

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."

Think of it this way: The Judeo-Christian tradition says this is a world of sin, in which the weak suffer at the hands of the strong; that we should all be selfless and serve God and others, especially the sick and helpless; and that in a future ideal world—heaven—the lion will lay down with lamb, and the inescapable power of God will bring salvation to the meek and judgment to the wicked.

The Marxist socialist tradition says this is a world of evil exploitation, in which the strong take advantage of the weak. But we should all be selfless and sacrifice for the good of others, especially the needy—“From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”—and that the forces of history will necessarily bring about a future ideal world ending all harsh competition, empowering the oppressed and eliminating the evil exploiters.

Both religion and socialism thus glorify weakness and need. Both recoil from the world as it is: tough, unequal, harsh. Both flee to an imaginary future realm where they can feel safe. Both say to you: Be a nice boy. Be a good little girl. Share. Feel sorry for the little people. And both desperately seek someone to look after them—whether it be God or the State.

And where, asks Nietzsche, are the men of courage? Who is willing to stare into the abyss? Who can stand alone on the icy mountaintop? Who can look a tiger in the eye without flinching?

Such men exist. Every generation produces its occasional magnificent men—sparkling, vital



*Wanderer Above the Sea of
Fog, Caspar Friedrich,
1818*

individuals who accept easily that life is tough, unequal, unfair, and who welcome asserting their strength to meet the challenge. Those who have unbending wills against anything the world can throw at them.

But such magnificent human beings are few and far between in the nineteenth century, and Nietzsche wonders why. And he looks back on past cultures where the magnificent men dominated: strength was prized and inequality was a fact of life. Assertiveness and conquest were a source of pride. He names the Japanese feudal nobility as an example, with their samurai code of honor, and the Indian Brahmins who rose and imposed their caste system, the Vikings who raided ruthlessly up and down the European coast, the expansionist Arabs—and of course the awesome Roman Empire.⁵²

What explains this stark contrast? Why do some cultures rise to greatness and unabashedly impose their will upon the world—while other cultures seem apologetic and urge upon us a bland conformity?

24. *Masters and slaves*

Part of the answer, says Nietzsche, is biological.

All of organic nature is divided into two broad species-types—those animals that are naturally herd animals and those that are naturally loners—those that are prey and those that are predators. Some animals are by nature sheep, field mice, or cows—and some animals are by nature wolves, hawks, or lions. Psychologically and physically, this divide also runs right through the human species. Some people are born fearful and inclined to join a herd—and some are born fearless and inclined to seek lonely heights. Some are born sedentary and sluggish—and some are born crackling with purpose and craving adventure.⁵³ Some of us, to use Nietzsche's language, are born to be slaves, and some are born to be masters.

⁵² *GM*, 1:11.

⁵³ *TI* "Skirmishes" 33, 35.