Decline Of Religion In 20th Century, Neitzsche Essay, Research Paper

In this paper I am supposed to choose an existential or nihilist thinker and apply their thoughts to the 20th century problems that we identified at the beginning of class. I?m not going to do this. What I?m going to write about is one of, if not the biggest, problem mankind has ever created for itself. Christianity. While Christianity was not on the list of problems that we identified I cannot help but wonder if the man I will examine and his writings had anything to do with the decline of this outdated monolith. Of course I?m speaking of none other than Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, born Oct. 15, 1844, was a German philosopher who, together with, Soren Kierkegaard shares the distinction of being a forerunner of Existentialism. He studied at the universities of Leipzig and Bonn, receiving his doctorate degree from the Leipzig in 1869. Because he had already been published, he was offered the chair of classical philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland before the doctorate was officially conferred on him. He left the university in 1879 due to ill health caused by a short stint in the military, and began concentrating on his writings. My focus will be on three of his works that show his opinions of the Christian/Slave morality, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and Beyond Good and Evil.

Beginning with The Gay Science, first published in 1882, Nietzsche?s contempt for Christianity (as well as other groups notably Germans) came to the forefront. In the third book Nietzsche?s Madman comes looking for God. As men who did not believe laughed and asked if God had become lost the madman uttered the words that the author is best known for. ?God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.? The Enlightenment, which had already begun to question religion laid the groundwork for the madman. Those men to whom he questions are the ?Enlightened? thinkers who felt the grips of religion begin to loosen. However these men are shaken by the madman?s words, showing the grip to not be completely gone. The madman seeing this throws his lantern to the ground ?I have come to early, my time is not yet.? as the light fades from his broken lantern.

And with that fading light I can almost see the darkness of Christian thought creep back into the picture. Consider the possibility of the madman today. More and more people are finding their way out of this darkness. Could it be that the lantern?s glow is finally overpowering those long dead father figures of antiquity? While Christianity is far from gone its steady decline cannot be ignored. Can it be that now, in this age of information mankind is finally strong enough to throw off the chains that were applied millienuim ago to our weak minded forefathers? I don?t think so. It is an unfortunate fact that even today human beings are not able to stand tall and face the very real fact that there could only be life and nothing else. The church?s tyrannical grip came about when life was harsh and short. By convincing these poor souls that heaven awaited if they did their duties and were pious was an effective tool for keeping the sheep in line. And the punishment that awaited the unfaithful were so terrible that sin (oddly enough all things that are enjoyable to those who live life) became an even more effective tool than the rewards of salvation. In book three, 129 and 130 of The Gay Science, Nietzsche writes on the conditions for God as well as the Christian resolve.

The conditions for God.— ?God himself cannot exist without wise people.? said Luther with good reason. But ?God can exist even less without unwise people?—that our good Luther did not say.

A dangerous resolve.— The Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad.

Nietzsche was well aware that Christianity?s bread and butter has always been weak of will and uninformed. Though Nietzsche wrote of the death of God he was aware that the majority of Europe was not prepared to follow him into a Godless world. As he writes in book five, 347 of The Gay Science of believers and their need to believe.

Believers and their need to believe.—

It has been argued that Nietzsche is a social Darwinist. This interpretation is not far from accurate in the sense that Nietzsche values the “beast” in humanity. However, it should be noted that the “survival of the fittest” is not a Nietzschean law. On the contrary, he argues that in his own time the strong and the noble were losing the battle for survival against the weak, who manifest another, more sinister, and opposite will … the will to nothingness, or the will to nihilism. Through a re-valuation of “noble” values, the weak (specifically the socialists–the inheritors and proponents of the Christian/slave morality) have created a world in which the strong and noble are seen to be “evil,” whereas from Nietzsche’s perspective these “evil” qualities are valuable in themselves, in that they serve the “enhancement” of the species as a whole:

Hardness, forcefulness, slavery, danger in the alley and the heart, life in hiding, stoicism, the art of experiment and devilry of every kind, that everything evil, terrible, tyrannical in man, everything in him that is kin to beasts of prey and serpents, serves the enhancement of the species “man” as much as its opposite does. Indeed, we do not even say enough when we say only that much. BGE 44

Evidently, Nietzsche believes that these “evil” acts serve the betterment of the species even more that acts of altruism, kindness, and love–about all of which Nietzsche is generally suspicious. For Nietzsche the “truth” of the matter is that in its essence, life wants to dominate; it matters not what. It does not want to be controlled, channeled, contained, or negated as, he argues, the slave morality and its proponents would have it. His description of the origin of what he calls the “higher cultures” illustrates this point:

Truth is hard. Let us admit to ourselves, without trying to be considerate, how every higher culture on earth has so far begun. Human beings whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey who were still in possession of unbroken strength of will and lust for power, hurled themselves upon weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races, perhaps traders or cattle raisers, or upon mellow old cultures whose last vitality was even then flaring up in splendid fireworks of spirit and corruption. In the beginning the noble caste was always the barbarian caste: their predominance did not lie mainly in physical strength but in strength of the soul–they were more whole human beings (which also means, at every level, “more whole beasts”). BGE 257

Interestingly enough, physical strength, here, is not the principal attribute that Nietzsche values. Rather, it is “strength of the soul,” the kind of strength that comes from a lack of guilt about one’s being, a wholehearted embrace of life in all its fecundity and wantonness, a will to dominate (as opposed to the force necessary to dominate), and a will to action that Nietzsche values. Life unrestrained by a life-negating slave morality is the key for Nietzsche.