

# Notorious Nietzsche and Religion

Lecture 1: The God Killer

Lecture 2: The Christ Denier

Lecture 3: The Life Affirmer

The series *Notorious Nietzsche and Religion* seeks to:

- A. introduce Nietzsche in a fresh way to those readers familiar with his writings, those new to them but wanting to know more, and to scholars curious about a different way of reading him
- B. dispel the misconceptions which perpetuate the myth
- C. provide through his theology of suspicion, exciting ways of approaching religion and life into an AI dominated 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> century

## 1. Introductory Remarks

It is important not to underestimate Nietzsche's influence. As Paul Bishop Professor of German at the University of Glasgow notes, Nietzsche, "is a figure from the mid-nineteenth century, whose influence reached well into the twentieth century and extends beyond into our own time," to the point where he has, "in some ways become so much part of our mental furniture that it would be easy to underestimate the impact of his thought."

The German Modernist poet Gottfried Benn (1886-1956) observes that everything his generation, "had discussed, had thought out

inside itself... done to death – all [*that*] had already been expressed and exhausted in Nietzsche.”

Otfried Höffe, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen, describes Nietzsche’s reception in the twentieth century as the most fascinating in intellectual history.

Under the title ‘Nietzsche, This Time It’s Personal,’ Professor Ken Gemes draws attention not just to Nietzsche’s demanding style but also to **the radical nature of his presuppositions:**

Nietzsche makes philosophy personal, paramount, and profound. To do philosophy his way takes both courage and insight... [he] questions our intuitions ... He questions not just the justificatory status of what are taken to be some of our most fundamental mental representations, but our very access to those representations.

In effect, Gemes notes, **‘Nietzsche demands that what we do in the way of philosophy should somehow inform our whole life, and conversely, he demands that our whole lives inform our philosophy.’**

Scholar Daniel R Ahern describes the experience of following Nietzsche as ‘unsettling,’ and disconcerting.

**‘Following the trail’** often means encountering what seem to be dead ends or lines of argument that just, ‘dissolve into fragments... [or that] leave nothing but a hint, or, at best, a guess,’ along with, ‘familiar, fairly well-defined markers.’

This then is the challenge, the provocation, and dare I say, the fun of reading, interpreting and practising philosophy with Nietzsche. According to the process, the Greeks call “peripatetic,” ‘talking, thinking, walking as we talk’ I shall be delivering this lecture by

practising Nietzsche's pedagogy not just theorising about it. Tapping into rational and emotional intelligences and perhaps even experiencing a more nuanced intelligence we might call "spiritual," "intuitive."

## 1. Notorious Nietzsche

### Lecture 1: The God Killer

If I were to introduce you for the first time to the Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) I have come to know, I would take you to Berlin and my earliest childhood memory lying in a bassinet **staring into a deep yellow sun embossed against an intense blue sky.**

Curiously it is the image which will dominate the parable so ingeniously devised by Nietzsche of the madman and his lantern at midday... announcing the death of God.

But, given the dismissiveness, the scepticism and disdain with which Nietzsche is often spoken in academe, I might have to take you further out than just our solar system, to the galaxies millions and billions of light years away – and Hans Zimmer's soundtrack for Chris Nolan's film *Interstellar* (2014), to which you have been listening, **a soundtrack which matches the title of Nietzsche's first and indeed foundational work** whose details he refined, and significantly in one notable aspect—recanted—the *pessimism* which leads to *nihilism* that he observed happening around him in the Europe he knew.

The title for that foundational work was Nietzsche's first love, from whose central ideas he never deviated. In the German it reads: "**Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik,**" 1872) in English: *The Birth of Tragedy arising from the Spirit of Music.*

While it is usually translated 'Spirit of Music,' I choose tonight to employ another of Nietzsche's terms as well: "**das Phantom von Ego**" which Nietzsche deployed to define the fate of the human spirit when it becomes less than its true self through neglect. But also, paradoxically, "**das Phantom**" speaks to Nietzsche of **an indefinable ethereal mystery, a special quality woven into the fabric of the human experience— known and unknown, mostly unknown.**

[PAUSE]

Hans Zimmer's sounds to which you listened as you entered this lecture hall speak of what Nietzsche might have meant by "aus dem Geiste der Music" arising from the spirit of music: **the bewilderment** we as humans feel when we come face to face with **the conundrum** of space-time and the *reality* of space-time's inhospitability, underscored by the brutality of the vastness and impenetrability of a cosmos which defies understanding.

The 95% unknown which astrophysicists name 'dark matter.' Its indescribable beauty and... its terror.

In sum... Zimmer's music gathers together the admission of unknowing and bewilderment which Nietzsche insists extracting from us as the necessary process of *naturalisation*, **one** which strips

humanity of all its illusion and self-delusion its pretensions of superiority.

For if our love of life which he called '*amor fati*,' (the love of our destiny) and our faith is real, they must together stand the test Nietzsche defines as the "eternal recurrence of the same"; the ALWAYS, the relentless ever-repeating challenges of suffering, misunderstanding and profound ignorance which assail humanity, leaving their trail of utter bewilderment... which Greek philosophy calls *aporia*, and Greek dramatists and musicologists name "tragedy" – the inescapable shock which an examined life must embrace and transcend.

[PAUSE]

**That's where you'll find Friedrich Nietzsche.**

As he leads, I follow. As I follow, we follow together and discover a place such as Nietzsche describes in his masterwork *So Spoke Zarathustra*:

It is strange, then, that in the face of ... inevitable mutual defeat – the irreparable and ultimate defeat of understanding, which life will never allow to tame and for which life will always remain insurmountable, alien; and the inevitable defeat of action which will never succeed in ordering the world which would pacify the longing for order, for structure, for stability inscribed in every action – is it strange that tasting the bitterness of the defeat on their lips, [Life and Zarathustra] should look at each other and gaze on the green meadow over which the cool evening is running just then and ... weep together? Is it strange then, that [exactly *then*] life was dearer to me than all my wisdom ever was?

So it is, inevitably, as we follow, that we arrive at a place in the mind of Nietzsche who must address the big questions of life as Professor More interprets them and as Nietzsche may himself have posed them:

How do we react to pain and loss? [Do] we turn ... to ways of thinking that justify and explain our distress, [to those] which console and give comfort [?] [But] what if our suffering continues and deepens? What if the familiar ways of thinking fail to heal us? What if they come to feel not only ineffective, but injurious? [...] What if untold human energy and hope [is] invested in exactly the wrong ways to react and think about human affliction? What if these ways [are] called the flowers of the human spirit: philosophy, religion, and science?

What then?

When on a Christmas Eve—1914 to be precise, on the Western Front—fourteen years after Nietzsche’s death we find ourselves... in a no-man’s land... where peace must reign only for a very short time – when soldiers from both sides of the divide *must* see and *do see through* the stupidity and madness of war.

When they are able to share Christmas together from opposite sides in food and drink, play together, bury their dead... grace those lost lives with dignity and honour.

Only to continue what has now come to be called *the Great War* ... which Nietzsche foresaw. When at the behest of their commanders and political leaders millions of lives are lost. A war which had been billed as nothing more than “a game of ruggar” ... surely to be over by Christmas 1914.

**It was not to be.**

The carnage continued for another four years.

Why must we follow this notorious Nietzsche and stop *there*?

Because it is *there*, ironically that two years later in 1916 when 150,000 of an especially durable wartime copy of *So Spoke Zarathustra*, is distributed to literate troops who are encouraged to take it with them into the trenches ... along with Goethe's *Faust* and the New Testament.

I say *ironically* because Rektor P. Hoche writing in March 1916 claims that "[Its] beautiful words more than [for] any other Volk possessed fighting natures in Zarathustra's sense."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, the words *were* "beautiful," but as Robert Pippin a much-respected Nietzsche scholar observes, "... it is hard to imagine a book less suitable for such a purpose ("fighting natures"),"<sup>2</sup> indeed, a book which has as its main theme the sort of self-overcoming that *affirms* life, not death.

[PAUSE]

**With introductions over, Nietzsche stops and suddenly turns to speak the parable of the madman.**

**Is *this* what you want? he asks, Is *this* what you think, Is *this* what you mean?**

And is just about to recite the parable... when more words in his spirit interject:

*In the horizon of the infinite.* – We have forsaken the land and gone to sea. We have destroyed the bridge behind us – more so, we have

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<sup>1</sup> "Nietzsche und der Deutsche Kampf," *Zeitung für Literatur, Kunst und Wissenschaft* 39:6 (12 March 1916), cited in Steven Ascheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p.135).

<sup>2</sup> Eds. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), xi.

demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, [watch out]! Beside you is [an] ocean... yes, it's true, it doesn't always roar, and at times it lies there like silk and gold and dreams of goodness. But there will be hours when you [come] to realise that it is infinite and that there is nothing more [bewildering] than infinity. Oh, poor bird that has felt free and now strikes [*again*] against the walls of the cage... what [devastation] when homesickness for the land overcomes you as if there had been more *freedom* there – and [now] there [*is*] no more [such thing] [as even the notion] of 'land.'

Nietzsche now speaks the parable:

*The madman.* – Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, 'I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!'

Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter.

Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated? – Thus, they shouted and laughed, [the] one interrupting the other.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes.

'Where is God?' he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I. We are all his murderers.

But how did we do this? (*the madman asks*)  
How were we able to drink up the [ocean]?  
Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?  
What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?  
Where is it moving to?  
Where are we moving to?  
Away from [*all*] suns?

Are we not [*continually*] falling?  
[And] backwards, sideways, forwards [...] in all directions?  
Is there [*still*] an up and down?  
Aren't we straying as [if] through an [*infinite*] nothing?  
Isn't empty space *breathing* at us?



Hasn't it got colder?  
Isn't the [darkness], night and more night[fall] coming again and again?

Don't lanterns have to be lit in the morning?

[Haven't you yet heard] the [sounds] of the gravediggers who are burying God?  
[Haven't you yet] [smelled] [...] the divine decomposition?  
– Gods too decompose!  
God is dead!

**[PAUSE] – Interstellar – Hans Zimmer Score plays (1 minute)** where it was stopped at the beginning of the lecture– the parable continues:

God remains dead.  
And we have killed him.

How can we console ourselves? [Of all murderers we [must be] the worst].

The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this from us?

With what water [is it possible] to clean ourselves?  
What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves?  
Is not the immensity of it all too great for us?  
Do we not ourselves have to become gods ...?

There was never a greater deed – and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history up to now.

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners[.] They too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly.

Finally [...] he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke in pieces and was extinguished.

'I come too early,' he said, 'my time is not yet.' This [catastrophic] event is still on its way wandering [in the wilderness] ... it has not yet reached the ears of [this humanity].

Lightning and thunder [require] time; the light of stars need time; [actions], deeds, need time even after they have [been accomplished], in order to be seen and heard [for their true meaning to be understood].

This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars – *and yet they have done it themselves!*

*Nietzsche leans on his walking staff: concludes the parable.*

[The story is still told] how on that same day the madman forced his way into several churches and started to sing his *requiem aeternum deo* [Grant God eternal rest].

When [the madman] was [escorted out] he was said to always have replied...

‘What then are these churches now if not tombs and sepulchres of God?’

### **So spoke Nietzsche through the mouth of the madman.**

The words appear in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* after a profound change in his thinking following a health visit to Sorrento in Italy. This period of deep contemplation produces his *magnum opus, So Spoke Zarathustra* and the final review of his life’s work *Ecce Homo*, the Latin Vulgate version of “behold the Man,” of the Christ and Pilate scene before Christ’s crucifixion.

**What are we to make of the parable? Is Nietzsche really the God-killer that his detractors make him out to be?**

I have learned from Nietzsche. He has taught me to observe and listen critically – not in a negative sense – but in the positive sense of ensuring that I adopt the kind of thinking which is open to the REALITIES before me and not take anything at face value, *even* Nietzsche’s plain speaking.

**Nietzsche insists we must make up our own mind as we unpick the parable together.**

Firstly, we confront the larger context—the book in which the parable is spoken *The Gay Science (GS)*.

There we discover Nietzsche's sense of a deep darkness descending upon Europe the very darkness which informs the parable and we might say continues to darken in our day:

the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe [...] **some kind of a sun seems to have set;** some old deep trust [has] turned into doubt: [...] [the] world [becoming] ... autumnal, more mistrustful, stranger, 'older.'

But with that estrangement, paradoxically, a hope and a great expectation is born:

Indeed, at hearing the news that 'the old god is dead,' **we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement...** – finally, the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; *finally*, our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger... **the sea our sea lies open again;// maybe there has never been such an 'open sea.'**

And with that new birth, an audacity, a new-found boldness – questions allowed to arise which refuse to be risk-averse:

**'Is that what you *want* – really want?' Is that what you really think?**

Questions which disturb because they come from a mind which we would normally dismiss as madness. But in the present times as with

Nietzsche's, such madness materialises, morphs and becomes a terrifying reality.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes.  
'Where is God?' he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I.  
We are all his murderers.

So much ink has been spilled on this. So many academic papers written.  
So much deep emotion expressed.

Even Nietzsche's best friends with him in Sorrento Italy were deeply troubled by the ideas he expressed. They recognised his pain but could neither understand nor embrace its cause.

If he were able at the time he might have said, what he wrote later in a letter to a friend:

I see and feel [my] friends' distress, which mirror my own. My 'time... to recall and reflect on myself, was terrifying in a way  
I saw myself utterly emaciated, utterly starved. [My] science hitherto had excluded my *realities*, and my "[true aspirations]." I realise that 'soon [I shall] have to express ideas which people *regard as disgraceful*... even my friends and relations will become shy and frightened.

[Yet] I must pass through that fire.'

In effect Nietzsche's the *Gay Science* draws from that Sorrento experience, in tintured by the same ambivalence :

On this perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grape turns brown... the eye of the sun just fell upon my life: I look forward, I looked backward, and never saw so many good things at once [...] I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation... someday, I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.

Aphorism 586, *Human All Too Human* is also a reflection with its roots deeply imbedded in the Sorrento experience, with visions of mountains, the moon, the sea – of love and Spring, underlining how easily those moments can pass us by:

Life consists of rare individual moments of the highest significance [...] they all speak truly to our heart only once: if they ever do truly find speech. For many people never experience these moments at all but are themselves [only] intervals and pauses in the symphony of real life.

Nietzsche speaks continually from a place of deep gratitude, and here in this short excerpt, with great empathy:

I am quietly waiting for the waves in which my poor friends are floundering to die down: if I pushed them into these waves—*life* is not in danger, I know that from experience; and if, here and there, *friendship* might be in *danger*—then we will serve the truth, and say: “as yet, we have loved only a cloud of one another.”

As we return to the parable we treat it as one would a Symposium, a dialogue, with its antiphonal Q-A: reminiscent of God’s conversation with Job, one of the oldest texts of the Hebrew Bible.

But how did we do this? ( <i>the madman asks</i> ) [How] were we able to drink up the [ocean]? <i>Who</i> gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?
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Did we realise the significance of what we were doing? The impossibility of it?

Can you by your cleverness drink the ocean dry? Can you really expunge a horizon as it recedes into infinity?

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?  
 Where is it moving to?  
 Where are we moving to?  
 Away from *[all]* suns?

Is not what you have done the decoupling of the earth from its sun? And if so, does that mean

we [...] [are] *[continually]* falling?  
 ... backwards, sideways, forwards [...] in all directions?  
 Is there *[still]* an up and down?  
 Aren't we straying as [if] through an *[infinite]* nothing?  
 Isn't empty space *breathing* at us?

Where is our compass now? How will we know what is up, what is down? How will we stop ourselves from falling? How will we ever be certain... about *anything*?

**[PAUSE]**

So compelling is Nietzsche's parable, that we easily slip into a reductionist and literalist mindset, never thinking for one moment that the parable in its entirety is turning (Nietzsche's) irony on us all.

How could *we* be so foolish as to think we could murder God? How irrational to think God could die. How misguided if we don't see that the whole exercise is a *non sequitur*.

If God is truly God, then *ipso facto* such a God *cannot* die and certainly cannot be *murdered*. Other gods, yes, who are mere idols; abstractions, playthings for our indulgence; yes, they die and when they encourage violence, deserve to die.

But the true God, the God Moses spoke to, who cannot be defined and boxed in, the *I AM God* who will be *who* and *where* and *how*

he/she/they will be that God can only wonder at *our* simplistic ways.

All of which opens the space to *Ecce Homo* the Latin Vulgate version of Jesus' of Nazareth's encounter with Pilate and the crucifixion sentence, Nietzsche's review of his life's work, and the subject of the second lecture, *Nietzsche the Christ Denier*.

While my conviction is based on more than just this following statement from *Human All Too Human*, with which I finish, I found it apt to whet your appetite and mine. It is a Nietzsche statement which tellingly and significantly expresses his surprising and close identification with 'Christ.'

**["Dieser homo bin ich nämlich selbst, eingerechnet das ecce; der Versuch mich ein wenig Licht und Schrecken zu verbreiten, scheint mir fast zu gut gelungen."]<sup>3</sup>**

Which when paraphrased (mine) reads as follows:

*Ecce "homo" is who I am – I am the man. My title aims to make that point. I am identified with Christ on Pilate's judgement day. And when you behold me, in the persona of the Christ, I am asking you to cast a long lingering look, not a passing glance, but make of it a considered, rational intelligent observation borne of curiosity as to why I am so identified. The whole exercise of this book... intended to enlighten and to startle I suspect is going to be too successful.*

**[PAUSE] – Interstellar – Hans Zimmer Score plays (2 minute) for people to catch breath**

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<sup>3</sup> KSB 8, Nr.1144, S.471, Z.12-15). "This "man" *homo* I myself am and calculated is the *ecce* [meaning 'behold'/'betrachte" (imperative)], look carefully, 'weigh up'/think about what you're looking at = den Blick längere Zeit auf jemanden richten, etwas neugierig... literally, be curious enough to cast a lingering look at someone, be prepared as you look at [me] that it be an [intelligent] 'considered,' judgement.

**This first lecture will be offered in November 2023, in person and live streamed.  
Lectures 2 and 3 will be offered in 2024.**