Searching for Answers: Examining Historical Christianity in Nineteenth Century Europe Through Kierkegaard & Nietzsche

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Introduction

The Europe of the 1800s saw remarkable change. Previously unthinkable ideas and 'isms' made their way to the forefront of exploration in European society, forcing Christianity to a crossroads it had never before experienced. Still wielding a considerable amount of power, the Evangelical/Lutheran tradition was unsurprisingly resistant to any sort of change. Up to this point, the ironclad alliance of 'throne and altar' had forged a strong symbiotic relationship: politics had begun to weave itself into the very fabric of religion, blurring the lines between the two. However, the 'common man' was not necessarily interested in continuing this status quo.

Michael Burleigh writes in his book *Earthly Powers*, that the "modern era in which the divine basis of political power was rejected, and Church and State gradually separated, but also witnessed the sacralization of such collectives as race, state, and nation."[1] In other words, Christendom had been antiquated by sovereign nations that questioned divine rights, while mankind searched for meaning in the world through the sciences. Similar to a church, nineteenth-century movements like the French Revolution aroused mass sentimentality, while defining life's ultimate purposes and governing what could be considered moral and virtuous.

Radical new ideas were gradually throwing the power structure into turmoil. In these complex and consequential times, two of the most prominent

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[1] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War*. New York City: Harper Collins, 2005. Pg 6

and provocative thinkers at the forefront were Søren Kierkegaard and Freidrich Nietzsche. Both writers were raised in the Lutheran tradition. Growing up, Søren was immensely influenced by his father's strict piety. His religious views were a complex mixture of orthodox Lutheranism, Moravian piety, and an enduring spiritual melancholy. It was a dark and grim Christianity that stressed punishment, suffering and the inevitability of sin. His father's rigid Lutheranism would influence Søren the rest of his life. Similarly, Nietzsche was born a son of a Lutheran pastor and, despite his father's eventual passing when Friedrich was only four, adhered to his father's Lutheranism wholeheartedly, and even had every intention of becoming a pastor himself one day. When Nietzsche's grandmother grew up in Naumburg, its religious circle was governed by the plain Lutheran ideals of duty, modesty, restraint, and simplicity. However, when Friedrich and the rest of his family moved back to Naumburg in the 1850s, the Awakening movement had its own impact, valuing fervency and sublime revelation over rational beliefs. People were declaring themselves born again. This new and odd behavior did not suit Nietzsche's family. They would find their friends amongst the wives of high court functionaries and the wives of Justices of the High Court, a wealthy section of society untroubled by pesky new ideas.

For most people, the concept of religion is both intellectual and emotive; it is both thought and felt by those with and without formal education. Both authors were intellectuals and had difficulty understanding and/or respecting certain emotional bonds of religion. Nevertheless, both of them had burning questions

challenging the Evangelical/Lutheran tradition and its place in the world. While these two writers had much in common, both personally and professionally, they arrived at drastically different conclusions. Søren Kierkegaard saw what was happening and it troubled him deeply. Instead of listening to authority figures on something as important as religion and faith, he was determined to find life's pressing questions through his own spiritual journey. He wrote in his journal in 1835, "What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know...the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die."[2] While Kierkegaard was aiming to "reintroduce Christianity to Christendom," Freidrich Nietzsche wanted to demolish religious pillars of society in favor of an entirely new direction. The polemic writer predicted in his autobiographical book, *Ecce Homo*, that "One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous — a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite."[3]

How they arrived at such drastic modes of thought is worth exploring. It is as if both writers knew they were stuck in between the end of one era and the start of another. An analysis of the secularization of Europe is needed to gain a proper context of the world they saw so lacking. Without exposure to themes like

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[2] Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Soul of Kierkegaard:Selections from His Journals." pg 44
[3] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. Penguin Classics, 1969. Pg 96

how Christianity became the prevalent creed, the relations between Church and State, and the causes of secularity, we cannot do the very thing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche wanted us to do. Searching for life's answers without the help of authority, government, or religious dogma was one vital component both men encouraged in their readers.

There is no concrete "Kierkegaardian" or "Nietzschean" path to live; the beauty of their work is they wanted the reader to search for themselves. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have become part of Western culture whether we realize it or not. Unfortunately, only academics tend to know this, but it is worth trying to address that shortcoming.

Given the fusion of religion and politics in the nineteenth century across Europe paired with Enlightenment thought, the "sources of authority" shifted from the Bible to "reason." Previous historians and biographers typically label Kierkegaard as a reformer of Christianity. Joakim Garff offers an exhaustive account of his life and works. Stephen Backhouse looks to make him more readable to nonspecialists. Carlisle examines his life through his mantra, 'life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.' On the other hand, scholars cite Nietzschean texts on religion as almost always revolutionary in nature. Sue Prideuex and Robert Solomon focused their works on the fact that Nietszche is and was largely misunderstood, while others, such as Brian Leiter focus almost exclusively on his views on morality. All offer valuable information, but the crux of their works tend to overlook something. Given the unique process

of secularization in the nineteenth century, both writers offer something more than that. The following chapters will assert that both remind readers that despite their differences, reveal that religion can develop in different ways, and more importantly, its inevitable progress or decline in the post-Enlightenment world depends almost solely on the individual. They both uniquely force us to reconsider the extent religion impacts not only human life but also social and cultural conditions as Chapter One will describe. Both are uniquely situated to respond to the secularization of Europe and the fusion of politics and religion. Historically speaking, it is important to examine what influenced these men, to delineate their exact ideas, and to make their ideas more accessible to all readers. In doing so, we can formulate a better understanding of the world around us, as well as continue to question pillars of society previously considered unshakeable.

Chapter One: Secularization of Europe in the Nineteenth Century

GK Chesterton once said, “When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing - they believe in anything." One can argue that simple, yet keen thought can sum up the state of Christianity in nineteenth century Western Europe. The French Revolution served as the catalyst of the movement away from the dogmatic, stale influence of the Church and the dramatic turn towards what Michael Burleigh calls “political religion.” This term could be defined as an anti-religious surrogate for religion; not merely political ideals hiding behind the

separation of church and state. The secularization of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century simply did not happen overnight. It was the gradual disintegration of a bedrock of European society since the time of the Roman Empire.

The meteoric rise of civil religions, political religions, nationalism, political ideologies such as communism, and the rise of scientific inquiry contributed to the secularization of Europe and the rebranding of religion. Philosophical giants such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche offered vastly different responses to the secularization of Europe in addition to how society should move forward with the changing role of Christianity. While both thinkers took vastly different routes in their work arriving at very different solutions, in short, they attempted to answer the persistent question: “how should a human being live?” In order to fully comprehend their ideas on religion in European society, it is critical to thoroughly exam how the context of the nineteenth century world around them led to their groundbreaking existential philosophies. Their thoughts helped influence not only nineteenth century Europe, but later generations of thinkers as well.

It’s important to examine the spark that set ablaze the movement of political religion throughout Europe, which Michael Burleigh would argue is the French Revolution. For about 600 years, France was known as the “eldest daughter of the Church” and the French were supposedly God’s chosen people. The French monarchy and the Church establishment were an inseparable duo

with ultimate power until the revolution. The French clergy was omnipresent in French society and, more importantly, particularly for later thinkers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, set the tone in terms of what was moral and what was not. The clergy was, however, stuck in between a rock and a hard place. Clergymen had to "walk a fine line between curbing practices that made the church look ridiculous to smart opinion in an age so concerned with reconciling reason and revelation, and alienating their flocks by outlawing customs which made abstract belief meaningful and tangible to them."[4] Religious debates were becoming more political, and this was not the only problem facing the Church establishment.

The work of Enlightenment thinkers had gained momentum. Lutheran orthodoxy had begun to unravel under the combined impact of natural sciences, which theology experienced internally with the rise of biblical criticism. Immanuel Kant once described the Enlightenment as man's coming of age, or in other words, a freeing of the mind from "external controls." It meant a newfound belief in man's natural goodness (a turn away from the concept of Original Sin), as well as a newfound faith in reason and use of empirical evidence to questions worthy of research. The enemies of the Enlightenment were religious fanatics, moral hypocrites, and political tyrants. It was inevitable that if the intellectuals of the day would try to "rewrite" Christianity to better fit the needs of the era, it would lead to conflict with those who held things like miracles or literal interpretations of the Bible as infallible. This divide is articulated well by Gibbon when he said: "the

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[4] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War*. New York City: Harper Collins, 2005. Pg 25

various modes of worship were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and the magistrate as equally useful."[5] In the age of Enlightenment and in the years beyond, self-fulfillment became a form of atonement, and love of humanity had eclipsed the traditional "love of God." These ideals were rampant in nineteenth-century Europe and a far cry from what had been practiced. Self-fulfillment is a consistent theme in both Kierkegaard's as well as Nietzsche's works.

In the nineteenth century a new form of Luthern theology had emerged from these upheavals under the name of liberalism. Hinlicky wrote, "liberal theology continued impulses from both biblical criticism and Pietism, but developed them in terms of a scheme of progressive revelation, culminating in the supreme idea of God as love as manifest in the perfect God-consciousness of the human Jesus."[6] Since Immanuel Kant had ruled out any claim to "know God," liberal theology would instead look into "historical knowledge of human representations of God which it then organized in an evolutionary scheme of progressive historical development."[7] As a result, a minority theological reaction against liberalism could be described as 'neo-confessionalism' which unsuccessfully "tried to disrupt the liberal scheme of an imminent and progressive evolution of divine representations in human history by asserting the

[5] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers,* 40
[6] Hinlicky, Paul. *Lutheran Theology: A Critical Introduction*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020. Pg 6
[7] Hinlicky, Paul. *Lutheran Theology: A Critical Introduction*. Pg 6

'paradox' of a revelation in time and space, as may be see above all in the lonely witness in the 1840s of the Dane Søren Kierkegaard."[8]

Not to be overlooked is the relationship between Danish society as a whole and "State Christianity." For most people at the time, becoming a Christian was not a matter of faith but more so a matter of being born to Christian parents, observing the religious rituals, and getting a feeling of solidarity from church attendance. This was especially true of the Protestant Lutheran churchgoers in Denmark, who were also required to be members of the State Church. Kierkegaard would later describe it vividly saying "thus it was established by the State as a kind of eternal principle that every child is naturally born a Christian. The State delivers generation after generation, as an assortment of Christians, each bearing the manufacturer's trademark of the State, with perfect accuracy, one Christian exactly like all the others with the greatest possible uniformity of a factory product."[9] It isn't outlandish to suggest this is how Nietzsche viewed Lutheranism/Evangelicalism in German society in his time.

Luther's "sola scriptura, sola fides" was prevalent in nineteenth century Germany and Denmark. Sola scriptura simply means that all truth necessary for our spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in scripture. For an author like Kierkegaard, this would be met with scrutiny due to higher criticism. To be sure, Søren admired the simple truths and lessons from the gospels all his life,

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[8] Ibid. pg 6

[9] Solomon, Robert. *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-century Backgrounds*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

but seldom if ever quoted the Bible to support his arguments. For Luther, truth is inseparable from his doctrine of the Word of God.[10] Luther believed faith doesn't necessarily require information, knowledge, or certainty, but a free surrender to God's goodness. Luther placed so much emphasis on faith, a recurring and persistent theme for both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, that it was to be "the article on which the church stands or falls." The other half of that phrase, Sola Fides, or "justification on faith alone," would hold much more appeal to the Danish author. In fact, it could be argued that this exaggerated claim for the Bible as a treasure trove of revealed truths would eventually lead to intensified criticisms of the Bible in an attempt to show it couldn't bear the epistemological burden.

Political movements, such as the French Revolution, always seem to adopt "intellectual parents" to emulate. Two of the big thinkers that the French intellectuals/revolutionaries were interested in were Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Chartier cites a telling question and answer sequence: "who are the men who by their writings prepared the revolution? Voltaire, J.J. Rousseau, etc.What do you call these great men? Philosophers. What does that word mean? A sage, or friend to humanity."[11] By keeping separate citizens' right to their own opinions on what happens when they die from his or her duties as a citizen of French society, Rousseau wanted to transcend the duality of spiritual and secular powers inherent to the Christian faith. Instead of the strict set of laws

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[10] Pelikan, Jaroslav. *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. Pg 107

[11] The First Elements of Republican Education, cited by Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC 1991) pg 89

and commandments of the religious establishment dominating every mode of thought and action, political and religious thought would be just as important and also serve as two separate strands of thought. The attempt to convert the revolution itself into a form of religion will leave disastrous consequences that will leave the Church hostile to any form of change or calls for equality, nation, or people. People were beginning to think for themselves instead of the First Estate dictating what is truth for them. Given existentialist thought patterns on finding truth and meaning in a subjective manner, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche surely would've supported searching for truth instead of it coming from government or organized religion.

In a remarkable blow to the Church authority, the Declaration of the Rights of Man had some very telling articles included. European societies were trying to figure out how to function to a degree without the aid of religion. Article 18 states that "no one can be disturbed for his opinions, even religious ones, provided that their expression does not infringe the public order declared by law." With this article in place, at least in theory, people could actually go about their lives without subscribing to the canon law of the Church. People were now seen as empty vessels, which could increasingly be filled with the content (or beliefs) of their choice.

One key to decrease the power and influence of the Church establishment was to depict it as a crumbling remnant of the ancien regime. If the First Estate could be lumped in with the 'out with the old in with the new' mantra of

revolutionaries it would obviously benefit their cause. One deputy warned the clergy that "the church is part of the state. The state is not part of the church."[12] This was a momentous shift from the status quo. Popular sovereignty would finally start to override the dogmas and expectations of the Church. Frenchmen who attended the churches with non-juring clergy were called aristocrats and those who attended reform-minded churches were deemed patriots.[13] Eventually, all clergy were compelled to take the oath "I swear to be faithful to the Nation, to maintain with all my power liberty, equality, the security of persons and property, and to die if necessary for the execution of the laws."[14] Instead of being martyrs for their Christianity people were willing to die for other ideals. This also foreshadowed the coming of nationalism in Europe.

The necessity of a religion to help fan the flames of revolution, regardless of whether or not it was Christianity as the status quo or a politicized version of it, seemed obvious. Burleigh highlights this brilliantly when he wrote: "the attempted fusion of Church and Revolution through the Constitutional Church had been a divisive failure. So why not elevate the Revolution itself into the religion?"[15] It had all the components needed to pass as a religion in nineteenth-century Europe; whether it was its own list of vices and virtues, liturgies, creeds, and even the notion of regenerating (or resurrecting) mankind itself. It didn't matter this "new religion" was devoid of divine intervention or

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[12] Ibid., 59
[13] Ibid., 63
[14] Ibid., 64
[15] Ibid., 81

thoughts on the afterlife. The revolution itself was mired with religious terminology turned political, such as martyr, missionary, catechism, gospel, sacrament, zealot, and credo. Gabriel Riqueti Mirabeau wrote that the "Declaration of the Rights of Man has become a political gospel and the French Constitution a religion for which people are prepared to die."[16] Many of the symbols of the revolution, such as the Liberty Tree, the Triangle cum Trinity, or the Mountain from which the new republican virtues were supposed to radiate were borrowed from traditional Christianity. The concept of Original Sin had been defiantly rejected when the Jacobins had subscribed to the pliancy of humanity. This clearly is indicative of future philosophers and their existentialist ideologies. Things that had been confined to Christianity and held sacred had been redefined to fit this brave new world. Starting in 1789, the notion of baptism was being taught as the resurrection of the French and her people. Communion was now preached as the acceptance of the human connection and the rejection of idols or monarchs. Lastly, penitence was synonymous with traitors to the "fatherland." It becomes much easier to sway masses of people if it can be instilled in them that their cause is just and noble.

Robespierre was central in adding the moral component to both the revolution as well as this newfound "political religion." Some, such as Wieland, welcomed the revolution as an opportunity to free people from despotic abuses from the Church, monarchies, or aristocrats and put into place the principles of

[16] Ibid., 81

the Enlightenment. This new political religion was also being reinforced by the French generals leading revolutionary armies. Wieland wrote at the time: "Whoever does not recognize their notions of freedom and equality as the sole truth, is an enemy of the human race, or a despicable slave, who, bowed down by the narrow chested prejudices of the old political idolatry, bends his knee before self made idols."[17] Alexis de Tocqueville adds to the narrative when he wrote, "...it itself became a new religion, an incomplete religion, it is true, without God, without ritual, and without life after death, but one which nevertheless, like Islam, flooded the Earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs."[18] This 'us versus them' narrative is typical with revolutions. It was clear at this point that religious reform, be it Catholic or Protestant, was going to have to come from external forces.

On a larger scale, the last years of the eighteenth century saw France ruled by a five man directory. They claimed tolerance of the Catholic Church, provided it kept its nose out of politics and functioned under certain limitations. The Church and State were formally separated on February 21st, 1795. Vehement anticlerics were brought into power in 1797 and insisted on a new clerical oath that declared a "hatred of royalty." The theme of the church and crown being tied together is a consistent one not only in the revolution, but also throughout the century. The rise of the far left group meant a ban on religious processions, bells and images that could be heard or seen by the public, and

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[17] Ibid., 92

[18] Alexis de Tocqueville, The Old Regime and the French Revolution, ed. François Furet and Francoise Melonio (Chicago 1998) 1

wearing clerical dress in public. All clergy, regardless of whether or not Catholics could also be republicans, were treated the same. When Napoleon became emperor and had undisputed power, he regarded the clergy as an asset whose effectiveness was like a soldier. The Church in France had essentially become a department of state. Bishops and lower clergy members were obligated to pray for the health of the Consulate and loyalty to the republic at the end of every mass. In sum, the Church had at last ceased to be the First Estate. The parlements and monarchy of the ancien regime were wiped out. Religious affiliation was no longer required for citizenship. The Church as an establishment simply did not have the influence and power it once wielded. The alliance between throne and altar in France had been forever changed. These ramifications would be felt throughout the continent in a relatively short amount of time.

The early nineteenth century would see the results of the revolution and Napoleon's influence spread from France to the rest of Europe. The conflict inside the Church would grow even more ugly. Proponents of the new secular creed were out to eradicate adherents of the old. When revolutionary or Napoleonic armies helped spread sacrilege and blasphemy, the result was the fusion of counter-revolution, nationalism, and religion in many parts of Western Europe, such as Spain, Germany, and even Denmark. It’s not hard to see why Western Europeans would scoff at the once enthusiastic support for the French Revolution and its ideals when French soldiers were ransaking local villages and

creating terror. To many, Napoleon was the Antichrist and the political ideals of the Enlightenment were discredited by the revolution. Burleigh wrote that "the view was widespread that any assault on religion led logically to the subversion of governmental authority, and with it morality."[19] Pope Gregory XVI posed the question "does the Holy Law of God permit rebellion against the legitimate temporal sovereign? No, never, because the temporal power comes from God."[20] He continued by saying "we have learned that certain teachings are being spread among the common people in writings which attack the trust and submission due to princes; the torches of treason are being lit everywhere...both divine and human laws cry out against those who strive by treason and sedition to drive the people from confidence in their princes and from their government."[21] A French bishop named Le Groing de la Romagere took it to radical new heights when he told his flock "to continue to obey in the civil order whoever derives sovereign power from above, however evil his morals, whatever his religious beliefs, whatever the abuses, apparent or real, of his government, and however impious and tyrannical the laws he enacts in order to pervert you."[22] Those in power, regardless of denomination, pushed back on the assault on their authority and used the fear of divine retribution as a means of retaining influence and power. The alliance of throne and altar was to be the foundation of all authority and power, and had been so throughout Europe. While of course many monarchies

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[19] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers,* 115

[20] Ibid., 116

[21] Ibid.,, 116

[22] Dansette,Adrein *Religious History of Modern France. From the Revolution to the Third Republic* (Freiburg 1961) 1, p176

would take 100 more years to die off after the first world war, the revolution in France had drastically reformed the Church and created an appetite for further reform. Many absolutist monarchs had used nationally conscious elements to fight off Napoleon, but it came at a price. Burleigh writes that they "had unleashed forces that they would never be able to fully control, although it would take the rest of the century for that aspect of democracy to become evident."[23]

In other parts of Europe, the debate concerning the role and responsibility of religion in society was being discussed and debated as well. Philosophers would eventually come to look at the ideals of Irish Whig Edmund Burke with disdain and disgust. He advocated change happening only incrementally and wanted each generation conscious of what it owed to not only the future but also the past. Religion, in the form of international law, was the "great ligament of mankind." Burke loathed the idea of separating Church and State and compared it to the French Revolution's 'Atheism by establishment.' Burke opined that "the political function of religion was not simply to keep the lower orders quiescent," which would be relentlessly argued by generations of Marxists later on, but also to impress upon those who had power that they were here today and gone tomorrow, and responsible to those below and Him above: 'All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that they act in trust, and that they are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great Master, Author, and Founder of society."[24] The mutual

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[23]Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers,* 121
[24] Ibid., 122

interest in a strong relationship between monarchs and established religious organizations was ultimately to retain power. In short, the Anglican Church was like any corporate monopoly faced with fresh rivals that was characterized by those more religiously tolerant. Times were changing and the establishment was obviously resistant to the winds of change.

Louis de Bonald seems to not only sum up the idea of civil religion quite well, but also depict the context of the state of religion and its relationship to government in early nineteenth-century Europe: saying "government is a real religion: it has its dogmas, its mysteries, its ministry; to annihilate or to submit it to discussion by every individual, amounts to the same..it lives only by the strength of the national reason, that is to say political faith."[25] The state of Christianity in Western Europe was clearly at a crossroads; people regardless of wealth or status were trying to make sense of their world in addition to what might be the ramifications of the Church receding into the background. Religion and faith in something cannot be extinguished easily or overnight; as Chesterton pointed out. Faith must be placed in something. That something could potentially be government without the persistent influence of the altar, or it could possibly be "chosen people," or even the nation itself as a form of religion.

Christianity had left its mark on the political ideologies of the nineteenth century (and vice versa). The notion of nationalism (i.e. the belief that the nation represents the best arrangement to fulfill the human desire for belonging) also

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[25] Talmon, J.L *Political Messianism. The Romantic Phase* (London 1960) p 312

influenced how man saw God. God was no longer simply this celestial being in "heaven"-God could now take the form of monarch or other leaders. Nationalism, as Elie Kedourie asserts, does not have nice and neat starting points. Nor was it invented on the fly or out of thin air. Rather, in Europe, it was constructed from pre existing components like institutions, law, language, and local experiences with Christianity. Nationalism was not necessarily a surrogate, or even a replacement for Christianity. It did, however, absorb some of the major themes that Christian Europeans held dear, such as divine elections, or a belief that a select people had been chosen for divine purposes. It's also important to note that for many nationalism didn't intrude on the religious beliefs per se, for a minority it was essentially worshipping the nation as a God. Nevertheless, the boundaries between nation and God were blurred as the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth century would later indicate. Burliegh points out that the "process of education that in its enormous ambition and scope rivalled Europe's conversion to Christianity born in the Dark Ages and in the vernacular missions of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, nationalists adopted religious exemplars."[26] The idea that nations should have a common religion unique to them was prevalent in the nineteenth century. It didn't help that leading German thinkers like Hegel wrote that such a religion "expresses the innermost being of all people, so that all external and diffuse matters aside, they can find a common focus and, despite inequality and transformations in other spheres and

[26] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers,* 145

conditions, are still able to rely on each other."[27] He also opined that "man must venerate the State as a secular deity." In Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity*, he interprets Jesus as more or less a teacher of morality, and by doing so, showed his "inclination to secularize Chrisitian teachings and change them into abstract moral principles."[28] Pelikan wrote that "there is much to be said in favor of the view that in Hegel the secularization of Lutheran theology becomes virtually complete."[29] Pelikan provides more context by saying, "among the Scandinavians, Bishop Hans Martensen of Denmark stands out as a prominent example of a synthesis between Hegelianism and Lutheranism."[30] It was largely this prevalent Hegelianism, paired with the established Danish church that provided the context for Kierkegaard to write the works that he did. Kierkegaard was critical of Hegelian dialectic mediation (i.e. the process of human reason attaining absolute truths). Paired that with Hegel's 'system' depicting that the individual must be subordinate to the family, the family to society, and society to the State was anathema to the Danish author. This mode of thought is exactly what both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche would despise and respond to in their works.

Due in large part to Hegelian intellectualism influencing the Danish church and Danish theology, Kierkegaard's sharpest criticisms were usually directed

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[27] *Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* trans with intro from TM Knox, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1962 pg 285
[28] Pelikan, Jaroslav. *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. Pg 107
[29] Pelikan, Jaroslav. *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology*. Pg 108
[30] Ibid., pg 112

against it.[31] If 'divine authority" was going to come from anyone in Denmark, the average Danish citizen likely thought it came from Bishop Martensen. Time and again he scoffs at what he terms, "the system," referring specifically to Hegel and Martensen. For both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Hegel's assumptions that a balanced system of reality can be constructed rationally from the truth is at best delusional and at worst dangerous.

Since one philosopher is a native German and the other one is from nearby Denmark, it seems appropriate to examine the ideas of nationalism and its relationship to religion in Germany at the time. Nations with a long held sense of identity and state formation such as England, or Spain, were well suited to integrate nationalism into their being as opposed to a state like Germany. German Protestants used religion as a means to deduce who was a German 'patriot' and who was not. Jews and Catholics were typically the targets of this. Both were suspected of having dual allegiances; one to Germany and the other to Rome in the case of Catholics. German Chancellor Bismarck himself thought them the enemies of the German Reich. Germany had also struggled itself after the revolutions in 1848 with the throne and altar relationship. Protestants had generally been unanimous in the symbiotic relationship of the church and state: i.e. the Church gives legitimacy to the state and in turn it enables them to preach the gospel. One of the most influential Protestant theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher, bolstered the idea of faith and country being interwoven. He

[31] Ibid., pg 114

stated that " to serve mankind is noble. But this is possible only when one is convinced of the value of one's one people."[32] In other words, someone wanting to make the world better must stop and appreciate the value of their own ethnic background before helping anyone else. This would have been anathema to the existentialists of the later century. Further to this point, he writes that "every nation, my friends, which has developed to a certain height is degraded by receiving into it a foreign element, even though they may be good in itself."[33] Despite it going against basic tenets of Christianity, nationalism calls for the 'believer' to put countrymen over everyone else. Again, Burliegh captures the essence of religion and nationalism well when he states that, "unlike philosophers, and before the age of the schoolmaster, clergymen had a virtual monopoly on large gatherings where they could mobilize patriotic fervor through their sermons. If incipient nationalisms seem suffused with religion this was often because pastors played a vital role in their transmission, giving them moral and spiritual accents that resonated at a time when Christianity seemed under attack by the militant Jacobin godless."[34] The end result was a perfect storm between the Jacobins in France and nationalists in Europe that helped lead to the turbulent and confused state Christianity found itself in.

Keeping with the theme occurring across the continent, liberal publicist Robert Prutz exclaimed, "We conduct politics as we hold Protestant Illuminati,

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[32] Hoover, Arlie. *The Gospel of Nationalism. German Patriotic Preaching from Napoleon to Versailles* (Stuttgart 1986) pg 59

[33] Nicholls, David *Deity and Domination. Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London 1989)

[34] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers,* 153

Pietist, and German-Catholic meetings-why not politics as politics? This supposedly religious movement of the present is really not a religious but a political movement."[35] German intellectuals had clearly carried the Protestant religious fervor into secular fields. Historian Robert Bigler adds to this, saying "An outright control of the Protestant church came about largely because the German reformation developed under the protection of the rising territorial princes. Lutheranism became the official religion of many of the new states ruled over by the princes."[36] He goes on to discuss how German Protestant churches essentially became ecclesiastical departments subject to territorial law.

The Napoleanic wars in Germany undoubtedly helped spur not only nationalistic fervor in Germans but also provided examples on how German patriots should conduct themselves. Although not necessarily unique in religious history, it's interesting and important to note the injection of God into the wars of men. The idea of a "German God" battling a "French devil" became normalized (i.e. "rejoice today German victory! The French fell, the false, the disloyal..and the poisonous serpent fled.'')[37] God had also miraculously sent snow and ice towards Napoleon's army and blessed Germany with ample harvests. The sentiment is reinforced by Skidelsky: "Emperors such as Napoleon were not about to go down on their knees in penitential dread. The Church was thus forced to rely for protection upon rulers whose concerns were purely worldly, and

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[35] Bigler, Robert. "The Rise of Political Protestantism in Nineteenth Century Germany: The Awakening of Political Consciousness and the Beginning of Political Activity in the Protestant Clergy of Pre-March Russia."
[36] Bigler, Robert. Pg 423
[37] Ibid., 156

who regarded religion as no more than an instrument for the maintenance of power and wealth."[38] Clearly hatred of the French and reverence for everything German was prevalent. Arndt captures the spirit of nationalism and German religion when he wrote, "to be a nation, to have one feeling for one cause; to come together with the bloody sword of revenge, is the religion of our time. That is the ultimate religion, to hold the Fatherland more dearly than lords and princes, than mother and father, than wives and children."[39] Talleyrand backs this up as well when he wrote that for young people the unification of Germany had become "their cry, their doctrine, their religion, carried even to fanaticism."[40] While Arndt wasn't necessarily advocating nationalism as a substitute for Christianity, many began to have similar views to French revolutionaries (such as worshipping flags and weapons as opposed to the cross). During the wars with Napoleon, German clergymen enlisted; looking to incite a spirit of active citizenship. Bigler wrote that, "In hundreds of sermons they compared the war against Napoleon with the crusades, and used religious terms such as redemption, rebirth, resurrection etc., to stir up enthusiasm."[41] The mingling of patriotic and religious sentiment was expressed clearly in the "Call to the Clergy of the Prussian State" which was issued in 1813, "It is to you, members of the clergy that we look with the greatest confidence. You can contribute greatly to the victory of our weapons by awakening the patriotic spirit of every soldier and civilian." Lower classes in

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[38] Skidelsky, Edward. 2005. "Far from Heaven." New Statesman 134 (4761): 48–49
[39] Ibid., 160
[40] Zamoyski, Adam *Holy Madness. Romantics, Patriots and Revolutionarie*s 1776-1871 (London 1999) pg 193
[41] Bigler, Robert. "The Rise of Political Protestantism in Nineteenth Century Germany: The Awakening of Political Consciousness and the Beginning of Political Activity in the Protestant Clergy of Pre-March Russia." *Church History* 34, no. 4 (1965).

Germany were the ones that needed prodding to adopt the notion of a unified Germany while the elites were its initial propagators. Clubs and societies, where ideas were shared and often debated were the place where national consciousness could be kindled. They helped provide the focus that while Christianity itself derived from the Churches, the Churches themselves could also serve as a vessel for nationalist ideology. Patriotic piety and religious patriotism had become one and the same, with the nation itself held on a sacred pedestal. Bigler adds that "the combined effort of the French Revolution, the Prussian Reforms, and the supreme efforts in the wars had a powerful impact on some clergymen….some of those holding high ecclesiastical positions seemed to be strengthened in their belief that 'Throne and Altar' must oppose the revolutionary ideas of Zeitgeist."[42]

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche loathed the nationalistic fervor present in their respective countries. In response to the Danish N.F.S Grundtvig's nationalistic works, he seethed that his work was not only a retrogression to paganism, but also "Christianity specifically wanted to do away with paganism's deification of nationalities!"[43] Nietzsche detested nationalism in Germany and elsewhere. While Germans were building monuments to the heroes of the Franco-Prussian War in the hope of sewing together a unified German state, Nietzsche would write, "Arrogant European of the nineteenth century, you are

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[42] Bigler, Robert. "The Rise of Political Protestantism in Nineteenth Century Germany: The Awakening of Political Consciousness and the Beginning of Political Activity in the Protestant Clergy of Pre-March Russia."
[43] Backhouse, Stephen. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. Pg 122

raving! Your knowledge does not complete nature, but only kills your own. For once measure your height as a knower against your depth as a person who can do something. Of course, you clamber on the solar rays of knowledge upward towards heaven, but you also climb downward to chaos."[44]

Not just in France, England, or Germany were nationalistic ideals taking root. Nationalism was not confined to these larger nations, but was becoming rampant throughout the continent, like a virus spreading without recourse. Places like Poland, Ireland, and Greece sought identity and independence and could easily adopt a victim, or to keep with religious vernacular, a martyr nation. To struggle, fight, and even die for ideals was clearly appealing and could sway many looking for a new direction. Nor was Italy immune to the merger of religion with politics and nationalism. Perhaps as a result of her neighboring countries, or simply in Italy's own unique manner with the help of writers like Giuseepe Mazzini it was led in this direction. He is a classic example of the context of religion in the era. "Young Italy" was seeking a renewal of the country, and a highly moralistic one at that. Their creed was layered with religious terms like crusade, purification, regeneration, and salvation. They even had passwords to correctly identify members (it was martyrdom) with the appropriate reply being resurrection. Mazzini even once said, "I am not a Christian, or rather I am a Christian plus something more."[45] Like Germany and France and elsewhere, each nation had a God given mission and it was the job of the individual to help

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[44] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History.* Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.
[45] Denis Mack Smith, Mazzini (New Haven 1994) p 17

fulfill it. In order to help inundate the sense of nationhood, politicians needed religion to help. Luckily for them, historian Chris Duggan highlights the undeniable religiosity of man in addition to providing context by writing, “in man religiosity is something innate, organic like sexuality, property, and the family..no system will succeed in suppressing religiosity in the myriad forms in which this instinct manifests itself. It is the task of politicians simply to direct it towards good, and maximum benefit of society.”[46]

There’s little question that nationalism was a potent and impressive “church” to emerge in nineteenth-century Europe. This sense of belonging was obviously compatible with being a Christian, Jew, or other denomination. It is also apparent that with the rise of science and new literature, theology and blind religious faith was gradually receding into the background of European life after being previously omnipresent. Mankind’s comprehension of the world had advanced drastically. Many questions ending with the simplistic answer of “that which I do not understand I shall call God” now had scientific answers and/or empirical evidence. This age of publicly vocalized religious doubt was something very new and unheard of. Novelist George Eliot captures this sentiment well, writing “I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity- to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the unseen, but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind. Many things I should have argued against ten years ago,

[46] Duggan, Chris. *Francesco Crispi, 1818-1901*. Oxford University Press, 2002. Pg 433

I now feel myself too ignorant and too limited in moral sensibility to speak of with confident disapprobation."[47] Also important to note is the struggle to continue in the certainty of miracles in an age of unprecedented scientific discovery. Leading German thinker Hegel had written a *Life of Jesus,* where there was no mention of miracles whatsoever. Hegel's Life of Jesus is certainly linked with many of the higher criticisms of the age. He ultimately wanted to show that Christianity was dictated by universal moral law, writing that Jesus was "determined to remain forever true to what was indelible written on his heart, i.e. the eternal law of morality."[48]

Truth pertaining to a strict dogma or creed was finally coming into question. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both would have supported this enthusiastically. Ward's main character Elsmere says "It is not that Christianity is false, but that it is only an imperfect human reflection of a part of truth. Truth has never been, can never be contained in any one creed or system!"[49] Comte himself added to this wave of new ideas as well in his positivist ideology (i.e. belief in the certain and distinctive knowledge acquired through scientific inquiry.) In his work *Course on Positivist Philosophy*, he showed how math, physics, chemistry, etc had been 'positive' or, at the very least, based on empirically validated laws.

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[47] Haight,Gordon *George Eliot. A Biography* (London 1968) p 331

[48] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, Clark Butler, and Christiane Seiler. 1984. *Hegel, the letters*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[49] Ward, Humphrey. *Robert Elsmere* (27th ed London 1889) pg 365

In addition to the concept of miracles and all encompassing truth being brought to the forefront of leading thinkers, the ethical standards of Christianity were also not immune to examination. Societies had begun to humanize their penal and judicial systems, and the concept of "divine lottery" in terms of who is saved and who is resigned to eternal damnation was also looked at with distaste. Charles Darwin brings this to light in his autobiography: "I can indeed hardly see how anyone anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all of my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."[50]

Lastly, forms of government itself had adopted religious themes in order to help attain its objective. The most notable and brazen form in the nineteenth century was German born Marx's communism, an offshoot of both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Much like the French Revolution, they had prioritized equality and identified with the Jacobins. John Goodwin Barmby, a young Englishman determined to connect fellow thinkers on continental Europe, had once described himself as the "Pontifarch of the Communist Church" and Communism was the final religion humanity would need: "I believe that the divine is Communism and the demoniac is individualism."[51] Marx and Engels were looking for a new doctrine, one that fused moral passion and scientism into a new eschatology. Marx was heavily influenced by a Hegelian

[50] Burleigh, Michael. *Earthly Powers,* 213
[51] Ibid., 244

apostle Feuerbach, a freelance scholar that desired shifting man's focus away from an otherworldly God to this world. Men should stop being 'candidates for the afterlife' and instead opt to be a 'student of this life.' It ceased to be relevant to communist thinkers if religion needed to necessarily be true or untrue; what mattered more was what function it played in society. Since religion itself did not address the underlying problem, it could not serve as a viable solution to society's issues. If nothing else, Marx was adept in identifying the alliance of throne and altar as problematic when he famously called religion the opiate of the masses. Like revolutions before it as well as nationalism, it isn't difficult to prescribe some of the Judaeo-Christian terms to Marxism: comrades (faithful), capitalist (sinner), devil (counter-revolutionary), and classless society (paradise). Burleigh points out that many nineteenth-century thinkers had come to the conclusion that society was progressing from outdated religious modes of thinking to 'rational' creeds focused on the present world and humanity at large. With their sympathetic middle class, Socialism had also assumed many of the characteristics of a "Church of the working classes." It joined the Church in facing the same challenges concerning recreational activities like shopping, the pub, and newspapers, all of which served to undermine the pretensions of both politics and religion. Socialists and communists both had tried to make the connection between religion and their forms of government evident. "The question of the proletariat is becoming a religion"[52]

[52] Ibid., 267

The early to mid-nineteenth century saw violence, bloodshed, and a Europe desperately trying to find its identity. The Jacobins and other French revolutionaries had unknowingly sparked a massive shift in the Church and its relationship with the State. The relationship between the elites and working classes had shifted as well. Germans and other Europeans had slowly but surely constructed 'the nation' into a new means of worship as a way to stay united under the threat of Napoleon's conquest. The rise of scientific inquiry and emboldened questioning of biblical literature once thought infallible had audaciously stepped out from the shadows and into the public arena. Reform minded Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau among others had indirectly influenced the state of Christianity as well. Socialism and Communism had also directed people's attention not only as its own form of religion, but also as a new direction in the state of humanity and away from the afterlife. All of this in its context served as a perfect storm for both Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche and to father the existentialist movement and change how Europe and the world think about Christianity forever.

Chapter Two: Søren Kierkegaard the "Scourge of Christendom"

Why does Christ seem so far away despite eighteen centuries of Christianity? Has the construction of Christendom, with its refinement of doctrine, biblical commentary/criticism, and preaching brought believers closer to God or farther away? Why would anyone even bother following Christ and imitate

His suffering when there are far easier ways to live? These burning questions consumed the “Socrates of Christendom” Søren Kierkegaard. Born in Copenhagen in 1813, Søren was the youngest of seven children, however all of his siblings would die early except for his brother Peter. He grew up in a strict and pious home run by his father, whom he had a complicated relationship with. Soren was always frail and sickly and suffered from a curvature of the spine. His father worked hard and accumulated enough wealth to eventually have both him and his family set financially for life. Michael Kierkegaard’s religious views were orthodox Lutheranism that stressed punishment, suffering, and the inevitability of sin. This grim outlook on life and Christianity would very much influence Søren the rest of his life. There are few writers who could depict that religion can develop in different ways, with progress or decline in the post-Enlightenment world being ultimately tied to the individual as well as Kierkegaard.

Michael Kierkegaard believed God had rewarded him with paternal prosperity, but would need punishment for his sins by riddling his children with death and disease before the age of 34 (Christ died at 33). This led to Søren, believing for much of his life that he was living on borrowed time, to write at an astounding pace. Søren’s life and work would be immensely influenced by not only his relationship with his father, but also his failed engagement to Regine Olson. Søren would break off the engagement to pursue his calling as a writer. His failed engagement and its ramifications on a personal level would impact Kierkegaard’s work the rest of his short life.

Everywhere Søren looked in Danish and European society he saw intolerable incompatibilities and urged us to wake up from our cozy sentimental illusions about life. Kierkegaard scholar Stephen Backhouse emphasized this when he wrote, “if you were an academic or literary figure in Denmark in the 1830s, Hegel was inescapable.”[53] A consistent target of Søren was Danish theologian Hans Martensen, who adopted the Hegelian view that the established Danish church, culture, and state were critical to religion and part of Christianity’s ‘inevitable progress.’ Pelikan calls Martensen a “prominent example of the synthesis between Hegelianism and Lutheranism.”[54] Carlisle adds to the narrative by writing, “Martensen is an example of what it means to be a cultured, reflective Christian in nineteenth century Christendom.”[55] In his journal Søren lamented that “there are many people who reach their conclusions about life like schoolboys; they cheat their master by copying the answer out of a book without having worked out the sum for themselves.”[56] Unlike most of his intellectual peers, Kierkegaard was more concerned with the question “what must I do” as opposed to abstract thinking focused on “what must be known.” Kierkegaard was staunchly against Hegel’s notions of reason and logic as the sole means to truth. Idealism was immensely popular in Europe at the time and Søren was writing in response to this. In 1835 he wrote a letter to his brother-in-law saying,

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[53] Backhouse, Stephen. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. Pg 67

[54] Pelikan, Jaroslav. *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. Pg 112

[55] Carlisle, Clare. *Philosopher of the Heart*. Pg 34

[56] Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Soul of Kierkegaard:Selections from His Journals." edited by Alexander Dru, 53. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003.

"I grew up in orthodoxy, so to speak, as soon as I began to think for myself the enormous colossus gradually began to totter."[57] This obsessive thinker needed answers to life's burning questions. In 1835 he wondered in his journal, "what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had no deeper significance for me and my life?"[58] His entire career Kierkagaard would write his books under different pseudonyms, such as Johannes de Silentio or Johannes Climacus. He did this mainly to avoid critique of his work based on his name as well as being able to contradict himself from earlier works if he felt he needed to. The Lutheran religion was no longer a disruptive force; its long established church had given way to complacency and indifference. Kierkegaard wanted his work to serve as a much needed gadfly to arouse in Danish Christians their love and need of God. Kierkegaard wanted to know if there were any Christians left in all of Christendom. It stood to reason that these densely populated cities of Christendom, with their efforts to acquire knowledge through science and research, were drowning out softer, quieter voices longing for self understanding and inner peace.

Another prominent politician, pastor, and author that loomed large in Danish society and Kierkegaard's works was Nicolai Grundtvig. Not unlike what was going on around the European continent, he was an unapologetic nationalist. He wrote that different nations throughout history had been appointed "divine tasks." Now it was Denmark's turn. Keeping with the theme of political

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[57] Backhouse, Stephen. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.
[58] Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Soul of Kierkegaard:Selections from His Journals." pg 44

religion, he wrote that ancient Norse culture is “baptised” and given revelatory status. Søren (and later Nietzsche) would come to detest this thought pattern. Explicitly combining patriotism with Christianity, Søren considered Grundtvig’s work even more dangerous than the “intellectualized religion of the elites.”[59]

Kierkegaard would go on to write his first influential book titled *Either/Or* in 1843. It was written for the reader who considers himself a Christian and yet is living entirely aesthetically. Robinson reveals that, “what puzzled Danish readers was the lack of an overriding ‘authorial voice’ in the book, one that finally steers the reader towards some sort of moral consensus.”[60] The lives of the characters are extreme, so there is no possibility for a Hegelian synthesis or middle ground; hence the title *Either/Or.* This work aimed to examine two specific spheres of human existence, starting with the aesthetic sphere. The aesthetic lifestyle is one completely devoted to immediate worldly pleasures. Obviously this life will eventually prove to be unsatisfactory; a life confined to chasing the next enjoyment or thrill will eventually end up with a feeling of emptiness. The aesthetic life, at its very core, is a series of repetitive experiences that will gradually lose their allure. Existentially speaking, the aesthetic person passes the time on the sidelines and is uninvolved with the great cares of human existence. All of these worldly and temporal pleasures will lead to boredom. Time will pass and the aesthetic person will find only repetition and no grasp of

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[59] Backhouse, Stephen. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. Pg 122
[60] Robinson, Dave. *Kierkegaard: A Graphic Guide*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 2013.

the infinite, or religious, aspects of existence. For the despairing aesthete, there is another sphere of existence.

The ethical sphere is one where it is folly to think of societal duties such as marriage or a job as boring or meaningless. Despite its appearances, humans are still able to develop and change in this sphere. In the ethical sphere the enjoyment of beauty and base pleasures are still "good" things in life, but they are no longer the singular reason for living. An ethical individual adopts a new life view, acquiring an enhanced sense of self, and changes his or her conception of time. Life isn't merely just a series of strategies to escape boredom, but is something related to the infinite. While the ethical sphere has certain qualities and advantages, it does not entail the self exploration needed for faith and the religious life since it requires the individual to follow a set of socially accepted laws and customs. All of this leads up to the third and final sphere of existence, one that is central to Kierkegaard's writings and works, the religious sphere. Kierkegaard attempted to explore the religious sphere and the leap required to get there in his next influential work.

Eight months after his first major work *Either/Or* was published, Kierkegaard released his next important book titled *Fear and Trembling*. This work focused on the story of Abraham and his son Isaac to articulate what is required of an individual with faith. He opens the book by saying that "above all we should impress on our memory as an infallible rule that what God has revealed to us is incomparably more certain than anything else: and that we

ought to submit to the Divine authority rather than to our own judgement even though the light of reason may seem to suggest, with the utmost clearness and evidence, something opposite."[61] Contrary to Kantian or Hegelian ethos, he is making it evident almost right away in the story that Christians should trust in God despite what finite moral laws humanity may have already in place. Søren casts the Hegelian theologian Martensen as "as a nineteenth century Sophist profiteering from pedagogical enterprises."[62] God asks Abraham to ride up Mount Moriah and offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. When Abraham, the father of faith, was about to follow through with God's command an angel appeared and told him to offer up a ram instead.

Abraham is great because of what he suffers during his trial of faith. The anguish of Abraham in this grueling process is explored. Much like the book's author, Abraham's suffering seems to isolate him in a radical way from his society and also its societal customs. Kierkegaard takes this story and applies its lessons to nineteenth-century Copenhagen. One message of this critical work is that the modern discussions surrounding faith cheapen the trials of someone like Abraham.

One central tenet of *Fear and Trembling* is Kierkegaard's concept of faith. Faith is not something that can necessarily be defined in concrete terms. In fact, Kierkegaard opines that a person of faith shouldn't be able to explain it to anyone else. A difficult concept to grasp is that faith has no place at all in a system of

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[61] Kierkegaard, Søren. "Fear and Trembling." New York City: Penguin Classics, 1985. Pg 43
[62] Carlisle, Clare. *Philosopher of the Heart*. Pg 35

thought, it begins “precisely where thinking leaves off.” Kierkegaard also says that “he who walks the narrow path of faith no one can advise, no one can understand.”[63] In short, if you have to ask, you’ll never know. Kierkegaard tries to emphasize what it must have meant to Abraham to be told by God to sacrifice Isaac, to bear witness to his faith but to be able to do so only by putting his beloved son to death. Kierkegaard clearly admires Abraham for his actions, and is met with “fear and trembling” at the thought of whether or not he could do the same. Abraham’s greatness lies in that he didn’t doubt he would get Isaac back one way or another. It’s important to know that, for Kierkegaard, faith in the existence of God is something that Abraham already has. The faith he is needing to prove is that in the end he won’t be deprived of Isaac even when he carries out God’s command. In a sense, Abraham is handing Isaac back in order to receive him again on the proper basis. He wants to remind us that “he who loved himself became great in himself, and he who loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all.”[64] Kierkegaard wants his readers to realize that Abraham took this existential leap of faith and embraced the paradox of the moment. Kierkegaard uses this illustration in the life of Abraham to portray the substance of the passionate Christian life. The Christian faith is a pilgrimage that needs this leap. There are times in life where there's nothing in front of us but darkness, and yet God is still calling us to move ahead. We must leap by trusting that God will be out there in the darkness. In a

[63] Kierkegaard, Søren. "Fear and Trembling." pg 95
[64] Ibid., pg 50

moment of crisis like this, the time for ethics or aesthetics is past and this leap forward into the religious sphere is central. It isn't an easy path by any means, but by using Abraham's trial as an example for ourselves, we can develop a better understanding of what Kierkegaard wanted us to know about faith.

Central to Kierkegaard's writings and philosophy is his so-called "knight of faith." The only real example of a knight of faith Kierkegaard mentions would be Abraham. That, however, does not stop him from imagining what a knight of faith might look like. He wrote, "If I knew where such a knight lived I would journey to him on foot, for this marvel concerns me absolutely...As I said, I haven't found such a one; still I can very much imagine him...The moment I first set eyes on him I thrust him away, jump back, clasp my hands together and say half aloud: 'Good God! Is this the person, is it really him? He looks just like a tax-gatherer." [65] Much like the image of Jesus or those He helped in His time, a knight of faith would likely take on the persona of an ordinary person, since a person's faith is not apparent from the outside.

Abraham takes the leap from the ethical to the religious sphere of existence. This is one that a precious few people are able to achieve in this temporal life. Again, this is something that nineteenth-century Christianity, nor the major philosophers of the day, could debate on. Kierkegaard is adamant that faith is not a 'step below' knowledge. "No one has the right to let others suppose that faith is something inferior or that it is an easy matter, when in fact it is the

[65] Ibid., pg 68

greatest and most difficult of all."[66] Hegelian logic and reason are capable of telling how vapid and empty certain ways of life are, but they cannot tell us as humans which one to pick. It is not what happens to humanity that makes them great, it is what they do. To become a knight of faith is a long and arduous journey for each individual and can only be purchased in deep pain. This knight of faith has created a synthesis of both the finite and the infinite; he or she now has the best of both worlds. This person has made and is at "every moment making the movement of infinity... He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he makes it with such accuracy and poise that he is continually getting finitude out of it, and not for a second would one suspect anything else."[67] This brave knight, according to Kierkegaard, takes a "purely human courage to renounce the whole of temporality in order to win eternity."[68] This is not unlike at all what Abraham did in choosing to sacrifice his son Isaac; he was resigning something near and dear to him in order to make the movement toward the infinite (i.e. grounded before God and His love). A knight of faith needs their love of God to trump their worldly happiness, as well as setting aside personal comfort for a higher cause. Sometimes God might call on us to do truly appalling things, such as sacrificing our own kin.

While Kierkegaard is troubled by this, he, like Abraham, appears willing to put it all on the line and remain strong in the face of opposition. The knight of

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[66] Ibid., pg 80
[67] Ibid., pg 70
[68] Ibid., pg 77

faith is “acting on the strength of the absurd; for it is precisely the absurd that as a single individual he is higher than the universal.”[69] In other words, the knight understands that the walk of faith isn’t a group activity, nor is there necessarily a need to justify his actions to those who don’t understand. Abraham, along with Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, stood as diametrically opposed to the faith being preached by nineteenth-century Danish theologians and clergymen. The story of Abraham was used to expose the limitations of human reason in addition to questioning contemporary philosophers like Hegel. Authority shouldn’t come from Hegelian rationality or Bishop Martensen and the Danish State Church, but from a spiritual journey. Given the inherent subjectivity of the matter, Kierkegaard wouldn’t have necessarily been worried about what particular denomination the believer had been raised in. Faith was not something one could just wake up and suddenly have; it has to be lived out and experienced by the believer. Carlisle sums it up succinctly writing that, “religiousness-the double movement of resignation and faith-expresses the maximum passion, accomplishes the greatest transformation, and is, therefore, the highest truth.”[70] The book appears to fall in line well with Luther’s teachings. Bigler wrote that Luther taught “he (the believer) is responsible to God, not to the world. When evil acts are imposed on a person through his duty to obey worldly authorities, his personal relation to God absolves him of guilt.” Kierkegaard biographer Joakim Garff wrote that the book is “a work that focuses to a great extent on the conditions that make it possible

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[69] Ibid., pg 85

[70] Carlisle, Clare. *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming:Movements and Positions*. Albany: State University of New York, 2005. Pg 95

for a person to regain an immediate relation to himself and to the world."[71] For Kierkegaard that was a clearly a prevalent and persistent problem in Danish culture and European society at large. Abraham's absurd actions not only fly in the face of Hegelian rationality, but also Danish churchgoers simply going through the motions of living a faith-filled life.

Written in 1847, *Works of Love* deals in part with Kierkegaard's claim as God being the source of our ethical obligations. He thinks that God has a justifiable claim who created mankind and intends a life of love and happiness in relation to Himself. Through a history of interactions, as human lovers require certain obligations and responsibilities to each other, so it is true with our history of God: "But that eternal love-history has begun much earlier; it began with your beginning when you came into existence out of nothing, and just as surely as you do not become nothing it does not end at a grave."[72] Because of our debt owed, we must obey God's laws: "But you shall love God in unconditional obedience, even if what he requires of you might seem to you to be to your own harm, indeed, harmful to his cause; for God's wisdom is beyond all comparison with yours...all you have to do is obey in love."[73] Kierkegaard looked around at the modern world and saw a concerted effort to subvert this divine authority. With God no longer our moral lawgiver, morality's requirements can be determined by

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[71] Garff, Joakim. "Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography." Translated by Bruce Kirmmse. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005 pg 249

[72] Kierkegaard, Søren. "Works of Love." Translated by Howard Hong and Edna Hong. New York City: Harper Collins, 1962. Pg 150

[73] Kierkegaard, Søren. "Works of Love." pg 20

a kind of social agreement. Kierkegaard detests this idea. It's clear to him that the result of this moral muddying is the confusion and disintegration of morals humans once held dear.

The "Socrates of Christendom" lived a somewhat sheltered life. He would walk around his beloved Copenhagen and socialize with her people at cafes or libraries, then return home and write feverishly and reflect on the state of Christianity in his time. He was immeasurably influenced by both his father's simple, almost peasant like Christianity and was disgusted by the Danish clergy in all their smug and guise. For Søren, they came to represent everything that was wrong with Christendom and set out to address this form of "cheapened Christianity" in great detail in his later works. In short, "the consoling teaching of Bishop Mynster, who leads the Danish State Church from his episcopal residence by the Church of Our Lady, must be countered with rigorous insistence on the difficulty of the Christian life."[74]

Interestingly enough, German mystics were particularly important for Kierkegaard because of their influence on both German idealism and the Pietist tradition in which Kierkegaard was raised. While he usually didn't think very highly of most German thinkers, Meister Eckhardt had some influence on his works. It's not hard to see why, given German mystics' views on truth, knowledge, and faith. There was clearly an influence from the German mystics

[74] Carlisle, Clare. *Philosopher of the Heart*. Pg 73

to Kierkegaard's own thought. There are over 50 references to Johann Arndt in Kierkegaard's authorship and 21 references to Johannes Tauler.[75]

Kierkegaard's work titled *Sickness Unto Death* was published in 1849 considered by him to be his best work. It's important to remember just the year before, "The Communist Manifesto was published and distributed to European cities. Nationalist feeling runs high...the monarchy's absolute rule is challenged, conservatives, liberals, and peasants jostling for power."[76] It's a vitally important book exploring his thoughts on both modern society and Christendom. The book was written for people who drift through life with little hope of becoming 'authentic' human beings.[77] This was clearly an overwhelming sickness of Danish society from Kierkegaard's point of view. The 'sickness' the title is referring to is a resistance to the belief that there is everlasting life waiting for us when we die. This work outlines a pandemic unconscious progression towards the crisis of despair. Kierkegaard states that human beings are not simply bodies and minds, but spiritually related to God. Unlike our bodies, our spirit is not fully developed: we are faced with the momentous task of becoming ourselves. Kierkegaard is also focused on the subgroup of people professing their Christian beliefs but, at least in his mind, are falling well short of measuring up to the standards they profess. Questions of faith in God's existence do not play a part here; Christians are being called to accept, and try to measure up to, a divinely

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[75] Piety, M.G.. "The Stillness of History: Kierkegaard and German Mysticism" Konturen [Online], Volume 7(23 August 2015)
[76] Carlisle, Clare. *Philosopher of the Heart*. Pg 59
[77] Robinson, Dave. *Kierkegaard: A Graphic Guide*.

set standard of fulfillment. To reject Christianity, according to its author, is indeed the greatest sin of all. Kierkegaard defines sin as "before God in despair not to want to be oneself, or before God in despair to want to be oneself."[78] The author believes that God gives humans freedom, and humans use this freedom to distance themselves from God. Humanity is tasked with returning to one's spiritual home grounded with God.

The main theme of the book is despair, a state of being that most people don't even consciously realize exists, let alone aware they are in. The book's pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, writes that the "biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, an arm, five dollars, a wife, etc. is bound to be noticed."[79] For Kierkegaard, this makes the ever present despair extremely dangerous if practicing Christians are to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. Kierkegaard thinks that this problem is pervasive with most people: "Just as a physician might say there isn't a single human being who enjoys perfect health, so someone with a proper knowledge of man might say there is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little, in whose innermost being there does not dwell an uneasiness, an unquiet, a discordance…"[80] Kierkegaard wants us to become conscious of our despair, how we got where we are, and how to fix it. This progression to "spirit" requires us to face our difficulties rather than avoid or run away from them.

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[78] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Sickness Unto Death*. London: Penguin Books, 2004. Pg 113
[79] Ibid., Pg 1
[80] Ibid., Pg 52

The despair described as the "sickness unto death" is either the refusal or failure to place oneself in God's care. Readers need to consider despair to be "under the aspect of eternity." Kierkegaard says that "if there were nothing eternal in man, he would simply be unable to despair."[81] No matter how much a person tries to escape it, eternity "will nevertheless make it evident that his condition is that of despair."[82] Since this despair is eternal, we have no way of completely eliminating it. "Having a self, being a self, is the greatest, the infinite, concession that has been made to man, but also eternity's claim on him."[83] Looking at spiritual mentors of Kierkegaard such as Christ, Abraham, and Job, he knows that eternity cannot be fully realized, but temporality can be focused towards the eternal. Despair happens when this fails to take place. The task to become oneself can only be done in the relationship to God. Clare Carlisle, noted Kierkegaard scholar, adds that "if humans do not ground their identity in God, they will ground them in something else that is a substitute for God."[84]

Despair differs from what one usually calls a sickness, because it is a sickness of the spirit; this sickness isn't necessarily mortally threatening. For a Christian, death is an event with less significance; it is one step closer to eternal life. From the Christian point of view, "death is not the sickness unto death, so much less so everything that goes under the name of earthly and temporal suffering: want, illness, misery, etc"[85] The remedy is faith. When an individual

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[81] Ibid., Pg 51
[82] Ibid., Pg 51
[83] Ibid., Pg 51
[84] Carlisle, Clare. *Philosopher of the Heart*. Pg 14
[85] Ibid., Pg 38

becomes grounded in God, these feelings of despair eventually subside. In order to live our best life, we need to go on a spiritual journey to gain our "self."

The human being, according to Kiekegaard, is a synthesis of both the finite and the infinite, of the temporal and the eternal, and of freedom and necessity. When these are not coexisting synthetically it leads to despair in one form or another. As humans, we are all given a "self" that is uniquely our own. For most people this self can be given by nature, but for Christians, this comes from having a relationship with God. While one kind of despair steers towards the infinite, another kind of despair allows itself to be cheated of itself by "the crowd." Kierkegaard is extremely apprehensive about the person who "finds being himself too risky,' finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd."[86] In a spiritual sense people like this have no self. Feelings of despair often come from a despondency of the self and/or the realization that acquiring your true self is a task that requires work and dedication. The human being can progress through life with worldly success and grow in knowledge and still have a total lack of self. But humans who drift through life lacking this self awareness are never completely fulfilled; a fully human understanding is needed that cannot be found just anywhere. Becoming your own self is not a walk in the park; nor should it be. Luckily for humanity, with God everything is possible and eternally true. Kierkegaard is interested in whether or not the person looking to become themselves has faith. He writes in

[86] Ibid., Pg 64

Sickness Unto Death that "to have faith is precisely to lose one's mind and to win God."[87] Passages like that serve as a reminder that ultimately most of Kierkegaard's works, particularly in the 1840s, he is writing in response to the prevalent Hegelianism of his day. He adds that in order to believe it is his undoing and yet believing in possibility is to have faith. The author writes that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.

Kierkegaard's later work titled *Practice In Christianity* begins to discuss some of the strenuous aspects of life as a Christian. This book explores how to follow Christ and in addition to the difference between imitating Jesus in suffering and observing His story from a distance. The person who admires Christ from a distance "will make no sacrifices, renounce nothing, give up nothing earthly, will not transform his life and will not be admired…"[88] Genuine faith requires an almost militant stance against Christendom, where everyone is naturally assumed to be a Christian. Christianity had become such an integrated part of Danish culture that for many it meant conforming to bourgeois familial and cultural values. He goes on to sarcastically observe that there are just as many Christians as there are people. He also examines the difference between a rigorous Christian journey and 'lenient Christianity.' To be sure, Kierkegaard offers relief for someone worried the requirements of true Christianity are too rigid. He even considered himself not a Christian by his own stringent standards. The author himself summarizes that the book serves as a reminder that we need

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[87] Ibid., Pg 68
[88] Carlisle, Clare. *Philosopher of the Heart*. Penguin Books, 2019. Pg 220

to recognize our sins and need for grace. A little Socratic ignorance would go a long way in revitalizing the Christians of Denmark as well as Europe. Robinson wrote that, from Kierkegaard's perspective, that "most 19th century Danish citizens would be horrified if they ever chanced to meet Jesus- a carpenter's son accompanied by beggars."[89]

Towards the end of Kierkegaard's life, he grew increasingly ambivalent and openly vitriolic towards the state of Christendom and certain members of the Danish clergy. His last published work is titled *Attack Upon Christendom* in a journal called The *Fatherland*, and he does not hold back his disdain for the established Church, the cheapened Christianity that is prevalent, or Danish society at large. He is highly critical of Bishop Mynster's preachings and detests that someone in his position is a witness to truth. In his mind, a witness to the truth is someone who tries to replicate Christ's life marked by renunciation and suffering, yet the present day priests and clergymen do not hide their desires for worldly goods and advantages. Kierkegaard loathes the Danish bourgeois preaching from a position of power. The state church attempting to preach the New Testament while living the life of luxury is blasphemous to God. Kierkegaard also lambasts the priests and bishops for prioritizing kings and emperors over beggars. Jesus came not for the wealthy and powerful, but for the poor and destitute. Given the fact that Denmark's modern constitution introduced

[89] Robinson, Dave. *Kierkegaard: A Graphic Guide*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 2013.

a constitutional People's Church, it shouldn't be a surprise Søren's work shifts to these themes.[90]

Individuals capable of being Christians compatible with the New Testament are few and far between. By fusing the God-relationship with bourgeois values, modern Christendom has infected the radical teachings found in the New Testament. Kierkegaard goes as far to say that, "The religious situation in our country is: Christianity (that is, the Christianity of the New Testament—and everything else is not Christianity, least of all by calling itself such), Christianity does not exist."[91] Clearly pervasive in Europe at the time, he also mocks the very idea of Christian lands, Christian people, or Christian nations. Far too many people in Europe would call themselves Christians, become baptized, and sit in a pew every Sunday because "that's just what you do." He also implored his readers to stop going to church; he was often seen in the library on Sunday mornings instead.[92] This surely could not have sat well with his readers.

In both this and *Practice in Christianity* he wants us to live contemporaneously with Christ. He is cautioning against "the official preaching of Christianity, performed by royal functionaries, men of consequence, whose preaching is their worldly career.."[93] When this preaching of Christianity is

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[90] Nicholas Hope. *German and Scandinavian Protestantism 1700-1918.* Oxford History of the Christian Church. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Pg 354
[91] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Attack Upon Christendom*. Princeton University Press, 1946. http://www.christianebooks.com/pdf_files/kierkegaard-satta00kier.pdf. Pg 29
[92] Carlisle, Clare. Pg 243
[93] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Attack Upon Christendom*. Pg 18

compared with the New Testament, it is clearly not up to par. This is outlined clearly in this excerpt: “In the New Testament Christ calls the Apostles and the disciples "witnesses," requires them to witness Him. Let us see now what is to be understood by this. These are men who by the renunciation of all things, in poverty, in lowliness, and thus ready for every suffering, were to go out into the world which expresses mortal hostility to the Christian way of life. This is what Christ calls "witnesses" and "witnessing." What we call "priest," "dean," "bishop," indicates a livelihood, like every other employment in the community, and in a community, be it noted, where, since all call themselves "Christians," no danger is in the remotest degree connected with teaching Christianity, where on the contrary this profession may be considered one of the most agree- able and the most highly honored. Now I ask, is there the least resemblance between these priests, deans, bishops, and what Christ calls "witnesses."[94]

This forgery of Christianity is so deeply ingrained in society Kierkegaard thinks that most people haven’t the slightest idea they are living counter to the New Testament. We must remember the perspective of Christ Himself as well as His disciples; nothing came easy for them in their spiritual journey. In short, Kierkegaard thinks that Jesus would be shunned and ostracized if He were alive in nineteenth-century Denmark.

Kierkegaard would fall ill in November 1855. He refused final rites from anyone in the established Danish Church and gave everything he owned to his

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[94] Ibid., Pg 23

ex-fiance Regine Olson. The celebrated Pastor Nicolai Grundtvig, an ecclesial and cultural giant in Danish life at the time, clearly did not mourn the death of the Danish gadfly. In a letter to a friend he wrote, “I do not wonder that he was surprised by death, for as long as the day of the Antichrist has not yet come, those who tinker with the national church will always come to grief, and quickly, just like false Messiahs.”[95] There is little denying that his legacy as one of the most profound thinkers of the nineteenth century is well deserved. Kierkegaard’s life and times were monumental regarding the history of ideas in nineteenth-century Europe and challenges us to reevaluate our relationship to Christianity. There is little doubt that he depicts the inevitable progress and decline of religion being tied to the individual first and foremost. If there was to be any hope for the Danish State Church, it was going to have to come from individuals Kierkegaard writes about. Another philosophical giant from Germany took a very different, and yet in some ways similar, viewpoint regarding the state of religion in Europe.

Chapter Three: Nietzsche and the Death of God

Friedrich Nietzsche was certainly one of the most uncompromising and provocative thinkers of the nineteenth century and undoubtedly influenced the relationship between Christendom and Europe. This chapter will assert that Nietszche outlines religion’s decline must be prompted on an individual basis.

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[95] Backhouse, Stephen. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.

He was clearly living in an era of unprecedented change. The authority of the Church was being challenged, radical breakthroughs in science were redefining worldviews, and thinkers like Nietzsche were free to unleash ideas that would've had him killed centuries earlier. He was born in the village of Röcken in what is present day Germany and raised in a devout home fathered by a Lutheran pastor. Ironically for someone who would refer to himself as the "Antichrist" at the end of his sane life, Christianity had been woven into the fabric of his being from an early age. In the Autumn of 1848, when he was only four years old, his father became mentally ill and his childhood would be turned upside down. His father had a terminal brain disease and endured an agonizing and painful end, suffering from what was termed "softness of the brain."[96] As he grew older the horrific death of his father posed a theodical question he had to wrestle with: how could a God leave such a faithful man to such a painful end?

As a young man he was always an exceptional academic and took a particular interest in both philology and theology. When he went to university in Bonn he had every intention of becoming a Lutheran pastor just like his father. While there he had done some studies in higher criticism. In other words, critics would argue that the Bible isn't rooted in historical facts but rather myths. Paired this with his father's passing and now Nietzsche had both intellectual and emotional grounds to question his lifelong faith. As he began to turn away and reject Christianity, he had two major influential philosophical figures. One was

[96] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. New York City: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

Arthur Schopenhauer and the other was composer Richard Wagner. Schopenhauer was possibly the most pessimistic thinker of the modern era. In short, he believed our natural drive was towards a "will to survive" and to get through life with the minimum of pain. He opined that mankind is in a constant state of desire without true satisfaction. When Nietzche read his book, *The World as Will and Representation*, he was astounded, saying it was "like looking into a mirror."[97] Wagner was an immensely influential father-like figure for Nietzsche in his early adult life and an admirer of Schopenhauer. Nietzsche admired Schopenhauer "not least for his independence from state and society." Despite Schopenhauer's pessimism, he was a suitable alternative juxtaposed to Kant, whose influence was prevalent in German philosophical establishment. This was in no small part because Christianity at the time was a vital element to the essence of German society, used by the State in the service of conservative, nationalist politics. For a thinker like Nietzsche who was finding Christianity increasingly incompatible with life, this put both him and Wagner as outsiders, which of course neither minded at all.

As a young adult his journey into doubt was consumed by not only the religious beliefs but also the moral beliefs he held dear in his life up to that point. He began to scrutinize Christianity as an unhealthy focus on the next world and not the present, robbing us of any sublime meaning in the here and now. Christian teachings, he argued, was a place of dreary exile from God. It wouldn't

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[97] Pletsch, Carl. *Young Nietzsche: Becoming a Genius*. New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

take long for him to break off from his mentor Schopenhauer, advocating that life was a thing to be celebrated, not just endured. He was set on finding a means to affirm life despite all the suffering and obstacles while also renouncing the dogmas and backwards teachings of organized religion. With his outright rejection of Christianity, Nietzsche needed to seek a new direction to find both meaning and contentment in life. He wrote to his sister in 1865, "if you wish to seek peace of mind and happiness, have faith. If you wish to be a disciple of truth, then search."[98] This conviction would obsess Nietzsche and his work for the rest of his sane life. It obviously stands to reason that Nietzsche does not put much stock in the concept of faith; his letter to his sister reveals he thinks faith is something to help most people to live comfortably without too much critical thinking.

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, is just the start of his philosophical journey on how best to cope with suffering as well as how meaning can be found in a godless universe. For this he turned to Greek mythology as well as the role of music to give both beauty and meaning to life. Laurence Gane wrote that the book's thesis was formed to show "why the rational is secondary and also why modern culture is sick and how it must be revived." This is the early stages in Nietzsche's quest for meaning in a world lacking "God." Noted scholar Simon Goldhill, states that the book came about after a series of conversations with his mentor Wagner. Wagner wanted to transform society

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[98] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Pg 44

through art and Nietzsche wanted to provide the philosophy behind it. In Greek tragedy, Nietzsche was able to find a way of talking about human nature in the context of the nineteenth century (i.e. finding meaning and truth in addition to human suffering). Nietzsche wrote his book centered around two Greek figures Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo represented logic, light, and the status quo. Dionysus would be the focal point, and for good reason. The god of wine confuses boundaries, dances frequently, and lives freely. This was the Dionysian response to the pain of day to day life. By using Dionysus as his model, Nietzsche was writing against the notion that logic is the way to truth. In focusing on Dionysus, Nietzsche was also reacting against the German intellectuals and theologians of his time, such as Hegel. He wanted Dionsysus to represent the outsider that hasn't lost himself in the collective and transcend that into an affirmation of life. This early philosophical work was loathed by scholars and theologians alike, and it began to alienate Nietzsche from the intellectual inner circle of his fellow academics.

In a clear indication of the times of "surrogate" religions in nineteenth-century Europe, Nietzsche would echo these sentiments in his short work *Schopenhauer as Educator*, writing numerous insightful aphorisms such as "the state never has any use for truth as such, but only for truth which is useful to it"[99] as well as "the state wants men to render it the same idolatry they formerly rendered the church."[100] Despite his works not yet being popular or selling at this

[99] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Schopenhauer as Educator: Nietzsche's Third Untimely Meditation*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014. Section 4
[100] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Schopenhauer as Educator Section 4*

time, he clearly had a pulse on the state of affairs in nineteenth-century Europe. Gane reminds us that he briefly served in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, and this influenced him to totally reject the patriotic fervor of the Prussian "Second Reich."[101] Nietzsche proved this when he prophetically wrote, "the waters of religion are ebbing away and leaving behind swamps or stagnant pools; the nations are again drawing away from one another in the most hostile fashion and long to tear one another to pieces. The sciences, pursued without any restraint and in a spirit of the blindest laissez faire, are shattering and dissolving all firmly held belief."[102] At this point Nietzsche's works represented a "rejection of the rational scholastic approach."[103]

Nietzsche's next book, *Human All Too Human* was what he described as a monument to a crisis and examined the human condition. In addition, it is an outright rejection of Immanuel Kant's idealism that pervaded German society in the nineteenth century. It's also his first book he wrote in his famous aphoristic bursts due to his fragile health. In this book, Nietzsche observed the failures of both Romanticism as well as the Enlightenment to fill the void regarding how best to replace old ways of thinking. The time had come to be "free of phantoms and a hermit shadow's play."[104] In other words, he was finally free of Wagner's influence as well as nostalgic glorification of the ancient Greeks. Importantly, we see Nietzsche's first hints of existentialism, not to mention further critiquing the

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[101]Gane, Laurence. *Nietzsche: A Graphic Guide*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 2013. Pg 25
[102] Ibid., Section 8
[103] Gane, Laurence. Pg 25
[104] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Pg 172

Christian notions of truth, writing “there are no eternal facts, nor are there any absolute truths.”[105] Religious and moral sensibilities are only at the surface of our being, though man wants to believe these matters are at the heart of everything. It is here that some of Nietzsche’s early arguments against religious based morality surface.

Nietzsche begins to unload on the nearly 2000 year old pillars of European society by writing that “all religions are born out of fear and need, creeping into existence on the byways of reason.”[106] To add context, it was around this time that “nineteenth century nation states collaborated in establishing festivals, rituals, and symbols in which each nation worshipped itself.”[107] He also is harsh on the “common man” practicing religion, saying that “people who think their daily lives too empty and monotonous easily become religious.”[108] He is also particularly critical of both the Old Testament as well as modern religious customs. He writes “if Christianity were right in its tenets of a vengeful god, general sinfulness, predestination, and the danger of eternal damnation, it would be a sign of stupidity and lack of character not to become a priest, apostle, or hermit and, with fear and trembling, work exclusively on one’s own salvation.”[109] In other words, religion has yet to provide us with any sort of “truth” Nietzsche is searching for. Keeping with his theme of Christianity robbing

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[105] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Human, All Too Human." Translated by Marion Farber and Stephen Lehmann. University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Pg 15

[106] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Human, All Too Human." pg 79

[107] Burleigh, Michael. 2002. “Political Religion and Social Evil.” *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions* 3 (2): 1

[108] Ibid., pg 86

[109] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Human, All Too Human." pg 86

humanity of the present as well as bashing nineteenth-century European life, Nietzsche brilliantly wrote that “there is not enough love and kindness in the world to permit us to give it away to imaginary beings.”[110] The Christian notion of God presupposes an overpowering being who delights in revenge. He takes time to lament the notion of Original Sin and Christianity’s tendency to not only label the world as ugly and cruel, but our very essence as humans as ugly and cruel. He articulates this bluntly in his next book, stating that “the Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad.”[111] In short, despite this book still being in the embryonic stages of his philosophy free from external influences, he concludes Christianity is a barbaric form of thought wanting to “destroy, shatter, stun, and intoxicate” rather than enable man to feel a sense of self respect.

Nietzsche also cautions that the “higher swindle” that is religion is in danger of being replaced by science. It’s important to note Nietzsche’s attitudes on science given the context of the nineteenth century. He stresses that science helps us understand the world, but hardly leads us to truth. It has no consideration of ultimate purposes. Science cannot explain the world, only describe it (i.e. the hows and not the whys). Nor can it fill the void of meaning left by religion. He says “science has no consideration for ultimate purposes.”[112] Most people in the nineteenth century did not realize this and instead worshipped

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[110] Ibid.,pg 88
[111] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. New York City: Random House, 1974. Pg 185
[112] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Human, All Too Human." pg 58

science as another “surrogate religion.” In order to be the “free spirit” he is describing, we must analyze critically both science, religion, and the ideal. In short, in his next book he writes that man shouldn’t be the servant of knowledge. Knowledge should be the servant of man. *Human, All Too Human* marks the beginning of Nietzsche’s search for the free spirit, the man whose existential hunger can be satiated despite the absence of the ideal or divine intervention.

Nietzsche’s next work, titled *The Gay Science*, has some of his most developed and visceral critiques of Christianity up to this point. The parable of the Madman illustrates Nietzsche’s infamous phrase “God is dead" and the situation he felt nineteenth century Europe was facing. He wrote: “have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God! As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? Asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? Asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. Whither is God? He cried; I will tell you.We have killed him-you and I…..God is dead. God remains dead….What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe the blood from our hands?”[113] Nietzsche goes on to point out that this radical view is almost certainly before most people are ready. The madman

[113] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Pg 211

exclaims, “I have come too early, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightening and thunder require time; the light of the stars require time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars- and yet they have done it to themselves.”[114]

The raw brutal language he chose to describe the death of God is indicative of the seriousness of the crisis he thought was coming. Without the belief in God there was no authority for the moral values that had underpinned European society for nearly 2000 years. We were now either liberated, or condemned, to create our own set of values and morals without any divine intervention. Nietzsche didn’t think “God” was being literally killed per se. He thought Europe had finally outgrown the usefulness of the Christian God and was ready to cast aside its influence. The time had come to find our own path. This must have been a terrifying proposition for not only Nietzsche but his readers that understood the parable in its entirety.

One final point that needs addressing is how the madman declares we have killed God. While this “killing” strips God of all functions, the ambiguity of the text suggests that God once had an extremely important function. The “shadow” he cast over the world is what’s left of our perception of not only the world but ourselves. God offered humanity a framework for this that Nietzsche

[114] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Human, All Too Human." pg 212

believed had not been replaced. This statement is key when considering how far the secularization of Europe has progressed according to Nietzsche.

Other key themes on coping with life's tribulations featured in his book *The Gay Science* is "amor fati" or love of fate as well as eternal recurrence of the same. Nietzsche believed that even though we have failures or heartbreak in life (death of a loved one or divorce) we should learn to incorporate these mistakes, imperfections, and sorrows into the beauty of the whole. Nietzsche adamantly believed we should construct our lives so we are our own heros and decide who we want to be, how we want to live our lives, and then love the choices we've made. With this attitude the thought of reliving our existence can be met with a life affirming yes. It's an exuberant embrace of life. Suffering wasn't something mankind had to be redeemed from as Christianity taught; it was to be embraced and overcome.

This brings Nietzsche to his magnum opus work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche considered this his best and most iconic work. It is here that he offers a path for mankind. However, this path puts the death of God behind them while relinquishing the ethical and moral pillars of Christianity. In this book Nietzsche introduces one of his most iconic ideas, the "übermensch."

In the book Zarathustra is a prophet that comes down from the mountains ready to impart all the wisdom he's accumulated over several years of solitude. He is wanting to preach about a big event (i.e. that God is dead and Christianity with all its universal absolute moral values is no longer believed in). Zarathustra

preaches to the villagers that man is a bridge and not a goal, and challenges them to work to become something greater. “What is the ape to man? A laughingstock, a thing of shame. And just the same shall man be to the superman, a laughingstock, a thing of shame.”[115] Nietzsche has Zarathustra telling the masses “somber is human life, and as yet without meaning: a buffoon may be faithful to it. I want to teach men the meaning of their existence, which is the overman.”[116] With the supposed death of God we should be working to become our own overman. The question on what it means to be human is needing to be reevaluated.

In order to describe Nietzsche’s übermensch it’s almost easier to say what it is not. It is not a biological concept or superior human race. An übermensch is no longer concerned with inauthentic external goals society or religion gives him or her. An übermensch is someone who will make their own values, and embrace the challenge of thinking fully for ourselves. The model given in his book of someone living truthfully to the ideal of the overman is fiercely independent, non-religious, self-disciplined, as well as creative. This übermensch is the antidote for centuries of moral and cultural decay caused by European decadence and Church domination. This is reinforced when Nietzsche writes that it’s “better to have no god, better to set up one’s destiny on one’s own account.”[117] The übermensch is totally free from belief systems (both science and religion) and ironclad moral convictions are not needed for a stable world.

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[115] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." Translated by Thomas Common.Thrifty Books, 2009. Pg 20
[116] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." pg 26.
[117] Ibid., pg 202

Nietzsche must have thought this was a daunting task because there's simply no blueprints or manual for the übermensch. It was a way of providing meaning in a godless world. At the end of the book Zarathustra realizes that no one is listening to him yet and decides that his time has not yet come. He returns to the mountains to wait until humanity is ready for the looming crisis. Zarathustra laments that "dead are all the gods:now do we desire the overman to live."[118] Clearly this book parallels his outlook on European society at the time; given the masses of people laughing and ignoring Zarathustra's warnings on the crisis to come. Gane supports this by writing, "the text is devoted to the psychological dissection of modern man, the emptiness of his values and beliefs. This is a picture of a nihilistic, anti-life society which promotes the mediocre and mistrusts originality."[119]

At this point Nietzsche's thoughts on religion had been steadily coming together since the early 1870s. After *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote *Beyond Good and Evil*. Prideaux reminds readers that Nietszche was prompted to write this work "in opposition to society's indolent, good natured, moral apathy in clinging to the Judeo-Christian code of morality while no longer believing in the religion itself. To live like three-quarter Christians!"[120] This subversive work further takes a hammer to everything Christianity had established as pillars of truth and virtue for nearly 2,000 years in European society. Nietzsche himself thought this work was terrifying in its own right; exploring some of the dark

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[118] Ibid., 69
[119] Gane, Laurence. *Nietzsche: A Graphic Guide*. Pg 74
[120] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Pg 269

realities that nineteenth-century science had laid bare. While most nineteenth-century intellectuals critiqued Christianity but still accepted its values, Nietzsche thought this was a catastrophe. Nietzsche argues that clinging to Judeo-Christian codes of morality while no longer subscribing to the religion itself is to live in both hypocrisy and untruth.[121] In perhaps his most vitriolic and explosive work to date, Nietzsche maintains that Christianity is "an ongoing suicide of reason" by means of the imposition of religious dogmas and doctrines on the individual. Nietzsche feels confident in concluding that the first human sacrifice to religion is the sacrifice of our true nature.

Much like later thinkers, Nietzsche considers Christianity a neurosis that entails an unnatural self denial and sacrifice. After the death of God, Nietzsche predicted that mankind would sooner or later need to redefine ideas of good and evil and with it, a critique of civilization and the foundations of modernity. Here he is calling into question the notions of good and evil as eternal absolutes rather than fleeting questions. He maintains that all truths are only our personal interpretations; we are nothing more than our mental states existing in whatever society we belong in at the time. Keeping with the context of the times such as surrogate religions as well as nationalism, Nietzsche insightfully points out that "Madness is something rare in individuals — but in groups, parties, peoples, and ages, it is the rule."[122]

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[121] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Pg 269

[122] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pg 70

So, how in Nietzsche's view did man willingly adopt the Christian values that turned us into obedient cattle (i.e. the herd or slave morality)? Attempting to answer this historically speaking, Nietzsche points out that the first Christians were slaves and peasants in the Roman Empire. Powerless to impose their will on anyone yet lusting for power nonetheless, the slaves grew resentful towards their masters. Asserting their only possible revenge, they inverted the values of the time by incorporating their grievances into a religion that glorified their miserable condition. Put another way, the least of "us" lied their weaknesses into strength. Nietzsche thinks that the values of the poor Roman slave, such as humility, poverty etc. makes it safe for the weakest in society. When it becomes entrenched in everyone's values it can lead to nineteenth- century Europe as we knew it.

In doing so, traits like 'rich' and 'powerful' were suddenly demonized because those were values of the elite. Christianity was a denial of the will to life made manifest into a religion. In other words, it's a denial of our human, all too human nature. More specifically, Christianity is attempting to mask and/or shame our very human drives because they are an affront to God (such as sexual drive or ambitions for power). It denied the realities of our human nature and turned everything into a conflict of "ought" and "is." To explain further, instincts that are not discharged outwardly are now internalized. Burdened by guilt, we turn against ourselves in self loathing stoked by the tale of Original Sin and the ascetic imposed by the priests. With our natural drives and urges

inhibited by Christianity, it's no wonder in Nietzsche's view he sees mankind as backwards, in decline, and needing to reevaluate the role of religion and God in contemporary society.

In terms of the master morality Nietzsche seems to admire, he wrote that the "wellborn" simply felt themselves "happy"; they did not have to manufacture their happiness artificially through looking at their enemies, or in cases to talk and lie themselves into happiness."[123] Mankind is stuck in this religion of comfortableness clinging to outdated certainties and must be overcome. If humanity was to survive, it needed the great individuals that slave morality/Christian culture was holding back. He goes as far as to say that it has led to a degeneration of the European race, saying "these are the people (Christians) who have controlled Europe's destiny so far, with their "equal in the eyes of God," until they have bred a diminished, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something good natured, sickly, and mediocre, today's European…"[124] The book sums up Nietzsche's campaign against the "idols" (i.e. morality, science, religion, truth, etc).[125]

Nietzsche eventually migrated to Turin for the climate, basking in his self satisfaction over his latest works. He was working at a tremendous pace before his descent into madness, writing *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and *Ecce Homo*. Regarding his philosophy and overall attitude toward religion warrants a

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[123] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Genealogy of Morals." Translated by Horace B. Samuel. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003. Pg 20

[124] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Genealogy of Morals."pg 57.

[125] Gane, Laurence. *Nietzsche: A Graphic Guide pg 96*

look at *The Antichrist*. It can be considered an analysis of the corrupting nature of Christianity as well as laying the foundations for his later works that never came to be titled *A Transvaluation of All Values*. *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* opines that these works were written in part due to "Christianity's inertia. Although historically outdated, it did not give way to new ideas."[126] Nietzsche maintains that priests and theologians who dictate to the masses the meaning of life are woefully unqualified to create such values and ideals. The values upon which mankind built its hopes and desires are now decadent and completely distorted from reality. He challenges mankind to look past the traditions and values of the last 2,000 years. Nietzsche says it himself when he stated, "the problem I set in this work is not what will replace mankind in the order of living things, but what type of man must be reared, must be willed, as having the highest value, as being the most worthy of life and the surest guarantee of the future."[127] Prideaux states that Nietzsche is "reiterating his thoughts concerning Christianity's dishonesty in devaluing life on earth against the hypothetical life to come. This erroneous favoring of cotton-wool-cloud eternity over trash heap everyday reality powered ressentiment, the vengeful, jealous, morally superior mindset used by priests to subdue whole populations whom they managed to reduce to slave morality."[128]

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[126] Magnus, Bernd, and Kathleen Higgins. *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
[127] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Antichrist: A Criticism of Christianity." Translated by Anthony Ludovici. New York City: Barnes & Noble, Inc, 2006. Pg 4
[128] Prideaux, Sue. *I am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche*. Pg 269

Christianity has not only “waged a war upon this higher type of man,” it has sided with everything weak, lowly, and decadent. The strong man is now cast as the pariah or villain. Nietzsche also had little patience for the theological instinct to endow their vision to their flock, claiming that “no other point of view is any longer of value, once theirs has been made sacrosanct with the names “God,” “Salvation” and eternity.” In other words, it is hard to argue or discuss anything of meaning or truth with someone of ironclad religious convictions. The “will of God,” in his mind, is nothing more than the preservation of the priesthood and Christendom. Nietzsche also rails against mere conviction as being the criterion for truth. He says that theologians muddy the water to make it seem deep. Chalking up answers for any sort of truth to life to “it is God’s will” or simply “have faith” wasn’t sufficient for Nietzsche.

He stays on this point critiquing those who hold the Bible as infallible truth, saying they “cannot be read too cautiously; difficulties lurk behind every word they contain.”[129] He also has no respect for the subsequent church molded by the “second rate interpreter” St. Paul. Nietzsche blames him for depicting Christ’s life into a legend of guilt sacrifice. It was Paul who was responsible for focusing on a hatred of not only the flesh but the world at large. In sum, Christianity had led mankind to wander furthest from his natural instincts as well as giving inverted, antiquated morals that led us to be miserable in our own skin. All the while the priests and theologians remain in power preaching what they do to

[129] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Antichrist: A Criticism of Christianity." pg 45

keep the slave morality in their flocks strongly integrated. Nietzsche thinks we are meant for so much more than the sorry situation he thought Europe was in.

Shortly after his last work *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche descended into madness and never recovered. He would never write again. Nevertheless, his work was extremely influential. His work, like Kierkegaard's, clearly revealed Lutheran/Evangelical traditions progress (or mostly in Nietzsche's case decline) was ultimately in the hands of the individual. His work would catalyze existential philosophy as well as embolden those who would want to critique Lutheran/Evangelical ideas in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Chapter Four: Finding Common Ground

While both thinkers are wrestling with many of the same questions regarding truth, faith, how best to live, and the state of Christianity, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche arrived at very different solutions. Given their emphasis on individuality, lived experience, and responsibility, it shouldn't be a surprise they are frequently compared. Both writers address important aspects of the challenges posed by the modern mind to traditional religion, and present their own unique options for the future of religion. By delineating the disagreements between the two scholars can benefit from the insight each writer may offer. It's also important to find where they may have agreed on topics in order to find common ground between them in addition to better understanding of the issues raised in their dialogues. By comparing and contrasting the two authors' works, we can further the argument that given the unique process of secularization in

the nineteenth century, religious progress or decline hinges ultimately on the individual.

The emphasis on religious subjectivity in both writers' works appears time and time again. Henriksen writes in her works *The Reconstruction of Religion*, that "the insistence on founding religious concerns on personal subjectivity rather than on doctrinal corpus of truths given in tradition can be seen in the Enlightenment understanding of natural religion against 'the supranatural,' as well as Kierkegaard's insistence on subjectivity as truth. The principle of subjectivity finally finds its most critical expression in Nietzsche's interpretation of religion as framed and shaped by the will to power."[130]

Not to be overlooked when comparing the authors is the eclectic character of their work. This is perhaps due in part to their lack of a "systematic" mode of thought being difficult to integrate into any one coherent system. Obviously Søren Kierkegaard wrote under several pseudonyms for many of his works to counter previous arguments, offer fresh perspectives, and keep his work uninfluenced by his name alone. While Nietzsche did not use pseudonyms, he admits that he sometimes, "wears a mask." The reason for the mask can likely best be explained in parts of *Beyond Good and Evil*. There he wrote that every deep spirit needs to make use of a mask due in part to his or her social position. Nietzsche is therefore exposed to a picture of himself (a mask) that is developed by his readers that can understand his words superficially but misinterpret every

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[130] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. *The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001. Pg 2

sign he gives. Both writers seem to anticipate the postmodern insight that no stance is final and that it's always possible to make some other reflection. Interestingly enough, by doing so they exhibited a strand of thought that can still be found in today's postmodern culture.

Both thinkers would have believed that "when societal forces pressure the proclamation of belief in a dominant ethic, it is no longer a religious affirmation, but is transformed into mere adherence to a societal norm."[131] Given the plurality of worldviews and personal situations, as well as different experiences, make "identical transmission and reception of religion impossible." With "identical transmission of religion" unfeasible, it seems unavoidable for subjectivity and individual reflection to creep in, despite Christianity being a "societal norm" in both Denmark and Germany in the nineteenth century. In his book *The Heretical Imperative*, Peter Berger wrote, "the more choices, the more reflection. The individual who reflects inevitably becomes more conscious of himself. That is, he turns his attention from the objectively given outside world to his own subjectivity. As he does this, two things happen simultaneously: The outside world becomes more questionable, and his inner world becomes more complex."[132] That description seems to suit both authors extremely well. For both authors, religion is no longer an objectively presented option, but as Henriksen writes, is "something to be regarded in terms of *how it functions for the subject and his or*

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[131] Altman, C.,Kierkegaard And Nietzsche: Contrasts and Comparisons. In: *Philosophy Classics Volume IV, Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Press. (2003)

[132] Berger, P. *The Heretical Imperative.* Garden City, NY.: Anchor 1979 pg 22

her personal development."[133] Both would have also agreed with Berger's understanding of religion as something that becomes increasingly 'privatized' and the individual is the constructor and not the family unit or religious community at large. That being said, the contrast between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's understanding of a Christian is sharp. Nietzsche sees the Christian as the herd animal, while Kierkegaard sees the Christian as the individual taking on the lonely and painful challenge of developing himself or herself.

Kierkegaard clearly views Christ as a centerpiece in reforming Christendom across Denmark and Europe as a whole. He calls on his readers time and again to "live "contemporaneously with Christ" and has a clear affinity for Christ's lessons in the gospels. In his journals he discusses becoming more "Christ-like." He wrote, "present-day Christendom really lives as if the situation were as follows: Christ is the great hero and benefactor who has once and for all secured salvation for us; now we must merely be happy and delighted with the innocent goods of earthly life and leave the rest to Him. But Christ is essentially the exemplar, that is we are to resemble Him, not mere profit from Him."[134] In contrast, as much as one can expect for a man who fashions himself the Anti-Christ, Nietzsche has mixed thoughts on Jesus of Nazareth. He did label Jesus as "the one true Christian" yet considered him misguided and ultimately disdained his elevation of the lowly.

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[133] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. *The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche*. Pg 8
[134] Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journals."

Needless to say neither of their writings regarding Christianity offer much promise. Nietzsche opines that Christianity, along with its backward morals, and decadent societal pillars that once served as the bedrock of civilization, has deteriorated to the point of no return. Nietzsche never would have favored rebranding and reviving Christianity in Europe like Søren Kierkegaard had wanted. His parable of the madman depicts the death of God (an ending of humanity's need for God, Christian morality, and the end of favoring the humble and meek). Nietzsche obviously thinks it is time for sweeping and radical changes (i.e. a reevaluation of all values). Nietzsche wrote at length regarding the perceived "backwardness" of Christianity as completely incompatible with living a life seeking truth and meaning. Nietzsche took great lengths to reconstruct Christianity on modern terms. An even more radical task, however, would be to "deconstruct religion as a human made device to maintain our picture of reality, and to cope with it in the way we find best or most suitable for ourselves."[135]

Kierkegaard agrees that the current state of Christianity is unacceptable for modern society, but for very different reasons than Nietzsche. Kierkegaard's oft repeated goal, particularly in his later writings, calls for "reintroducing Christianity into Christendom." He would never have agreed with Nietzsche in terms of his take on Christian morality and the death of God. Kierkegaard seems much less optimistic concerning a godless world with no cosmic justice or divine

[135] Henriksen, Jan-Olav pg 131

order in the world. He laments that, “If there were no eternal consciousness in a human being, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting force writhing in dark passions that produced everything great and insignificant, if a bottomless, insatiable emptiness lurked beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?”[136] This is a key difference between the two. Despite the passionate inwardness Kierkegaard found necessary, in the end he still believed mankind needed to reawaken its love and need for an external pillar (ie God). Kierkegaard’s radicalized reconstruction of Christianity makes him an ideal “counterweight” to the radically negative position Nietszche held.

Rather, Kierkegaard wrote to upset blind habits and overturn easy assumptions in terms of the day to day relationship with Christianity. While it’s easy to see how Nietzsche can be regarded as secular, Kierkegaard being understood as secular is not quite as simple. Clearly he was writing to help reform Christianity in Europe, as opposed to the more revolutionary Nietzsche. However, Søren clearly had no love for the fusion of the Danish State Church and the political powers that be in Denmark. Polka argues that given the distinction between Christianity and Christendom, “the single individual of the present age of modernity is at once religious and secular.”[137] Both writers, particularly Kierkegaard, were also writing in response to the prevalent Hegelian view that the established church, the state, and culture are imperative to religion and Christianity’s gradual progress. For Kierkegaard this would lead to

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[136] Kierkegaard, Soren. "Fear and Trembling." New York City: Penguin Classics, 1985.

[137] Brayton Polka (2014) The Single Individual in Kierkegaard: Religious or Secular? Part 1, The European Legacy, 19:3, 309-322,

disastrous consequences: change was always needed in an individual, intrinsic manner. Kierkegaard writes in his journal that "the single individual is the category through which, in a religious sense, the age, history, the generation must go."[138] The established church had led Christianity to Christendom as opposed to the Christianity of the New Testament. Instead of sweeping, artificial changes to established churches, Kierkegaard encourages Christians to realize their spiritual potential through a rigid individualistic journey that could last a lifetime.

In a subtle yet notable difference between the two authors in question, Kierkegaard is "concerned not mainly with the general truth of Christianity, but how the individual relates to Christianity."[139] Kierkegaard is clearly critical towards any simplistic understanding of Christianity that reduces it to a mere historical entity. A historical approach is just not capable of framing the passionate search for eternal bliss and salvation. Unlike Nietzsche, who held that history held no reason sufficient enough for maintaining a religious position, Kierkegaard appears to think that history can be valuable through personal appropriation and/or as a means for personal development of the relation toward God. Kierkegaard clearly stressed that faith demands a leap that cannot be secured by rationality. This leap of faith he discusses was just as much a leap for Jesus' disciples as it is for modern believers. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, the absurdity of faith and the necessity of a leap of faith helps to explain the Christian

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[138] Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journals." edited by Alexander Dru, 53. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003.
[139] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. *The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche*. Pg 100

religion as more than just a historical phenomenon. To overcome the detached relation to religion is to live in faith, or in other words, “objective uncertainty.” Nietzsche clearly would represent a stark contrast to this.

The individual cannot take his religious position for granted. Henriksen adds that, “the challenge to reflect on the subjective relation to Christianity implies that one overcomes the given life world, and determines this relation by means of one’s own, individual passion, and not by simply noticing the common goods of history, tradition, or any transferred mode of thought.”[140] Simply put, the individual is challenged to create his own relation to religion in a way that is not commonly ‘arguable.’ This is most clearly explained in *Fear and Trembling*, where Kierkegaard stresses how a religious commitment cannot simply be spelled out in terms of ‘the common.’

If either writer were being honest, none of their ideas would help in making humans lives “easier” so to speak. Nietzsche is calling on his readers to suffer as a means to grow as well as turning away from religious pillars of society that have stood for 2000 years. Suffering is not meant to be feared, but embraced whenever possible to assert one’s ‘will to power.’ He writes in his unpublished book *Will to Power*, "To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities - I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them, because I wish them

[140] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. Pg 101

the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not - that one endures."[141] As harsh as it sounds, Nietzsche wants us to embrace life head on: obstacles in life are not meant to be avoided, but overcome.

Kierkegaard's tomes are certainly comparable. He was no stranger to suffering and was nicknamed the "melancholy Dane" for good reason. Henriksen wrote that, "the religious individual need not, and should not search for suffering in order to secure or confirm his or her worldview. Rather, it is a question of realizing that one exists in a state of suffering, religiously speaking that is, one exists in untruth."[142] Time and again he took the position that being a Christian is not passively obeying a set of religious dogmas and conventional rules, but a lifelong commitment to a personal and individual relationship with God that will, at times, invoke fear and trembling. He emphasized how Christian existence is always on the cusp of scandal or offense. As a result, what he offers is not a "simple or easy fix," but a sincere "challenge for a subjectivity that realizes that something in life is more important than other things, that it is worth living for in spite of scandal, and cannot be taken lightly."[143] It also involved the possibility, and even inevitability, of suffering. He writes in his journal in 1853 that, "Little by little I noticed increasingly that all those whom God really loved all had to suffer in this world. Furthermore, that is the teaching of Christianity: to be loved by God and to love God is to suffer."[144] For both of these men, suffering is an

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[141] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Will to Power." Translated by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale. New York City: Random House Inc., 1968. Pg 481
[142] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. Pg 101
[143] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. Pg 129
[144] Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Soul of Kierkegaard: pg 225

inescapable part of life that must be met in one way or another, albeit in vastly different ways. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he wrote that in order to become religious a person should "grasp the secret of suffering as the form of highest life, higher than all good fortune."[145] Suffering as the highest form of life sounds "Nietzschean" at his very core. To Kierkegaard's dismay, the spiritual struggles of Martin Luther, Job, and Jesus Himself have been forgotten. Living contemporaneously with Christ while dithering in the established churches of the day is a call for hardships indeed.

A central tenet of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy is the knight of faith and übermensch respectively. Just as the death of God was critical for Nietzsche's writings, the need for God was every bit as vital for Kierkegaard. With the death of God, Nietzsche believed there would be a void where humanity had found meaning in life. Kierkegaard would argue that meaning in life has been diluted and blurred by abstract concepts, too much Hegelian rationality, and an indifference to the pillars of Christianity such as faith and sacrifice. Kierkegaard's knight of faith is someone who has moved beyond relying on external rationality for life's problems and has dedicated themselves to a higher calling. To steal a phrase from Nietzsche, the knight of faith is 'beyond good and evil' and someone who will act regardless of ethical concerns from society. The knight is one that needs to renounce the earthly and resign to God's will. Nietzsche's ubermensch would have none of this, nor would he have been

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[145] Kierkegaard, Soren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Vol. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. Pg 372

interested in a literal “superman” with enhanced human qualities. The übermensch is someone who will make up their own moral values and strives to live in the present moment. The übermensch will accept suffering as a necessary component of life, may be deemed selfish at times, and not worried about the opinions of others; nor would they be concerned with societal conceptions of good and evil. An ubermensch will have no need for religious doctrine, deeming them weak or decadent. While Nietzsche’s übermensch would have gladly accepted and embraced suffering in order to overcome it, faith would have played no part helping to cope with pain. Kierkegaard’s stance on the obedience to God through faith is one Nietzsche predictably would have disagreed with thoroughly. His life of faith as a lifelong task from God involves “making yourself nothing before God.” Nietzsche explained this “will to nothingness” as weak, self loathing, and the “will to self belittlement.” Nietzsche would have equated Kierkegaard’s notions of faith as not only self hatred but also not wanting to know what is actually “true.” Carlisle depicts Kierkeagaard’s concept have faith quite differently, saying that “the task of faith is not to explain suffering, but to live with it.”[146] The knight of faith and the ubermensch both cherish individual thought and freedom as well as an insistence on self discipline. Both the übermensch and knight of faith are extremely individualistic in nature and despise going with a herd mentality. In short, Kierkegaard finds that God may very well be the only pillar for mankind’s existence, while Nietzsche’s work is

[146] Carlisle, Clare. Philosopher of the Heart. Pg 47

based on the idea that it is up to humanity to experience life in all its richness. In either case it's ultimately up to the individual to influence the fate of religion in the post-Enlightenment world.

Both writers were obsessed with the current events of the period and longed to be outsiders. Regarding the masses or crowds, both writers have some serious overlap, albeit with different motives and agendas. Nietzsche had thought that the majority of people were living miserably in "comfortable Christianity" with backwards values and a slave morality keeping them in that weakened state. Nietzsche believed that the herd makes decisions on fear and peer approval as opposed to personal conviction or exploration. Nietzsche tends to be much more focused on the 'will' of the individual as well as the historical roots of our Christian morality. Kierkegaard's response to the crowd, though equally bleak, was starkly different. His emphasis on the individual and objective truth does not portray 'the crowd' in a flattering light. He writes that, "a crowd – in its very concept – is untruth, since a crowd either renders the single individual wholly unrepentant and irresponsible, or weakens his responsibility by making it a fraction of his decision."[147] Kierkegaard laments about the 'philistine' (ie the crowd) and how for most, it's just easier to let others make the "big decisions" for you. The "crowd" had dodged self conscious reflections about what kind of life they want to lead. By allowing others to decide how to live for the individual, they are lacking personal freedom and authenticity. Nietzsche would have agreed

[147] Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Crowd is Untruth*. New York City: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

with this. When the crowd takes away vital individualistic decision making responsibilities, it can lead to dire consequences according to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Despite their differences, both authors appear to assert that every human being is in a process of becoming. However, they clearly disagree on the role religion can and should play in this process. Kierkegaard clearly emphasized the passionate and religious elements in existence, and opines that human development hinges on Christianity. He also stressed the need for the individual to deepen his or her faith outside of any known tradition or religious ethical life or *sittlichkeit* as Hegel would have put it. Nietzsche on the other hand, appears to have no positive understanding concerning Christianity's contribution to "the self." The same can be said concerning its historical and societal function in Europe. Therefore, his work is marked with clear alternatives separate to those developed by Christianity. For Nietzsche, religion has only served as a means of "repressing socialization of individuals into one uncritical herd, which is incapable of making its own subjectivity transparent."[148] One of the most important differences between the two is the "direction" of subjectivity. Obviously Kierkegaard directs his attention inward, but eventually outward the loving relationship with the "other" (God, family, neighbors, etc). Nietzsche also looks inward, but is much more one dimensional in a sense. He lacks any positive or trusting relation to the world of others. Put another way, these two men

[148] Henriksen, Jan-Olav. Pg 187

displayed a different relation to the other, a relation that is closely linked to their understanding of religion and the religious life.

Conclusion

It's clear that, as both writers display, religion's inevitable progress or decline in the Post-Enlightenment world depends almost entirely on the individual. The secularization of their time was immensely influential for both writers and provided the perfect opportunity for them to question Christianity, the establishment, and 'group-think.' Interestingly enough, none of the 'isms' of their time held any real attraction for either author. Liberalism was on the decline, and it appeared that nationalism, socialism, scientism/positivism, etc. held their attention except as a diversion from the issues they both wrote about extensively. Nineteenth century Europe provided the perfect context for them to express their radical new ideas. Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche looked at the world around them and saw contemporaries living in comfort and compromise, unwilling or unable to examine their own authenticity. Both writers absolutely rejected the Enlightenment project as reason being the main authority. While existentialists tend to not fit under any specific and consistent school of thought, their writings have impacted revolutionaries, churchmen, atheists, academics, politicians, and anyone looking for answers such as "how best to live?" as well as our relationship to God.Charles Williams predicted that, "His sayings will be so

moderated in our minds that they will soon become not his sayings but ours."[149] By making these two thinkers more accessible, we can see how the questions they were asking were not unlike what modern thinkers, theologians, and historians are exploring today. Religion was central to both authors' works, and its place in post-Enlightenment thought was a focal point for both of them. Analyzing Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's works offer a glimpse into the post-Enlightenment world they both asserted was lacking. They also help us understand the ever-shifting role religion played in the 1800s. They challenge their readers to reconsider to what extent religion has something important to say about human life as well as our cultural and societal conditions.

The historical significance of both writers is worth mentioning to fully understand the impact made by both men. Firstly, Kierkegaard helped to reveal the flaws of Hegel's universal synthesis through faith-oriented existentialism, which eventually led to Barthian theology in the next century. In addition, his representation of biblical figures to bring out their modern relevance, his stylistic experimentation, and his critiques of the German romantics has been explored by thinkers ever since his death. From a historical point of view, Kierkegaard's writings can be a 'friend to all and none.' Atheists dislike his popular idea concerning "the leap of faith." Christian apologists support his critiques of scientific rationality, but dislike his critiques of Christian apologetics. Liberals appreciate his love for the common man but detest his critique of the present

[149] Backhouse, Stephen. Kierkegaard pg 13

age's misguided belief in historical progress. Conservatives admire his liberty of the individual but don't like that he finds the enemies of this liberty to be Christian culture. Backhouse insightfully stated that "his influence on our various modes of thought is widespread, and the exact nature of this influence is difficult to articulate."[150] With support and disdain from so many diverse thinkers and writers, it's no wonder that Kierkegaard is routinely called the "father of existentialism." Stemming from that, existentialist theologians drew from his work in the twentieth century. Robinson reminds readers that "few modern theologians are so determinedly focused as Kierkegaard on suffering, sin, and fear as the only convincing verification of a true Christian."[151] Paul Tillich may come closest to emulating Kierkegaard's stress on the role of choice in Christian life in addition to the paradoxical nature sometimes found in Christian belief. Other theologians took note of Kierkegaard's works as well. Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* emphasized "the radical difference between the revelation of God and the natural endeavors of mankind challenges prevailing theologies of human progress."[152] He wrote in his introduction, "If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity."[153] In 1937, rebel theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer published *Discipleship*. The book attempts to depict how to live as Christians in a Christendom ruled by Hitler. Bonhoeffer was steeped in Kierkegaard's work,

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[150] Backhouse, Stephen. Kierkegaard pg 12
[151] Robinson, Dave. *Kierkegaard: A Graphic Guide*. Pg 169
[152] Ibid, pg 196
[153] Ibid pg, 196

as is evident in his major tenets such as “cheap grace” and “religionless Christianity.”[154]

Backhouse also emphasizes the influence Kierkegaard had on the highly influential writer Karl Jaspers. Jaspers would “write about Kierkegaardian themes for most of his career, changing the shape of the establishment’s view of mental illness and health.”[155] In addition, Jaspers’ pupil Hannah Arendt would go on to write about power, totalitarianism, and violence while coining the phrase ‘banality of evil’ to describe the manner in which crimes can be committed through complacency of the masses. In 1964 she recalled studying politics from a young age and stated, “then I read Kierkegaard and everything fell into place.”[156]

His influence was not confined to simply Europe; Martin Luther King Jr. discussed the influences that led to him embracing nonviolence as a way of life. In his “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” he talks about how Kierkegaard and others helped shape his thoughts. In addition, his Nobel lecture in 1964 echoed Kierkegaard when he said, “Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live.”[157] Writer John Updike’s works are littered with Kierkegaardian themes. Crowley writes that, “Not only are some of the “sources” of John Updike's fiction to be found in the works of Søren

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[154] Ibid, pg 197
[155] Ibid, pg 195
[156] Ibid, 196
[157] Ibid, pg 202

Kierkegaard: much of that fiction itself is no less than a dramatic recapitulation of the Kierkegaardian method."[158]

Nietzsche's historical influence is both rampant and notorious in the 20th century. His work was nearly unread and uninfluential in his own time, and his work suffered through his sister's distortions to twist his thinking into a set of ideas supporting Nazism. Hitler had *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* issued to every soldier in the German army.[159] His sisters blatent anti-Semitism was always a serious point of disagreement between them. Politicians, Nietzsche had observed, are more concerned with expedience than truth, as Hitler himself agreed with in his book *Mein Kampf.*[160] At the Nuremberg trials, Nietzsche was cited as a major figure in Nazi ideology. In addition, his most often quoted (and rarely understood) utterance "God is dead" placed his thought beyond the pale for many potential admirers. Nevertheless, his influence has been much richer and diverse than many stereotypes might suggest. It's not altogether surprising that a man who embraced contradictions should influence future thinkers in a profound manner.

Nietzsche's writings on the 'death of God' requiring humanity to take control of its own moral standards inspired future existentialists Karl Jaspers, Martin Heiddegger, and even Albert Camus. Possibly the most influential writer

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[158] Sue Mitchell Crowley, John Updike: "The Rubble of Footnotes Bound into Kierkegaard", Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume XLV, Issue 3, September 1977, Page 359

[159] Brians, Paul. The Influence of Nietzsche. Last modified April , 1998. https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/10/12/the-influence-of-nietzsche/

[160] Gane, Laurence. *Nietzsche: A Graphic Guide pg 149*

to be influenced by Nietzsche was French historian of ideas Michel Foucault. After reading Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, he immediately changed the direction of his work and decided to focus on the history of ideas. He cites Nietzsche's texts as the catalyst for his own work *Madness and Civilization*. Foucalt would also go on to write other micro-histories featuring sexuality and punishment. However, Nietzsche was not necessarily welcomed with open arms into liberal democratic and/or progressive circles in the twentieth century. Many, like Bertrand Russell, regarded him as an inegalitarian thinker who celebrated strength and cruelty. Russell spoke for many at the time when he wrote, "I dislike Nietzsche because he likes the contemplation of pain, because he erects conceit into a duty, because the men whom he most admires are conquerors, whose glory is cleverness in causing men to die."[161]

Ironically, Nietzsche has had a powerful influence on theologians, such as Paul Tillich, who developed an "existentialist, human centered theology which tried to salvage elements of faith while drawing on rationalism."[162] In the 1960s, Thomas Altizer helped create the oxymoronically named '"death of God theology" together with other theologians who argued for religion without God. Their persistent use of Nietzsche's most famous phrase is a reminder of their debt to him. Psychologists were not immune to Nietzsche's influence either. Sigmund Frued and Carl Jung both held a deep admiration for Nietzsche and gave him credit for shedding light on the human character. The Freudian idea of repression

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[161] Brians, Paul. The Influence of Nietzsche. Last modified April, 1998. https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/10/12/the-influence-of-nietzsche/

[162] Brians, Paul. The Influence of Nietzsche.

is also evident in Nietzsche's analysis of pride in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Also, Freud's pathological orientation is reflected in *Human, All Too Human* when he wrote "deviating natures are of the utmost importance wherever there is to be progress."[163]It's also not surprising that poets and authors have been drawn to Nietzsche. Rainer Maria Rilke, like other writers influenced by Nietzsche, rejected the traditional Christian dualism which tends to sort existence into good and evil. Rilke's affirmation of life is very much Nietzschean.

More than anything else, the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche were a call to action--a call to wake up from our dreary and comfortable lives and to seek out meaning, truth, and let our innate individuality manifest itself. Predictably, neither writer offers a "final answer" to any of the questions being posed; it is up to the reader to "find a truth that is true for them." Kierkegaard captures not only his own mood but that of Nietzsche and anyone choosing to read their works when he prophetically wrote, "The conflict about Christianity will no longer be doctrinal conflict. The conflict will be about Christianity as an existence…..The rebellion of the world shouts: We want to see action!"[164] Perhaps on an intrinsic level, believers and non-believers alike are searching for answers and are looking to these two sensational thinkers for guidance and action.

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[163] Gane, Laurence. *pg 153*
[164] Ibid., Pg 210

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