

Talking About the Problem of Evil

T.S. Weaver has put together an intellectual response to the problem of evil that includes a theology of evil and suffering, and a philosophical/theological series of proper defenses of God and His righteousness considering evil.

What is Evil?

The problem of evil is famous. This problem is personal because my wife stayed stuck as an agnostic for a long time. An agnostic, by the way, is a person who says they don't know if there is a God. Like so many people, she thought that if you believe in a God who is all good and all-powerful, then the presence of evil and suffering creates a problem.



Atheist philosopher David Hume said, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able to but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

Let's address this. I'll give you a roadmap of where we're going. First, we need to address how one can even object to evil. Second, I will talk about what evil is and is not. Then I will talk about some possible reasons God allows evil. Finally, I'll close with God's solution.

To start, if this challenge were raised by an atheist, we need to address the moral argument. If there is right and wrong, then they are grounded in the existence of a good and moral God. Because without an absolute Moral Law, which requires an absolute Moral Law Giver, the atheist has no grounds for a

complaint against evil.

Former atheist C.S. Lewis summarizes how this thinking eventually guided him to Christianity: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

Evil is not a “thing” that exists; and God is not the cause. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas point out that evil is not a real entity in the world. This means evil is not a material or a phenomenon that exists by itself. It’s like darkness, which is not a created thing; it’s the absence of light. Evil describes a deficiency or denial of good. Philosophers call this deficiency a privation. Evil is what occurs once the good is altered or distorted. In Genesis 1 and 2, God told us all that existed was good. Evil was not an innovation, but a distortion. So, God is not the creator or author of evil.

The Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds

Let us consider the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument. The place to start is God’s omniscience. This allows God to understand all possibilities. If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. Since God is also completely good, He always wants and works out the best world and the best way.

Leibniz (the philosopher who came up with this defense) wrote, “The first principle of existences is the following proposition: God wants to choose the most perfect.”

The power of this argument is to show that out of every world that a good God could have produced, His decision to generate *this* one means this creation is good.

There are several principles that tie into this defense.

The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes that before God decides which world to produce, He understands the value of every possible world. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."

To believe God can intercede in what he has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be like a soldier who abandons his post and knowingly allows enemy infiltration to instead stop a colleague from drinking while in uniform. The soldier ends up allowing a greater evil in order to stop a lesser evil.

Another principle that reinforces this argument is the principle of "pre-established harmony."

Leibniz describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we should see, and should not believe only, that what God has done is the best."

Human Free Will

Above, we covered the principle of sufficient reason as part of the best-of-all possible worlds. The last principle of the best-of-all-possible-worlds is human free will. For Leibniz, this idea was just a principle in part of his greater defense. For Augustine, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga it was an entire defense by itself. In its simplest form, it goes something like this: God set us up not to be machines but free agents with the power to choose.

If God were to make us capable of freely choosing the good, He had to create us also able to freely choose evil. Consequently, our free will can be misused and that is the explanation for evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre communicates this wonderfully: "The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. . . . If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone." God knows that a better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly.

Were God to force us to make good choices, we would not be making choices at all, but simply implementing God's instructions like when a computer runs a program.

For humans to have the capability to be ethically good, free will is necessary. Morality hangs on our capability to freely choose the good.

Plantinga asserts, "God creates a world containing evil, and he has a good reason for doing so." John Stackhouse Jr. says, "God, to put it bluntly, calculates the cost-benefit ratio and deems the cost of evil to be worth the benefit of loving and enjoying the love of these human beings."

Stackhouse sums up Plantinga's argument like this:

"God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of 'compulsion,' is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used not to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest."

God created us with free will because our decision to say "yes" to Him is only a real choice if we are also free to say "no" to Him.

The Greater Good

To review, so far, we've addressed how one can even object to evil, in the moral argument. We've talked about what evil is and is not, and the idea of it being a privation. We've talked about some possible reasons God allows evil, which included the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument and the free will defense. Now I want to go over the greater good principle. While all the arguments I've given so far are intellectual and do not necessarily help with the emotional side of evil and suffering, this principle is especially delicate. I say "delicate" because this defense may not help a questioner much if they have been a victim of a seemingly very unwarranted evil, and/or if they are still carrying anger or bitterness.

Again, the topic we are examining is the greater good principle, which argues that certain evils are needed in the world for certain greater goods to happen. To put it another way, certain evils in this world are called for, as greater goods stem after them. For instance, nobody would believe a doctor who cuts out a cancerous tumor is being evil because he made an incision on the patient. The surgery incision is much less evil than letting the tumor develop. The greater good is the patient being cancer-free. Parents who penalize children for poor conduct with the loss of toys or privileges or even giving spankings are instigating pain (particularly from the kid's viewpoint). Although, without this discipline, the other possibility is that the kid will develop into a grownup with no discipline and would consequently face much more suffering. We do not understand in this world all the good God is preparing; therefore, we need to trust that God is good even when we can't see it and we can't understand the larger picture of what He's doing.

Plus, nearly all individuals will award some truth to the saying ascribed to Nietzsche: "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Consequently, the principle of allowing pain in

the short term to bring about a greater contentment eventually is legitimate and one we know and use ourselves. That implies there is no mandatory contradiction between God and the reality of evil and suffering.

The Cross

Finally, I end with the cross and the hope of Christianity. Jesus agonized in enduring the nastiest evil that can be thrown at him: denial by His own adored people; abhorrence from the authorities in His own religion; unfairness at the hands of the Roman court; unfaithfulness and disloyalty from His closest friends; the public disgrace of being stripped nude and mocked as outrageous “King of the Jews”; anguish in the agony of crucifixion; and the continuous weight of the lure to despair altogether, to crash these unappreciative beings with shocks of heaven, to recommence with a new race, to assert Himself. Instead, Jesus remained there, embracing into Himself the sins of the world, keeping Himself in position as His foes wreaked their most terrible treatment.

Our faith in a good God is sensible, because Jesus suffered on our behalf, and took the punishment we deserve. *He* understands what it is to suffer. *He* has lived there.

The cross was a world-altering occasion where the love and compassion of God dealt efficiently with the immensity of human sin. His death and resurrection show evil is trounced, and death has been slain. Contemplate the many implications of the atonement: Jesus is the Victor, He has paid our ransom, God’s wrath has been satisfied, and Jesus is the substitution for the offenses we have perpetrated.

As if that is not enough, the Christian narrative ends with faith in the future where complete justice will be done, and all evils will be made right. When Christ returns, He will not once more give in to mortal agencies and quietly accept evil.

He will come back to deliver justice. The Bible's definitive solution to the problem of evil is that evil will be dealt with. God will create a new heaven and a new earth for persons God has loved so long and so well. This is the core of our faith in the middle of pain and suffering.

In conclusion, what I've just presented to you, and what my wife eventually figured out, is that evil is not a thing created by God. A valid complaint against evil cannot be made without the existence of God. God has plausible reasons for allowing evil. And He clearly has a plan to defeat it. All He wants you to do is trust Him.

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Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion

Christianity: Religion of Hate?

In the last decade, it has become increasingly common to hear the accusation that Christians are hateful. In the United States, this type of comment has become the mantra of homosexual rights groups who are outraged that Christians would claim that homosexuality is a sin. With the murder of homosexual Matthew Shepherd in 1999, Christians were blamed for creating a hostile environment and provoking violence against homosexuals by claiming that homosexuality is immoral. Homosexuals often scoff at Christians who say, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," insinuating that the two cannot be separated. Consequently it has become increasingly difficult to dialogue with these individuals due to their suspicion that

Christians, in spite of their expressions of love, actually *hate* homosexuals.

Of course, accusations of hatred against Christians are nothing new. This charge was leveled at the first century church as a preamble to the state sanctioned persecution that occurred off and on throughout the Roman Empire until the fourth century. But today many of those who accuse Christians of hate take their marching orders from their understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche, who called Christian priests "the truly great haters in world history . . . likewise the most ingenious haters."[\[1\]](#) Nietzsche was absolutely contemptuous of Christians and pulled no punches when it came to his polemic against them. He is infamous for his announcement of the death of God in his writings and was known to be Hitler's favorite philosopher. Consequently, Christians typically distance themselves from Nietzsche due to his hostility to the Christian worldview.

But while Nietzsche's writings are often blasphemous, this does not mean that Christians should ignore his insights. Rather than dismissing his critique, we should ask ourselves if he may have something to say to the church. Perhaps we need to be reminded that Jesus' harshest words were directed toward those who put on an impressive outward show of religiosity, but whose hearts were not right with God. We need only read Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three to see that some of His most severe rebuke is found there, directed towards His own. Unfortunately, one major school of interpretation has determined that the seven churches represent different ages of church history, of which the first five have already transpired. This interpretation tends to distance us from the Lord's rebuke, as if evangelicals are the praised church of Philadelphia, and the lukewarm Laodiceans are the apostate church of the end-times. It is no wonder that we reject the blistering critique of someone like Nietzsche when we comfort ourselves by assuming

that the “gentle” Jesus would never speak harshly to us!

Just as Jesus spoke out against those who hid behind the façade of religion, Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity is based on the assertion that Christianity is not motivated by love, but rather by a hateful envy, driven by the need for power over others. And since Nietzsche is the inspiration for many today who call Christianity hateful, it would seem that listening to Nietzsche’s critique is especially important. By understanding Nietzsche, we can be better equipped to respond to the accusations of hatred against Christians that have become common today. Furthermore, we may find that Nietzsche, rather than being just a cranky despiser of religion, actually has a prophetic message for contemporary Christians.

The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota made headlines by claiming that religion is for weak-minded people who are incapable of getting through life without some sort of crutch. The governor quickly apologized for any offense he may have caused, but his claim that religion is just a crutch for the weak is certainly not new. Karl Marx said essentially the same thing by calling religion the opiate of the masses. However, no one has been more creative than Nietzsche when it comes to a critique of Christianity. His contention is not just that Christians are weak, but that Christianity itself was the vehicle by which the weakest members of society were able to overcome the dominance of those more powerful than them. Thus the very basis of Christianity is said to be hatred for, and envy of, the rich and the powerful.

It is important to recognize that Nietzsche was a trained linguist with a deep interest in the history of words. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche claims that the concept of *good* originally was a synonym for nobility and therefore referenced the noble aristocrats of ancient times. At the same time, those who belonged to the lower strata of

society, those who were originally referred to as plain and simple, were designated as *bad*.^{2} Nietzsche's point in all this is that when we look at the original sense of the words *good* and *bad* they were descriptive of one's social status, rather than being a moral evaluation.

However, it is Nietzsche's contention that this all changed when priestly religions such as Judaism and Christianity were able to attain power in society. He suggests that not only did they transform the conceptions of good and bad to include a moral dimension, but that they went even further by creating the concept of evil as well. Out of their hatred and envy for the ruling elite, and their desire for power, the priests transformed the word *good* to refer to the poor and lowly members of society and had the audacity to refer to the rich and the powerful as evil! When we read the beatitudes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we see how Nietzsche indicts Christianity for this reversal. It is not the rich and the powerful who are blessed, but the weak and the poor! Nietzsche believed that Christ's praise of the powerless was an act of subversion, an attempt by the weak to exact revenge against the elites of society for their natural superiority. As far as Nietzsche was concerned, there was no other way to account for how Christianity had become a major world religion than to suggest that Christianity created concepts such as sin and guilt to cut the rich and powerful down to size.

It was Nietzsche's suspicion that all human relationships are driven by the desire for power over others. He found Christianity to be especially insidious because, rather than admitting that it desires power over the minds of all humanity, it proclaims itself to be a religion of love. But in fact, Scripture tells us that Christ willingly became powerless so that human beings might know the power of God. Christ set aside the prerogatives of deity to become a servant; He became poor that we might become rich. Perhaps Nietzsche is correct in arguing that human relationships are

often governed by the desire for power. However, it is clear that in the encounter between God and man, it is the infinite God who submits Himself to the limitations of humanity.

Sin and Guilt as Human Conventions

One of most disturbing aspects of contemporary culture is the nihilistic worldview of many of our youth. The horrible assault on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 revealed how deeply alienated many young people are from society. It is apparent that Harris and Kleybold felt entirely justified in killing their classmates out of a sense of outrage at how they had been treated by the more popular students at school. Incredibly, they were convinced that their heinous act would be glorified in Hollywood and entertained themselves by asking who would portray them in the blockbuster movies that would follow their killing spree. What is especially disturbing is the question of how such sociopathic tendencies arise in a prosperous Colorado suburb.

According to Scripture, human beings are sinners in need of redemption. All of us stand guilty before a holy God and only the shed blood of the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, can cleanse us from the power and penalty of our sin. Therefore, a guilty conscience can be a positive thing in that it enables us to respond to the gospel message. But in contemporary culture, as Senator Daniel Moynahan has stated, there has been a tendency to "define deviancy down." Acts that were considered immoral or even criminal in the recent past have been accepted as normal, so that our threshold of what is morally acceptable continues to lower. Additionally, in our therapeutic society anything that makes a person feel better about herself is exalted, while feelings of guilt and shame are discouraged. In a certain sense, this thinking is part of the heritage of Nietzsche.

According to Nietzsche, human beings developed a sense of guilt out of the financial relationship between a creditor

and a debtor.{3} Nietzsche maintained that the similarity between the German words for *guilt* and *debt* were indications that financial obligations were the original source of a sense of obligation toward others. Of course, a debtor is obligated to his creditor, and in ancient times the debtor would pledge some form of collateral in case he were unable to repay the debt. This of course gave the creditor power over the debtor, even to the extent that he could inflict cruelty upon the debtor to extract his “pound of flesh.” According to Nietzsche, this gave rise to the idea that suffering could balance out our debts and is the basis for the biblical account of Christ’s work of the cross.{4} The problem arose when human beings somehow internalized the original sense of financial obligation, so that what had previously been simply a matter of external punishment evolved into the guilty conscience.

Nietzsche’s contention was that a feeling of guilt is destructive and prevents us from acting in accordance with our noble instincts. But the question is, How can human beings be noble without acknowledging their own limitations? The denial of a sense of guilt, the denial of conscience, inevitably leads to pride and the arrogant assumption that we are accountable to no one. While it would be unjust to suggest that Nietzsche encouraged acts such as the Columbine shootings, it is also clear that Nietzsche recognized that a sense of guilt leads us to conclude that we are accountable to someone else for our actions. Wanting to insure that human beings did not conclude that they were accountable to God for their actions, his only option was to conclude that the guilty conscience is a figment of our imaginations. Unfortunately, incidents such as Columbine are not.

God is Dead! Now We Can Really Live!

Who can forget the famous cover of *Time* magazine, which asked the question “Is God Dead?” Many people may have dismissed

such an absurd question, as if it makes sense to say that the eternal God could pass away. But that is precisely the point. In Nietzsche, the announcement of God's death is simply to force people to acknowledge that they no longer care about God. He has been removed from His throne by the advancements of science and technology and has little to say to modern man. According to Nietzsche, God choked to death on pity.[\[5\]](#)

On the other hand, Nietzsche claims that we have killed God. It is not that these statements are contradictory, but that Nietzsche viewed "God" as a concept, not as a person. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Zarathustra setting out to deliver the startling news that God is dead, but his first words are directed to the sun. While to the casual reader this may seem absurd, this is actually a vivid reference to the philosophy of Plato. And according to Nietzsche, Christianity is nothing more than Plato's philosophy dressed up as a religion. The whole point of Nietzsche's philosophy is to deliver us from the teachings of Christianity, which he called the "Platonism of the people." Nietzsche believed that both Plato and Christianity overemphasized the distinction between human existence and the realm of eternity; in order to effectively demolish Christianity, he felt it necessary to destroy the foundations of Plato's philosophy as well.

Plato lived in an era that was concerned about the implications of change. Because Plato denied that we can truly know anything that is changeable, he conceived of an ideal world populated by what he called "forms." The forms were eternal and unchanging models for the objects that we experience every day, and Plato's concern was with how we can come to know these forms. Part of his answer to that question was his conception of the ultimate form, the form of the Good. The form of the Good is what illumines the soul's understanding, so Plato utilized the sun as the most fitting symbol for this form. Later, some Christian theologians

baptized Plato's philosophy by claiming that the forms were ideas in the mind of God, but what critics like Nietzsche find so disturbing is that both Plato and Christianity seem to place more emphasis on an afterlife than on day-to-day existence. It was his desire that we recognize the value and pleasures of this life, but to do so he completely rejected a transcendent world. The question is whether he is justified in claiming that Christianity denies the validity of this life by focusing solely on a heavenly afterlife.

While it is true that a variety of movements within Christianity, such as the monastics, have devalued earthly existence as a mere prelude to the afterlife, this is a far cry from claiming that Christianity *itself* is the religious equivalent of Plato's other-worldly philosophy. St. Augustine, who was a devoted student of Plato, claimed that Plato was a valuable tool that helped lead him to Christianity. But the one thing that he found lacking in the Platonists was the teaching of Scripture that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh. God himself has come to live amongst us! The incarnation of God in Christ means that human existence is vitally important. God himself lived as a man. Rather than devaluing life, Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Nietzsche the Prophet?

As we close our examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking and its consequences for Christian faith we should note his conviction that terms such as *sin*, *morality*, and *God* are simply human conventions with no reality supporting them. He hoped to overcome these concepts by taking us back in history to discover how we came to these "erroneous" beliefs. According to Nietzsche, the concept of a God who rewards believers with eternal life has devalued human existence. Consequently, he attempted to devalue any belief associated with a transcendent being or an afterlife and emphasized

overcoming Christian standards for morality. His ideal was the *overman*, unique individuals who were not restrained by what society conceived as right or wrong. The problem is that, when taken to its extreme, his philosophy has been utilized to justify a wide variety of crimes. In 1924, two students at the University of Chicago justified their murder of a twelve-year-old boy by quoting from Nietzsche. And of course, Hitler assumed that Nietzsche's philosophy called for world domination by Germany and the ruthless elimination of all its enemies. Many therefore assume that Nietzsche was some type of proto-Nazi.

Nietzsche would have had little sympathy for Hitler and was not an anti-Semite as some have claimed. These accusations are common, but cannot be the result of actually reading his works. What we can say is that Nietzsche attempted to replace the good news of Jesus Christ with a pseudo-gospel based on the assertion that Christianity was a fabrication that has hindered mankind for centuries. The Bible tells us that Christ has set us free through His atoning work on the cross; Nietzsche insists that such a story is what has placed us in bondage. Like many utopians, Nietzsche denied the inherent sinfulness of the human heart and insisted that the idea of God was what had prevented mankind from reaching its highest potential. Obviously, evangelical Christianity and Nietzsche are in severe disagreement on most subjects.

Still, Nietzsche does have a message for the Christian community. Considering Nietzsche's contempt for Christianity, that would seem to rule him out as a mouthpiece for God. However, we also note that pagan kings such as Cyrus of Persia (Ezra 1:1-4) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:34-35) were spokesman for God in particular instances. So to paraphrase John 1:46, "Can anything good come out of Nietzsche?"

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of reading Nietzsche is his emphasis on our motives. Just as Jesus accused the Pharisees for disguising their hardened hearts with outward acts of

service and sacrifice, Nietzsche demonstrates keen awareness of the subtle ways we can deceive even ourselves. One of Nietzsche's favorite accusations is that Christians can speak about loving their enemies, but they have also been known to comfort themselves with thoughts of those same enemies roasting in eternal hell-fire. Perhaps then one of the reasons Christians avoid reading Nietzsche is that he can make us feel so uncomfortable. Do we give to the Church out of love for God or perhaps simply for the tax deduction? What about our service in the church? Are we motivated by the applause of man, or by our love for God? The Christian cannot read Nietzsche without feeling challenged on these questions. Rather than simply dismissing his radical critique of Christianity, the church would be well-served to understand how Nietzsche has influenced modern culture, and in turn to reflect on how we can demonstrate the love of God to a dying world.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1967), 33.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 27-28.
3. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 62.
4. Ibid., 65.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

The Holocaust: Ideas and Their Consequences

Former Probe staffer Ray Cotton examines two conflicting worldviews in Nazi Germany, the Christian church and atheistic naturalism.

"Schindler's List," Steven Spielberg's award-winning film based on a novel by Thomas Keneally, brings us a story of great moral courage in the midst of a culture of fear and hate. Set in World War II Europe, during the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust, the movie chronicles the fanatical determination of the Nazi regime to eliminate the Jews from the face of the earth. Along the way, the movie teaches a lesson about the power of a single individual to do good, in spite of the circumstances and in the face of unbelievable difficulties.

The movie allows us to observe the moral growth that took place in the life of Oskar Schindler as he matured from a greedy war profiteer to a rescuer of Jewish people. Mr. Schindler went from amassing a personal fortune to draining that fortune and risking his life in the process. He saved 1,300 Jews from the Nazi death camps. But he could only save a small percentage of the persecuted Jewish people, and the movie re-emphasizes the horror of this tragedy.

Six million Jews (and five million non-Jews) went to their deaths under the hands of the Nazi exterminators. This means that half of all the Jews in Europe and a third of all the Jewish people on earth perished in the Holocaust. This historical lesson of man's inhumanity to man must never be forgotten and today, thanks to Holocaust museums in cities around the world and movies like "Schindler's List," the message is being kept alive.

1994 marked the 50th anniversary of the D-day invasion of Europe; it also marked the liberation of the first death camp, Majdanek, where 360,000 people, most of them Jews, were exterminated. The liberations continued as the Allied forces advanced during the next six months.

Auschwitz, the most infamous death camp, was liberated on January 27, 1945.[{1}](#) The stories of that came forth from those who liberated the camps were at first dismissed as too horrible to be true. But as each succeeding camp was liberated, it became impossible to deny the reality of it all. To this day the world continues to ask, how could such things happen in modern times? Even more frightening is the realization that the same forces which gave rise to the Holocaust are operating in our world today.[{2}](#)

Adolf Hitler, on the last day of his life, April 29, 1945, in the Berlin bunker, dictated these final words to the German people: Above all I charge the leaders of the nation and those under them to scrupulous observance of the laws of race and to merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry.[{3}](#)

What was the overpowering idea that brought forth the paradigm that allowed Hitler and the Nazi party to come into power? Was it the anti-Semitism of the church or was it the ever growing idea of atheistic naturalism?

It has been asserted that the early church said the Jews may not live among them as Jews, that the secular society followed by saying the Jews could not live among them, and the Nazis ultimately said the Jews may not live. Is this a valid view of the progression of ideas that led to the Holocaust and, if so, how did this progression develop and what, if any, leaps of logic or inconsistencies took place during the process?

Accounting for the Holocaust

Accounting for the Holocaust, deciphering and explaining the social and moral conditions that led up to it, has prompted all sorts of theories. It is more than an academic question for if the same conditions occur again will we be able to forestall another Holocaust? Also, how could one of the world's most advanced nations become the seat of such cruelty and depravity? What ideas were in place in the German culture that led to this tragedy? How did these ideas gain enough of a following among the European people to produce such a hideous atrocity? These are important questions. They deserve serious answers, and we will now attempt to shed some light on the issues.

The Church and Anti-Semitism

First, we need to look at the record of the early Christian church. The early church was zealous in its efforts to convert both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were a major stumbling block because of their resistance to conversion, their unwillingness to accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah. The first anti-Jewish policy started in the fourth century A.D. in Rome under Constantine. Comparing the anti-Jewish measures of the early Catholic Church canonical law with the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazi regime in the 1930s and early forties reveals a striking similarity. As soon as Christianity became the state religion of Rome, in the fourth century A.D., Jewish equality of citizenship was ended. Over the centuries this eventually led to expulsion of the Jews and the establishment of ghettos in Rome in the 1800s in which the Jews were incarcerated.[\[4\]](#)

The Roman Catholic church deviated greatly from the teachings of Jesus Christ as demonstrated in the parable of the good Samaritan and other lessons from the life and ministry of Christ found in the gospels of the New Testament. Christ's teaching was the ethic of love and the only individuals He

dealt with severely were those Jewish Pharisees and Scribes who were hypocrites. The attacks of the Apostle Paul were directed at the Judaizers (Phil. 3:2) who were trying to oppose the spread of Christianity among the Gentiles. The Judaizers often described the gentiles as dogs, so Paul called the Judaizers dogs. Paul was not attacking all Jews, but only those actively opposing the teachings of Christ.

But all the blame does not fall upon the Catholic church. Martin Luther and some other reformers in Germany were guilty of communicating an ever increasing anti-Jewish perspective.[\[5\]](#) Clearly, Jews were perceived as enemies of Christendom by many church leaders, but it is a huge leap from considering someone an enemy of your cause to seeing them as a non-person whom you are free to dispose of at will.

In today's culture, you may consider yourself to be anti-Nazi or anti-skinheads. This means you avidly oppose all that they stand for, but it does not mean you would actively pursue their physical demise, except in just retribution for their personal actions. In fact, if you saw one of them in physical danger, you would probably take action to protect them, possibly at your own personal risk. The Catholic church and many fathers of the reformation may be guilty of anti-Semitism, but that does not provide the foundation necessary to set the stage for the events to follow. The far greater question is how one arrives at the Nazi position of annihilation or "the final solution" to the "Jewish Problem"? That is, how did the German people come to the point of seeing the Jews as non-persons whom they could dispose of at will? What ideas came in to corrupt the thinking of a people steeped in church culture?

The Real Culprit: Atheistic Naturalism

At this point we must bring in a completely different world view, that of atheistic naturalism. Atheism is the doctrine that denies or disbelieves the existence of God or divine

beings. Naturalism, which goes hand in hand with atheism, is the belief that all truth is derived from a study of natural processes. All action is based on natural instincts and desires. Only the natural elements of the world are taken into account, the supernatural or spiritual is excluded.

Machiavelli's Evil Influence

To set the stage for a naturalistic worldview, one could go all the way back to Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), a great voice in the revival of the ancient view of political naturalism or power ethics, long suppressed in the Western world by the impact of the early Christian church. Machiavelli's most influential work, *The Prince*, was significant because it helped to mold modern minds and, in turn, modern history. His theme was plain: the ruler "who wants to keep his post must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires."[\[6\]](#) In other words, do what you need to do to preserve your position and don't concern yourself with what is the ethical thing to do.

The Downward Spiral Continues

The ethical stance that whatever strengthens the state is right had a great influence on the thinking of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Hobbes, although heavily influenced by the ideas of Machiavelli, was also influenced by the revived Epicurean ideas of pleasure. Epicurean philosophy is centered around the goal of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Thomas Hobbes developed the idea of good being what we like and evil what we dislike, as well as the idea that self-preservation is achieved through the sovereign state. In Hobbes we can trace the merging of Machiavelli's power ethics philosophy with the Epicurean philosophy of pleasure.

The teaching of Hobbes influenced others such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Marx (1819-1883), and Friedrich

Engels (1820-1895). From this group came the power politics of men like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. In fact, Hitler personally presented a copy of Nietzsche's works to Benito Mussolini, and Mussolini submitted a thesis on Machiavelli for his doctor's degree.

From Nietzsche to Auschwitz (and the Gulag)

There is a need to take a much closer look at the ideas espoused by Nietzsche, since he became the primary influencer of two divergent worldviews or paradigms, both antagonistic toward the Jews and both responsible for the murder of countless millions of innocent people. One line leads to the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini, while the other leads to the communism of Lenin and Stalin. Nietzsche had a profound impact upon Hitler and subsequent politicians of power.

Although atheism has never lacked a spokesman, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche shines forth as the one who changed the flow of history with his eloquent presentations leading to the "death of God."

"There will be wars," Nietzsche had written, "such as have never been waged on earth. I foresee something terrible. Chaos everywhere. Nothing left which is of any value, nothing which commands: 'Thou shalt!'" Nietzsche and others prefigured and predicted the moral nihilism of the twentieth century, the revolt against reason and the limitless pursuit of the irrational. Nazi Germany materialized the progression toward this chaos.^{7} "Nietzsche despised religion in general, and Christianity in particular. So profound and operative was Nietzsche's philosophy upon Hitler, that it provided the conceptual framework for his demagogical onslaught to obliterate the weak and inferior of this world."^{8} Hitler's hatred of Christians was second only to his hatred of Jews and Gypsies.

Nietzsche was quick to attack the ethics of love as taught by Christ in the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. He believed that if mankind sought to show responsibility toward the poor and weak, then the losers would be in control. He predicted that the twentieth century would become the bloodiest century in history and that universal madness would break out. Hitler and Stalin brought forth the reality of his predictions.

In Nietzschean terms, the cause—atheism, and the result—violence and hedonism, are as logically connected as the chronological connection between Hitler's announcement of his intent in *Mein Kampf*, and the hell ushered in by the Third Reich.[{9}](#) Hitler took Nietzsche's logic and drove the atheistic worldview to its legitimate conclusion.

Even though there was anti-Semitism both in the Catholic church and expressed by reformation leaders, it was atheistic naturalism that provided the real power behind the Holocaust. In seeking to blame both the church and atheistic naturalism for providing the ideas that led to the Holocaust, how does one reconcile the huge antithesis between the two totally opposing worldviews?

One cannot, except to say that the weakness, or failure of the church to maintain biblical standards allowed for the inroads of anti-Semitism. The biblical position is totally at odds with the actions of the Holocaust. As we address the church, we can say the Holocaust may not have happened if the church had maintained obedience to biblical teaching, for love is the ultimate norm of the Christian ethic (Matt. 22:37-40).

But to the atheistic naturalists, we must say, you have faithfully followed out both the ideology and logical conclusions of your position.

The mass murder of the Jews was the consummation of his (Hitler's) fundamental beliefs and ideological position.[{10}](#)

There is a world of difference in the lessons to be learned from the two positions. The naturalist's hope is in man and looks at the world accordingly. The Christian's hope is in God and sees man as sinful. History bears witness to both the sinfulness and failure of man, i.e., history validates the Christian position and destroys the naturalist's position. The naturalist's only hope is in education. What hope does education give us for preventing another Holocaust? We will examine the hope of education and the true nature of man.

Is Education Really Our Best Hope?

The philosophy of atheistic naturalism can logically lead to the excesses of the Nazi and Communist regimes. Since this is true, how are we to prevent such horrors from happening again?

Many today believe the answer lies in education. Education does an excellent job of teaching us how to best do what we already believe in, but it does a dismal job of helping us see what it is that we should believe. It is at this very point that we realize the need for transcendent truth.

Man's Greatest Need

Man's greatest need is for a redemptive truth beyond himself. The murder of millions has been perpetuated by some of the most educated, cultured people in the world. While up to 12,000 people a day were being obliterated at the Auschwitz camps, the builders of those state of the art camps were enthralled by the music of Wagner. They had the best of education and of culture. The Bible tells us that the nature of man is flawed and that without help from beyond ourselves we are doomed to eternal death. Even Bernard Shaw recognized this problem as sin when he wrote:

The first prison I ever saw had inscribed over it "Cease to do evil, learn to do well": but as the inscription was on the outside, the prisoners could not read it. It should have been

addressed to the self-righteous free spectator in the street, and should have read, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."[\[11\]](#)

We all stand naked and guilty before God. Romans 3:10 says that "There is none righteous, no not one." If the Holocaust did nothing else, it did strip away all illusions about the refined nature of man. Only when we are prepared to come humbly before God and confess our sin and ask for forgiveness and deliverance can we have a hope for the future. Speaking to the Jewish people, God said in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." This is a promise that all those who belong to the kingdom of God can apply and claim.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are drawn to say that the Nazi's "final solution" was the untimely child of the union of Christian anti-Semitism and German nationalism,[\[12\]](#) but Christian anti-Semitism is an oxymoron and is the product of an disobedient church, be it Catholic or Protestant. Jesus Christ, the One we adore was a Jew, the Apostles from whom we have the New Testament Scriptures were Jews, and all the teaching of the New Testament is built upon the foundation of Jewish Old Testament Scriptures. In contrast, the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany was the logical conclusion to the ideology that German nationalism was built upon, that of atheistic naturalism.

Therefore, the anti-Semitism of the church became the convenient, albeit invalid, excuse while the real reason for the Holocaust was the atheistic anti-Semitism of German nationalism based on a naturalistic worldview.

Notes

1. John Conroy, "Beyond One Man's Heroism," *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, 10 July 1994, Section G, page 1.
2. Pauline B. Yearwood, "Reminders from a 'Schindler Jew,'" *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, 10 July 1994, Section G, page 1.
3. Adolf Hitler, "My Political Testament," NCA, 6, Doc. 3569-PS, pp. 258-63.
4. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 5-6.
5. Peter J. Haas, *Morality After Auschwitz* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 20.
6. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1977), p. 44.
7. Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933-1945* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. xiii.
8. Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1990), p. 17.
9. Ibid., p. 26.
10. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), p. 3.
11. Bernard Shaw, Preface to "Imprisonment" in *English Local Government* quoted in *Making Moral Decisions*, ed. D. M. MacKinnon (London: SPCK, 1969), p. 67.
12. Dawidowicz, p. 23.