

Ground Motive

Dialogue at the intersection of philosophy, religion & social ethics

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Christianity: Slave Morality or Anthropotechnics?

Posted by: [Dean Dettloff](#)

By Dean Dettloff



Fernando Niño de Guevara, Inquisitor


In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously argued that Christianity bound humans to what he called “slave morality.” On his telling, morals are not absolute goods but relative, developing out of historical situations. Slave morality arose in response to what he calls “master morality,” which is characterized by strong will. Weak willed individuals, according to Nietzsche, unable to overcome the strong, responded by inventing morals to keep the strong in check. This invention, however, was not done out of love (despite its claims to the contrary), but out of resentment, fear, and pessimism. The weak, unable to overcome the strong, asserted themselves by the creation of arbitrary values. Although these values are presented as shining examples of altruism, they are haunted, says Nietzsche, by a hidden and embarrassing egoism.

With the “death of God,” explored poetically by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, these values were revealed to be empty shells, stunting the growth of human beings by privileging the weak over the strong. In the wake of this change, humans were finally liberated beyond the shackles of repressive morality. Freed, for better or worse, from the strictures of slave morals, human beings gain the ability to determine for themselves what they are to become. Now it falls to those who have ears to hear, the strong-willed, to rise above the chatter of those who do not yet know that God is dead, to make something of themselves and refuse to bend to the resentful will of the weak, a will most perfectly expressed in institutional religion. Nietzsche calls for a joyous affirmation of life and optimism, the releasing of forces long subdued by dry and repressive religious schemes.

Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality is damning, and indeed all too true all too much of the time (to paraphrase Merold Westphal). But can the history of Christianity be reduced to the history of values crafted by resentful victims? Contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk disagrees. “I concede that I am unsure whether a major event such as the ‘slave revolt in morality’ invoked so forcefully by Nietzsche ever occurred,” he writes in his recently translated book *You Must Change Your Life* (129). Sloterdijk suggests Nietzsche’s critical insights were important, yet unfortunately raised to an excessive scale. Instead, argues Sloterdijk, Christianity has always also been a fundamental source for the kind of strong-willed self-creation Nietzsche puts forward as a positive project. “Christianity undeniably has a share of the copyright on the word *Übermensch*, incurring royalties even when it is used for anti-Christian purposes” (128). What we know as religion, argues Sloterdijk, is a vast wealth of what he calls “anthropotechnologies,” that is, the technologies of human beings by which humans create and transcend themselves.

Nietzsche’s critique of religion, on Sloterdijk’s reading, fails to see the deep, implicit practices, anthropotechnology, at work within religious culture. In fact, Sloterdijk goes so far as to say there is no such thing as “religion,” per se, but rather “misunderstood spiritual regimens” (3). Religious discourse is not simply a cover for resentment. Instead, Sloterdijk suggests spiritual regimens should be examined for the ways in which they help (or fail to

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help) human beings in the process of transcending their given situations. Thus the better question becomes who is better trained, better equipped, for the circumstances of life and, most importantly, the overcoming of those circumstances. Where Nietzsche accused Christianity of an insidious slave morality, Sloterdijk sees in it the possibility for rigorous and healthy exercises that allow humans to become spiritually strengthened--Christianity, at its best, is a technology for the creation of better human beings, not reducible to a clever and disingenuous means of suppressing the strong. Thus Sloterdijk suggests we must look to the real practices at work in religion, not simply the doctrinal or dogmatic content it professes.

Of course, suggesting the analysis of practice is more revelatory than the analysis of theory is nothing new, nor is the decision to examine religion as a set of habits and practices (as for example in Wittgenstein or certain versions of pragmatism). Indeed, Nietzsche himself was attempting to do just that, looking to the secret motives behind Christian actions instead of the doctrines of pity and mercy which cover them over. The novelty of Sloterdijk's theory lies in its insight that the practices housed in traditions we call religion need not be viewed as mere descriptions of everyday life, but may in fact be employed for the radical change of everyday life—hence the title of his book, *You Must Change Your Life*. Drawing positively from Nietzsche, Sloterdijk's understanding of spiritual exercises presents the possibility of self-creation, with all its opportunities and dangers. Far from being a



Saint Francis of Assisi

necessarily “conservative” or “regressive” force, spiritual practices contain the tools for extending ourselves beyond ourselves, training ourselves for a Kingdom which is both coming in the future and yet already among us.

Sloterdijk's work on religion hardly does away with Nietzsche's critiques, which function as necessary, even prophetic correctives to the pathologies present in Christianity. And Sloterdijk's own position provides as many ambiguities as it does clarifications. But in showing how Christianity also corresponds to, and in fact anticipates, the positive dimension of Nietzsche's project, Sloterdijk offers Christian thinkers the possibility of thinking along new, creative lines. Instead of maintaining a status quo or bandying about abstract ideas with no ties to concrete experience, we might relate to the rich wealth of the Christian tradition and its practices with a mind toward putting it to work in the process of confidently becoming better persons, the kinds of persons who are at home in a world of peace and who refuse to settle for a world of resentment, fear, scarcity, and violence. Sloterdijk rightly notices the ways in which Christianity is fixed on the task of conversion, of radically changing ourselves and our activity such that the world itself must change. At its best, this is what religion has always, traditionally, striven to do.

Dean Dettloff is a Junior Member at the Institute for Christian Studies, pursuing an MA Philosophy, where he is working on a thesis examining cynicism and creative action.

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