 'will to power' by selling people tickets to come and see him in his tragic derangement.

It is doubtful whether anyone has written more incisively or vividly than Nietzsche about the consequences of atheism. As Ravi Zacharias puts it, 'He compelled the philosopher to pay the full fare of his ticket to atheism and to see where it was going to let him off. Nietzsche wanted to look life squarely in the eye, with no God to obstruct his vision, and the picture he saw was agonizing to the mind. He saw no vast mind behind the framing of the world, he heard no transcending voice giving counsel to this world, he saw no light at the end of the tunnel, and he felt the loneliness of existence in its most desolate form.'

Colin Brown rates Nietzsche's influence upon European literature and philosophy as 'incalculable', yet for all his impassioned rhetoric he made no contribution to the question of the existence of God. Instead, all his brilliant and at times tortuous thinking was based on the unexamined assumption that God was non-existent. He lived just a few painful and deranged months into the twentieth century and, he ended his life 'wandering through an infinite nothing'. In one of his works he had written, 'Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are!' Cold comfort on one's dying day!

Some time ago a piece of graffiti scrawled on a wall in New York announced, "'God is Dead". Nietzsche.' Underneath, someone added, "'Nietzsche is dead". God.' Quite!

Extract from John Blanchard (Does God Believe in Atheists)