

GOD IS DEAD

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 -1900)

Nietzsche was a German philosopher, cultural critic, poet, composer and Latin and Greek scholar whose work has exerted a profound influence on Western philosophy and modern intellectual history.

“God is dead! He remains dead! And we have killed him”. Actually Nietzsche never issued this famous proclamation in his own voice but rather put the words in the mouth of a character he called the madman and later in the mouth of another character, Zarathustra.

Nevertheless Nietzsche endorsed the words. “God is dead” is often mistaken as a statement of atheism. It is not, though Nietzsche himself was an atheist. “Dead” is metaphorical in this context, meaning belief in the God of Christianity is worn out, past its prime and on the decline. God is lost as the centre of life and the source of values.

The death of God will lead Nietzsche says, not only to the rejection of a belief in cosmic or physical order but also to a rejection of absolute values themselves – to the rejection of a belief in an objective and universal moral law, binding upon all individuals. In this manner, the loss of an absolute basis for morality leads to nihilism. This nihilism is that for which Nietzsche worked to find a solution by re-evaluating the foundations of human values. This meant, to Nietzsche, looking for foundations that went deeper than Christian values.

Note on meaning of nihilism

Most commonly nihilism is presented in the form of existential nihilism which argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. Moral nihilists assert that morality does not inherently exist, and that any established moral values are abstractly contrived.

In a world where God is dead we can only hope that technology and science do not take control and “be treated as the new religion”.

Nietzsche’s words express a fear that the decline of religion, the rise of atheism and the absence of higher moral authority would plunge the world in chaos. The western world had depended on the word of God for thousands of years – it gave order to society and meaning to life. Without it, Nietzsche writes, society will move into an age of nihilism. Although Nietzsche may have been considered a nihilist by definition, he was critical of it and warned that accepting nihilism would be dangerous.

Nietzsche’s statement prompted several replies from his more religious opponents and from later existentialists. Albert Camus, for example, considered the human need for higher order absurd. He argued that the death of God was inconsequential – that humanity had no need for a higher authority or the threat of divine wrath to live a good and moral life. Some other philosophers were less prepared to part with the concept of a higher authority and instead tried to imagine an absolute morality that didn’t depend on a supreme being.

Nietzsche's rebellion was a way of saying that no great metaphysical forces governed human life and created a framework for meaning; every individual faced the possible absurdity of existence alone.

Nietzsche was as much a German writer as he was a philosopher. His father, who died when he was four, was a Protestant minister and Nietzsche was brought up in an atmosphere of gloomy Lutheran piety by his mother and sister. It was against the oppressive weight of Christian moralising on his sensual being that he passionately rebelled; and this rebellion was fired all the more by chronic illness, which further limited his chances to love life.

Moving on from Nietzsche to a more general view of the topic, I think an important question to ask is: **Why is religion declining?**

A survey conducted in the U.S.A found that religious involvement was low when individualism was high in society. Individualism – a cultural system focusing more on the self and less on social rules – has been on the increase, with increased self-focus more tolerance and equality (around race, gender and sexual orientation), less adherence to social rules (with acceptance of pre-marital sex at an all-time high), less social support (lower empathy) and less interest in large groups and social rules. Things are not all better and they are not all worse. American society is more focused on individual freedom and less focused on social rules than it used to be.

Belonging to a religious group means following its beliefs and practices, which can be difficult in a cultural environment favouring personal choice and individual freedom. Religion often involves respect for authority and Americans are less likely to respect authorities such as the government, schools, or even the medical establishment.

I will now outline a few reasons why I think religion is declining:

1. CHOICE

Today with more rights and more freedom, it is more present in cultures to give children the choice to believe in a religion or not. There is no one right way of behaving anymore.

2. EDUCATION

The modern schooling system accelerates the effects of new choices by allowing for an unbiased teaching of different cultures and ideas. Children now see that religions have very large similarities and that one religion is not worth any more than another.

3. Religion is unnecessary, even counterproductive.

Many people view religion as a burden on society or themselves. Ideas such as having to take time out to go to church every Sunday, praying regularly, sexual abstinence, fasting etc can seem like a waste of time to some people.

4. FREE THOUGHT AND LOGIC

With the introduction of new rights and the encouragement to think freely and rationally, many people see religion today as something that is fundamentally irrational. In a literal

sense, turning water into wine or healing peoples ailments through touch may be seen as contradictory to modern science.

Finally, I will outline some of the consequences of the decline in religion.

1. The decline in religion is eroding society. With increasing poverty, welfare dependency and violence, religion and religious organisations have an important role to play combating societal problems. Religions based on the principal of service and a focus on the less fortunate help a society deal with want.
2. Religious belief is also a benefit to the believer. There is clear evidence that religious belief and practice improves an individuals mental and physical health and helps reduce societal problems such as violence, suicide, substance abuse.
3. Religion helps to strengthen our families. Pat Fagen, director of the Centre for Research on Marriage and Religion, compiled independent research that found Americans who attend church are more likely to have higher levels of satisfaction in their marriage and family. In fact the research also showed that children who attended church regularly have better coping skills and perform better in college than those who did not attend.
4. Belief in God and the resurrection of Jesus brings hope and promise to our lives. It strengthens the family and marriage as we focus on Christ as our example of pure love compassion and tolerance towards others.

To conclude I will leave you with 3 questions:

1. Is God dead?
2. If He is dead who or what killed him?
3. If He is dead, with what will we replace Him?