

Anti-theism and Eschatology: Countering Nietzsche's Claim that Christianity is too "other-worldly"

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KEY WORDS

| Apologetics | Eschatology | Friedrich Nietzsche |
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ABSTRACT

Friedrich Nietzsche is undoubtedly one of the most influential atheists in history and his work continues to strongly influence atheism today. The firmest legacy of Nietzsche's atheism has actually been his antitheism and view that the Christian way of life is undesirable. We see this influence in the virulent and pervading anti-theism of the "New Atheists". However, despite Nietzsche's clear influence, relatively little modern academic work has been directly published on the specific question of how Christians today ought to respond to his critique of Christianity. In this essay, I hope to begin to redress that inattention by critiquing Nietzsche's polemic against Christian salvation and eschatology.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I assess the extent to which Christianity is solely an other-worldly religion, examining how this might affect our presentation of the Gospel today. This question is especially topical as anti-theism is common in western Europe and was particularly acute in the output of the "New Atheists", especially Christopher Hitchens who wrote, 'I am not even an atheist so much as an antitheist [...] life would be miserable if what the faithful affirmed was actually true.'¹ We must take care to forensically trace the deep, historic roots of this thread of anti-theism in order to effectively diagnose them and then engage with these critiques today in context.

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 55; Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). Hitchens's brother, Peter, meticulously catalogued this new trend in *The Rage Against God*.

In the first part of this article, a summary of Nietzsche's critique of Christian eschatology, which he sees as an escapist, life-negating form of transcendental nihilism, will be provided.² After that, I will analyse his critique, explaining why it is a polemical caricature due to its oversimplification and misunderstanding of Christian eschatology, as well as its neglect of nuanced understandings of the key Christian doctrines of creation, Incarnation, sanctification, and the self. This analysis will be conducted in three subsections, each of which will examine a different aspect of Nietzsche's critique. The first explores his understanding of the doctrine of total depravity as this-worldly denial. The second assesses Nietzsche's view that

² Iain Thomson, "Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 54.2 (2011), 140–59.

Christianity proposed a 'slave morality' which amounted to this-worldly denial. The third and final aspect I will investigate is Nietzsche's critique of the Christian ideal of self-denial as being inherently hostile to earthly life.

I argue that, while Nietzsche's critique of Christian eschatology is thought-provoking, it is over-simplistic and unfairly caricatures Christianity, often asserting false dichotomies. Although Nietzsche's critique presumes an inaccurate and partial understanding of Christian eschatology, I still think it demands a thorough response from the believer, even if it may now be even less applicable to today's more nuanced Christianity. Then, as an alternative to Nietzsche's attack on eschatology, as expressed in statements such as: 'The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life', I will propose inaugurated eschatology.³ Finally, I conclude that Christianity is neither a solely this-worldly nor a solely other-worldly religion, as 'This Age' and 'The Age to Come' substantially overlap due to the Recreation.

I contend that Christianity is a largely 'this-worldly' religion as it yearns to see the transformation, rather than replacement, of this world. Therefore, our Gospel presentation should reflect this nuance by incorporating the fact that, even though we believe this life points to the Recreation and 'The Age to Come', we still

believe in life before death, as well as life after it.⁴

NIETZSCHE'S POLEMIC OF CHRISTIANITY AS A SOLELY 'OTHER-WORLDLY' RELIGION

Nietzsche's underlying concern with Christianity is its perceived obsession with an imaginary utopian world, separate from earth, to which humans would flee at death.⁵ He viewed Christianity as a solely other-worldly religion which denied earthly life to affirm eternal life.⁶ 'Other-worldly' refers to a world spatially and temporally separate from this one (another world beyond this one). Nietzsche's eschatological critique rests on his polemical perception of total human depravity, and Christianity's "Master-slave morality", which leads to "ressentiment" and the "Denial of Life".⁷ Nietzsche can be said to have had a broadly similar understanding of Christianity's supposed devaluation of temporal life to that of Ignatius of Antioch who once wrote, 'I want no more of what men call life'.⁸ Thomas à Kempis writes in a similar vein: 'It is good that we sometimes have some troubles' as they force us to remember that

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Viking, 1967), p. 1052; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. by Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993). Benjamin L. Gladd, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016). Derek Morphew, *The Future King Is Here: The Theology of Matthew* (Cape Town, South Africa: Vineyard International Publishing, 2011); Derek Morphew, *The Implications of the Kingdom* (Derek Morphew Publishing, 2010); Derek Morphew, *Demonstrating the Kingdom: Tools for Christian Discipleship* (Independently published, 2019). James Paul, *What on Earth Is Heaven?* (London: IVP, 2021). Grant Macaskill, *Revealed Wisdom and Inaugurated Eschatology in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

4 'Our Aims', Christian Aid <<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/about-us/our-aims>> [accessed 12 May 2022].

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, §129, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 48.

6 Ibid., Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 28.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, §10, and Essay III, §15, ed. by T. N. R. Rogers, trans. by Horace B. Samuel, Dover Thrift Editions (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc.), p. 18. 79-80; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §154, pp. 110-11.

8 Ignatius of Antioch, 'The Epistle to the Romans', in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. by Andrew Louth, trans. by Staniforth Maxwell, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 87.

humans are ‘here [on earth] in banishment [... then] he sorroweth [... and] is weary of living longer, and wishes that death would come.’⁹ However, while Nietzsche may inadvertently have ended up echoing both Ignatius and Kempis in their respective diagnoses of earthly life’s emptiness within Christian theology, this similar initial observation led them to very different conclusions. While Ignatius and Kempis viewed their bleak diagnosis of temporal life as an enticement to the afterlife, the same diagnosis led Nietzsche to instead choose to reject Christianity on the basis of taste and its failure to appreciate the present moment as good in itself.¹⁰

TOTAL DEPRAVITY AS THIS-WORLDLY DENIAL

Within the context of his general distaste for the Christian view of earthly life, Nietzsche especially took issue with the idea of total depravity, which was deeply ingrained within him thanks to his 19th-century pietist, Lutheran upbringing.¹¹ He derived his particular perception of total depravity (that, in lieu of divine grace, humans could never perform good deeds and would never choose God) from a plain reading of certain scriptural verses, including, for example, Jeremiah 17:9, Psalm 51:5, and Isaiah 64:6. For him, these sorts of verses reinforced the point that Christianity was hostile to this-worldly life. Nietzsche believed that Christianity turned humans into miserable, bitter, self-loathing, pitiable and

helpless subjects whose purpose in this-worldly life was to repeatedly fling themselves upon God’s mercy and endlessly bow down to him like grovelling, sycophantic slaves.¹²

He writes, moreover, that Christianity ‘buried [humanity ...] in mud: into [...] total depravity it then suddenly shone a beam of divine mercy, so that, [...] stupefied by [...] grace, man gave vent to a cry of rapture.’¹³ He saw Christianity as producing ‘profound self-dissatisfaction, guilt, soul torment, self-contempt, [...] habitual shame, despair, and sickening obeisance.’¹⁴ He also contended that Christianity was too ambitious regarding its moral capabilities, forgetting that we are ‘human, all too human’ (born into original then perpetual sin). Hence, Christianity’s strict prohibitions set its followers up to fail and then condemned them for doing so.¹⁵ Stephen N. Williams summarises Nietzsche’s attack on total depravity well: ‘Demeaned humanity plus subservience to the law of a Creator plus complicity in the grace of redemption equals the human worm.’¹⁶ Nietzsche, therefore, saw total depravity as life-negating and a confirmation of Christianity’s excessively and nauseatingly other-worldly nature, and hostility to this-worldly existence.

It is, however, worth remembering that

9 Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, ed. by Paul Bechtel, The New Moody Classics (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 39.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, §132, trans. by R. Kevin Hill, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 146.

11 *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Thought*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 295.

12 Stephen N. Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bletchley, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: Baker Academic: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 90, 112; Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay II, §14, §21-22, and Essay III, §26, pp. 47-48, 54-56, 97-99.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 114.

14 Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, p. 124; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 60, 69, 75, 77-79, 94, 130, 321, 546.

15 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 78, 247; Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §159, pp. 112-13.

16 Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, p. 125.

Nietzsche's critique here may be more readily applicable to the strict pietist Lutheranism of the 19th century with which he was brought up than it is to today's mainstream Christianity.¹⁷ However, having said that, it would be difficult to argue that Martin Luther himself devalued earthly life, 'God wants the government of the earthly kingdom to be a symbol of the heavenly kingdom, like a mime or mask'.¹⁸ It is also worth remembering that the precise definition of total depravity is still disputed and not all Christians, especially in the case of Roman Catholics and liberal Protestants, subscribe to the doctrine.¹⁹ Furthermore, Nietzsche has a habit of generally neglecting creation, sanctification, the Incarnation and recreation to the detriment of his understanding of Christianity. Even when he does directly address these topics, he often produces oversimplified caricatures.²⁰ This weakens his argument for Christianity's exceedingly other-worldly nature, especially as no real distinction may be drawn between creation and salvation. Providing a more compelling vision in comparison with Nietzsche's thought, David Bentley Hart writes:

17 Claeys (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Thought*, p. 295.

18 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Volume 13: Selected Psalms II, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 197. Gustaf Wingren provides a helpful summary of Luther's view high view of earthly life: 'God has made all the offices. Through this work in man's offices, God's creative work goes forward [...] God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations, toward man's life on earth [...] Thus, love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations' (in Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), pp. 27–28).

19 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1645; Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, trans. by A. V. Littledale (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1955), pp. 148, 151–52, 156–57; Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1974), pp. 108, 110, 112–13.

20 Williams, p. 65.

'In the end of all things is their beginning, and only from the perspective of the end can one know what they are, why they have been made [...] protology and eschatology are a single science'.²¹ As Williams rightly states, 'a theology of creation warrants the most vivid possible interest in creation,' as God purposefully made a 'very good' world (Genesis 1:31) and made 'humankind in his image' (Genesis 1:27), and will renew creation, rather than abandoning it (Romans 8:18-24).²²

Adding to this stream of nuanced Christian eschatology where God wishes to renew rather than destroy or replace creation, Henri de Lubac writes,

Christianity does not deny man in order to affirm God [...] its revelation of God was a promotion of man [...] "The Glory of God is a man fully-alive" [...] Christianity professes so lofty an idea of man that it defends his nobility and wants to assure his salvation.²³

De Lubac is powerfully arguing here that Christianity's emphasis on fallen humanity's redemption does not itself imply a divine distaste for humanity per se. God's choice to redeem humanity through the Incarnation by having his Son take on human form and live on earth shows that God works in and through the world, not despite it or against it. He works to restore our true, divinely-willed human nature.

As Christ was fully-human, he is the template for humanity so, as Max Scheler argued, 'it was Nietzsche who diminished man; the Christian God, on the contrary, allowed man to be more than man' such that 'the death of God means the

21 David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, & Universal Salvation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 68.

22 Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, p. 107.

23 Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 400.

death of man.’²⁴ Yet, for de Lubac, ‘The denial of God did not open up a new era for a “liberated” man; [...] it drove him into primeval savagery’, as was for him evidenced by the contemporary rise of Nazism across Europe.²⁵ Nietzsche’s understanding of total depravity, therefore, led him to see Christianity rather negatively, particularly as a solely other-worldly religion.

CHRISTIANITY’S ‘SLAVE MORALITY’ AS THIS-WORLDLY HOSTILITY

In a similar vein, Nietzsche viewed Christian morality and its restrictions as being inherently hostile to earthly life. Nietzsche believed that the persistent Christian focus on the afterlife makes Christians undervalue this-worldly existence and its pleasures, moralising them into sins to be avoided. He viewed Christianity as an excessively prohibitive religion, preventing humans from acting on their instincts and thereby affirming this-worldly life.²⁶ He believed that there were no moral phenomena but only moral perceptions of phenomena, arguing that Christianity invented morality and sin.²⁷

24 Yves Ledure, ‘The Christian Response to Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity’, in *Nietzsche and Christianity*, ed. by Claude Geffré and Jean-Pierre Jossua, trans. by Ruth Murray (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), pp. 42–50 (pp. 45, 47); Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, p. 65.

25 Ledure, ‘The Christian Response to Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity’, p. 47.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Twilight of the Idols’, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 31–124 (p. 52).

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §108, trans. by Helen Zimmern (Seattle: Amazon Classics, 2017), p. 73; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, Book II, trans. by R. Kevin Hill, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2018), pp. 146, 148, 150; Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The “Improvers” of Mankind’, §93, in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, §132, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 202; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, §148, trans.

Christians’ ‘determination to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad.’²⁸ He used the Christian condemnation of lust to explain this: ‘Christianity gave Eros poison to drink’, making it degenerate ‘[in]to Vice.’²⁹

Nietzsche identified two types of morality: ‘master morality’ and ‘slave morality.’³⁰ ‘Master morality’ described the behaviour of ‘strong-willed’ ‘noblemen’ who valued pride, power, strength, courage, self-worth, and self-betterment through the ‘will to power.’³¹ Conversely, ‘slave morality’ emphasised compassion, forgiveness, charity, humility, pity, chastity, self-control and selflessness.³² Out of the two, Nietzsche preferred the former and argued that the latter described Christian morality.³³ He saw religious moral values as deriving from the aggrieved, envious and vindictive instincts of early weak, cowardly and resentful Christians who deviously subverted master morality by inverting its values.³⁴ Nietzsche thus argues that the Christian is envious of what the master has and represses this jealousy by asserting that the master’s self-improvement is immoral, deriving from sinful selfishness.³⁵

Incidentally, Christopher Hitchens echoed

by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 132–35; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, §143, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 1–3.

28 Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, §130, p. 146.

29 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism §168, trans. by Helen Zimmern (Seattle: Amazon Classics, 2017), p. 168.

30 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, pp. 16–28.

31 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Book I, §55, §124 and §129, and Book II, §252, pp. 48–50, 90, 94, 171–72.

32 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §169, §235, §394, §734, and §786, pp. 117, 159–60, 252–53, 471, 499–501; Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, §46–47, §50, and §103–104, pp. 37–38, 55–56.

33 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, §9, p. 17.

34 *Ibid.*, Essay I, §10, p. 18.

35 *Ibid.*, Essay III, §15–16, pp. 78–81.

this Nietzschean understanding of Christian morality and God's oversight of us when he said,

it's an excellent thing that there's no reason to believe [in God ...] It is the wish to be a slave. It is the desire that there be an unalterable, unchallengeable, tyrannical authority who can convict you of thought crime while you are asleep, who must subject you to a total surveillance around the clock [...] a celestial North Korea.³⁶

It is especially interesting that he chose to focus on the prohibitive nature of morality, to employ the language of slavery in relation to Christians, and to discuss the desirability, rather than probability, of God's existence.

For Nietzsche, the Christian does not want to overtake the master, but bring them down to their lower level – what Nietzsche calls 'the cleverest revenge'.³⁷ The Christian then invents a utopian paradise where they will receive a hundredfold in compensation for their selfless earthly sacrifices, while the master is eternally punished in Hell.³⁸ This resulted in Christianity becoming a vindictive, cynical, resentful, cowardly religion of weak slaves. Here Nietzsche writes: 'The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life [...] The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life'.³⁹ Nietzsche argues further that priests count this earthly life as 'a bridge to that other existence. The ascetic treats life as a wrong path that he has to walk along backwards till he reaches the point where he starts'.⁴⁰

36 Christopher Hitchens, Peter Hitchens, *Debate: Hitchens V. Hitchens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, 2008) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngjQs_QjSwc> [accessed 23 February 2023].

37 Ibid., *Essay III*, §15-16, p. 16.

38 Ibid., Nietzsche, *Essay II*, §XXII, p. 55; Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §129, p. 69; Matthew 19:29.

39 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 1052.

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed.

Indeed, Nietzsche believed that Christian eschatology almost implied that God had made a mistake in creating this world. He suspiciously viewed Christianity as, 'the will to deny reality [...] a conspiracy against health, beauty, well-constitutedness, bravery, intellect, *benevolence* of soul, *against life itself* [...] It is [...] the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge'.⁴¹ For Nietzsche, 'Christianity is the antithesis of the free spirit' and is inherently opposed to curiosity and experimentation.⁴²

It is in this way that Nietzsche saw Christian eschatology as the escapist, cowardly invention of another better world where weak, embittered Christians would finally have their self-denying moral efforts and unfulfilled vengeance for wrongs suffered ultimately recompensed.⁴³ Nietzsche writes, 'Suffering it was [...] that] created all worlds behind this one'.⁴⁴ He saw this form of eschatology as wishful thinking by Christians who are secretly envious of *Übermensch* ("Overhumans") who overcome challenges by affirming life itself in this world.⁴⁵ As Donald Ude summarises, in Christians' 'warped sense of judgement, the healthy and the noble of this world are the ones that will be condemned to eternal damnation, while they [Christians ...] are supposed to be

by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 85.

41 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (New York and London: Penguin, 1990), p. 62.

42 Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, p. 101.

43 Donald C. Ude, 'Ressentiment in Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity' (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Alberta, 2016), pp. 38–39 <<https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/d083cc85-0a1d-4954-aa53-3a7849a507f9>>.

44 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 28.

45 Ude, 'Ressentiment in Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity', pp. 38–39; Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 13–14.

compensated.⁴⁶ Eschatology, in this sense, is the ultimate expression of Christians’ antagonism towards this world: Christianity ‘has forged out of the *ressentiment* of the masses its *chief weapon* against *us*, against everything that is noble, joyful, high-spirited [...] against our happiness on earth ... “Immortality” granted to every Peter and Paul has been the [...] most malicious outrage on noble mankind ever committed.⁴⁷ Nietzsche saw such an other-worldly and pessimistic eschatology as being inherently hostile to earthly life, viewing it as the main piece of evidence demonstrating Christianity’s life-denying spirit.⁴⁸ Ude summarises, Nietzsche ‘sees Christian eschatology as a political device used by the unfortunate to tyrannize the fortunate.’⁴⁹

Conversely, Nietzsche sees suffering as a vital tool for human betterment, wishing that all his ‘disciples’ should experience ‘suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment [...] self-contempt’ and ‘defeat’ so they may demonstrate their ability to endure and thirst for life itself.⁵⁰ Nietzsche summarises his view of Christian eschatology thus: ‘God degenerated to the contradiction of life [...] God the formula for every calumny of “this world”, for every lie about “the next world!” In God [...] the will to nothingness [was] sanctified.’⁵¹

On the basis of this critique, Nietzsche argues that Christianity invented the moralistic concept of sin to constrain the behaviour of its followers and limit their success but also

to piously appear magnanimous in defeat to the victors in this life, in resisting temptation and turning the other cheek.⁵² Christianity thus infantilises its followers, turning them into resentful, depraved, enslaved, grovelling, sycophantic worms: ‘Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls [...] directed against that which is *elevated*.’⁵³ Nietzsche argued that Christians were ‘the very people who invented sin in the first place!’, and this devalued the temporal significance and consequences of our earthly actions.⁵⁴ Morality is central to Nietzsche’s attack on Christian eschatology and supports his thesis that Christianity is solely an other-worldly religion. For Nietzsche, this is because the overburdensome prohibitions that Christianity enforces constrain human curiosity and success, preventing life-affirmation.

SELF-DENIAL OR DENIAL OF LIFE?

Nietzsche saw the Christian virtue of “self-denial” as a pre-requisite to eschatology, and the main barrier between Christians and temporal life-affirmation. He took a plain interpretation of these verses: ‘let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’ (Luke 9:23); ‘those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?’ (Matthew 16:25-26); and ‘I punish my body and enslave it’ (1 Corinthians 9:27). He uses such verses to argue that Christianity is hostile to life. Nietzsche writes, ‘If man is sinful through and through, then he ought only to hate himself’,

46 Ude, ‘Ressentiment in Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity’, p. 38.

47 Ibid, Ude.

48 Ibid, Ude, p. 37.

49 Ibid, Ude, p. 42.

50 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Oscar Levv, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici (Delhi: Delhi Open Books, 2020), p. 576.

51 Nietzsche, ‘The Anti-Christ’, p. 18.

52 Nietzsche, ‘Twilight of the Idols’, §38, pp. 161–62.

53 Nietzsche, ‘The Anti-Christ’, p. 43; Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals, Essay II*, §14, §21–22, and *Essay III*, §26, pp. 47–48, 54–56, 97–99.

54 Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, pp. 148, 150.

neglecting the fact that the Fall marred, but did not eradicate, the divine image (Genesis 1:28).⁵⁵ Furthermore, the Bible commands Christians to love themselves, as well as others: ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18, cf. Matthew 22:39). Neighbourly love cannot therefore automatically come at self-love’s cost – that would be too binary a view. It is also possible to love others as much as yourself and even prefer their needs to your own without neglecting yourself.⁵⁶ “Self-denial” may therefore be better understood as “self-limitation” and/or the condemnation of “self-preference”.⁵⁷ Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity does not seem to sufficiently appreciate these nuances.

Moreover, Christianity’s notion of the self is complex to say the least, as is evidenced by St. Paul’s own humble bafflement on the subject: ‘I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’ (Galatians 2:20, AKJV). St Paul states that humans are inherently divided selves and so the kind of straightforward condemnation of self Nietzsche is implying here is ruled out, ‘I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do’ (Romans 7:18-19). Furthermore, it is no surprise, given Nietzsche’s general neglect of creation, that he glosses over the fact that God saved the peak of his creation (humanity) until the final day, uniquely making

humans in His image (Genesis 1:28).⁵⁸ We read in the Scriptures, ‘your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 6:19), but Nietzsche would respond that this infantilises us, making us mere incubators for Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ In a similar vein, Nietzsche also seems to neglect sanctification: ‘clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God’ (Ephesians 4:24), and ‘all of us [...] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Corinthians 3:18). If the self is being sanctified, it makes it harder for us to believe Nietzsche’s suggestion that it is straightforwardly condemned.

Not only that though, but God freely chose to send His only Son to become incarnate, assuming human nature and living among us. In this respect, I agree with Emmanuel Mounier and Yves Ledure that Nietzsche’s underestimation of the Incarnation’s centrality enabled him to misunderstand Christianity’s affirmation of life.⁶⁰ As Ledure writes, ‘Christianity, a religion of incarnation, which has to be lived by flesh and blood people, in their human weakness [...] is necessarily bound up with life on earth.’⁶¹ That is why Christians pray, ‘Your kingdom come [...] on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10). It is therefore clear that Nietzsche’s understanding of self-denial leads him to see Christianity as a life-denying religion, but he fails to adequately factor the Incarnation into his argument.

55 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 388.

56 John Lippitt, ‘True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 66, 2009, 125–38 (p. 126); R. Groenhout, ‘Kenosis and Feminist Theory’, in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, ed. by C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 291–312.

57 Lippitt, ‘True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice’, p. 126; Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 95–111.

58 Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, p. 65.

59 Nietzsche, ‘The Anti-Christ’, p. 43; Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals, Essay II*, §14, §21-22, and *Essay III*, §26, pp. 47–48, 54–56, 97–99.

60 Emmanuel Mounier, *L’Affrontement Chrétien* [The Christian Confrontation], ed. by Guy Coq (Les Plans-sur-Bex (Suisse) Paris: Parole et silence, 2017); Ledure, ‘The Christian Response to Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity’, p. 49.

61 Ledure, ‘The Christian Response to Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity’, p. 49.

INAUGURATED ESCHATOLOGY AS AN ALTERNATIVE ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION

The main flaw of Nietzsche’s anti-eschatology is his presumption that there is a stark, binary separation between this world and the afterlife. As a more accurate alternative to his polemical caricature of Christian eschatology, I present ‘inaugurated eschatology’, as developed by George Eldon Ladd.⁶² Ladd was, like Nietzsche, concerned with what he saw as the Christian obsession with only the ‘futuristic aspects of the Kingdom of God’, which meant that the Kingdom ‘often ceased to have immediate relevance to contemporary Christian life, except as hope.’⁶³ As alluded to in section three above, Nietzsche’s misconception of Christian anthropology and eschatology is largely caused by his neglect of the Incarnation and creation (*creatio originalis* [the original act of creation], *creatio continua* [God’s ongoing act of sustaining the world], and *creatio nova* [the New Creation]).⁶⁴ He forgets that God is always fully present to and caring for his creation, and is incrementally recreating this world. Nietzsche also neglects Christ’s nearness to us in his Incarnation and God’s free, deliberate choice to create this world and wish for it to be redeemed with us, not destroyed.⁶⁵

62 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 70.

63 George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. xi.

64 See further Guy Burneko, ‘Creatio Continua’, *The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, 61.8 (2005), 622–28 (p. 622) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02604020500288117>>; Dennis Bielfeldt, ‘Creatio Ex Nihilo’ in *Luther’s Genesis Commentary and the Causal Question* (Institute of Lutheran Theology), p. 14 <https://www.academia.edu/12405696/Creatio_ex_Nihilo_in_Luthers_Genesis_Commentary_and_the_Causal_Question>; Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, p. 107.

65 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging with Contemporary Issues* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 32; Stephen D. Morrison, *Jürgen Moltmann in Plain English* (Columbus, Ohio: Beloved Publishing, 2018), p. 35.

Ladd’s approach rightly highlights Nietzsche’s misconceptions concerning eschatology which led to his polemic against Christianity. Ladd developed an ‘already and not yet’ eschatology, seeing the Kingdom as being both a ‘present reality’ (Matthew 12:28) and ‘future blessing’ (1 Corinthians 15:50).⁶⁶ Moreover, he argued that the Kingdom has two moments: the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises through Christ’s temporal ministry, and that fulfilment’s consummation/realisation at This Age’s end, heralding the Age to Come.⁶⁷ Ladd’s approach remains loyal to the contours of Scripture, making equal sense of both those passages which declare that God *is already* King of the whole world (2 Kings 19:15; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 46:8; Psalm 29:10; 99:1-4), and also those which prophesy a day when he *will become* King (Isaiah 24:23; 33:22; 52:7; Zephaniah 3:15; Zechariah 14:9ff).⁶⁸ Ladd states that although God *is* King *now*, the ramifications of His rule have *not yet* been realised globally.⁶⁹ It is true that we read that ‘the kingdom of God is among you’ (Luke 17:21) and Jesus’s declaration, “‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:21). However, we also read that ‘the end is not yet [... and] will come’ (Matthew 24:6, 14) and ‘He must reign till he has put all enemies under His feet’ (1 Corinthians 15:25).⁷⁰ I find Ladd’s analogy for this world’s predicament helpful, since ‘Satan has been bound; he has fallen from his place of power; but his final destruction awaits the end of the age.’⁷¹ The

66 George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), p. 18, 48.

67 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 108.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16, 118.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

pivotal battle in the war against Satan has been won but the final victory awaits in the Age to Come.⁷² Each victory over the manifestations of Satan's power is a foretaste of Christ's ultimate consummation of creation.⁷³ These nuances go largely unrecognized in Nietzsche's critique of Christian eschatology.

Inaugurated eschatology is, however, not only the most convincing approach Biblically though, it is also the most applicable to our post-Enlightenment era where the ultimate inability of the advances of reason, science, technology, medicine and the free market to promote humanity's relentless progression into peace, health and happiness has become clear.⁷⁴ This is because Ladd's approach affirms *both* the present and the future, refusing to dispense with the essential virtue of eschatological hope while also advancing a nuanced understanding of hope temporally. Stephen D. Morrison summarises this understanding well, 'In contrast with escapist hope and utopian hope, [Christianity] is hope in the transformation of this world by the coming of God.'⁷⁵ Morrison continues, 'True Christian hope is not hope for *another* world but the new creation of *this* world', agreeing with Tom Wright that 'The Bible is not about the rescue of humans *from* the world but about the rescue of humans *for* the world.'⁷⁶ Paula Gooder agrees with Morrison and Wright, arguing, 'the world we live in is not something temporary that we will cast off [...]

but is the place where we learn to live as we will live for eternity with the difference that the new heaven and earth will be united.'⁷⁷ Finally, Hans Urs von Balthasar powerfully put it this way,

The earthly man already lives in eternity [...] this fleeting, temporal existence [...] is not a pure here-and-now, followed by [...] an eternal beyond as a second existence. Rather, the two are one [...] time is concealed eternity, and eternity is revealed time.⁷⁸

[I]t is not about detaching oneself from the transitory things [...] to flee into some real or supposed eternity, but, conversely, about sowing the seed of eternity into the field of the world and letting the Kingdom of God spring up in this field.⁷⁹

It is important to remember that, while there is certainly significant overlap between this life and the one to come, there are also key differences, such as the absence of marriage, which should not be neglected in efforts to correct oversimplistic, dualist misunderstandings of Christian eschatology.⁸⁰

Building on these proper understandings of Christian hope, Moltmann rightly notes that the most common criticism of eschatological theologies of hope is they are too utopian, implying satisfaction's futuristic deferment and an evacuation theology.⁸¹ They seem to rob us of happiness here and now, devaluing this-worldly existence, implying we are merely on 'probation'

72 Ibid., p. 117.

73 Ibid.

74 John D. Simons, 'The Myth of Progress in Schiller and Dostoevsky', *Comparative Literature*, 24.4 (1972), 328–37 (p. 328) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1769460>>; Richard Bauckham and Trevor A. Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context, Trinity & Truth Series* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1999), pp. 26–31.

75 Morrison, *Jürgen Moltmann in Plain English*, p. 31.

76 Ibid., p. 35.

77 Paula Gooder, *Heaven* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 103.

78 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 140.

79 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Life Out of Death: Meditations on the Paschal Mystery*, trans. by Martina Stockl (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), p. 35.

80 See Mark 12:25.

81 Rob Bell, *Love Wins: At the Heart of Life's Big Questions* (New York City: Harper Collins, 2011), p. 46.

here.⁸² It is at this point that an emphasis on *inaugurated* eschatology avoids these earlier pitfalls. Indeed, responding to those arguing that the recreation emphasis within his eschatology merely changed the geography (from another world to a recreated earth in the future) and not the substance of Christianity's hostility to life here and now, Moltmann writes:

Expectation makes life good, for in expectation man can accept his whole present and find joy not only in its joy but also in its sorrow [...] living without hope is like no longer living [...] The hope that is staked on the Creator *ex nihilo* becomes the happiness of the present when it loyally embraces all things in love, [...] bringing to light how open all things are to the possibilities in which they can live.⁸³

Continuing this theme of Christian hope beyond mere blind optimism as a nuanced response to Nietzsche's critique, Moltmann argued that the theology of hope must be rooted in the Resurrection whose effects continue to incrementally ripple throughout all creation, even though the event has already happened within history, and will only be fully implemented by the time of the recreation. Pope Benedict XVI provides further insight that resonates with Moltmann's approach:

Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent [...] It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for [...] Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a "not yet". The fact

82 Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. by Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), p. 9; Irenaeus of Lyons, 'Against Heresies: Book IV', in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), pp. 25515–63 <https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against_heresies_iv/anf01.ix.vi.xxxix.html>.

83 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 22.

that this future exists changes the present.⁸⁴

Benedict did not, however, agree with Nietzsche that this means Christian hope must necessarily dissolve into temporal nihilism or that this made Christianity a solely other-worldly religion. Indeed, Rik Van Nieuwenhove likewise calls into question Nietzsche's view that a focus on eschatological hope makes this world now largely superfluous or corrupt:

Whenever we cry out, in the face of suffering, "This is not how it should be!" Our very revolt implicitly affirms the overall goodness of the world [...] Our revolt or indignation only makes sense in the light of an implicit affirmation of the thesis that goodness overrides evil in this world.⁸⁵

Given the potential of Nietzsche's critique, a refreshed perspective on Christian eschatology is warranted. It is therefore clear that inaugurated eschatology is a strong, grounded alternative ideal for combating Nietzsche's assertion that Christianity is solely an other-worldly religion.

LESSONS FOR GOSPEL PRESENTATION

Although I do not agree with Nietzsche's conclusion that Christian life is unattractive, his critique of eschatology and caricature of Christianity as a solely other-worldly religion has been a catalyst for further thought. His critique of eschatology is therefore a thought-provoking sounding board and 'necessary cathartic', even if it is inaccurate concerning

84 Pope Benedict XVI, 'Spe Salvi', 30 November 2007 <http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html> [accessed 3 April 2021].

85 Rik Van Nieuwenhove, 'Protest Theism, Aquinas and Suffering', in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, ed. by Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (London: T&T Clark, 2019), pp. 71–86 (pp. 73–74).

Christianity's essence.⁸⁶ Nietzsche's critique is a helpful antidote to Christian insularity and complacency regarding our Gospel presentation style. Nietzsche reminds us that salvation must be presented as a past, present and future reality, and that God purposely created this world and wishes to recreate it. A redressing of this balance would help the Gospel become more relevant to 'the average person' in their daily lives, rather than seeming to be a nihilistic, utopian hope in a remote and alternate world. This is an important lesson for us today, given the rise of religious apathy in both Christians and non-Christians.⁸⁷ To engage in evangelism and Christian witness most effectively, we must therefore adopt a more biblically informed eschatology and accurately represent the Gospel in the light of that fresh understanding.

A 2021 Gallup poll found that 25% of the US population thought religion was 'not very important' and only 27% thought it was fairly important.⁸⁸ More critically, a 2020 YouGov poll found that 44% of British Christians said that 'religion isn't important in their life.'⁸⁹ Appreciating this religious apathy and engaging with it in an informed way is especially important in our evangelism to young people who tend to be the most indifferent towards religion and are the most likely generation to not be religiously-affiliated.⁹⁰ These statistics

demonstrate the need to recontextualise the Gospel in a way which is immediately relevant to people's this-worldly lives.

This discussion of Nietzsche's opposition to Christianity based on 'taste' rather than rational probability provides an insight into why particularly young people today do not want Christianity to be true so do not then take the necessary leap of faith.⁹¹ I believe that Nietzsche's anti-theism effectively paved the way for the rise of the "New Atheism". His laying of the initial groundwork is why the "New Atheists" became so popular so quickly. This insight into the true roots of today's strand of anti-theism should encourage evangelists to emphasise why people *should want* God to exist, instead of simply trying to persuade others that he *does* exist.

86 Ledure, 'The Christian Response to Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity', p. 49.

87 Milan Dinic, 'How Religious Are British People?', YouGov, 2020 <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2020/12/29/how-religious-are-british-people>> [accessed 10 May 2022]; 'Religion', Gallup, 2007 <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 'America's Changing Religious Landscape', Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 2015 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>> [accessed 10 May 2022]; K. Robert Beshears, 'Apathism: Engaging the

Western Pantheon of Spiritual Indifference' (presented at the Evangelical Missionary Society, Dallas, Texas, 2016), p. 6 <<https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:11093/>> [accessed 10 May 2022]; Michael Green, *You Must Be Joking: Popular Excuses for Avoiding Jesus Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), pp. 13–24, 76–87; Paul Weston, *Why We Can't Believe* (Leicester: Frameworks, 1991), pp. 23–37.

91 Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, §132, p. 146; Thomas Nagel, 'Evolutionary Naturalism and the Fear of Religion', in *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 127–43 (pp. 130–36); Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Melbourne: Rough Draft Publishing, 2014), p. 40.

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