

22. *God is dead*

“God is dead.” For thousands of years we have believed in religion. But in the modern world religion has become a shadow of its former self. Nietzsche’s dramatic phrase, *God is dead*, is meant to capture the personal and shocking quality of this revelation.⁴⁹ For those of us raised religiously, religion personalized the world. It gave us a sense that the world has a purpose and that we are part of a larger plan. It gave us a comfort that, despite appearances, we are all equal and cared for and that upon death—instead of a cold grave—a happily-ever-after ending awaits us.

We find that hard to believe anymore. In the modern world we have seen the dramatic rise of science providing different, less comfortable answers to questions religion traditionally had a monopoly on. We have thrown off the shackles of feudalism with its unquestioning acceptance of authority and knowing our place. We are more individualistic and naturalistic in our thinking.⁵⁰

But in historical time, all of this has happened very quickly—in the span of a few centuries.

For millennia we have been religious, but come the nineteenth century even the average man has heard that religion may have reached the end of its road. For most of us, even the suggestion of this hints at a crisis.

Imagine a thirteen-year old who is awakened in the middle of the night to be told by strangers that his parents have died. He is suddenly an orphan. As long as he can remember, his mother and father have been presences in his life, looking after him and guiding him, sometimes firmly, but always a benevolent protection and support in a world that he is not yet able to handle on his own. Now they are gone and, ready or not, he is thrust into that world alone. How does the young

⁴⁹ GS 108, 125.

⁵⁰ GS 117.

teen handle that sudden transition?

Culturally, Nietzsche believes, we are like that young teen. For as long as we can remember, our society has relied on God the Father to look after us—to be a benevolent and sometimes stern guiding force through a difficult world. But suddenly we are orphaned: we wake up one morning to discover in our heart of hearts that our naïvely childhood religious beliefs have withered.

So now, whether we like it or not, a question creeps into our minds: How do we face the prospect of a world without God and religion?

Well, says Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century most people do *not* face that question well.

23. *Nihilism's symptoms*

Most people avoid the issue, sensing that even to raise it would be to enter dangerous territory. They sense that the game might be up for religion, but out of fear they shutter their minds and will themselves to believe that God is still out there somewhere. Life without religion is too scary to contemplate, so they retreat to a safety zone of belief and repeat nervously the formulas they have learned about faith. Now, believes Nietzsche, it is one thing for a medieval peasant to have a simple-minded faith, but for us moderns such a faith has a tinge of dishonesty about it.

Slightly better to Nietzsche, but not much, are the socialists of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Socialism is on the rise, and many socialists have abandoned the religion of their youth—but only halfway. Most socialists accept that God is dead—but then they are very concerned that the State take God's place and look after them. The mighty State will provide for us and tell us what to do and protect us against the mean people of the world.

⁵¹ Z 1:11; *TI* Skirmishes 34; also 37: "Socialists are decadents." See also *HAH* 473: "Socialism is the fanciful younger brother of the almost expired despotism whose heir it wants to be."