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## NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

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### Abstract

The aim of the present research paper is to analyze Nietzsche's critique of religion. Nietzsche's critique of religion is based on historical analysis and genealogical criticism. He criticizes religion in general and Christianity in particular. In his critique of religion, Nietzsche rejects supernaturalism, denounces asceticism and puts a question mark on scientific supernaturalism. He disqualifies nihilism due to its asceticism. He favors Buddhism due to its denunciation of asceticism. He criticizes Christianity and asserts that it is based on slave-morality. Christian morality is based on resentment and pity. He presents his own alternative to religion i.e. Dionysian affirmation.

### **Keywords:**

Genealogical Criticism, Anthropomorphism, Supernaturalism, Asceticism, Buddhism, Slave-morality, Resentment, Dionysian Affirmation

## **Introduction**

Friedrich Nietzsche's criticism on religion is one of the most influential criticism since the 19th century. Nietzsche attempts to explain why people become religious beings. Nietzsche employs the method of "historical and genealogical criticism" for criticizing religion, particularly "Judeo-Christian tradition".<sup>1</sup> He criticizes Christianity because it promotes "slave-morality". He puts a question mark on Christian morality and Christian worldview. Christian morality is completely against "master-morality". "Slave-morality" is the morality of the weak people and they try to control the masters after teaching their slave-values like humility, mercy, altruism and sacrifice. According to Schopenhauer, "metaphysical need" is the origin of religion. Nietzsche shows disagreement with Schopenhauer. He asserts that people became habitual of "the other world". After the death of God, they felt "meaninglessness and deprivation". We have created God and we have killed him! We are the creators and we are the killers! Due to this feeling of "emptiness and deprivation" came the idea of the metaphysical world which was only a misinterpretation of natural events. Human beings anthropomorphize and personify everything. They anthropomorphize their deities. They had moral and political relations with gods and goddesses. They magically explain natural happenings and human situations. They give a religious, moral explanation of their conditions. Nietzsche rejects both tendencies. Supernaturalism bifurcates reality into two realms: the supernatural world and the natural world. Asceticism creates hatred for the natural world and the body.<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche also criticizes science and he argues that science also has its own ideal world.

The statement, "God is dead" merely means that Christian Catholic God is dead. Nietzsche wants from nihilists to eradicate asceticism from nihilism. He criticizes supernaturalism, asceticism, Christianity, scientific supernaturalism, nihilism, and Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

## **Nietzsche's Religious Background**

Nietzsche was the son of "Lutheran Minister" he was also a royal tutor. His grandfather was a Lutheran Minister too. The brother of his grandfather was the professor of theology in Königsberg.<sup>4</sup> His

both grandfathers were Lutheran Ministers. He was pride of his family. His mother was also a practical Christian. His aunt Roselie was alsoa religious lady. He himself was too religious in his childhood. His family expected to make him a Lutheran Minister. He was famous for his piety and good character in his childhood. His age fellows used to call him “the little pastor”. And one boy even described him “ a Jesus in the temple”. He used to read Bible in seclusion. In Bonn University, he studied the classics and theology. But after some time, he left theology. With the passage of time, he lost his faith in Christianity and generally in religion. The method of historical criticism was taught to him at Schulpforta school. It was a protestant school. Nietzsche used the same method of criticism against Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, he went not only against Judaism but the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. He was exceptionally acquainted with Judeo-Christian tradition. He offered prayers and did other religious services. He knew about Christian prayers, sermons, services, scriptures, and cult very well. Usually, he used biblical language and rhetoric in his writings. He achieved knowledge of Judeo-Christian tradition at Schulpforta School, Bonn University and Leipzig University.<sup>6</sup>

### **Schopenhauer on Religion**

Schopenhauer recognized the value of all religions in all epochs for all nations. According to Schopenhauer, there is a metaphysical need which religion and philosophy try to satisfy but their endeavors are different in nature. Philosophy uses reason in its endeavor religion depends on authority. He admires religion because it realizes the falsehood of everyday experience and scientific experience. He asserts that mostly people philosophize. So religion cannot be abandoned. But some people leave religions and move towards philosophizing. Religious people have the following fundamental doctrines:

- Literalism of their beliefs or doctrines, these doctrines can be true allegories.
- The absolute truth of their doctrines: All other are false including philosophical concepts.

- Reliance on the false concepts of the world because they rely on authority rather than reason.<sup>72</sup>

### **Nietzsche's Critique of Religion**

Nietzsche used the method of historical analysis and criticism for analyzing religious creeds and giving his own views about them. People wanted to explain human condition in the universe. So, they formulated myths, religions and different sciences.<sup>8</sup>

As Aristotle says “All men by nature desire to know”.<sup>9</sup> Seeking explanation of a phenomenon is an intriguing human desire. In our everydaylife, we experience a lot of things and try to explain them. But our usual explanations are full of errors or they are just filtered prejudices.

People used the theories of luck or unluck for explaining human situation. But it does not appeal to emotions because they are abstract, mysterious, accidental and impersonal in their nature.

Human beings also explain the universe with natural-laws explanation. It is asserted that the universe is governed by natural laws and by the principle of causality. Under the scepter of this scientific theory, our human actions also become determined. The primitive people had no idea of natural law and causality. Therefore, there is no possibility of this theory in the primitive society.<sup>10</sup>

The primitive people explain human situation, lives and natural happenings with magical explanations. Natural forces, gods, goddesses and deities all were personified and anthropomorphized.<sup>11</sup>

All the beauty, sublimity and power existing in actual and imaginary things are actually in the personalities of the men. Gods and goddesses are personified figures. Whatever man admires and praises in gods is actually in him and he tries obstinately to conceal this fact from him.

### **Nietzsche on Supernaturalism, Nihilism and Asceticism**

The world was bifurcated into two realms i.e. material world and spiritual or dream-world. The dream world is the spiritual world. It is the death world. Dying is like sleeping or death. The primitive men

were like our parents. They gave rewards to the good men and punished to the wrongdoers. But they could be bribed and flattered.

The bifurcation of material and the spiritual world occurred for the explanation of fortune and misfortune, pain and pleasure, success and failure. The spiritual world was full of spirits. They were persons in nature. As man moved forward in the hour-glass, the spirits became gods (polytheism) and gods became one God (monotheism) That was man's journey from polytheism to monotheism. It all happened in the ancient world.

In the ancient age, the world of God was based upon emotions. They did not have law. But with the development of society, men began to have legal codes and laws. Gods also started to give the divine code due to social, human and legal codes. The divine code was the projection of human legal code. They ascribed laws to gods due to their mentally engraved habit of personification and anthropomorphism. Gods are projected personalities. They could be bribed or their favors could be gained by making a temple or giving a sacrifice.

The self-affirmation is more possible in polytheism than in monotheism. The moral supernaturalism of Greco Roman tradition was replaced by the inflexible commandments of Judean Christian God. According to Christian moral code, human actions will be judged in the hereafter spiritual world.

The supernatural world is full of positive values and the natural world is the full of negative values. The earth is between the heaven and the hell. It is valueless. Asceticism spread self-loathsome, self hatred and world hatred attitude in the people.<sup>12</sup>

The primitive thinking was based upon opposites and binaries. For example, Pythagoreans gave a list often opposites.

The exclusive bifurcation of the world appeared between the natural and the supernatural world. Since the natural world is full of negative values, nothing positive can come out of it.<sup>13</sup> But the earth is between heaven and the hell. It is neither positive nor negative. It is valueless.

Nietzsche despises religious supernaturalism and asceticism. Religious supernaturalism preaches otherworldliness which is anti-natural. Asceticism divested all values from the natural world and makes it negative and worthless. According to Nietzsche, supernaturalism and asceticism are amalgamated in Christianity. Christianity also has some positive characteristics. But it is negative on the whole. It does not give the solution of people's sufferings or pains. What it does it only gives them a "narcotic illusion of heaven". As Marx considers religion opium of the people.

Christianity like ascetic supernaturalism condemns this world and preaches that this world is devoid of positive values. The spiritual world is the real world. It is the world of the positive values. It is a world of compensation. If someone does injustice to you, you should not worry because you will have justice in the world here-after. The unsuccessful in this world will be rewarded in the real world. If you do not get revenge in this world, you will get revenge in the spirit world.

Nietzsche mentions Tutullian's sadistic position and concludes that Christianity is the religion of hatred, not of love. Christians will see Romans being punished in hell who persecute them in this world.<sup>14</sup> According to Christianity, everything which creates love for this world is evil against sexuality.

Nietzsche does not only criticize religious ascetic supernaturalism, he also accuses philosophers of infusing ascetic supernaturalism to their philosophical doctrines. It can be called philosophical ascetic supernaturalism. It begins with Parmenides when he asserts that there are two worlds: world of permanence and the world of change. The world of permanence is the world of reality the world of change is an illusion.<sup>15</sup> We also find philosophical ascetic supernaturalism in Socrates.<sup>16</sup> He also corrupts Plato. Philosophical ascetic supernaturalism can be seen in all the ancient thinkers Heraclitus is only an exception. Plotinus is an ascetic philosopher. He says "life in a body is itself an evil."<sup>17</sup> The soul is evil by being interfused with the body."<sup>18</sup> We ought to take the same attitude towards our earthly bodies that the gardener takes to the maggots in the rotten part of a plant;<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche believes such asceticism is sickness. Far from being

spiritually good, it is spiritually bad. Asceticism is an illness; it is the disease of the human spirit.

Scientists also create their spirit world in which they place theoretical entities like atoms, gravity and forces. These are biologically useful fictions; they do not exist. The specifically qualitative aspect, for example of every chemical process appears to be a 'miracle', as does every locomotion; no one has 'explained' the push. And how could we explain! We are operating only with things that do not exist-with lines, surfaces, bodies, atoms, divisible times, divisible spaces. How is explanation to be all when we first turn everything into a picture-our picture! it is enough to view science as an attempt to humanize things as faithfully as possible; we learn to describe ourselves more and more precisely as we describe things and their succession, cause and effect; there is probably never such a duality; in truth a continuum faces us, from which isolate a few pieces, just as we always perceive a movement only as isolated points, i.e. do not really see, but infer."<sup>20</sup>

### **Death of God**

Nietzsche announces the Death of God in his different books. In *Gay Science*, he narrates the story of the madman world.

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?<sup>21</sup>

This expression was previously used by Ralph Waldo Emerson in the divinity school address. He says, "Men have come to speak of the revelation as something long ago given and odne, as if God were dead".<sup>22</sup>

When Nietzsche says, "God is dead", he simply means Christian conception of God is not true. He rejects Christian view of God and theism.<sup>23</sup>

Theism says that god is omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent, the truthful, the intelligent, absolute and eternal. Nietzsche denies that there is someone like it. The distinction between theism and atheism is of Christianity. Christians believed either there is a Christian god or there is no god. But this is not true.

By simply saying that Nietzsche is an atheist is to trivialize Nietzsche's position. It is a simple way to stereotype his philosophy. Eric Steinhart describes Nietzsche's position as "transtheism". "Trans" means beyond or far. Transtheism is the denial of the opposition of theism and atheism.<sup>24</sup>

The division between the natural and the supernatural world is also done in nihilism. Since supernatural world is dead, so its values are also dead. No one hates heaven because there is no heaven but one still hates the earth.

Nietzsche says that Christianity is like alcohol or like a narcotic drug. It is like heroin.

The nihilists have lost their faith in comforts and hopes. There is still a need of savior, a redeemer for the nihilist they are sick but there are no drugs. They still need a cure salvation. Therefore, they try to find their redemption in other fields like arts (romanticism) in scientific progress and in revolution.

What Nietzsche wants from the nihilists? He wants them to eradicate asceticism. They should not deny the earth, the life and the body.

Nietzsche has a positive attitude towards Buddhism. It is a pessimistic as well as nihilistic religion. But it has got rid of asceticism.

Nietzsche is not against the existence of divine. He is against the Christian conception of God particularly proposed by St. Paul. The Christian conception of God is a corrupt conception of God.

Nietzsche replaces the Christian theory of God with the Dionysian theory of divinity. There is not any god or spirit in this theory. Dionysus does not have any existence. It is "Yes to life". It is a way of life.



### **Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity**

Nietzsche criticizes Christianity by using the "genetic method". He was the son of a Christian religious family. In his childhood, he himself was too religious. His friends used to tease him by calling him by "little minister". He lost his faith in God particularly in Christianity on his teen age. To him, religion is only a "suprahistorical power". All religions including Christianity will die out their one day. Religion is the false expression of morality. Christianity is the fictitious expression of the morality of resentment. He also thinks that different modern ideas like socialism, liberalism, democracy, are the result of some Christian concepts. He is not against Christ but against the institutional Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

Nietzsche's method of historical criticism is a weapon against Christianity and all religions. Both historical method and genealogical criticism prove the invalidity of the religious beliefs and their assumptions. Nietzsche learnt this method at Schulpforta. In 1862, he wrote an essay, "Fate and History". In this essay, he developed the argument against Christianity. By using the method of historical criticism, he gave up the credibility of "the authority of the holy scripture", and its "inspiration".

Historical criticism remained his preferred method for criticizing religions. He desired to replace "metaphysical philosophy" with historical philosophy." Metaphysics is only a substitute of religion. And he asserts that Schopenhauer is "the last metaphysical philosopher."

He distinguished between "unhistorical phenomena" and "suprahistorical phenomena." He also criticizes metaphysical with the tool of historical criticism and analysis. With the passing of time, particularly Christianity and metaphysics began to get too intolerable for him. For Nietzsche "historical refutation" is "the final refutation".<sup>26</sup>

Nietzsche did not stop here. He developed genealogical criticism for condemning and criticizing Christianity and eradicating it forever and he named himself "antichrist". Nietzsche criticized Christianity due to its inertia. Christianity did not give new ideas. It holds us to its old design. He asserts that the ideas which are usually considered new

and secular, are not new. They are based upon the old ideas. What changes is only the surface not the substance. There are philosophical systems of traditional philosophy. The democracy, liberalism and socialism are also the results of Christian doctrines.

In sections 108, 125 and 343 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes about “the Death of God”. In section 125 of *The Gay Science*, stated the story of the madman. He was searching God in broad daylight with a lantern in his hand. He went into a marketplace where many atheists were standing there. They made fun of him. The madman cried, “where is God?” I’ll tell you! We have killed him \_\_you and me! We have all his murders... God, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have still killed him!” after saying such things, he became silent, he looked at his listeners. They were too silent the madman threw his lantern and that broke into pieces. And he went away by saying “I come too early... my time is not yet”. It is said that the madman visited different churches on that day “singing his requiem aeternam deo” “(grant God eternal rest).”<sup>27</sup> What Nietzsche wanted to realize people is “the meaning and the consequences of “the death of God”. Nietzsche desired to realize his contemporaries “*the revaluation of all values.*” Nietzsche accused St. Paul for the debased state of Christianity. Christian morality is the morality of the weak or slaves. It was Nietzsche’s conscious attempt to go against system-building philosophy. He did not desire to form a coherent philosophical system. He endeavored to do the genealogical analysis of Christianity. *Ressentiment* played a fundamental role in Christian morality.<sup>28</sup>

Ressentiment is a “psychological disposition”. Weakness and the greed for revenge become motivation for it. The character of this psychological disposition is reactive. Christian morality is founded upon resentment. Therefore, Nietzsche denounced Christian morality because it is based on slave mores. The strong people must despise the slave morality and the slaves. Is Nietzsche application of genealogical method on Christianity a successful one? It is yet to be determined. But one thing is confirmed, his genealogical method is scholarly and thought provoking.

## Responses to Human Suffering

According to Nietzsche, the ultimate problem of philosophy is human suffering, pain and pleasure, fortune and misfortune. Nietzsche very clearly knows that time has no mercy. Our beloved ones, friends and families will pass away one day in the mists of time. There are three famous answers to the human suffering i.e. Ascetic Supernaturalism, Detachment (Buddhism and Epicureanism) and Stoicism.<sup>29</sup>

The first response to human suffering is **ascetic supernaturalism**, it denies the natural world. The natural world is full of negative values. It affirms the supernatural world. It is the real world. It is a compensation world. Human sufferings, pains and misfortunes are compensated in the spirit world.

The second proposed solution to human suffering is **detachment**. This is the attitude of Buddhism and Epicureanism towards human suffering. The people of detachment do not involve themselves in the affairs of life and the world. Nietzsche does not like their attitude too because they deny the natural world. But in Nietzsche's opinion, this response is better than the ascetic one.

The third response to human suffering is **Stoicism**. It teaches tranquility and equanimity. In the state of equanimity, a person does not pass his judgment on feelings and emotions. According to Nietzsche, stoicism is even better than ascetic supernaturalism, Buddhism and Epicureanism.<sup>30</sup>

Nietzsche's own attitude towards human suffering is the attitude of **affirmation of life**. He says that affirm everything in life, say *yes to life*. Existence is better than non-existence. He is against Schopenhauer who is in favor of non-existence. Nietzsche condemns the denial of natural world. He rather affirms the natural world, our lives, our bodies and this earth. In this *Dionysian naturalism* we should have love of the fate, ***Amor fati***. We should affirm our destinies. Dionysian naturalism is neither the feeling nor the reaction.<sup>31</sup>

Suffering is passive but affirmation is active. The opposite of affirmation is condemnation. We should not condemn this world and demand compensation.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Nietzsche is a critic of religion par excellence. He applies the method of historical and genealogical criticism on religion and particularly on Judeo-Christian tradition. He critically analyzes religion and its roots.

According to Nietzsche, the religious people have anthropomorphized and personified religion. They try to explain human condition in this world with religious and moral interpretation. All human actions and deeds are explained spiritually and morally. They likewise attempt to explain human pain, pleasure, suffering success, failure, etc. with the mysterious explanation of luck and unluck. But emotionally it is unappealing. People have political, moral and spiritual relation to the gods. Everything is seen in binaries. Nietzsche is strongly against religious supernaturalism and asceticism. Religious spiritualism affirms the existence of spirit-world. It is anti-natural. Similarly, asceticism snatches all the positive values of this natural world and makes it negative. Nietzsche denounces Christianity because it is the amalgamation of religious supernaturalism and asceticism. Christian morality is the result of weakness and resentment. Religious supernaturalism and asceticism are also found in philosophical systems like that of Plato. Nietzsche strongly criticizes philosophical ascetic supernaturalism and system building philosophy. He thinks science also has its own spiritual-world where it places its own entities like “lines, surfaces, bodies, atoms, divisible spaces.” Nietzsche’s announcement “God is dead”, perhaps the most notorious statement in philosophy. By writing this expression, Nietzsche simply means that Christian catholic God is dead. He means that Christian conception of God is a corrupt one. He has a positive attitude towards Buddhism because it has got rid of asceticism. It is pessimistic and nihilistic. He condemns nihilism due to its asceticism. What Nietzsche desires from nihilism is to get rid of asceticism.

There are different responses to human sufferings; they are ascetic supernaturalism, detachment (Buddhism and Europeanism) and stoicism. Nietzsche’s response to human suffering is Dionysian affirmation. This is the affirmation of this life and this world.

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