Nietzsche’s account of religion

THE ASCETIC IDEAL

‘From the beginning, Christian faith has meant a sacrifice: the sacrifice of freedom, pride, spiritual self-confidence; it has meant subjugation and self-derision, self-mutilation.’ (§46) Nietzsche’s account of religious belief is closely linked with his account of slave morality and the slave revolt (see the handout on ‘Master and slave morality’). Nietzsche is concerned primarily with Christianity, though he thinks that other religions equally display the ascetic ideal described here, e.g. §61, §195.

Prior to the revolt, pagan gods were based on the qualities that the aristocratic class saw and valued in themselves. With the revolt, God became reinterpreted as the opposite of human beings’ animal nature. Goodness came from a transcendent spiritual world. Whatever was of the natural world, especially our bodies and ‘their’ instinctual desires, was sinful (§47), and something to feel guilt about. So Christian faith required a sacrifice of our animal instincts and wills. Before God, we are guilty in our very nature.

This is the ascetic ideal from which slave morality originated. It denies the value of our (animal) life as it is, and looks for redemption in a transcendent realm. It rejects bodily desires and experiences and praises a life of the ‘spirit’. In this, it complicates the spirit, setting our wills against themselves. There is what we naturally want, and opposed to this is the ideal of transcending what we want. So the ascetic ideal spurs people on to become better, more developed spiritually. It transforms the energy of their bodily desires into spiritual desires (§47), and the constant sense of guilt and failure drives ever greater attempts at ‘making amends’ for who one is, which can expressed in cultural achievements and spiritual depth.

The original force and demands of Christianity have faded, thinks Nietzsche. Religious belief today is ‘naïve and quarrelsome’; at least the original Christian faith deserves respect, something that believers in modern ideas are unlikely to understand (§58).

Is Nietzsche’s interpretation of religious belief fair? For instance, what about the meaning of the Incarnation? This doctrine – that God became human – is usually interpreted as a validation of human nature, as a good gift from God. Nietzsche can ask in reply how successfully this message has actually got through. How much Christian teaching has celebrated the body in contrast with that which has denigrated it? Even if there are strands of Christian thought that challenge his analysis, historically most religions have incorporated an ideal of a spiritual life that transcends and denigrates the body.

The will to power in religion

The ascetic ideal is paradoxical for Nietzsche. It seems to oppose life and the will itself; and yet all values are an expression of the will to power. How could it have been adopted at all, and how could it have become so widespread? Answering these questions will complete the natural history of morals.
The spread of the ascetic ideal (in the West) originates in the slave revolt, which Nietzsche says began with the Jewish prophets and continued with Christianity. It was not, then, slaves but priests (and saints) who first held the ascetic ideal. This is only suggested in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but developed at length in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III.

The priests do not have the direct, expressive will to power as the aristocrats. They resent the power of the aristocrats and the respect they have gained, but they cannot express this directly. So they teach that aristocratic values are evil and decadent, and praise a life of poverty and self-denial, the opposite of the aristocratic ideal. They develop the idea of God to support this revaluation. God will punish evil-doers (the aristocrats) and reward the good (the slaves). They create a standard by which the nobles are inferior to themselves and the common people. So they use the ascetic ideal to gain power as teachers, and therefore leaders, of the people. Nietzsche connects this account to Christianity’s gaining power in the Roman empire, although the ‘priest’ type exists everywhere, he says.

But why should people listen to the priests accept this revaluation? What is the appeal?

The aristocrats: the ancient aristocrats were amazed by the phenomenon of the saint, respecting the self-discipline involved in self-denial: ‘in it they recognized anew and were able to honour their own strength’ (§51). They made the mistake of thinking that the ‘monstrous denial’ required by the ascetic ideal could not be for nothing, and so become susceptible to the saint’s values.

The common people: the praised life of poverty and self-denial is the common person’s life. They suffer physically, but also mentally, through the resentment they feel towards the aristocrats. But what is worst is the thought that their suffering is meaningless. The ascetic ideal gives meaning to their suffering, providing two outlets for their resentment: first, that the aristocrats can be blamed (an imaginary form of revenge), but second and more centrally, that they are themselves the cause of their suffering. The ascetic ideal condemns the body, our instincts, our sensuous desires; yet we are animals with these desires. Our suffering is our punishment for being what we are, for not successfully transcending the body and the world, for not living up to the ascetic ideal. This makes suffering meaningful, and therefore bearable. Furthermore, the idea of a transcendent world after this one provides hope. And so the common people adopt the ascetic ideal.

Common people have only a weak will to power that struggles to maintain itself in the face of so much suffering. The denial of the will to power, the denial of this bodily life in favour of a spiritual life in a transcendent world, is a way in which their will and their lives succeed in maintaining themselves. So the ascetic ideal is an expression of their will to power.

Nietzsche repeatedly notes that the ascetic ideal cannot be honest with itself (e.g. §2) and acknowledge its historical or psychological origins, because it disapproves of the motives it is founded upon. Yet more direct assertions of will to power continue to slip out in the actions of people supposedly acting ‘morally’:

> In helpful and benevolent people one nearly always finds a clumsy cunning that first rearranges the person who is to be helped so that, for example, he ‘deserves’ their help, needs their help in particular, and will prove to be deeply grateful,
dependent, subservient for all their help. With fantasies such as these they control the needy like a piece of property... (§194)

And how Nietzsche continues the passage illustrates his account of the priests:

no father disputes his right to be allowed to subjugate his child to his concepts and judgments... And like fathers, so teachers, classes, priests, and princes still see in every new person an immediate opportunity for a new possession.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF RELIGION

The first advantage of religion is that it gives people’s suffering and their lives meaning, and so enables them to continue to live. We can tell how sick of life someone is, Nietzsche says, by how they want the image of life distorted, falsified, ‘transcendentalized’ (§59). Religious people have a terrible fear that life is meaningless.

But enabling ‘weak’ people to live is also the first and main disadvantage of religion. Christianity has kept alive what ought to have perished, and so humanity has become degenerate. We have come to hate life, the will to power, strength, whatever is of the ‘world’. And so, a second disadvantage, the development of higher people has been undermined, because their traits are slandered as evil.

But Nietzsche repeatedly praises what the ascetic ideal has made possible, in terms of art and in deepening the soul. Art makes human life bearable by making it beautiful, even as it falsifies it. And so Nietzsche calls religious people the highest artists (§59). They falsify the image of life the most, but make something more beautiful out of human beings. This is a second advantage of religion. It allows us to bear the sight of ourselves (§61).

A related, third advantage is that the ascetic ideal calls upon people to strive to better themselves. Nietzsche is concerned that herd morality after the ascetic ideal will lead to us becoming even ‘smaller’.

A fourth advantage is that the ascetic ideal is the source of the unconditional will to truth. While Nietzsche condemns this, he says that it is because of the unconditional will to truth that we have been able to discover the origins of the ascetic ideal and undermine it, together with moral values and the idea of God itself. In early times, people sacrificed people to God; then they sacrificed their strongest instincts; and now the same ideal has led them to sacrificing God, so that all hope and comfort is gone (§55). The development of atheism in the West is the result of the commitment to truth ‘at any price’. But giving up belief in God means that we must, in consistency, also give up the morality that has gone with it. That morality is founded on a belief in a transcendent realm; without this, it lacks foundation. The unconditional will to truth leads us, eventually, beyond good and evil.

The fifth advantage leads onto a discussion of the future use of religion by new philosophers, and helps us understand the religious tone of Nietzsche’s account of eternal return. This advantage is illustrated not by Christianity, but by pagan Greek religion: ‘The astonishing thing about the ancient Greeks’ religiosity is the tremendous wealth of gratitude pouring forth from it: only a very noble kind of person can face nature and life like this!’ (§49). Affirming eternal return required a great sense of affirmation of life, which we can now say would naturally lead to and express itself in gratitude for life.
THE FUTURE USE OF RELIGION

New philosophers will use religion in their grand projects of turning humanity into a higher kind of being (§61), adopting a role similar to that of ‘priests’. First, religion can be used as a way of overcoming obstacles. It can be used in selecting what kind of people go on to reproduce (presumably by labelling them as valuable or ‘chosen’). It is a bond that ties subjects to their rulers, as subjects give up their judgments of right and wrong to their rulers. It protects the more contemplative philosophers against the cruder political authority of others, supporting their authority as derived from a different, higher source. Its practices also protect the ‘purity’ of their souls.

Second, religion can also be used as a training in leadership. Religion provides guidance and the opportunity for exercising authority over others. It encourages self-development, an chance to test one’s self-control and solitude – not only for the new philosophers but for the people they are breeding to become higher. New philosophers will also use, not the ascetic ideal, but ascetism in their self-transformation. The ancient philosophers used ascetism to be able to pursue their goal of doing philosophy single-mindedly, and all higher people must have some ascetism to transform themselves and achieve their goals.

Finally, to common people ‘who exist to serve and be generally useful’, and who are therefore needed to support the project, religion also offers contentment, an acceptance of how things are.