

# Nietzsche's Contribution



Who was Nietzsche? What did he say and why has he been called "the awakener and creator of new life-values"?

*Professor Sir Lloyd Geering*

This presentation will explore relevance of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's (1844-1900) thought in today's world. Nietzsche may be described as the prophet par excellence of the new age. Martin Buber referred to him as 'the first path-finder of the new culture', 'the awakener and creator of new life-values and a new world-feeling'.

Nietzsche believed that the traditional Christian concern with the supposed spiritual realities of the other-world, far from leading to human fulfilment, had the effect of falsifying all the real human problems of politics, of social organization and of education and of causing men to despise the basic concerns of life itself.

The modern growth of this-worldly concerns meant, for Nietzsche, that mankind was entering on an entirely new era, one pregnant with both hope and disaster on the grand scale. In the transition to modernity, a transition in values he called 'the revaluation of all values' is taking place..... 'There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena'. Instead of becoming the slave of values, falsely believed to be absolute, each person has to become the master of the moral component of his/her own human condition.

**Professor Sir Lloyd Geering** is the author of at least 10 books, including his autobiography, *Wrestling with God*, (2006). He was awarded an Honorary DD by the University of Otago in 1976 and a CBE in 1988; in 2001 he was named a Principal Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit and in 2007 he was admitted to the Order of New Zealand.

In my book *Christian Faith at the Crossroads*, (initially published as *Faith's New Age*), I described Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844—1900) as the prophet *par excellence* of the new age. **Martin Buber referred to him as 'the first path-finder of the new culture', 'the awakener and creator of new life-values'.**

Nietzsche came of a long line of Lutheran pastors and had been reared in an atmosphere of extreme Lutheran piety. But the premature death of his father left him thereafter in a household entirely composed of female relatives. His childhood experiences were undoubtedly influential in engendering what became his four pet hates — pharisaic piety, nationalism, bourgeois provincialism and domineering women.

After a school career made notable for his brilliance in classics, Nietzsche went to the University of Bonn to study theology. He soon turned back to classics. Nietzsche was so brilliant that he was awarded his doctorate without examination and appointed immediately to the Chair

of Classical Philology at Basel. It was his only academic appointment. Ten years later he resigned, partly because of growing ill-health and partly because of increasing disillusionment with academic life. He spent the next decade in southern Europe, nursing his failing health and writing. In 1889 he became hopelessly insane and remained so until his death. It was only after he had lost his sanity that his books came to be widely read and it was mainly during the twentieth century that his real significance came to be recognized.

Even during his student days at Leipzig, Nietzsche was becoming fascinated with the condition of modern society — with what he called the true and urgent problems of life. He began to probe beneath the surface of Western culture with remarkable insight. His greatness was to perceive the radical character of the cultural and religious change then taking place. He recognized that Western Christendom had come to an end. That observation is commonplace today; 130 years ago many even found the thought offensive.

Nietzsche ceased to be a believing Christian during his schooldays. In an essay which he wrote at the age of eighteen he said, **'That God became man shows only that man is not to seek his bliss in eternity, but to establish his heaven on earth'**. That's a brief summary of what Feuerbach had said in 1841 in *The Essence of Christianity*. But Nietzsche dismissed Feuerbach as a shallow thinker who did not realise the full significance of what he had done in turning Christianity upside down.

Nietzsche produced about a book a year. At first these consisted of a series of essays (e.g. *Untimely Meditations*), and then for a while he expressed himself in the form of aphorisms, short pithy observations, some as short as a sentence and others forming a brief essay of several pages. Nietzsche presented no coherent philosophical system. Such was the radical character of the cultural change taking place, and such was the enigmatic nature of human existence (as he saw it), that systems of thought were no longer possible. In this respect he showed himself to be a post-modernist even before the flowering of modernism.

His thoughts were often extremely provocative, sometimes at variance with one another, and sometimes so outrageous as to appear absurd. They were intended to jolt one out of complacency and stereotyped ways of thinking. He did not expect his readers to agree with everything he said; rather he was encouraging them to think for themselves. His books cannot be read quickly; they must be wrestled with, pondered on and responded to. They reflect the ambiguities of life, the fact that creative and destructive elements are both present in the life process.

The time was past for uncovering eternal truths and seeing how they fitted into a neat and coherent whole. (Of course, in one sense it had never really existed, but people had long assumed that it did.) Nietzsche's own philosophy, if one can call it such, defies systematization and lacks logical consistency. He recognized that even **ultimate reality itself is in a state of change and flux. He said that everything is in a state of becoming - 'there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths'**.

Nietzsche sketched the post-theistic character of the new religious age very strikingly in his now well-known Parable of the Madman. There he described a madman running through the market-place with a lantern during the brightness of the morning and crying out that he was looking for God. The bystanders poked fun at him and asked him if God had lost his way or gone

on a distant voyage. Thereupon he declared that God was dead and would remain dead. Moreover, he said, humans were all responsible for the death of God. As a result of the death of God, it was just as if the earth had become unchained from the sun and was already moving out into the cold, dark and empty space of the vast universe. That was why he had lit his lantern even though it was still light. This strange announcement silenced the onlookers and caused them to stare at him in astonishment. Then the madman grew silent and threw his lantern to the ground, where it broke into pieces and went out. That led him to say, 'I have come too early; my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way. It has not yet reached the ears of men'. He then went round many of the churches and made his pronouncements within them declaring, "What are these but the monuments and tombs of God?" If you look up U-Tube you will find several different video clips of this story, and Don Cupitt produced another in his original *Sea of Faith* BBC series Part 6.

Some of Nietzsche's predecessors, people like Hegel, Strauss and Feuerbach had recognized that humankind had entered into a post-theistic age. Indeed, Hegel had actually been the first to use the phrase 'the death of God'. But, in Nietzsche's view, they had not properly appreciated the stark and frightening significance of such a shattering cosmic event. Hegel and his followers had optimistically assumed that all the Christian moral values inherited from the past would still remain even after the Christian God had been got rid of. They had not reckoned with the fact that the death of God also meant an end to the absoluteness of all values, and all truths, for God had been the embodiment of them all.

Yet Nietzsche rejoiced in the fact that Christendom was being shaken to its deepest foundations, that the belief in God had been undermined. His denunciation of Christianity was more violent than any other nineteenth century critic and reached its peak in the *The Anti-Christ*, where he said, for example, **'I condemn Christianity, I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible charge any prosecutor has ever uttered. To me it is the extremist thinkable form of corruption... The Christian Church has left nothing untouched by its depravity, it has made of every value a disvalue, of every truth a lie... I call Christianity the *one* great curse... the *one* immortal blemish of mankind'**. If Nietzsche had lived to see the rise and spread of fundamentalism he no doubt would have regarded it as proof of these very words. After writing those words Nietzsche noted that we date the years of our calendar from what he called that unhallowed day when Christianity began. He said we should start our calendar from the day Christianity came to an end with the revaluation of all values.

Yet it was something of a love-hate relationship which he had with Christianity. It was the love of truth which he had imbibed from Christian culture which enabled him to be so critical of it. He said, **'even we students of today, who are atheists and anti-metaphysicians, light our torches at the flame of a millennial faith; the Christian faith, that God is truth and truth divine'**. Indeed it was this very concern for truth, hidden at the heart of Christianity, which was now, in his view, bringing about the dissolution of the historical forms of Christianity. He wrote, **'This Christianity as dogma perished by its own ethics, and in the same way Christianity as ethics must perish; we are standing on the threshold of this event. After drawing a**

**whole series of conclusions, Christian truthfulness must now draw its strongest conclusion, the one by which it shall do away with itself.**

The suggestion we have here that, if Christianity were voluntarily to bring about its own dissolution, it would be its finest hour, is unexpectedly consistent with the paradox which is central to Christianity, namely that one must die in order to live. Nietzsche is implying here that Christianity must let its old self die in order that it may rise to a new kind of life. So it is not surprising that Nietzsche, in spite of his polemic against Christianity, was attracted to some aspects of the Christ figure. 'In reality', he said, 'there has been only one Christian, and he died on the Cross. The "Evangel" *died* on the Cross.'

Nietzsche claimed that "This "bringer of glad tidings" died as he lived, as he *taught* — *not* to "redeem mankind" but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to mankind *is his practice . . . his bearing before the judges . . . his bearing on the Cross*'. Genuine Christianity consists in the practice of living a life like that of him who died on the Cross.

Whereas Christ had taught that whoever set out to save his soul would lose it and called people to take up their own cross and follow him, Christianity had completely twisted this to become the way of how to save one's soul and thus be assured of a place in some eternal world through the benefits of the Cross of Christ. Nietzsche laid most of the blame for this distortion on St Paul. Today some scholars would agree with him. Nietzsche charged Paul with the responsibility of shifting the centre of gravity from this life to a life beyond and that beyond turns out to be nothingness.

Nietzsche scathingly rejected the dualistic world-view which had come to dominate orthodox Christianity. He said, "The "kingdom of Heaven" is a condition of the heart — not something that comes "after death". The "kingdom of God" is not something one waits for; it has no yesterday or tomorrow, it does not come "in a thousand years" — it is an experience within a heart: it is everywhere, it is nowhere'.

Nietzsche believed that the traditional Christian concern with the supposed spiritual realities of the other-world had the effect of turning attention away from all the real human problems of politics, of social organization and of education, and of causing people to devalue life itself. **The concept of the "beyond" as the "true world" had the disastrous effect of devaluating the only world there is. The concept of the "soul"- the "immortal soul"- had the effect of devaluing and even despising the body. The concept of "God" as one dwelling in another world - a pure and spiritual world - had become a counter-concept of life.**

So for Nietzsche, the modern growth of this-worldly concerns - what we today call secularization - meant that humankind is entering an entirely new era, one pregnant with both hope and disaster on the grand scale. Nietzsche believed that in the transition to modernity a transition in values was taking place, one more radical than all previous transitions. This transition he called '**the revaluation of all values**'. **In this transition, instead of looking for some absolute moral values to be revealed or discovered we human ourselves must become the creator of values.** It is one of the themes of his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, in the course of which he says, '**There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena**'.

Nietzsche's doctrine of the revaluation of all values is all of a piece with the dissolution of the other-world, the recognition of the death of God and the awareness of the absence of any eternal moral absolutes. The new age called upon mankind to revalue and sometimes even reverse the former 'eternal values. In the past the so-called absolute values or divine commandments had led to what Nietzsche called the 'slave morality'. They induced a **slave morality because they caused people to be dependent on the approval of God and/or of their fellows. Slave morality stunted moral growth, smothered initiative, crushed the freedom of the human spirit** and encouraged the continuance of child-like and servile dependence, and lack of self-confidence.

What Nietzsche hoped to foster, by the revaluation of all values, was what he called '**the master morality**'. This has nothing whatever to do (as has sometimes been mistakenly supposed) with a morality of mastering it over others. It is the morality of **the noble type of person who 'feels himself to be the determiner of values, he does not need to be approved of . . . he creates values'**. As the master-painter creates beauty out of his pains, the master of morality creates values out of human activities. As an example, think of the TV1 Sunday series of personal vignettes that it calls Good Sorts.

"The noble human being honours in himself the man of power, also the man who has power over himself, who understands how to speak and how to keep silent, who enjoys practising severity and harshness upon himself and feels reverence for all that is severe and harsh'. **The exponent of master morality is the morally mature person, the one who is morally well-balanced. He is the one who goes the second mile!**

Far from making it morally easy for people, the attainment of the master morality would make much greater demands upon them than the traditional moralities had done and it was by no means certain in Nietzsche's mind that the human race would be equal to these demands. But in so far as people met the requirements of the new age, there would emerge a new type of human being, of whom there had been only very occasional examples in the past. Nietzsche called this new type **the Übermensch**. This has been translated as 'superman' but this is a misleading translation for the word already has too many associations which are in sharp conflict with what Nietzsche had in mind. Although 'overman' is preferable it is still far from satisfactory. It is better to leave the word untranslated. Although the Nazis claimed Nietzsche as their own prophet, and were encouraged to do so by Nietzsche's own sister, it is a gross misrepresentation of all that Nietzsche stood for to have his name even associated with Nazism; the popular image of the Nazi storm-trooper was almost the polar opposite of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.)

The story of Zarathustra, in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. was Nietzsche's counter to the story of Christ. He chose Zarathustra because he was the originator of moral monotheism - God as the embodiment of goodness, truth, justice and so on. That God has died. With the death of God came the end of all absolute values.

What led Nietzsche to go back to Zoroastrianism and its founding prophet Zarathustra? I do not know. Was it because he was the first monotheist? Moreover he was a moral monotheist, in the sense that the very essence of God was not almightiness but morality. Zarathustra proclaimed himself the prophet of Ahura Mazda - the Lord of Light. Perhaps Nietzsche felt it was



necessary to go back to origins. In any case he chose Zarathustra to be the Proclaimer of his message.

It is in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that Nietzsche expounded the concept of the Übermensch. There he is said to be, not the person who lords it over others by virtue of superior strength, but rather the one who has first of all channelled his/her own will to power towards the mastery of the self. The key to the understanding of the Übermensch is to be found in self-discipline. **The Übermensch is the one who has overcome the HUMAN (*mensch*) in himself. He is the one who has overcome the animal nature in humankind, who has brought some order to the chaos of warring passions in humankind, who has sublimated its destructive impulses, who has become the 'man of tolerance, not from weakness, but from strength, a spirit who has become free'.**

The **chief symbol of Zoroastrianism - the Fravashi** - actually portrays in symbolic fashion much of what Nietzsche was propounding. Though it is often referred to as a symbol of one's guardian angel, it is actually a symbolic portrayal of the human condition.

Nietzsche did not share the optimistic view of human nature displayed by Feuerbach, Marx, Comte and later humanists. He knew that humankind has within itself the potential for both good and evil, the latter sometimes leading to unbelievable inhuman savagery; he believed that the 'phenomenon of man' (to use the phrase of Teilhard de Chardin) could end in complete disaster. **'Man is a rope over an abyss, fastened between animal and Übermensch'**, said Zarathustra. In his parable in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche likened humankind to a tightrope walker, treading a path fraught with danger but, provided he/she did not fall, it would lead them from his animal origins to the attainment of their Übermensch potential.

Nietzsche contended that the slave morality proclaimed by Christianity leads people to the denial of life, and encourages them to attempt to escape from the world to find ultimate fulfilment in another world. Just think of the long history of the monastic tradition! But **the Übermensch is an affirmer — a Yea-sayer — who says 'Yes' to life, in spite of the absence of any ultimate meaning to history or to human existence.** Any significance people come to recognize in life must be found in the present, for only the present truly exists and both the past and the future are simply imaginary. Nietzsche was thus acknowledging the coming of the secular world and was welcoming it.

It is here also that Nietzsche's existentialist stance becomes clear. It led him to make a break with the linear view of time and of history, which has so strongly characterized Judaism, Christianity and Marxism, and which encourages people to look back to ultimate beginnings and to pin their hopes on a final consummation. In contrast with the linear view of history Nietzsche minimized ends and purposes and maximized the present state of being. This may be simply understood by likening life to an unending sea journey. Since there is no possibility of ever reaching land, the question of what the ultimate destination will be loses all meaning, but the question of whether one becomes sea-sick or not is a matter of very great moment. The present moment (and all through life) is therefore of infinite significance; it takes on the quality of eternity.

As a prophet of the new age Nietzsche was not a prophet after the order of Zarathustra, the Buddha, Muhammad or even the Christ. (Though the findings of some modern scholars

researching for the original Jesus tend to show that Jesus was more of a sage who goaded people into thinking for themselves. This would Nietzsche more like Jesus.) Nietzsche did not unfold to us an authoritative teaching to be believed and obeyed. If he had, he would not be a prophet of the new age but simply one more prophet of the post-Axial age, of which there are many (though of lesser rank) still arising in the present religious confusion.

The importance of Nietzsche is not that we should applaud him and hang on his every word. Indeed the development of anything like a Nietzschean cult (there have been tendencies in this direction) would constitute a travesty of all that Nietzsche stood for. Nietzsche himself warned us against it, 'there is nothing in me of a founder of a religion ... I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced *holy*'.

Nietzsche was a prophet of the new age in the sense that he understood the nature of the human predicament after the 'death of God'. It is one in which we humans have to find our own way forward without authoritative guidance from elsewhere. We have to discern and enunciate the values we must try to live by. Though few could understand this when he was writing, what has taken place during the twentieth century and into this century has made clear how right he was. We have witnessed the decline and even the demise of many principles of the past - such as "Might is right", "My country right or wrong", which were still dominant before the First World War. They have now passed their use-by date and must be abandoned or radically revised.

The twentieth century began to manifest the transvaluation of all values, whether people had ever heard of Nietzsche or not, An increasing number began to acknowledge the transvaluation of values and in following ways:

1. All values are **our** values - not God's values, nor some eternal values we have discovered but - **human** values. The universe and its physical laws are beyond all moral judgments; they are neither good nor bad in themselves. Nature still enjoys the moral innocence of the Garden of Eden.  
Humans are the only creatures who are aware of good and evil. That is one of the fascinating insights acknowledged in the Adam and Eve story. By eating the forbidden fruit humankind had their eyes opened to the reality of good and evil and were cast out of the Garden of Eden. All other animals still live in the Garden of Eden, blissfully unaware of good and evil.
2. We humans create (or enunciate) our values. We subject human relationships and activities to more judgment. In doing so we create values.
3. Values arise out of the supreme value we attach to life. The good consists of that which leads to a fuller life and to happiness; the evil is that which takes away from life and leads to unhappiness.
4. Our values are not absolute or eternal but are relative to our experience and may even be peculiar to the age we live in. We still talk of Victorian values or of Maori values. The enunciation of values may differ from culture to culture and century to century.
5. In our time human values are emerging from the process of globalization which is making us aware of what we all have in common as a human race, irrespective of race, culture or religion. These global human values may take precedence over traditional or cultural values.



Some emerging global values are:

- a. Freedom from subjection to others. Hence, the abolition of slavery.
- b. Gender equality. Hence the fight for women's rights.
- c. Freedom to be oneself. Hence the Declaration of Human Rights and laws concerning the right to privacy.
- d. Freedom to exercise one's natural sexual orientation.
- e. Widening of the institution of marriage.
- f. Extension of family responsibilities to the larger society, in the form of social justice. Hence the need to decrease the financial gap between rich and poor, both nationally and internationally.
- g. Sustainability - Preserving the ecological balance in nature on which life is dependent.

These are some of the values that have originated or come to the fore with the transvaluation of values in the 20th century. You can no doubt add more. One of the aims of this conference is to discern and enunciate what we find to be the chief values laying a claim upon us in the present age and for the near future of human existence on this planet.

*Lloyd Geering*