

[This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article: “Review of Stephen N. Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity*,” *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 14.4 (2007): 611-613, which has been published in final form at <[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9418.2007.00361\\_16.x/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9418.2007.00361_16.x/abstract)>.

**The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity**, Stephen N. Williams, Baker Academic 2006 (ISBN: 0-8010-2702-4) 311 pp., pb \$24.99

Stephen N. Williams begins his treatment of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity by quoting one of Nietzsche’s clearest and most unambiguous denunciations from *The Anti-Christ*. He sets as his goal to provide “an occasional, rather than systematic, response” to the question of why Nietzsche found Christianity so detestable (13), positioning this work as neither a contribution to Nietzsche scholarship nor an introduction to his thought, though he definitely wrote it for an academic audience (14). Although he does not explicitly state this, it is also very clear from the outset that he has in mind a largely evangelical Christian audience.

Before treating his topic directly, however, Williams spends a significant amount of time providing the personal and intellectual backdrop of Nietzsche’s rejection of Christianity, with special emphasis on what Nietzsche saw as the positive alternative to it. The first chapter flirts with a biographical and psychological approach, focusing particularly on the death of Nietzsche’s father, but is mostly focused on Nietzsche’s most important predecessors, such as the Left Hegelians, Hölderlin, and Schopenhauer. He then deals with the importance of music to Nietzsche and in particular on his relationship to Wagner during the period of Nietzsche’s professorship and the writing of *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is summarized at some length. In this context, Williams complains of Nietzsche’s neglect of the Christian doctrine of creation and

proposes Karl Barth's reflections on Mozart as a counterpoint to Nietzsche's thoughts on music, after which he draws on C. S. Lewis's treatment of the Dionysian in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He concludes the chapter with an assessment of Roger Scruton's theory of high art as an alternative to traditional religious moral groundings.

Williams continues by connecting Nietzsche's break with Wagner and with Christianity. He argues that Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is at base rationalistic, founded in the conviction that Christianity is "an intellectual error" (91), and places him in the tradition of the aphoristic approach of the French *moralistes* (94). Williams finds Nietzsche's hostility, however, to be founded less in reason than in taste. Nietzsche's positive alternative is found in the "free spirit," who is characterized by the qualities of curiosity, nomadism, and "dancing over morality" in the spirit of *Tristram Shandy* (114). Williams then takes up the famous declaration of the death of God in *The Gay Science*. He traces Nietzsche's objections to the idea of God back to his objection to the notions of sin and redemption, which Nietzsche regarded as anti-life. Here again, Williams criticizes Nietzsche's neglect of the doctrine of creation. He argues that Nietzsche's portrayal of Paul is not worth taking seriously and (at greater length) that his approach to Pascal is extremely one-sided at best.

After dealing briefly with Nietzsche's relationship with Lou Salomé, Williams devotes almost an entire chapter to a summary of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, emphasizing those aspects of Nietzsche's argument where he contrasts Zarathustra with Christ. Notwithstanding the importance of *Zarathustra*, this summary seemed to me to be disproportionate; I imagine that most readers will end up skipping it altogether. Williams then discusses Karl Barth's treatment of Nietzsche in *Church Dogmatics* III/2, castigating Barth for taking Nietzsche too seriously. Nietzsche's claim that Jesus was an "idiot" then provides an opportunity to discuss

Dostoyevsky's novel of the same name and his other works, which for Williams provide a much more plausible and appealing portrayal of Christ.

Williams then turns from *Zarathustra* to consider the broad influence Nietzsche has among moral philosophers. For Nietzsche, the death of God also meant the death of morality. Williams is clearly appalled by Nietzsche's valorization of the classical ideal and of cruelty and by many other perceived consequences of the death of morality. He concedes that "injustice is done to Nietzsche if he is regarded as an anti-Semitic precursor of Hitler" (226), but repeated references to Hitler—including Williams' reference to the distribution of copies of *Zarathustra* to Nazi soldiers in the same paragraph in which he recounts Nietzsche's death (267)—substantially undermine this statement's force. Williams introduces Bonhoeffer, particularly his *Ethics*, as a counterpoint to Nietzsche's teaching and claims, "We can hardly take seriously Nietzsche's portrayal of Christ, Christianity, and Christian morality when we think about Bonhoeffer" (248), apparently ignoring the fact that Bonhoeffer was very much the exception among Christians of his time. He complains that Nietzsche misunderstands Christian love by reducing it to compassion, which is limited in scope only to the fallen world and has no place in Eden or the kingdom of heaven.

The volume concludes with a brief chapter on the question of truth. Setting aside the task of laying out Nietzsche's full doctrine of truth, Williams focuses his attention on Nietzsche's claim that the Christian faith produced the will-to-truth that caused its downfall. He analyzes Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as the most plausible attempt to disconnect faith and (empirical) truth and finds that on this point he agrees with Nietzsche over Kierkegaard. Williams concludes by stating that Christianity must not shy away from asserting the historical truth of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Williams' approach throughout is highly unsympathetic toward his subject. When he is not claiming that Nietzsche's critique badly misses its target (based on what some will find to be a highly idealized vision of Christianity), Williams simply dismisses Nietzsche's critique and reasserts what he takes to be the Christian view. His preliminary treatment of Nietzsche's early intellectual influences is much more sympathetic and, to my mind, more useful than the remainder of the work, though the latter chapters contain creative and even illuminating uses of literature—most notably the lengthy comparison between Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. But overall, one gets the impression that Williams simply does not think Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is worth taking seriously. Though the book is subtitled "Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity," its ultimate purpose seems to be to present "Christianity's Critique of Nietzsche," and thus it will likely be of very little use to those who do not already share Williams' views.

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