

**She Closes Her Eyes to Herself:**

**Nietzsche, Feminism, and Christianity**

**Abbie N. Caudill**

**Washington and Lee University, Class of 2013**

**Candidate for Bachelor of the Arts in Religion with Honors**

**Advised by Jeffrey Kosky and Alexandra Brown**

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### **Abstract**

This paper works to examine the lives and arguments of early Christian female ascetics and modern feminist Christians through the lens of Friedrich Nietzsche. The arguments against orthodox Christianity presented in Nietzsche serve as a foundation for the unorthodox practices of female Christian ascetics in Roman society and of feminist Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Themes of life affirmation, self-creation, and freedom from moral judgment connect the women presented in this paper to the work of Nietzsche. Concepts such as the pathos of distance, the master mindset, and affirmation and denial are examined both in the writing of Nietzsche and in the context of Christianity. Nietzsche's writing on the problems and struggles of female existence in patriarchal society are compared to the writing of feminists such as Judith Butler and Margaret Farley. Finally the conceptualization of a new definition of God and of Christianity found in the work of feminist Christians, the lives of the female ascetics, and in Nietzsche is applied to a general 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian context. This research suggests that Nietzsche's work can be utilized in the context of feminist movements in ways it has not in the past, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of both Nietzsche's relationship to Christianity and unorthodox feminist movements' foundations in philosophy.

### **Preface and Acknowledgments**

My inspiration for this project came in my sophomore year at Washington and Lee University in my Religion and Existentialism class. When reading Friedrich Nietzsche, I found myself in agreement with his strong arguments against Christianity. As a Christian myself, I was fascinated with the similarities I found between Nietzsche's writing and the topics of discussion among my liberal, feminist, and even atheist friends when it came to religion. The complex relationship among religion, psychology, and politics had always fascinated me, but I found Nietzsche's writing especially compelling in both its strength and insight. I felt that Nietzsche had something to add to the scholarly and political discussion about Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. I knew that the curiosity sparked by my first reading of Nietzsche was something I wanted to pursue further, and I was able to develop this personal interest into a thesis.

The writing of this paper became an opportunity for personal growth as much as academic development. Themes of gender, development, and sexuality, which had always been the focus of my psychological research, became prominent in this paper as well. This project, more than any other in my academic career, has allowed me to pursue questions about gender and faith that are central to my own life in an insightful, meaningful, and of course challenging manner. I began this thesis with much to learn about the topics included here, and I feel that the insight I have gained over the past year has been deeply personal as well as academic.

I have many people to thank in this project for both their encouragement and their unconditional support. First, I would like to thank Daniel, Jared, the entire Mock Trial team, and my family, who have been my sustaining force through this process. Thank you to

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*Abbie N. Caudill*

*Lexington, Virginia*

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## Introduction

On April 2, 2012 the cover of Newsweek magazine featured a figure wearing a hooded sweatshirt while walking through New York City. The youthful and modern outfit and background were juxtaposed against a familiar face- a portrayal of Jesus, wearing his crown of thorns and tangled beard. The caption simply read, "Forget the Church, Follow Jesus." The accompanying article was titled "Christianity in Crisis" and detailed frustrations with Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular from the point of view of Andrew Sullivan, a Catholic gay man. The article examined the sexism of the Church through issues such as birth control, but more generally examined the political nature that Christianity has taken on. At one point in the article, Sullivan poses an important question with respect to the Church's political strivings- "What is politics if not a dangerous temptation toward controlling others rather than reforming oneself?" <sup>1</sup>

While Sullivan's argument is modern in its details and references, the crisis he describes is one that the Christian Church has been fighting against for years. Women in particular have faced a Church that both appeals to their faith while seemingly failing to protect their rights or even fighting against them on some political fronts. In the early Christian church, women turned to asceticism to fight against the limited roles that Christianity and Roman society had created for them. Similarly, some modern feminist Christians have argued for a new Christianity which supports individual freedom and life affirmation while condemning the political, judgmental, and social morality that has become synonymous with Christianity for many people.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sullivan, "Christianity In Crisis" *Newsweek*, 2012.

The modern feminist Christian opinions against the Church are not without precedent. While Nietzsche is not known as a feminist, his arguments against the Christian Church support and often mirror those of many modern feminist Christians, and his suggestions toward a new view of God, if not a new God entirely, are not only useful but foundational to many of the views and ideals of modern feminist Christians looking to change Christianity and its meaning personally and in society. Nietzsche does not describe himself as Christian, yet many Christian feminists use an unorthodox Christian spirituality to overcome the obstacles placed by society and religion and create a fulfilling life for themselves much like the one described in Nietzsche. Many of the questions posed by Sullivan are also explored through Nietzsche, and a modern reading of Nietzsche can provide insight and support to the arguments for reformation of the Christian Church.

In combining principles used by the spiritual early female Christian ascetics and Nietzsche, an atheist philosopher, modern feminist Christians have the opportunity to strengthen the Christian Church through creating a model by which spirituality and atheism can coalesce to create an improved dialogue and framework for Christianity. While the sources for these ideals are different both on their background and their goals, the critiques of the Christian Church and the ideals expressed are complimentary, and these are the same opinions and arguments found in modern feminist Christianity. Drawing from these varying sources provides depth and strength to the modern feminist Christian argument.

## Christian Foundations in Nietzsche

### **An Unorthodox Christian**

The study of Christianity has always been complex. From its beginning, Christianity included a variety of beliefs, rituals, definitions, and practices that together represented a belief in Christ. Even this belief was debated, with varying definitions and interpretations of humanity, divinity, and the life of Jesus. While the ancient Church councils met to set Church doctrine and define orthodox Christianity, these orthodox definitions did not quiet the debate.<sup>2</sup> In modern theological study, the variations on Christianity have continued to be diverse. While Christianity is just one of many world religions, there is no doubt that the discussions and debates surrounding this religion are beyond what one could address in a lifetime of work. One of the vast areas of study within Christianity stems from the unorthodox beliefs and practices of those who call themselves Christians yet disagree with parts of the church dogma. It is here, through unorthodox Christianity, that many philosophers, thinkers, and individuals who do not consider themselves Christians, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, are most able to contribute to the discussion of Christianity and religion in general through a mutual disagreement with various aspects of orthodox Christianity. While unorthodox Christians vary greatly in their arguments against orthodoxy, they all share in their desire to broaden the definition of what being a Christian means by going against the ideals that are considered orthodox in the religion. Unorthodox

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<sup>2</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 48.



believers and non-believers can reach common ground through discussion of disagreements with Christian orthodoxy.

A debate within Christianity lies in the relation of God to the world. The spiritual and moral emphasis of orthodox Christianity has traditionally been thought of as casting worldly things, from the body to possessions to experiences, in a negative light. Vatican II described the world as having “fallen into the bondage of sin” and noted that the document was “inspired by no earthly ambition” but instead motivated by a superior spiritual cause.<sup>3</sup> However, a modern, unorthodox Christian perspective is taking shape, which ties the experiences of this world to God. In this way, nonbelievers who are focused on worldly experiences and sciences can again find common ground with unorthodox believers who emphasize this world as opposed to casting it aside as a temporary burden. Christianity has always debated the relationship between the divine and the humane since the time of the first Church councils and creeds, but modern times have allowed for developments in science that have increased the chasm between orthodox spirituality and science. Christian believers who attempt to reconcile these two worlds find themselves able to engage non-believing scientists in ways that other Christians may not.

### **Nietzsche and Religion**

It is clear that commonality can be found between unorthodox believers and non-believers, yet a question exists as to what role figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche play in this discussion. Nietzsche’s strong anti-Christian sentiments seem to go beyond a non-

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<sup>3</sup> “Documents of the II Vatican Council,” accessed on March 25, 2013, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council.html).

believer into the realm of one who actively fights against Christianity, so why should he of all writers and thinkers be considered at all? In *The New Nietzsche* David Allison develops a discussion of Nietzsche as a writer who is fundamental to modern debate, religious and otherwise. Referring to the insights gained from looking back to Nietzsche's work from a 19<sup>th</sup> century perspective, Allison states:

It was the magnitude of this insight that now reveals Nietzsche- posthumously, as he himself correctly foresaw- as one of the underlying figures of our own intellectual epoch, and shows that what remains to be considered within Nietzsche's own thought somehow stands as a model for the tasks and decisions of the present generation.<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche's writing seems to lay the foundation for many modern arguments, and those surrounding Christianity are not an exception to this insight.

The discussion of Nietzsche in the context of Christianity is complex for many reasons. Nietzsche is first a philosopher and not a theologian; therefore his discussion of doctrine and Christian belief systems is contextualized by his thoughts on humanity, ideals, and other topics of philosophy. There is a distinction in the way in which Nietzsche's discussion of Christianity diverges from that of a theologian. He does not argue from the perspective of religion, or even necessarily from the perspective of atheism. He is interested in the greater picture of human existence as a whole, with religion functioning as only a small, and in his view misguided, part of life. His goals are not to argue for or against a divinity, but to argue for a full existence that may or may not relate to one's belief in divine power.

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<sup>4</sup> David Allison, *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1985), xi.

One of the other complications with Nietzsche is his strong view against Christianity. On the surface, it seems impossible to argue that a positive relationship could exist between a philosopher who argues that God is dead and a religion that focuses on the divine. Nietzsche does not hesitate to give voice to his problems with Christianity, and his words are not presented in a manner that takes away from their strength. While all religion creates a problem in Nietzsche's philosophy, his main argument falls against Christianity.

Beginning during his lifetime and lasting long afterwards, this view of Nietzsche was widely held by the theological and philosophical communities. He was an enemy to religion and nothing more, and the only way to discuss Nietzsche was to argue against his ideas and write them off. His ideas were reduced to dramatic quotations (such as "God is dead") and his work was viewed as having no place in religious discussion. Because of this attitude, discussions of Nietzsche in the context of religion are fairly new compared to his work.

Theologians eventually began to take note of what Kaufmann refers to as "the Nietzsche Legend".<sup>5</sup> The widely held views of Nietzsche seemed harsh and misguided when compared back to his work as a whole, especially with relation to his discussion of religion. While Nietzsche certainly was not a supporter of Christianity, the scholarly community began to reevaluate the judgment that had been brought against his discussion of religion and the divine. This discussion began as a defense against the harsh criticisms and exaggerations made against his work. Slowly the turn began in the religious community from seeing Nietzsche as enemy of religion to acknowledging the complexities of his evaluation of religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Kaufman, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1974), 3.

Another important step in the reevaluation of Nietzsche stemmed from the appreciation of his familial background. Nietzsche had grown up in a family of Christian ministers.<sup>6</sup> Both his father and his grandfather on his mother's side were leaders of their Lutheran churches. Surprisingly, Nietzsche had in fact grown up Christian. His turn to atheism did not occur until his twenties, after much writing from his original Christian perspective. Nietzsche developed into a frustrated Christian long before he became the atheist that was so widely known. In light of this bibliographical understanding, his discussion of religion and Christianity took on a new light. Nietzsche was not simply an outsider; in fact he was quite the opposite. He was someone who had strong Christian roots and had become disenchanted to the point of non-belief. In the context of a Christian background, even Nietzsche's strongest statements take on a new light. The statement that God is dead is not just an offensive outcry, but perhaps a reflection of the loss of God in his own life.

Discussion of Nietzsche's background provided a new basis for discussion of his work in general. Philosophers and theologians began to look to his theories of nihilism as a comparison with religion concepts of loss and self-destruction.<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche's discussion of Christianity was viewed as a longing for an answer to what he saw as a crisis, as opposed to a grim description of his reality.<sup>8</sup> The idea was proposed that perhaps Nietzsche wasn't arguing against Christianity as a whole, but against an inauthentic Christianity drained of its substance and meaning.<sup>9</sup> The movement away from viewing Nietzsche as an enemy of

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity* (New York, NY: Henry Regnery, 1961), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Allison, *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, 132.

<sup>8</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 46.

religion allowed for a broad discussion of the religious implications of his work, which has continued throughout modern times.

Nietzsche's relationship to modern Christianity has continued to become more complex. While the discussion of Nietzsche in Christian scholarly circles has certainly become more prevalent, it is far from common. Yet Christianity itself has also continued to increase in complexity. In the words of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, modernity has presented "a strange mix of atheism and theology, with the two often overlapping and coexisting."<sup>10</sup> Among the mix of atheism and theology, feminist Christianity has opened up discussion of the morality of orthodoxy and called into question traditions of Christianity that have existed since its beginning while still maintaining its Christian roots. These unorthodox beliefs, discussions, and practices are what make Nietzsche more relevant to Christianity now than ever before.

While Nietzsche is not the typical supporter of Christianity, most feminist Christians do not call for the typical Christian support. The criticisms that certain feminist Christians bring against orthodoxy are much the same as the criticisms of Nietzsche. From life affirmation (and the role of morality in stifling it) to the authenticity of the priesthood, feminist Christians who emphasize life affirmation and individuality express many of the same views that Nietzsche did in what Alexander Nehamas calls his crusade against morality, although from a different perspective.<sup>11</sup> It is paradoxical to think that Nietzsche, neither a feminist nor a Christian by traditional definitions, would offer strong support for the feminist Christian cause. Yet a close examination of his work shows a strong similarity,

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1983), 195.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 201.

and even agreement, between the two points of view. Both Nietzsche and feminist Christians share a common cause against many of the same aspects of orthodox Christianity.

The next step in the development of Christian interaction with Nietzsche is a closer examination of how his work supports the views of modern feminist Christians. Nietzsche's views of Christianity are complex, just as is the relationship between feminism and orthodoxy. It is not difficult to argue that the Christianity that Nietzsche argues as ideal in *The Antichrist* (one based on the life and teachings of Jesus as opposed to the moral structure and power of any church) is similar to the Christianity that some feminist Christians believe in and passionately argue for. A reconciliation between these two points of view would allow for a deeper understanding of not only Nietzsche, but of modern Christianity and the complexities of belief in general.

### **Nietzsche and Feminist Christianity**

In order to understand how feminist Christianity can embrace the philosophy of Nietzsche, it is critical to examine Nietzsche's arguments against Christianity. While Nietzsche does criticize religion in general, a majority of his writing on religion focuses on Christianity and its effects on the era in which he lives, in both scientific and humanistic realms. It is through this specific criticism that Nietzsche is able to describe a view in which Christianity can be successful and even vital to the life that Nietzsche describes as full and well lived and even suggest a god that would be conducive to this life. However, in order to arrive at these descriptive conclusions, Nietzsche must first move through a breaking down

of nearly every aspect of Christianity in order to redefine what it is meant to be at its core. It is at this core that Nietzsche finds Jesus, and from there builds an argument for a Christianity that emulates the one true Christian, Jesus Christ. In this way, Nietzsche is able to suggest a new Christian God, one that varies greatly from the God criticized in his arguments. It is this new concept of the Christian God that can be appreciated by Christian feminists whose views of the Christian God vary greatly from orthodox conceptions of divinity.

Nietzsche's argument against Christianity begins with his definition of Christianity as an attack on life itself. Christianity is life denying, and this denial is the flaw that leads to all of Christianity's problems. In Nietzsche's words, Christianity "had to invent another world in which the acceptance of life appeared as the most evil and abominable thing imaginable."<sup>12</sup> By promising a heaven that exists only after death, Christianity devalues life and in fact degrades it. The promise of eternity and heaven after death prevents life itself from having meaning. Christianity's concern with the afterlife necessarily devalues life in the present. Paradise is the ultimate goal, one that cannot be accomplished in the world, and therefore life is void of its meaning and fulfillment as it is a lower, temporary state. Nietzsche describes the full life as one that embraces both happiness and suffering, while Christianity encourages fear of both in favor of desiring and working towards the promise of eternity in the afterlife. Pleasure is sin, and pain is something to be relieved by God. Christianity is therefore unable to reconcile with life itself, making it impossible for a Christian believer to live in a way that is fulfilling.

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (New York, NY: Tribeca, 1997), 35.

Nietzsche argues that this portrayal of life as negative takes away the value of living. As he puts it, "The Christian resolve to call the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad."<sup>13</sup> Because Christianity describes life itself as negative, the world is then transformed into something negative. This negativity sprouts from the desire for another world that is better. "Christianity was from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life's nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in "another" or "better" life," Nietzsche laments in *The Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>14</sup> While Christianity claims that the focus on the afterlife is a positive one that is encouraging and brings hope, Nietzsche argues that this is simply a thinly veiled disguise for disgust with life itself.

Nietzsche criticizes Christianity for its lack of acceptance of science and knowledge in general. He argues that faith requires blindness to the facts, and that this ignorance is out of touch with both instincts and reality. Any religion that argues against science will never reconcile with life. Nietzsche also argues that this ignorance is used as a tool of Christianity, stating, "To help a perception to achieve victory often means merely to unite it with stupidity so intimately that the weight of the latter also enforces the victory of the former."<sup>15</sup> By undermining knowledge, Christianity perpetuates itself.

Nietzsche also argues that Christianity rewards weakness. In his description of interactions, Nietzsche describes the difference between master mindsets and slave mindsets. Master mindsets involve embracing life, pain, and suffering and facing these experiences without fear. It is through these experiences that one is able to live a life of

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York, NY: Tribeca, 1995), 120.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York, NY: Tribeca, 1997), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (New York, NY: Tribeca, 1996), 122.



power and creation. On the other hand, slave mentality involves fearing life, shying away from painful experiences, and limiting perception through denial. Christianity falls into the slave mentality category. First, morality allows Christianity to deny life and enforce this denial on others. "Under Christianity, neither morality nor religion has any point of contact with actuality," argues Nietzsche, pointing out that morality is removed from life.<sup>16</sup> Christianity rewards pity, a concept that by definition is denying of life. Pity occurs when someone perceives the situation of another as negative, as opposed to embracing that situation or giving value to other positive aspects of it:

Christianity has taken the part of all the weak, the low, the botched; it has made an ideal out of antagonism to all the self preservative instincts of sound life; it has corrupted even the faculties of those natures that are intellectually most vigorous, by representing the highest intellectual values as sinful, as misleading, as full of temptation.<sup>17</sup>

By defining superior concepts such as intelligence and power as weaknesses, Christianity has allowed those who are weak to gain moral power over those who have strength through their experiences.

After Nietzsche's argument against Christianity, it seems impossible that he could ever support any form of religion, let alone a form of Christianity itself. Nietzsche makes it very clear that he not only believes God to be dead, but also believes that it is Christianity that has killed the divine.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche writes, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."<sup>19</sup> By stating that we have killed God, Nietzsche is referring to Christians and Christian interpretation in general as being the reason behind the death of God. Nietzsche

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<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 128.

argues that the Christian interpretation of God has led to death through misinterpretation, misuse, and a definition of God that is misguided. The God that originated in Christian thought can no longer exist because the Christian definition of God, which includes moral judgment and denial (concepts that Nietzsche thinks are contradictory to any God that would exist), has ruined the original, true image of the divine as Nietzsche defines it. It is important to note that this suggests that God did exist (before being killed by Christianity) and leaves open the possibility for a divine presence that transcends Nietzsche's criticisms. Before it can be understood how this is possible, it is important to consider Nietzsche's own history and how his work has been used and interpreted after it was written.

In light of Nietzsche's arguments against Christianity, it is clear how what Kaufmann calls "the Nietzsche legend" developed. Because of his strong stance against the Christian God, Nietzsche was for a long time regarded as an irrational enemy of Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Aphorisms such as "God is dead" encouraged people to see Nietzsche as an enemy of Christianity and nothing more. Because of this, Christianity wrote off Nietzsche as someone who opposed religion in every way. For years after his death, it was not even considered that Nietzsche could positively contribute to Christianity.

Postmodern Christianity has allowed for a reconsideration of Nietzsche. Because of the "strange mix of atheism and theology" that Deleuze refers to, postmodern Christianity called for a rereading of Nietzsche in a new light.<sup>21</sup> As opposed to an irrational enemy, Nietzsche began to be viewed as a respectable counterpart to the orthodox Christian argument. Eventually, scholars began to reread Nietzsche as less of a strict and unrelenting atheist and more as a contemplative disenchanted Christian himself. The possibility of

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<sup>20</sup> Kaufman, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 195.

Nietzsche as a supporter of a sense of the word Christianity began to come to light through this rereading.

Karl Jaspers details the life of Nietzsche in his book, *Nietzsche and Christianity*. He examines Nietzsche's personal experience of Christianity in light of the fact that Nietzsche was born into a Christian family and was in fact an assenting Christian at a young age. Jaspers biographical considerations reveal that while Nietzsche is most famous for his arguments against Christianity, he is quoted as saying many positive things regarding the religion, including that it was the best example of the ideal life.<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche was a descendant of ministers on both sides of his family, and referred to the perfect Christian as the "noblest human type" in *The Will to Power*.<sup>23</sup> However, for each positive comment there are certainly negative comments to be found, and as Jaspers points out, "the mass of negative comment seems to reduce the few affirmations to insignificance."<sup>24</sup> Jaspers argues that Nietzsche's inconsistencies when discussing Christianity were not accidental.<sup>25</sup> They are rather a result of Nietzsche's own disenchantment with the religion to which he felt so attached. Nietzsche regarded Christianity as the noblest way in which to live, yet witnessed first hand what he calls its falsification of values.<sup>26</sup> As Nietzsche put it, "The Christian church has left nothing untouched by its depravity; it has turned every value into worthlessness, and every truth into a lie, and every integrity into baseness of soul."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 83.

Nietzsche understood Christian motivations to be noble, but Christian contents, teachings, and authority lacked meaning for him.<sup>28</sup>

Jaspers argues that Nietzsche wanted Christianity to be superseded with something different from, but based on, it.<sup>29</sup> Christianity had lost its meaning and passion, but it was that meaning that drove Nietzsche to explore the questions of Christianity and attempt to recreate it without the moral orthodoxy. Nietzsche was saddened by the current state of humanity and saw Christianity as a misguided force. While Christianity was in fact destroying life, it was a force that contained within it the possibility to be conducive to the life that he saw as full. The Christianity that Nietzsche argues against is the actual state of Christianity, as it is and not as it ought to be in his view. When Nietzsche claims, "We are no longer Christians," he adds that it is a stronger piety that does not allow it.<sup>30</sup> Just as Nietzsche had experienced a turn from Christianity, he saw the world itself turning from Christianity to something greater.<sup>31</sup>

Jaspers points out that much of Nietzsche's argument against Christianity is based in the fact that it is dissonant with reality as it is experienced by humanity.<sup>32</sup> Christianity is dissonant with both physical reality and the reality of God. Nietzsche explains:

The concept of guilt and punishment, the whole 'moral order of the world,' was set up against science- against the deliverance of man from priests...Man must not look outward; he must look inward.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 63.

When Nietzsche states that God is dead, he goes on to say that it is Christianity that has killed him, through irrational misinterpretation. Jaspers writes, "Among his answers, only one is comprehensively thought through and elaborated- the cause of God's death is Christianity."<sup>34</sup> By this he does not mean to celebrate the notion that God does not exist in the world, but lament the fact that the Christian concept of God has been perverted with false ideals and man-made morality to the extent that it can no longer have any force in the world. He argues that instead of addressing life and existence, Christianity built a façade of unrealistic notions, such as sin, redemption, morality, and even 'God' as Christianity defined it. In his view, the façade of Christianity is inevitably broken down at some point during each life, and once it has been the Christian will be left with nothing.<sup>35</sup> God and their entire way of life will seem to have been a lie, and it is here that there is nothing left for this Christian to believe and embrace. Their reality will have nothing to do with their beliefs, and therefore those beliefs will cease to exist for them. Nietzsche's story of Christianity is not vengeful and hateful, but rather one that inspires sadness at the disappointment that comes from Christianity, yet leaves room for the possibility of a greater divinity that transcends the moral implications of the Church.

### **Nietzsche's New Christianity**

Nietzsche's Christianity was a complex idea. It is first important to note that it in no way corresponded to the Christianity he saw before him. Nietzsche was not describing a smaller faction of Christianity as it was, but a Christianity as different as it could be. His

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<sup>34</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 15.

Christianity was an ideal that he was never sure could even be achieved. While it was based in the Bible and history of Christianity, it followed a path not taken by Christianity and instead avoided the pitfalls that had come to define Christianity for Nietzsche.

At the center of this new Christianity was Jesus. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche devoted most of his writing to discussing the negativity of Christianity, but when it comes to Jesus there was a distinct turn to positive thought. Just as Nietzsche described Jesus the savior as only possible in a bleak Jewish landscape where nothing else in life seems positive, Nietzsche's own description of Jesus stood above and beyond the distraught, fierce discussion that filled the rest of the text. In Nietzsche's words, "The very word Christianity is a misunderstanding. At bottom, there was only one Christian and he died on the cross."<sup>36</sup> Jesus, in Nietzsche's view, "had nothing do with Christian history."<sup>37</sup> The history of Christianity diverged from the life and example of Jesus so much that the two eventually became incompatible.

Jesus became the ultimate Christian for Nietzsche because of the way in which he lived. Nietzsche described the New Testament as a radical overthrow of the Old, with Jesus standing at the forefront with new ideas about God and his relationship to humanity. In Nietzsche's view, the New Testament showed that morality had failed, religious law was ineffective, and a dramatic new way of thinking needed to happen.<sup>38</sup> "With a little freedom in the use of words, one might actually call Jesus a 'free spirit,'" Nietzsche writes, "he cares nothing for what is established: the word killeth, whatever is established killeth."<sup>39</sup> Jesus

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<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 44.

came to overthrow the law and create a new relationship between humanity and God, one void of punishments and rewards that had to be earned, but in which humanity had a model to follow and could live without fear.

One of the most central tenets of Jesus as Nietzsche saw him was his inability to deny. Jesus was an example of a master mindset, who faced no situation with fear, but rather embraced it for himself as an experience through which to grow.<sup>40</sup> Jesus presented not a new faith, but a new way of life, and as Nietzsche explains:

It is not a 'belief' that marks off the Christian; he is distinguished by a different mode of action; he acts differently. He offers no resistance, either by word or in his heart, in those who stand against him. He draws no distinction between strangers and countrymen, Jews and gentiles.<sup>41</sup>

This was also true in his lack of judgment on other people. No one was denied in Jesus' eyes and his morality, the morality of God, was not pushed onto the people but rather shown through the way he lived. He did not shy away from those who sinned, but embraced them wholeheartedly. "Nothing is denied; everything is affirmed. Such an attitude was what Jesus called love," Nietzsche explains. In Nietzsche's view, Jesus was able to show love to anyone present at the time, therefore depreciating no one.<sup>42</sup> It was this love that Nietzsche believed to be truly Christianity, which gave indiscriminately and expected nothing in return.

It is important to distinguish the inability to deny from the inability to say "no". In Nietzsche's philosophy, the ass, a character in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, represented someone who uses the "yes" as a way to provide for itself and becomes incapable of saying

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<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 19.

no.<sup>43</sup> However, Nietzsche also argued that the great “yes” to life must always be preceded by a “no”. In other words, in any affirmation there is an inherent negation.<sup>44</sup> In affirming something one must deny its opposite. It is clear that Jesus falls into the second category of affirmation and not the first. Jesus did not have an inability to deny in the same sense that the ass did- on the contrary. Jesus first denied the same things that Nietzsche argued should be denied- the church, morality, and judgment. It is only through the denial of these things that Jesus was finally able to say “yes” to life. His inability to deny did not come from using the “yes” for his own needs and not knowing how to say “no”. On the contrary, Jesus first had to say no before he was able to live life without denying it.

Jesus also redefined the concept of death, in Nietzsche’s view. In Jesus, death was not something to be feared, but the ultimate experience of pain and suffering that was to be welcomed and embraced. Because of his inability to deny, Jesus was unable to deny even death and instead embraced just as he had everyone and everything else he had experienced in life. Nietzsche also viewed Jesus as living in a world where heaven existed in the here-and-now as opposed to an unfulfilled promise for later. The very existence of Jesus, as God incarnated, suggested to Nietzsche that humanity would not find salvation in eternity, but here on earth.<sup>45</sup> He stated that Jesus had a “profound instinct for the way one must live so as to feel ‘in heaven,’ to feel ‘eternal’.”<sup>46</sup> By refocusing his existence from the afterlife to the present, Jesus had reaffirmed life itself both in the way he lived and the way in which he spoke.

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<sup>43</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 178.

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 177.

<sup>45</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche & Christianity*, 17.



The prototype of the ideal Christian that should have resulted from the exemplary life of Jesus is one that involves living life to the fullest in the master mindset, which involves having power and control over oneself. They do not deny their body or any of life's experiences, but instead work to embrace all that is before them. Jesus gave them the ability to live a life free of fear, a life that embraced even sin, and the ideal Christian takes advantage of this gift through living a life without denial, thereby bringing out the feeling of heaven on earth. This lifestyle allows one to create a life for oneself and to live not without difference from others, but without judgment. This Christian is a strong figure who does not pity suffering, but instead accepts it and even appreciates it as the only way in which people can grow and become more complete in their lives.

This Christian also does not impose morality on others. Instead of judging based on societal definitions of sin and morality, this Christian embraces and delights in difference based in reality just as Jesus did. They practice the true definition of Christian love, in which they are unable to discriminate between anyone who is presented before them. People, just as experienced, are to be embraced in order to grow, regardless of their behavior.

The question then becomes, how did Christianity change from the model Nietzsche found in the life of Jesus to a religion that he saw as one of the greatest flaws of humanity? Nietzsche claims the early founders of the church, through their councils, doctrine, and moral judgments ignored Jesus' message and substituted one of their own, including the same morality and judgment that Jesus had rejected. Nietzsche claims that the early founders of Christianity imposed a morality that should have no longer existed after Jesus,

taking their own truth and claiming that their religion required all others to live by it in order to earn the reward of heaven.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly not just any Christian could embrace Nietzsche. Doctrinal, orthodox Christian thinkers would certainly still argue that his message dissents from the core orthodoxy of Christianity. A Christianity that exists in the world (as opposed to being ideal) and embraces Nietzsche would also have to wholeheartedly embrace his ideals about the body, pain, suffering, denial, and life itself. It would also need to have an understanding of his views of morality and truth, and how they can (or can not) exist in the Christian landscape.

Many would argue that Nietzsche's argument goes against the existence of God at all. Thomas Altizer states that the death of God is essential for Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence, arguing, "The enactment of Eternal Recurrence is not only possible but inevitable, and inevitable as an absolutely necessary transfiguration of that absolute nothingness that the death of God releases."<sup>48</sup> Altizer suggests that the death of God is fundamental to Nietzsche's arguments. However, Altizer also points out that the God Nietzsche argues against is "uniquely Christian" and that the Jesus figure Nietzsche described was "above all a Jesus who is infinitely distant from the Christian God."<sup>49</sup> This distinction of the God that Nietzsche argues against as specifically Christian (and separate from Jesus) leaves room for interpretation and suggestion of a God figure who is a representation of what Nietzsche sees as superior and fulfilling. The death of God refers to

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<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2003), 120.

<sup>49</sup> Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*, 120.

the death of a specific, Christian conception of God and does not negate the possibility of the idea of divinity or even a different conception of the Christian God for Nietzsche.

By stating, "God is dead," Nietzsche did not deny that God could exist. In fact, his argument suggests that God did (as reflected in the Jesus figure), and even should, exist, but the concept had been so diluted by Christianity that it could no longer even exist. In Nietzsche's argument against Christianity, he called for the creation of a new God, one void of the morality and judgment imposed on Christianity. This is the God that Nietzsche saw reflected in Jesus, and it is here that feminist Christians can find agreement with Nietzsche. When feminist Christians argue against the moral and social judgments placed upon them by the orthodox Christian church, they often are arguing against the very conceptualization of God. While orthodox Christianity supports a God who created a limited, specific role for women, one which is subordinate to men, some feminist Christians argue for a God that does not judge and certainly does not advocate for a limited experience of life. This reconception of God allows women to create lives for themselves that are fulfilling, powerful, and even spiritual. In postmodern times, Christian thinkers who find themselves at odds with Christian doctrine often find themselves turning to Jesus, as exemplified in scholarly work and public religious discussion.<sup>50</sup>

It is for these reasons that Nietzsche's views of Christianity align best with feminist Christian thinkers throughout Christian history. In early Christianity, the ascetic movement embraced the body, experience, and life in general in a way that most other Christians did not even consider. Pain and suffering became integral not only to life, but to spiritual existence as well. This was especially true of women, who had been taught by society and

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<sup>50</sup> Sullivan, *Christianity in Crisis*, 2012.

Christianity that their body was something to be denied and used only for specific purposes unrelated to experiencing life and living fully. Modern feminist Christianity can certainly also find alignment with Nietzsche in his argument against the imposition of morality and truth onto others. Modern feminist Christians face many of the same limitations that Nietzsche argued against and that early female ascetics fought against. In many ways, an embracing of Nietzsche by these Christian groups would strengthen their foundations on which they place their worldview and their argument against the very religion that they believe in.

## Nietzsche and the Early Female Ascetics

### **Ascetic Definitions**

In the early Christian church, few groups vocally expressed an attitude regarding the body and life in general that aligned with the views and writing of Nietzsche. However, the intentions of the female ascetics reflected many of the same principles and viewpoints as Nietzsche described in his writing, even if not directly. In order to understand these similarities, it is important to first understand what asceticism is and how it came to be in early Christianity. It is also important to understand the attitude toward the body of the early female ascetics in comparison to their male counterparts, as the differences between these groups are vast. Female ascetics and their appreciation of the body as a way to experience life can be seen as a mentality similar to the noblest ways of life that Nietzsche describes in his writing.

The word ascetic comes from the Greek word *askesis*, meaning training.<sup>51</sup> The type of training referred to is that of the athlete, thus the longstanding metaphor of the ascetics as spiritual athletes. Asceticism can also be defined as “the intentional development of virtues through self-denial.”<sup>52</sup> The early Christian ascetics used discipline of the body through fasting, poverty, celibacy, and other means of deprivation in order to enhance their lives through spirituality, fulfillment, and empowerment. Many thinkers considered Jesus an ascetic figure, such as Saturninus, who describes Jesus as the teacher of an “ascetic

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<sup>51</sup> Hultgren, *Early Christian Heretics* (Oxford: Augsburg Books, 2008), 62.

<sup>52</sup> Hultgren, *Early Christian Heretics*, 38.

ethic" that includes renunciation of marriage and eating of meat in order to redeem those persons who have the "spark of life" in them.<sup>53</sup> The ascetic lifestyle distinctly marks those who follow it from those who do not through its extreme practices.

The intentions behind asceticism vary greatly. Some ascetics believed that worldly desires were a distraction from God that had to be suppressed through denial. Others saw earthly practices as evil in themselves. Ascetics were said to take up the practice in order to mark themselves as Christians who were distinct from nonbelievers. Regardless of the reason behind the act, ascetics renounced the world around them in order to focus on their spirituality and the inner world of their faith and their soul.

Criticism of asceticism existed both within the Christian community and outside of it. Ascetics were seen as extremists who took their faith too far. They were criticized within the Christian community for their renunciation of marriage and family structure. Ascetic practice often led to lies about virginity in order to maintain the facade of celibacy and perfection. Ascetics were also often seen as gaining personally for their supposed spiritual leadership.<sup>54</sup> Ascetics, in making themselves distinct, also often gave the impression of being self-obsessed, prideful, or even insane. While this distinction between the self and others is not problematic in itself, the ascetics were criticized for distinguishing themselves by claiming moral and spiritual superiority over others. This superiority was not used for self-development but for personal gain in social and political terms. They certainly did not seem to give Christianity an image of normalcy or even realism in communities.

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<sup>53</sup> Hultgren, *Early Christian Heretics*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Hultgren, *Early Christian Heretics*, 133.

## Nietzsche and Asceticism

Nietzsche also raises many issues with asceticism, especially with the renunciation of the world and of life itself. He often wrote about Christianity being the hatred of the senses, and any joy that comes from the senses, a sentiment that is most clearly expressed through Nietzsche's criticism of asceticism.<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche condemns Christianity that leads to sacrifice and states that, "Wherever the religious neurosis has appeared on the earth so far, we find it connected with three dangerous prescriptions as to regimen: solitude, fasting, and sexual abstinence."<sup>56</sup> These practices are dangerous because they lead to a negative view of the senses, and therefore of life in general. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche speaks out against the ascetic who creates power for himself by shrouding himself in mystery, causing those who would normally turn away from self-negation to look on in fear and wonder where this strange power comes from.<sup>57</sup> In the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche defines asceticism as, "an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its *horror vacui*. It needs a goal- and it will rather will nothingness than not will."<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche clearly speaks out against deprivation of worldly pleasures and the use of asceticism for power over others.

How, then, can Nietzsche's ideas be mirrored by asceticism? The answer lies in the Christian life that Nietzsche was able to imagine as noble. Jaspers points out that Nietzsche wrote about Jesus having, "a profound instinct for the way one must live as to feel in

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<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York, NY: Start Publishing LLC, 2013), 40.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 43.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, 53.

heaven, to feel eternal.”<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche saw Jesus as living in a way that enhanced life and the senses (or feelings), instead of viewing those feelings as negative. When Nietzsche discussed Christianity, he suggested that the incarnation of God meant that salvation was to be found on earth.<sup>60</sup> In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche speaks of heaven and states, “The ‘kingdom of God’ is not something that men wait for: it had no yesterday and no day after tomorrow, it is not going to come at a ‘millennium’- it is an experience of the heart, it is everywhere and it is nowhere.”<sup>61</sup>

So what did this ideal Christian life look like? Nietzsche describes the life of the masters as ideal, meaning a life that is full of experience (even pain), is faced without fear, and is life affirming, as opposed to life denying. Nehamas argues that Nietzsche supported a nonmoral asceticism, of the philosopher’s asceticism. He states that, “the crucial idea for our purposes is that behind this mask the philosopher’s asceticism is practices for the sake of a better present life; it is neither a denial of life nor an atonement for past sin, and it is not a preparation for future existence.”<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche supports asceticism that is affirming and not denying, or that is empowering and not moral. This is the life that Nietzsche saw as positive in Jesus, and while many ascetics certainly denied the world around them, this noble life is also reflected in the lifestyle and the intentions of the female ascetics.

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<sup>59</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 47.

<sup>62</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 117.



## Female Asceticism

In order to understand the lifestyle of the early Christian female ascetics, it is important to note the living situation of women, both in society and in the Christian church, at the time. In Roman society, it was considered a tragedy for a girl to die unmarried or for a woman to die childless.<sup>63</sup> While it was unusual for men to be unmarried, it was absolutely unheard of for a woman.<sup>64</sup> The family was the central role for women, and their life was dominated by their duties to their family. Life outside of this role did not exist for women. Marriage was not an option, but a mandate, and family life was a center of pride (and shame for women who did not marry in time or who could not have children). Marriage was not a romantic lifestyle choice, but a necessity that was brought on by arrangements between families and the need to carry on tradition and family honor.

In the Christian church, women are often described as having (to this day) two roles: that of the mother, and that of the virgin.<sup>65</sup> The virgin can be seen in figures such as Mary, who is praised for her celibacy before marriage. The birth of Jesus is miraculous for many reasons, but Mary is part of this miracle because Mary was a virgin. Once women have married, their role turns to that of the nurturing mother. Women are valued for their ability to remain pure and to provide children, with no value placed on a life that exists between these two extremes. Women who defy these roles are nearly unheard of in the early

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<sup>63</sup> Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 66.

<sup>64</sup> Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 64.

<sup>65</sup> Karen Trimble Alliaume, "Disturbingly Catholic," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Christian church and in Roman society in general, and if they do they are seen as having failed their divine purpose. These roles also tie women to earthy life, with their importance being found in their sexuality and therefore in the image of the womb, the provider of life itself. They are not spiritual beings, but necessary worldly being whose purpose is to provide for their family, especially the men of the family. Mary Douglas ties the social boundaries and body boundaries into one, which is exemplified in the imagery of the virgin body as the pure church and the bride of Christ.<sup>66</sup>

Because of these limitations, women were certainly not able to experience life as Nietzsche described it. They were protectors, not affirmers, and they were supposed to shield themselves and their children from life experiences. Women were to have one life path alone, first as virgin and then as mother, and no other options seemed to exist. Women did not have the ability to live creatively as they had little choice in the experiences they were faced with and those experiences themselves were limited. Duty to their father came first, which later became duty to their husband, and finally duty to their children. Not only was life outside the family discouraged, it was selfish and dishonorable as it was seen as abandonment of the family and of women's true purpose in life.

It is important to distinguish the female ascetics from the male ascetics. In Roman society, men were not bound by the same roles and traditions as women. The male turn to asceticism often represented the denial of life that Nietzsche so strongly criticized. Men had the ability to experience a full life, and asceticism was a way to become morally superior by denying that life. For women, on the other hand, their roles were limited and created for them by outside forces. Asceticism represented a turn away from traditional family roles,

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<sup>66</sup> Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 66.

which gave women freedom to create a life for themselves. Asceticism did not limit women's experience, but instead expanded it and allowed them to pursue their desires, both worldly and spiritual, outside the limited sphere of the family.

When discussing the intentions of the early female ascetics, it is difficult to fully understand from women's own perspectives because of the documentation of their stories. Elizabeth Castelli writes on the challenges of writing from the perspective of the female ascetics:

According to Gregory's narrative, Macrina, at the age of twelve and through her own rhetorical finesse and theological understanding, evaded her parent's attempts to marry her off, and later single handedly converted her brother Basil to asceticism. Of course, hagiographical fervor may account for some of Gregory's claims about his sister's life; nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the entire account of Macrina's influence over Basil's spiritual life is invention. Therefore, it is somewhat shocking to discover that, in all of Basil's writings, which comprise four volumes of Migne's *Patrologi* and includes 366 letters, Macrina is never mentioned once. How many women lost their places in the written record of the church because no one chose to write their biographies and because the men whose lives they influenced omitted any mention of them?<sup>67</sup>

The omission of women from religious history and the lack of preservation of their own writing makes it difficult to fully understand their intentions in the practice of asceticism. However, we do have smaller fragments of their voices and full accounts of some women, such as Thecla and Perpetua, that make it clear that the meaning of asceticism for women varied from men, in its social consequences if not in its intentions. For example, Melania the Elder is quoted as saying, upon the death of her husband and two children, "Lord, I will

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2(1), 1986, 63.

serve you more easily, since you have relieved me of such burdens.”<sup>68</sup> Even without the intention of purposeful asceticism, the social consequences of freeing women from the burden of marriage and child bearing allowed them to lead spiritual lives that would have otherwise been impossible.

Asceticism thus became one of the only ways for women to have a life affirming existence and experience the world around them. While male ascetics often prided themselves on their denial of life, female ascetics took the opportunities provided by asceticism and used them in order to experience spiritual fulfillment and a life outside of the family. This is especially true with the principles of refraining from marriage and celibacy. Celibacy was not a denial of sexual practices as evil, but instead a freedom from children and family duty. Marriage was not seen as a distraction from God, but instead a prison that women seemed confined to until asceticism provided another route. As Clark states, female ascetics “did not (with few exceptions) persecute the body for being an obstacle to the soul.”<sup>69</sup> They were no longer using their bodies simply as vessels for childbirth, but instead as powerful tools used to experience life in ways that women had been unable to do before. Rouselle suggests that, “asceticism reflected revulsion, especially women’s revulsion, from arranged marriages, painful and unwanted childbirth, and modes of rearing children that made emotional relationships difficult.”<sup>70</sup> Their rebellion against these roles was shown in their strong asceticism. Female ascetics were no longer confined to the roles that the Christian church and Roman society had forced them into. They were in many ways men, in the sense that they had eliminated the social femininity that had for

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<sup>68</sup> Castelli, “Virginité and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” 70.

<sup>69</sup> Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 67.

so long limited them and made them inferior.<sup>71</sup> Asceticism was an escape from a limited life for women.

Through asceticism, women were able to experience the noble life that Nietzsche had described. As opposed to protecting themselves and their families from life, women were now able to experience life freely. Where as before social and religious morality had held them to one role in life, they were not free to fulfill whatever role they chose. While Nietzsche and female ascetics certainly differed on their spiritual and religious ideologies, the reasoning behind their lifestyle was the same. Life, including spiritual life, was about creating a more fulfilling experience, and asceticism empowered them to have that experience and to use their bodies as more than simply a tool for the family. While asceticism did not allow them to transcend societal and even religious judgment, it did allow the women to choose a different life than the one that had been chosen for them by society and the church.

### **The Legend of Thecla**

One of the most famous examples of female asceticism is found in the legend of Thecla. The story of Thecla is full of examples of Nietzschean principles about life, while also being one of the most famous stories about an exemplary female Christian. The legendary Thecla was a contemporary and eventual follower of Paul who was persecuted during her life but developed a strong cult following after her death. Thecla lives on not only as a legend of one woman, but as a symbol of the female ascetic and the potential that

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<sup>71</sup> Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 66.

a female Christian can have outside of her role as mother. Thecla used her renunciation of marriage and her celibacy to pursue a passionate, spiritual life full of experiences that would have otherwise been impossible for her.

During Paul's travels, he is welcomed into the house of Onesiphorus, where Thecla is said to have listened to him preach. Paul praises ascetic practices, speaking about chastity and purity in a way that intrigues Thecla. Thecla is engaged to Thamyris, a suitor picked for her by her family, and is soon to be married to him. However, Thecla is so taken by the words of Paul that she decides to call off her marriage and pursue the ascetic lifestyle.<sup>72</sup> It is clear from the beginning that Thecla is not intrigued by asceticism because of its negation of worldly life. Asceticism comes to her as a way to escape marriage and pursue her spiritual passions. As Nietzsche would say, asceticism is not a denial of life for Thecla, but rather a life affirmation, a way to say "Yes!" to a life that she otherwise would have never had the opportunity to pursue. The yes is not a submissive acceptance of life ascribed to Thecla by others, but a powerful creation of new possibilities. It is an empowering experience, not an experience of denial. Thecla was familiar with the path that she was destined for as a woman, and asceticism was a way to escape that predetermined and limiting life and instead experience a life that she saw as better for herself and more fulfilling spiritually.

Her family was by no means supportive of Thecla's decision. Any life outside of marriage and family was dishonorable to the family as a whole. Thecla was seen as selfish for her decision to deny Thamyris and go against what her family surely saw as a good life that had been laid out for her. Thamyris is so outraged by Thecla's decision that he calls for

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<sup>72</sup> Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 97.

officials to bring Paul to trial for deception.<sup>73</sup> Paul is put into prison, where Thecla goes to him at night and is found by her family embracing Paul. When her family and Thamyris find her in the jail, again defying the orders of her family, Thecla and Paul are brought before the Tribunal. Paul is sentenced to flogging and Thecla is to be burned. However, the fire does not touch her and she is saved by divine intervention. According to Thecla, this intervention is important because it is the first sign that God approves of Thecla and her asceticism. It suggests that God approves of the choice to pursue a life outside of the family, an idea that certainly was not embraced by all Christians and an idea that was uncommon in Christianity at the time.

After Thecla is saved, she finds Paul with her family and tells him that she wishes to cut her hair and follow him and asks him to baptize her. At this point, Thecla has decided to pursue a life completely outside of what is expected of her by the Christian church and society. Through a sign of social defiance (cutting her hair) Thecla intends to signal her transgression of feminine social roles into the role of a male figure who has the ability to pursue the life that Thecla desires. Again, Thecla is not using her asceticism to deny life or to self-negate, as Nietzsche criticized the ascetics for doing, but instead to affirm life and experience it. Thecla's asceticism allows her to create a life for herself according to her own plan. Thecla then follows Paul to Antioch, where a man named Alexander immediately assaults her. With Thecla being a traveling unmarried woman, Alexander again tries to force Thecla into the traditional roles by taking away her celibacy. Instead, Thecla is able to deny Alexander, therefore shaming him into turning her over to the governor.<sup>74</sup> It is important to note that Thecla does not try to escape her fate of death, but instead faces it

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<sup>73</sup> Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 97.

<sup>74</sup> Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 98.

fearlessly. Just as Nietzsche praised Jesus for embracing all of life, including death, Thecla does not deny even life itself.

When the beasts are released, they lie down at her feet and do not harm her. Again, divine intervention has saved her, suggesting approval of Thecla's non-traditional ascetic lifestyle. It is at this point that Thecla notices a pool in the middle of the arena, throws herself into it and baptizes herself. A woman performing baptism was forbidden, yet in the legend of Thecla God tames even the wild beasts to allow her to baptize herself and fulfill a spiritual life that was considered improper. Thecla's story ends with her dressing as a man, traveling with Paul, and "enlightening many by the word of God" before her death.<sup>75</sup> Thecla's life was certainly not absent of pain and suffering, but Thecla was able to embrace a pattern of life affirmation similar to that found in Nietzsche and live in a role outside what was morally correct in society and Christianity at the time.

Thecla remains one of the most famous Christian women. She developed a large cult following after her death. The seeming approval of the female ascetic lifestyle and a role for women outside of the family was appealing to many believers. Of course, many Christians, especially male Christians, were vocal antagonists to the legend of Thecla, which is evidence to the attempts by some orthodox Christians to quiet the message of life affirmation for women. Translations of the story after the original manuscripts tone down the asceticism in Paul's original speech. They also eliminate the erotic tones in the relationship between Paul and Thecla, emphasizing Thecla's virginity as opposed to her life outside of the typical Christian roles. Tertullian was an outspoken critic of the idea that a woman could perform baptism, and many manuscripts describe Thecla as simply a

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<sup>75</sup> Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 98.



character in her baptism story as opposed to the one performing the baptism.<sup>76</sup> In spite of attempts to describe her as otherwise, Thecla's legend still lives on as an example of a strong female ascetic. Her life affirmation and pursuit of experience distinguish her from her male counterparts and align her with Nietzschean philosophy about life and experience.

### **The Asceticism of Perpetua**

While her story is different from Thecla's, another strong female Christian who represented both ascetic and Nietzschean principles was Perpetua. Unlike Thecla, Perpetua was already a mother when she turned to the ascetic life just before her death. Perpetua was jailed for being baptized and proclaiming herself a Christian. Once in jail, Perpetua denied her family when they begged her to return to her role as daughter and mother by renouncing herself as a Christian. Perpetua refused. In a conversation with her father, he became emotional and begged her to return to her family. In many ways, Perpetua takes over the male role of power and dominance over her now submissive father, allowing her to choose for herself to remain in jail as a Christian as opposed to fulfilling her duty at home. Her father reminds her of her family, of the dishonor she is causing them, and of her role as daughter.<sup>77</sup> Even in the face of these pressures, Perpetua insists on continuing her asceticism in the jail as a Christian. Her choice to pursue her spiritual path over the moral social one again defines her as life affirming who is unable to deny life, and even the inevitability of death. The Nietzschean principle of life affirmation and lack of fear is

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<sup>76</sup> Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 99.

<sup>77</sup> Joyce Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 89.

reflected in Perpetua's choices. Thecla also embraces Nietzsche's idea of the pathos of distance by not making herself equal to her father, but instead embracing the differences in the male and female role and creating those distinctions within herself.

Perpetua not only denies her role as daughter, but also as mother. Her duty to her child prevented her from pursuing her spiritual life, and therefore in order to experience life as a spiritual Christian she was required to deny her role as mother.<sup>78</sup> When Perpetua is called from the jail to be questioned, her father appears holding her infant. He drags Perpetua from the steps and begs her to have pity on her baby. Even the official who is questioning her pleads with her to return to her societal duties of daughter and matron. The choice in Perpetua's story is clear- she must limit herself to the moral roles set out for her or pursue a life beyond what she would be able to do within the family structure. Perpetua responds with a concise, "I will not" and is sentenced to death.<sup>79</sup> When Perpetua made the decision to abandon her son, she wrote that he no longer needed to be fed by her and that she had stopped producing the milk to feed him. She saw that as a divine sign of approval, and confirmation that her martyrdom was incompatible with her maternity.<sup>80</sup> Again, Perpetua faced death without fear and used her asceticism to deny her role as mother and daughter.

While Nietzsche does not describe a full life as spiritual, Perpetua is able to create a life for herself through her spirituality. It is through her spirituality and her Christianity that she is able to deny the roles that society and Christianity itself have created for her and pursue her own spiritual fulfillment by her own definitions. Spirituality is not something

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<sup>78</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 90.

<sup>80</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 91.

that Nietzsche advocated for, but it is the tool by which Perpetua is able to pursue the life that Nietzsche praised so highly. Just as Jesus was able to live a noble life according to Nietzsche through Nietzsche's interpretation of Christianity, Perpetua is able to use a personal interpretation of the religion that Nietzsche argues against to reach the life that Nietzsche argues for.

Perpetua expresses Nietzschean ideals at the end of her life, but expresses them nonetheless. It is in fact her turn to Christianity that allows her to experience the life that Nietzsche saw as superior. Her experiences are limited by social constructs and it is only through her escape from these constructs that Perpetua is able to experience life outside of her family. Even when faced with certain death, Perpetua embraces this experience and moves toward it without fear or hesitation, just as in Nietzsche's description of Jesus. Perpetua reflects Nietzschean principles in her openness to experience and her movement beyond the social moral constraints that have been placed on her.

It is clear that many ascetics represented a life that Nietzsche argues very strongly against. Asceticism can be life denying, self-negating, and fearful. It can also be used as a tool to gain power over others. However, the distinctions between male and female ascetics are vast. Whereas male ascetics often used their asceticism to deny the world around them, for women it was a tool to open up opportunities and experiences that they otherwise would not have had. Male ascetics said "Nay" to life and its experiences, while female ascetics represent the Nietzschean "Yes" to life. These women faced even death without fear, and in spite of their painful trials continued to live a life of experience as opposed to a life of moral oppression and limit.

## **Nietzsche and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Feminist Christianity**

### **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Church**

Modern feminist Christians live in a world very different from the Roman society of the early Christian female ascetics. While both society and the Church have transformed in many ways, women are still faced with the same challenges in terms of the roles they are confined to by the Church. As recently as Vatican II the Christian Church praised marriage as the ultimate form of love and children as the ultimate result of marriage.<sup>81</sup> While the societal pressures may have shifted or even lessened, it is clear that in many ways the religious pressures have not. The family is still viewed as the ultimate role for women and those who step out of that role are criticized and often limited. Women are still unable to work as priests in many Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, which reflects the spiritual limitations placed on women and the view of their proper role. Feminist Christian women must work to overcome many of the same obstacles as the early female Christian ascetics.

Modern feminist Christians have the opportunity to combine the practices of the early female ascetics with the writings of Nietzsche to argue against orthodox Christianity. Nietzsche's concepts of life affirmation and self-creation are vital to the feminist Christian argument. The overcoming of social and religious roles by the early female ascetics in order to experience a different life provides a model to modern feminist Christians. The

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<sup>81</sup> "Documents of the II Vatican Council," accessed on March 25, 2013.

combination of these two sources and the overlapping concepts found in both allows the modern feminist Christian to bring together spirituality and atheism in a way that strengthens Christianity and allows for a new spiritual ideal.

When speaking of the modern Christian church and its relationship and reflections on women, there are many "Christianities" which one could refer to. With the continued expansion of Christianity, the varieties of practices and beliefs can be seen from an international perspective and even among churches in the same small town that call themselves Christian institutions. Moving forward, the Christianity referred to is not a specific Church or organization, but the conservative, common idea of Christianity that is found in American culture and politics. John Belcher writes about the emergence of a widespread conservative Christian culture after 1980. In speaking of this conservative movement, he states, "The notion that the world was sinful and controlled by Satan was a major platform of the movement. Much of the rhetoric of the movement encouraged people to separate or at least be suspicious of 'worldly' institutions, such as higher education."<sup>82</sup> The conservative Christian movement was one that emphasized the negative aspects of the worldly against the positive spiritual aspects. Melinda Bollar Wagner also writes on the effects of this movement, arguing, "Voluntary associations created by conservative Christians are providing a breeding ground for a king of 'generic' panconservative Christianity, with some of the corners of historical doctrinal differences rounded down."<sup>83</sup> Even in Church's where doctrinal differences would suggest varying views on worldly

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<sup>82</sup> John Belcher, "Conservative Christianity: A New Emerging Culture," in *The Psychologies in Religion*, ed. E. Thomas Dowd and Steven Liars Nielson (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2006), 128.

<sup>83</sup> Melinda Bollar Wagner, "Generic Conservative Christianity: The Demise of Denominationalism in Christian Schools" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(1), 1997,14.

matter, the conservative Christian movement has diluted those differences to create the perception, and often practice, of a conservative Christianity that emphasizes the hierarchy of the worldly and the spiritual, and in extension the male and the female. Recognizing that there are many different types of Christianity, there is still a common, normative perception with regards to Christianity and its relationship with women.

Modern, late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christianity has much in common with early Christianity in regards to its views of women and their role in their faith and in society in general. These views are often problematic for all women, including feminists, as they are often limiting. Just as the early female ascetics worked to overcome the roles assigned to them by the Christian Church and, more broadly, Roman society, feminist Christians work to change or even dissolve the strict roles for women in Christianity and allow for a more complete life that includes the opportunity to create for themselves roles that are fulfilling.

Women are still strongly connected to life, worldliness, and the body in modern Christianity. Morney Joy argues that throughout Christian history, "women became identified with matter, the body, and sensuality, while the association of the male was with spirit, mind, and purity."<sup>84</sup> In the religious hierarchy, this association places women below men, as they are associated with the earthly and even the sinful as opposed to the heavenly and spiritual. Many writers, such as Joy, argue that the concept of women being connected to the body, and therefore inferior since the word is considered below spirituality, is not only patriarchal, but also against the very scriptures that Christianity is founded on. "The anti-feminine, anti-body, world-negating interpretation was generally accepted without

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<sup>84</sup> Morney Joy, "God and Gender: Some Reflections on Women's Invocations of the Divine," in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 180.

question by the church fathers and came to be built into Christian theology. There was nothing 'Christian' about it. In fact, it was grossly anti-incarnational and a prime example of culture suppressing an integral part of the gospel."<sup>85</sup> With the introduction of incarnation, Joy, along with Nietzsche, argues that the world itself was redefined through Jesus. A hierarchy that simply elevates the spiritual above the worldly and negates life goes against the doctrine of incarnation and the life and teachings of Jesus found throughout the New Testament. In spite of the incarnation and its implications, the worldly, inferior view of women has become integral to Christian thought and practice.

Even some of the early church fathers refused to accept the idea of spiritual superiority over the world. Grace Jantzen points out that some of the early fathers, "thought rather of permeation: God is everywhere literally, not only in power and knowledge and goodness, but in substance."<sup>86</sup> The idea of God being substance, and this substance being shared by the world, alleviates some of the negativity associated with worldly matter and the body, and therefore women. If God is part of substance, a hierarchy that devalues substance no longer makes sense. Unfortunately, these ideas continue to be a minority in Christian thought. For the most part, the world is regarded as inferior and lowly, while the spiritual world is superior and the goal of life itself.

Along with being worldly, women are thought of as the sexual beings in Christianity. Margaret Farley explores issues of sexuality in the church, stating "Early Christian writers combined negative judgments regarding sexual desire with negative judgments regarding

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<sup>85</sup> Joy, "God and Gender," 180.

<sup>86</sup> Grace Jantzen, *God's World God's Body* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 30.

women.”<sup>87</sup> This view of women as sexual has defined their role in the Church. Women are given two roles within Christianity- that of the virgin, who must protect her sexuality and remain pure, fighting against her natural tendencies, and the whore, who is an object of sexual fulfillment for men whose true purpose can only be found in child bearing. Even in the role of mother, women are often viewed as incapable or failures. “Women in particular have appeared vulnerable to moral restrictions and judgments based on prevalent medical assessments of their sexual capabilities, ‘feminine characteristics’, and compliance with the rules for mothering,” writes Farley.<sup>88</sup> Women are viewed as not only worldly, but sexual, and their roles and value in the church and in society are defined as such.

Perhaps the view of women in Christianity would not be as consequential if it were not part of a larger social movement to restrict women to those views. Farley states:

Objectification of another is especially onerous when it is accompanied by efforts to make the other into what she is judged to be, constrain the other into roles and actions that are judged for her to be appropriate, subject the other in ways that allow no identity beyond the judgment imposed.<sup>89</sup>

Women are not only viewed as sexual and worldly, but are restricted to these roles. Judith Butler writes about the call, or the naming of another as something, arguing that, “the call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject.”<sup>90</sup> Just as Nietzsche described the problems for women who are defined by men, feminist Christians see implications for their self-creation in the definition of themselves as sexual beings. Sexual and worldly is not only what women are

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<sup>87</sup> Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2008), 44.

<sup>88</sup> Farley, *Just Love*, 55.

<sup>89</sup> Farley, *Just Love*, 121.

<sup>90</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 83.



accused of being, but what they are socially defined as. This social definition has implications for the limitations imposed on women as they attempt to create a life for themselves.

Christianity also restricts women in that they are not valued outside of these socially imposed roles. Rosalyn Diprose discusses the effect of this social restriction on the body. "The body which conforms to a uniform mode of subjugation is one which acts out a social role imposed on it," and therefore, "the embodied self is constituted by social concepts which discourage difference, creativity, and change."<sup>91</sup> Women are restricted to social roles and are not allowed the freedom to choose their role in society and the church, or even to fulfill those roles that they are drawn to outside of those that are strictly defined by the views of Christianity. In Nietzsche's terms, they are not allowed to become artists through self-creation, but must remain actresses in the roles imposed on them. It becomes more complex when these views are put in place not by scripture or doctrine, but by the views of others.

Many of the goals of feminist Christianity revolve around addressing the issues for women that are brought on by these societal roles in the church. Teresa Hornsby writes that, "to do feminist biblical criticism is not only to recognize the damage that biblical interpretations have done in this culture; it is an attempt to undo some of that damage."<sup>92</sup> Karen Trimble Alliaume addresses the Catholic Church, specifically in regards to their exclusion of women from the priesthood:

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<sup>91</sup> Rosalyn Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," in *Nietzsche, Feminism, and Political Theory*, ed. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 4.

<sup>92</sup> Teresa Hornsby, "The Annoying Woman: Biblical Scholarship After Judith Butler," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 7.

To understand why Catholic women may not, according to Church teaching, be ordained, we must understand how and why gender comes to matter in the theology promulgated by the Catholic magisterium, and in dissenting theologies by those theologians, feminist and otherwise, who question its conclusions.<sup>93</sup>

She concludes with a more general call to action; "Women who do not wish to be restricted to the Church-sanctioned and gender-complimentary roles of mother, virgin, and/or martyr, and who may not 'represent' Jesus Christ as priests, need alternatives."<sup>94</sup> Feminist Christianity calls for the Christian church to allow and support women in their roles outside of the sexual, restrictive ones that have been placed on them by centuries of Christian teachings.

In their work to empower women, feminist Christians search for arguments and methods by which to give modern Christian women the opportunity to create life for themselves outside of the restrictive roles of the Church. Through Nietzsche, these feminist Christians can find a foundation for their arguments against the moral and social roles of the Christian Church, both through Nietzsche's own conceptualizations of power and creation and through Nietzsche's description of Jesus. The early female Christian ascetics provide an example of women who used life affirmation and self-creation, concepts described by Nietzsche, to pursue opportunities otherwise denied to them. In the examples of Nietzsche and the early female Christian ascetics, modern feminist Christians have a model for life affirming and empowering Christianity.

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<sup>93</sup> Alliaume, *Disturbingly Catholic*, 73.

<sup>94</sup> Alliaume, *Disturbingly Catholic*, 97.

### **She Closes Her Eyes to Herself: Nietzsche and Women**

Nietzsche is often thought of as part of the patriarchal mindset of society as opposed to a feminist supporter. There is certainly much in his writing that indicates negative views of women that often align with the Church's limiting social constructs. Lorene Clark and Lynda Lange write in an essay arguing against political suppression of women, "Nietzsche's implications that women who seek education are not really women is clearly expressed in *Beyond Good and Evil*. 'When a woman has scholarly inclinations there is usually something wrong with her sexuality.'"<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche seems to certainly argue for a restrictive role for women and suggests that their value lies in their sexuality. Because of examples such as this, feminists have often turned against Nietzsche as an enemy to be argued with. This is especially true for feminist Christians, who are faced with writings that seem to devalue them both spiritually and based on their gender.

Like much of Nietzsche's work, his strongest anti-feminist statements are matched with an undertone of understanding women, or even admiring and supporting them. At the end of her essay on Nietzsche's anti-feminist views, Clark-Lange acknowledges the apparent contradiction between Nietzsche's writing and his personal life. "Nietzsche's ambivalence about educated women is seen even more clearly in the circumstances of his personal life. The two women whom he loved were both independent and liberated by the standards of the nineteenth century."<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche's apparent distaste for educated women

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<sup>95</sup> Lorene Clark and Lynda Lange, *The Sexism of Social Political Theory: Women and Reproduction from Plato to Nietzsche* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 123.

<sup>96</sup> Clark and Lange, *The Sexism of Social Political Theory*, 125.

was not reflected in his personal actions. Even in his harshest criticisms of women, there is possibility for contradiction.

Nietzsche supported women in more obvious ways, especially when it came to objectification and issues of the body. Many authors argue that Nietzsche's criticisms of Western culture and its views of the body could "be extended to a critique of Western patriarchal culture."<sup>97</sup> Rosalyn Diprose wrote on Nietzsche's views on objectification, the body, and women in general. When considering the body, "Nietzsche claims that the body is what compares and creates and that thought and the ego are its instruments."<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche's focus on the body does not stem from an argument against the spiritual hierarchy, but it does frame arguments that can be used in feminist Christian critiques. The importance of the body is also relevant to social relations. "For Nietzsche, one's place in the world is determined by the concepts which govern the structure of the social world and which sculpture the body accordingly- a body which is a unity as an organization and is therefore a work of art."<sup>99</sup> The social sphere defines the body, which in turn shapes the life of the person.

According to Nietzsche, the self is created by both art and society. A fulfilled person is one who is constantly working on their corporeal self and therefore creating a work of art in themselves. "Nietzsche sometimes refers to this difference within the self as the 'pathos of distance,'" states Diprose, and this pathos of distance is part of ideal existence to Nietzsche.<sup>100</sup> A person must be constantly recreating himself or herself in order to have a fulfilling life. This creation can only come with freedom from roles placed on that person

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<sup>97</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 29.

<sup>98</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 3.

<sup>99</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 3.

<sup>100</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 6.

through society. In order to create oneself, one must break free from the roles created by others (or society in general). There is no creativity in living in roles placed by others. Just as Butler talked about the implications of social definitions, Nietzsche's pathos of distance and recreation of the self suggest the importance of breaking free from societal definitions.

This idea of creation is especially important to Nietzsche when examining the relationship between men and women. Nietzsche criticizes the objectification of women by men as detrimental to both female creativity and male self-creation. Diprose explains, "A man can maintain himself by constructing an ideal and essential image of woman that is simply complimentary to himself, yet designed for his consumption. Their image still serves to affirm the self as unchanging: it silences the noise of other possibilities."<sup>101</sup> Men must define themselves through the creation of an opposite. Instead of applying the pathos of distance to self-creation, they apply it to the creation of another. In men's own self-creation, they also create an image of women, which is then projected onto her so that both can remain unchanged. In other words, to define himself as a consumer and superior being, man must first define woman as a distant and different thing from him. In another phrase of Nietzsche, "The most magic and powerful effect of woman is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, action in distans; but this requires first and above all- distance."<sup>102</sup> Man knows himself by comparison to another, to woman. By keeping women at a distance, man creates an image of her that is constructed only for himself, an image which incorporates the archetype of the virgin, to be admired but never touched, held on a pedestal but never allowed to experience. This created image limits women and constricts them to a self that is created by another, as opposed to a self that they create and recreate of their own free will.

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<sup>101</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 16.

<sup>102</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 16.

Nietzsche also engages the second archetype of women: that of the whore. He speaks of the shame associated with transitioning from the image at a distance to the submissive sexual counterpart, and this "submission results in the constitution of woman's bodily self as a calcified image of shame."<sup>103</sup> The woman is considered untouchable until she submits to a man. This submission is shameful in two ways. Diprose explains that, "it involves being sexually possessed by a man and, connected to this, is the shame involved in the revelation through submission that woman is not the profound, unfathomable depth, the mysterious eternally feminine, which man's desire seeks."<sup>104</sup> Women who are at a distance are at least given a sense of depth- they are a mysterious other that is untouchable. However, when women transition into a submissive role, they are suddenly revealed as shallow in their ability to be not only touched, but controlled. In both roles created for women by men, they are sexual objects (one being a symbol of innocence and temptation, the other being a tool for man's pleasure), which is shameful in itself. Furthermore, once they move from the distant created object to the sexual subservient, it is revealed that the depth created by the first image no longer exists. "In submitting to a man's desire, in giving up everything that she could be, woman's shame is constituted in revealing herself as surface."<sup>105</sup> Women cannot live up to the first image because they are in fact sexual beings, and they can not live up to the second because they desire to be more than just sexual beings.

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<sup>103</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 17.

<sup>104</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 18.

<sup>105</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 18.

Women's own creativity is impossible in this role designed for them by men.

Nietzsche points out that women are actors and artists in their own right in this role, stating:

Reflect on the whole history of women: do they not have to be first of all and above all else actresses? Listen to the physicians who have hypnotized women; finally, love them- let yourself be 'hypnotized by them'! What is always the end result? That they 'put on something' even when they take off everything. Woman is so artistic.<sup>106</sup>

In her constant social role as something other than herself, woman is forced to 'put on something' even when she 'takes off everything' and is therefore an artist in the sense that she is an actress. She is given the opportunity not to create herself according to her own will, but to force herself into the created image of others. Diprose argues "women are artistic only in so far as they are actors in a role imposed upon them. For women to be artistic in the proper sense would require the ability to incorporate experience according to one's own plan."<sup>107</sup> For women to be truly artistic, they would need the ability to create their corporeal reality for themselves, instead of being "changeable only to the extent that man's interpretations move her."<sup>108</sup>

Nietzsche not only describes the objectification of women, but also sympathizes with their condition and even argues against it. Diprose writes, "Nietzsche is not insensitive to the difficulties faced by woman as the object of man's desire."<sup>109</sup> Nietzsche examines in detail the psychological impact of man's creation of the role of women:

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<sup>106</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 22.

<sup>107</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 17.

<sup>108</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 19.

<sup>109</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 19.

Thus a psychic knot has been tied that may have no equal. Even the compassionate curiosity of the wisest student of humanity is inadequate for guessing how this or that woman manages to accommodate herself to this solution of the riddle, and to the riddle of a solution, and what dreadful, far-reaching suspicions must stir in her poor unhinged soul- and how the ultimate philosophy and skepsis of woman casts anchor at this point. Afterwards, the same deep silence as before. Often a silence directed at herself, too. She closes her eyes to herself.<sup>110</sup>

Nietzsche writes of the psychological difficulty of the roles imposed on women and acknowledges that these roles do not indicate the true character of a woman, concluding that in order to fulfill these roles she must "close her eyes to herself." In fulfilling the roles imposed on them by men, society, and the church, women must ignore their own desires. While Nietzsche certainly does not seem to approve of equality in the sense of closing the distance between men and women (as Diprose points out, "equality amounts to turning women into men and is therefore not a distancing at all"<sup>111</sup>), he does seem to support the idea that women should create their reality for themselves and participate in the world as true artists, not simply as actresses for the desires of men. While distance between people must exist, this distance does not require the control of one gender by the other, but rather recognition, not even necessarily based on gender at all, that our created and actual selves are at a distance from those around us in many ways.

Nietzsche further acknowledges the possibility of women fulfilling a role that goes against the male expectation when he discusses woman wielding a dagger. "Would a woman be able to hold us if we did not consider it quite possible that under certain circumstances she would wield a dagger (any kind of dagger) against us? Or against

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<sup>110</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 20.

<sup>111</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 21.



herself-which in certain cases would be a crueler revenge."<sup>112</sup> By ruining the male-created image of woman, women are able to free themselves from the constraints placed on them. Nietzsche acknowledges that there always exists the possibility that women will escape from their submissive image. This destruction of the pure, submissive image of woman ("turning the dagger on herself") is one of the most damaging ideas for men because it would not only ruin the created image for men, but would disrupt their own identity, which rests in large part on maintaining the image of woman as other. Nietzsche, in this sense, seems sympathetic to the feminist plight, and even insightful to the psychological condition imposed upon women by men, society, and Christianity. This interpretation gives depth to the typical reading of Nietzsche, which casts women in a negative light.

### **The Feminist Christian Movement**

The Feminist Christian movement has several purposes and goals. Many of these goals are built around the idea of self-creation and fulfillment within the context of the Church. Diprose argues, "Leaving behind the influences of social concepts which restrict our place in the world requires treating one's corporeality as a work of art."<sup>113</sup> Women must create for themselves in order to lead fulfilling lives beyond the roles created for them by religion and society. Christian feminists face additional obstacles in maintaining fulfilling spiritual lives while defying the roles created for them by society and the religion they ascribe to. Joy also points to the importance of self-creation, stating, "Women are indeed emphasizing that part of their feminist agenda which is the recognition of their

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<sup>112</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 20.

<sup>113</sup> Diprose, "Nietzsche and the Pathos of Distance," 6.

ability to name and claim their own experiences."<sup>114</sup> In order to live complete spiritual lives, Christian women must have the ability to create their own selves according to their own plan.

One of the largest criticisms of Christianity by Christian feminists is that the gender constructs in Christian teachings are not biblically based. Just as Nietzsche argued that Jesus was reconstructed for the purposes of those who taught about him, feminist Christians argue that gender has been reconstructed by society and patriarchy in a way that does not match with the scriptural description of gender. Frymer-Kensky argues:

The biblical image of women is consistently the same as that of men. In their strengths and weaknesses, goals and strategies, the women of the bible do not differ substantially from the men. This biblical idea that the desires and actions of men and women are similar is tantamount to a radically new conception of gender.<sup>115</sup>

Frymer-Kensky points to stories such as that of Eve, which can be read to suggest equality and harmony in the genders as opposed to hierarchy and submission. While there are social constructs of gender and gender relations present in the Bible, the descriptions of the men and the women are similar, and they are certainly not a reflection of the current Christian understanding of gender.

Because of this scriptural misinterpretation and misuse, feminist Christianity calls for at the least a new understanding of Christianity, and at the most a new understanding of God. Just as Nietzsche argued that a true understanding of God would require a radically different image than the Christian God, feminist Christians argue that the idea of God should be radically different from the patriarchal God created by Christianity. Joy works to

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<sup>114</sup> Joy, "God and Gender," 122.

<sup>115</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1993), 121.

“survey the numerous options available today for the reconception of God.”<sup>116</sup> Feminist Christians are not attempting to negate God and religion, but instead to redefine and transform the concepts to allow for a fulfilling life for women in the Christian context. Joy points to Mary Daly, who “envisages an end to all anthropomorphisms and suggests a form of God that is in touch with our dynamic and creative core. ‘Why indeed must God be a noun? Why not a verb- the most active and dynamic of all.’”<sup>117</sup> Joy argues that this dynamic God lends itself to the dynamic universe and that this allowed for all of humanity to reach its potential, stating, “New-feminist spirituality is best understood in its evolutionary setting, where it is assumed that the cosmos is not static and complete but dynamic and evolving, and that at least part of the goal of its cosmogenesis, biogenesis, and the rise of humankind is that human persons should be able to actualize their full humanity.”<sup>118</sup> Women must be able to be dynamic and changing, as opposed to the static image imposed on them by Christianity.

It is also important to note that feminist Christians, along with Nietzsche, do not wish to create sameness across all people, therefore destroying any distance. Feminist Christians often argue that these distinctions exist not between people, but within people, therefore creating paths of distance within the self that allows for greater self-creation. Joy states, “Contrary to the popular dichotomization (male, strong; female, weak, and so on) there is the established fact that both masculinity and femininity coexist in each person. It is a matter of both/and, not either/or. Both masculinity and femininity need to be

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<sup>116</sup> Joy, “God and Gender,” 122.

<sup>117</sup> Joy, “God and Gender,” 123.

<sup>118</sup> Joy, “God and Gender,” 177.

integrated and lived."<sup>119</sup> Nietzsche's pathos of distance is clearly present in feminist arguments that work not to negate male and female, but to argue that these differences exist within each person and not between the self and others. Sarah Coakley engages what she calls gender fluidity when she argues for the right of women to be priests, suggesting that both masculine and feminine traits are required within the same person to experience leading the Church.<sup>120</sup> Coakley works within Nietzsche's pathos of distance, arguing that the male and female counterparts are integral, necessary, and powerful in the context of the priesthood. While some figures, such as Mary Douglas, argue that these gender distinctions are reason for women to not be ordained, Coakley argues that the experience of the male and female exists in each individual and that this dichotomy is to be embraced, not used to judge or limit others.

This gender dichotomy within the self creates, in Nietzsche's terms, an affirmation of life and of others as opposed to a negation. Joy points out that:

Unlike the masculinist mode, in neo-feminist awareness these distinctions are not extrapolated such that I identify myself as not being you, and vice versa, which ends up as a mutual negation. Instead, it is identity established by a mutual affirmation. This engages and activates a quite different type of energy, positively affirming the other and seeking the other's good, giving oneself away and receiving from the other affirmative, life-giving energy.<sup>121</sup>

Whereas the suppression of Christianity destroys creativity and therefore life, feminist Christianity calls for an affirmation of life through self-creation and recognition of others.

Feminist Christianity uses many arguments against orthodoxy that are also found in Nietzsche. Nietzsche's concept of Jesus is critical in understanding how feminist Christians

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<sup>119</sup> Joy, "God and Gender," 181.

<sup>120</sup> Sarah Coakley, "The Woman at the Altar: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Subversion?" *Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004): 75.

<sup>121</sup> Joy, "God and Gender," 188.

can develop a Christian God that allows for existence outside of the moral roles of the Church. The pathos of distance and concept of self-creation lead to an understanding of why life outside of socially defined roles is critical for feminist Christians to lead a powerful spiritual life. Nietzsche's writings are foundational and can be utilized to strengthen the feminist Christian cause in many ways. Nietzsche's language, ideals, and arguments about God and Christianity in general are all helpful to the message of life affirmation and fulfillment that feminist Christians work toward. While Nietzsche has not been interpreted as a feminist supporter, or a Christian supporter, an in-depth interpretation of his arguments allows for similarity and support between the arguments.

## Conclusion

In Sullivan's article for the cover of Newsweek in 2012 addressing the issues Christianity was having in recruiting younger people to the Church, he argued that Jesus' teachings were "truly radical" and that they required followers to "give up power over others, because power, if it is to be effective, ultimately requires the threat of violence, and violence is incompatible with the total acceptance and love of all other human beings that is at the sacred heart of Jesus' teaching."<sup>122</sup> He discusses the role of religion in American politics and its implications on a national level, stating that the word secular "once meant belief in separating the spheres of faith and politics; it now means, for many, simply atheism. The ability to be faithful in a religious space and reasonable in a political one has atrophied before our eyes."<sup>123</sup> Finally, he discusses the loss of control in America by the Catholic Church, pointing to feminist issues as part of the basis:

The Catholic Church's hierarchy lost much of its authority over the American flock with the unilateral prohibition of the pill in 1968 by Pope Paul VI. But in the last decade, whatever shred of moral authority that remained has evaporated. The hierarchy was exposed as enabling, and then covering up, an international conspiracy to abuse and rape countless youths and children. I don't know what greater indictment of a church's authority there can be- except the refusal, even now, of the entire leadership to face their responsibility and resign. Instead, they obsess about others' sex lives, about who is entitled to civil marriage, and about who pays for birth control in health insurance. Inequality, poverty, even the torture institutionalized by the government after 9/11- these issues attract far less of their public attention.<sup>124</sup>

With the Catholic Church's outspokenness against women's issues, along with silence on many other important issues in the public, the Church has lost much of its authority in the

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<sup>122</sup> Sullivan, "Christianity in Crisis."

<sup>123</sup> Sullivan, "Christianity in Crisis."

<sup>124</sup> Sullivan, "Christianity in Crisis."

United States, with implications reaching not only the life of the Church, but American politics and daily life in itself.

Feminist Christianity provides in many ways a solution to what Sullivan calls the crisis of Christianity. Ursula King writes, "The vision of feminism empowers many women today and Christians must recognize that the great feminist themes of liberation, celebration, and community are also the central themes at the heart of the Christian gospel."<sup>125</sup> Grace Jantzen argues, "that is it advantageous philosophically and religiously to view the universe as God's body rather than thinking of God and the world as utterly separated into cosmic dualism."<sup>126</sup> Feminist Christianity creates an opportunity for Christianity to regain its strength, and much of what feminists argue align with what Nietzsche argues. Both feminists and Nietzsche see a Christianity that has gone away from its original intentions into a place where its followers are unable to reach their full potential in life. King argues that feminism is the solution. "Christianity and feminism exist in creative tension. They challenge each other. Their mutual interaction provides us with tremendous resources for Christian renewal and empowerment that we cannot afford to ignore."<sup>127</sup> Just as Christianity cannot afford to ignore feminism, feminist Christians cannot afford to ignore writers such as Nietzsche, who provide support and guidance as they fight for a new Christianity.

In a culture where religion is often seen as unreasonable, feminist Christianity, through its combination of the spiritual principles of the female ascetics and the atheist philosophical writings of Nietzsche, has the opportunity to provide a model for religious

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<sup>125</sup> Ursula King, "Christianity and Feminism: Do they need each other?" *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 4 (2004): 194.

<sup>126</sup> Jantzen, *God's World God's Body*, 188.

<sup>127</sup> King, "Christianity and Feminism."

conversation involving radically different sources. This unity of the spiritual with the philosophical allows for a strengthened argument for the reformation of Christianity, one that appeals to many audiences and ideals. Feminist Christianity provides a model for the combination of rationales in forming new Christian ideals.



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