



OUR FIRST LESSON THIS MORNING is taken from Chapter 7, verses 1 and 3 of one of the great masterpieces of our modern age:

There are no moral facts at all. Moral judgement has this in common with religious judgement, that it believes in realities which do not exist...One breathes a sigh of relief on emerging from the sickly dungeon-air of Christianity into this healthier, higher, wider world. How miserable the 'New Testament' is...how badly it smells!¹

Our second reading comes from the 62nd section of another modern classic by the same writer:

I condemn Christianity, I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible charge any prosecutor has ever uttered. To me it is the extremest 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, of every kind of integrity a vileness of soul...Wherever there are walls I shall inscribe this eternal accusation against Christianity upon them...I call Christianity the one great curse, the one intrinsic depravity...I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind.²

These texts are taken from two tracts that Friedrich Nietzsche composed in a matter of a few days during the autumn of 1888 - *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*. In these works, taking delight in what he called 'demonic' mischief-making, he continues a task he had been engaged in for long enough: unmasking morality and exposing it as nothing more than a human impulse to exercise power over others. In so doing he saw himself as the destroyer of idols.

Why do I begin with texts from that most militant of anti-Christian thinkers from the past millennium? For two reasons. First, because the profound influence of Nietzsche has been universally felt in the West. So much so that ample testimony to the power of his writings is not hard to find. Everyone who thinks today, Martin Heidegger once said, does so in Nietzsche's shadow. Others concur. One thinker writes, "Friedrich Nietzsche is certainly the most influential philosopher in the Western...world." Another describes all influential European philosophy as Nietzschean in some sense. Yet another considers Nietzsche the moral philosopher of our age.³

But I have a second reason for beginning our journey at this unlikely point of departure. In his remarkable book *Suspicion and Faith*, the Christian philosopher Merold Westphal makes the arresting suggestion that Christians should take up the serious and sustained reading of Nietzsche (and indeed Freud and Marx) as a penance for Lent.⁴ Why? Because Nietzsche's critique of Christianity powerfully reminds us that religion can be a work of the flesh.

AS A PRESBYTERIAN less sensitive than I ought to be to the Church's Calendar, I would say that Westphal's proposal - if it is good at all - is as good for Advent, or Ascension, or Pentecost as for Lent. Indeed right now - poised as we are at this perilous millennial moment - is as good a time as any to get started. If we are serious about these themes - beliefs, values and spirituality - we will have to take seriously the challenge that Nietzsche inaugurated.

What then is the gist of Nietzsche's outlook? Stephen Williams sums it up well when he comments, "Nietzsche's main opposition to Christianity is that it proclaims a dastardly lie about life. It is anti-life, setting moral clamps upon life's innate motions, presuming and projecting another world which blots the daylight of life out of this one."⁵ We may, of course, find the vehemence of Nietzsche's language offensive. But he is only expressing in graphic ways what is now largely felt about Christian beliefs, values and morals in our modern culture.

To put it straight: Christianity is regarded as wimpish. Nietzsche considers it a feeble whimper against human passion. Why? Because it fosters a self-denying ethic, a subservient outlook, a servile way of life that produces what he scorned as the 'slave morality'. By telling men and women to turn the other cheek, to practise self-control, to curb their appetites, to restrain their desires, Christianity subverted everything that was instinctive, manly and noble - the very virtues that Nietzsche held dear. In turn, it fostered a seething resentment that polluted human life. Christian morality was thus a veiled but sickly effort on the part of the weak and the wretched and the despicable to exact revenge on the passionate, red-blooded among us who live life to the full.

I want to use Nietzsche's stimulus as the vehicle to begin exploring what I think of as the two great opponents of Christian beliefs, values and spirituality that face us today - two impulses that militate against the Christian tradition. I am calling these the secular syndrome and the idolatry impulse. And it seems to me that authentic Christian experience always walks a tightrope between these two forces. Here in Northern Ireland, I believe the preoccupations with political order and the seductions of ethnic identity have obscured the degree to which these two forces have bitten into the fabric of our society.

The Secular Syndrome

If I read him correctly, Nietzsche's project is to strip away any idea that beliefs, values and morality are eternal. Instead they are mere masks for something else - rancour, hatred or malice. They are usually a covert attempt to exercise power over others. In one sense, then,

he wants to say that morals and values are entirely of this world. They are the product of purely natural forces. They are human productions, not eternal truths. There is nothing transcendent about them. Nothing eternal. Nothing supernatural. They are the product of historical circumstances not divine command. They are just secular forces given a religious gloss. They are entirely human prejudices dressed up in religious vocabulary.

Now this is a profoundly secularising move, and one that is widespread today. Let me mention two ways in which this mood surfaces: first, in science and, second, in society. The first I call reductionism, the second, preferentialism.

Reductionism

When Nietzsche described Christian faith as a neurosis, a sort of psychological disorder, he anticipated what Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist at Oxford University, would say more than a century later. Dawkins described faith as "a kind of mental illness" and "as one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate."⁶ Indeed elsewhere he has suggested that religion is a sort of cultural gene - what he calls a viral 'meme' - programmed into young children by the misguided.

What's going on here, fundamentally, is the idea that everything about us - from love for our children to personal loyalty to a feeling of wonder or a sense of God's presence - is just the activity of our genes or some kind of neural twitching or electrical flickering. This view is gaining currency these days as science progressively breaks down the distinction between human and machine, and maps the very material substance of life. The suspicion is widespread that everything about us - including our beliefs, values, and inclinations - are somehow or other packed into bits of DNA. We are just organised chunks of recycled star stuff - and nothing more.

Preferentialism

Where this view does not prevail, another equally sinister - though more socially fashionable - idea has taken hold. I call it preferentialism. This is the notion that moral values and principles are simply a matter of personal preference. They are the sort of thing you just make up or opt for. They are a human production. But there's nothing compelling about them, at least in any general sense. You do your thing and I'll do mine. So as long as you are true to yourself, as long as you get in touch with your feelings, as long as you feel good - no problem.

This radical individualism - often presented in the guise of human rights - afflicts modern society. It mistakenly supposes that moral principles and ethical virtues are mere matters of opinion, of personal choice, of individual

taste. We pick and choose our morality, just like we pick and choose our after-shave or hair style. It's just a question of which flavour you prefer. Religion and morality boil down to taste or disposition.

What has tended to reinforce this trend is a whole series of social changes that are often sloppily referred to as 'postmodernism'. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order locked into a specific place, role and station in life. But these have all broken down or been discredited. People now live out their lives in a variety of fragmented spaces, and this has led to an absorption with the self and personal identity. For identities are no longer fixed or rooted; rather, they are dispersed. We are told that answering the question 'Who am I?' is just the same as asking 'What space am I occupying at the moment, and which persona am I adopting?' So it is no surprise that ours has been characterised as the 'me generation'.

This has led directly to moral relativism - what's right for me is all that matters, and so we have the catch phrases that we need to be 'true to ourselves,' 'to get in touch with our deepest feelings,' 'to get ourselves together.' Such 'southern Californiaisms,' as I call them, are symptomatic of the fragmentation of the self. Human beings see themselves less and less as bound to fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances. Instead they are social atoms. And this atomization is most clearly marked in our use of language. We all resort to different linguistic codes, different modes of expression, depending on the space we currently occupy - home, church, work, sports field and so on. In these arenas, we are told, we are really different people, and it is for this reason that Frederic Jameson uses the metaphor of schizophrenia to capture the modern spirit of the self.⁷

These assaults on Christian morality are clear enough. But we ought not to leave the challenge there. For it seems to me that Nietzsche is on to something profound when he begins to uncover what really goes on behind religious language. Here we need to sit up and listen. For we indeed have an inclination to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are being virtuous when really we are trying to look good, or to impress somebody else, or to exercise power over somebody, or simply engaging in spiritual one-up-man-ship.

Neal Plantinga call this species of thing self-swindling. Evil, he says, does its best to look good.⁸ Evil spends a lot on make-up. In order to survive, vices have to masquerade as virtues: lust pretends it is love, sadism disguises itself as military discipline, envy poses as righteous indignation, domestic tyranny presents itself as parental concern. To this we might surely add many more: talk of God's blessing

can become a cover for material greed, offering help to a colleague might be nothing more than a subtle means of undermining their confidence, concern for doctrinal purity might be just a way of dressing up deep-seated prejudice, hatred can pose as standing up against falling standards.

Because evil masquerades as good, because vice poses as virtue, because pride disguises itself as piety, we've got to be on the alert. Lewis Smedes is surely on the mark when he notes, "First we deceive ourselves, and then we convince ourselves that we are not deceiving ourselves."⁹ It's a common practice. Nazi leaders could do unspeakable things to other people by telling themselves that their actions were in the best interests of society.

Josef Mengele, for example, killed whole families at Auschwitz so that he could gouge out their eyes and send them on for further research.¹⁰ Parents who batter their children can convince themselves that it's really in the kids' best interests. Spreading malicious gossip can be presented as sharing prayer requests. Crusades calling for equality might be nothing more than an expression of envy. Activists for justice can commit outrages against others until, as Nietzsche himself put it, "The world is drowned in their injustice." Haven't orthodox believers torched heretics? Don't the self-proclaimed virtuous often want to scratch out the eyes of their enemies? When you dig below the surface of those who are most enthusiastic for capital punishment, for example, it is usually easy to detect a message like, 'Let the scum fry.' Let's face it, people bring dirty weapons to holy wars.

So, when Nietzsche tells us that moral language is only a mask for more sinister things, we've got to honestly ask ourselves if he's right. And when he is, as Westphal insists, Nietzsche turns out to be one of the great secular theologians of original sin. Why? Because in exposing self-deception, he is revealing to us the real depths of human fallenness. Of course, this doesn't mean Christian faith is never anything other than the lust for power dressed up in Sunday gear. It doesn't mean that there is no such thing as genuine love of God or neighbour. But it does mean that every act of piety is human - all too human, and that when we look closely enough at it we just might find it serving the very sins it is meant to strangle. Piety, morality, spirituality - these are not exempt from scrutiny just because they go on in church. Sin doesn't stop and turn away at the church door. When Heaven sorts out sheep and goats, virtue and vice, its knife slices through human society at an unexpected angle.

The Idolatry Impulse

On one level, then, this is a profoundly secular world. We live in a post-Christian age. Fewer people than ever come to church in the West, there is a massive ethical revolt against conventional morality, even in the Church, and even among believers prayer is often a final resort rather than a first option. Yet I believe it was G.K. Chesterton who judged that when people stop believing in God they don't believe in nothing, they believe in everything.

He's right. Nietzsche hoped that he had inaugurated the decline of idols - by which he meant Reason and Morality - that he had ushered in the Twilight of the Idols; surely he was ultimately mistaken. For ours is a secular, yet profoundly idolatrous age. It is a society seeking for the sacred in everything but God. And Christians, I fear, are as likely to worship these icons of modernity as are unbelievers. Calvin was surely right: the human heart is a perpetual forge of idols.

We've got idols thick on the ground: sleek cars, sure-shot diet formulas, mobile telephones, sex kittens, gilt-edged mutual funds, the lust for new culinary delights. The crass materialism of these is obvious enough. But the trouble with idols is that they are usually things that are not just all right in themselves, but actually good. Let me try to mention a few.

Ours is a profoundly health-conscious world. The body is big business these days - body shops, weight-rooms, beauty salons, slimming programmes, body lotions. Why? Because the body is adored, pampered, petted, revered, venerated. It's an idol worshipped in the suburbs, that modern paradise where cleanliness, prosperity, safe sun-tans and brimming animal vigour are what life is all about. For many Christians the mirror is their only daily shrine.

Ours is also a sex-obsessed society. The goddess of sexuality has many worshippers. On an average night on British terrestrial television you might view an adult sex quiz, Dirty Dancing, where "couples perform their most sensual routines," something called Fetishes - a programme filmed in a Manhattan club which offers "men and women the opportunity to realise any sexual fantasy," and maybe a twentieth rerun of Emmanuelle 3. Goodness knows what exotic variations are offered on Sky.

Some years ago Theodore Roszak presented a telling critique of this modern sexual revolution. I can't do better than use his words here. "In the affluent society, we have sex and sex galore...[This Playboy] sexuality is, ideally, casual, frolicsome, and vastly promiscuous. It is the anonymous sex of the harem. It creates no binding loyalties, no personal attachments...The perfect playboy

practices a career enveloped by noncommittal trivialities ...Life off the job exhausts itself in a constant run of imbecile affluence and impersonal orgasms. Finally, as a neat little dividend, the ideal of the swinging life...gives us a conception of femininity which is indistinguishable from social idiocy. The woman becomes a mere playmate, a submissive bunny, a mindless decoration."¹¹

When I tell you that this was written thirty years ago, you will get a sense of just how prophetic its author was. Things have come a long way since then. And don't think that the church is unaffected. The statistics for premarital sex show no significant difference between Christian and unchurched youth in the United States.

Ours is a profoundly home-dominated age. On one level, of course, the home is under profound attack these days. Many forces are disrupting an institution that under-girds much of the stability of social life. But it has become an idol. Every time I go into my petrol station, I take a look at the magazines on display, and I'm overwhelmed with the number of the glossy-, country-, ideal-home variety. There's a market for them somewhere, for they are the temples of the middle-class.

In our modern western cities, the middle classes have become so obsessed with preserving their domestic shrines that they literally fence off their neighbourhoods from other social groups. Things have become so extreme in Los Angeles that Mike Davis can call it the carceral city - walled neighbourhoods like medieval baronies.¹² And remember, as someone has said, in LA the future arrives early.

And it's not just in the material realm that we find home-worship. We find it in the tendency to pour all our thought and love and time into our own family relationships. I've heard it said that the way to be sure of selling a product is to convince people that their family will suffer without it. When people tell us that the home is a haven in a heartless world, we can be pretty sure that they are substituting personal cosiness away from the world for Christian engagement with it.

The body and health, sexuality, the home and family - these are all good gifts from God. But they can too easily become idols from which we need to be liberated. But further, amongst churchgoers we can find the most insidious idol of all - religion itself. Of course we have a whole herd of new spiritualities baying for our loyalty today: New Age hocus pocus, eco-magic, what's called the new Paganism, civic religion, ethnic obsessions, manic holy nationalisms of one stripe or another. But I want to dwell on something else.

I BELIEVE IT WAS THE great theologian Karl Barth who once observed that the church is the last resort for people who are running away from God. Malcolm Muggeridge, I think it was, concurred when he suggested that church is a refuge for refugees from God. The idea here is that the forms of spirituality, feelings of devotion, abandonment in worship, can all be mistaken for signs of grace.

Let me illustrate this with a few words of the great American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards. In his Personal Narrative, written more than two hundred years ago, he reflected on his love of religion. "I experienced I know not what kind of delight in religion. My mind was much engaged in it, and had much self-righteous pleasure; and it was my delight to abound in religious duties...My affections seemed to be lively and easily moved, and I seemed to be in my element when engaged in religious duties. And I am ready to think, many are deceived with such affections, and such a kind of delight as I had in religion, and mistake it for grace."¹³ What Edwards had grasped is the profound difference between enjoying religion and loving God. It's like the difference between reading romantic novels and being in love. To mistake sentimental spirituality for encounter with God is to be engaged in idolatry.

Now I don't know what your idol is. For Shirley McLain it's astral bodies (or at least it was a little while ago), for teenage groupies it's ecstasy pills, for ex-fundamentalists it's liturgical bells and smells. For some of us, it might be mundane, like money, or fast cars, or Humphrey Bogart, or a golf handicap, or 1952 die-cast model Fords. Maybe it's more grandiose like culture, or haute cuisine, or Russian literature. Maybe it's just work. Maybe it's even church life or experiments in spirituality. Maybe it's more subtle, like projecting an image of Christian zeal, or enjoying a sense of spiritual superiority, or the self-conscious piety that is really furtive self-glory. Whatever it is, it needs to be unmasked, brought out from behind sanctified language and exposed for what it is. And then, we can really begin the job of personal liberation.

Facing in Two Directions

As I see it, the dilemma facing Christians on the cusp of this new century is to find ways to walk a path between the two inclinations I have been considering. On one side there is the sense that Christian beliefs, values and spirituality are nothing but human constructions - that they are the mere product of natural forces. On the other side, we find an idolatrous impulse to spiritualise everything and to worship the gods of our culture. How are we to creatively negotiate this tight-rope?

The answer, at least in part, is to get back to a radical agenda. To be radical, of course, means going to the roots. It means getting to the bottom of things. And to be radical today will mean getting back to basics.

Hence I suggest we need to face in two directions. We must engage with the future but in order to do this with integrity we have to dialogue with the past. This, of course, is deeply unfashionable. Modern society, as Tom Oden once put it, is "xenophobic toward [the] past...It adores today, worships tomorrow, disavows yesterday, and loathes antiquity."¹⁴

My own call today is for a retrieval of Christian roots, or - to put it another way - to recover tradition. Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not calling for traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan's distinction is valuable here. Traditionalism, he says, is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead.¹⁵ The idea is that if we are to confront modern society, if we are to speak to it, if we are to live authentically in it as Christians, then we need to call upon the entire resources of our Christian heritage.

We need to engage in a massive retrieval. Many of us, I suspect, know what team is currently at the top of the Premier League, many could tell me what Britney Spears' latest song is and what the Blair Witch Project is all about. If I were to ask what's been happening in the past two episodes of Friends and ER I'm sure a lot of hands could go up. Good. It's important to be in touch with our culture.

But, now tell me, suppose I asked you, What is the thrust of the book of Amos? How is it different from Ezekiel? What is the main difference between the First and Second letters of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians? How did Augustine transpose classical culture into a new Christian culture? How did Jonathan Edwards transform Christian thinking in America? What was distinctive about Hudson Taylor's missionary endeavours? How would we do? We're in touch with contemporary culture. Are we in touch with our Christian heritage?

I don't think we are. And I think we have to be. We have to attend seriously to the catechising of the people of God in our own time. We owe them something more than pop psychology and alterations of consciousness by music or chemistry. We need to listen to Paul speaking to the Romans, to Cyprian on martyrdom, to Wesley writing journal entries at the end of interminable days on horseback. Because without a strong sense of the biblical tradition, we will easily mistake woosy sentimentality, super-spiritual mush and evangelical muzak for transcendental encounter with God.

IF WE AREN'T ROOTED in biblical values, we will confuse 'getting in touch with my feelings' with appreciating that our identity is to be found in our relationship with God. To achieve this is to be genuinely radical. According to Tom Oden, "We have blithely proceeded on the skewed assumption" that in Christian things, "just as in electric toothbrushes or automobile exhaust systems—new is good, newer is better, and newest is best."¹⁶

It seems to me that the great danger in not facing in both directions is that Christians will be so mesmerised by modernity's seductions, its shallow sentimentality and its secular spiritualities, that the faith will be reduced to mere entertainment. Christian worship will be reduced to the worst of tele-evangelism. When that happens, as Neil Postman puts it, "everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and, above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence." In this environment, a flashy entertainment-preacher, or a

sleek worship leader, are tops; "God comes out as second banana."¹⁷

It doesn't stretch our imaginations too much to entertain my closing thought. Is it mistaken to suppose that an unbeliever, having accidentally stumbled into a church service, might walk away thinking, "Well now, I must say I got it wrong. I thought Christianity had a dark side. I thought it was about confession, self-denial, sin, about taking up the cross, about being willing to lose one's life for the sake of Jesus Christ. But now I see that I had the wrong end of the stick. Christianity isn't about struggling to preserve the truth; it's not about discipline or mortifying the flesh. It's mostly about celebration, and fun, and personal growth, and how to boost my self-esteem. It's about entertainment. But, to be honest, it doesn't do it half as well as The Fly, The Boom-Boom Room, or Paradise Lost." Whether this diagnosis is fanciful or perceptive, I must now leave for you to judge.

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* translated by Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) VIII,1,3

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (London: Penguin, 1990) 62

3 For these assessments See R.Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

4 Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998)

5 Stephen N Williams, "Dionysius Against the Crucified: Nietzsche contra Christianity, Part I" 219-243 in *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997) 226. See also Part II of this article 131-153 in *Tyndale Bulletin* 49 (1998)

6 Cited in Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 191-192

7 See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992)

8 Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)

9 Cited in Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* 107

10 See the discussion in Robert N Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988)

11 Theodore Rozak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) 15

12 See the discussion in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990); and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989)

13 Extract in Roger Lundin and Mark Noll (eds), *Voices from the Heart: Four Centuries of American Piety* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 70-78

14 Thomas C Oden, *After Modernity...What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 65

15 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 65

16 Oden, *After Modernity*, 32

17 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourses in the Age of Showbusiness* (New York: Penguin, 1986) 126

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