

BRIAN ZAHND



WHEN
EVERYTHING'S
ON
FIRE

FAITH FORGED
FROM THE ASHES



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *When Everything's on Fire* by Brian Zahnd.
Copyright © 2021 by Brian Zahnd. Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.



THE MADMAN'S LANTERN

Once upon a time, we all believed in God. In an earlier epoch, we believed in God (or gods) as effortlessly as we believed in the firm ground beneath our feet and the expanse of sky above our heads. An ancient Greek poet expressed it like this in a hymn to Zeus (later reappropriated by the apostle Paul): “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). For the ancients, the divine was as immanent as the air they breathed. But that was before everything was on fire. That was before the conflagration of world wars, before the skies over Auschwitz were darkened with human ash, before the ominous mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, before the world witnessed twin pillars of smoke rising into the September sky over Manhattan, before long-venerated institutions were engulfed in the flames of scandal, before the scorched-earth assault on Christianity by its cultured despisers. Today, it’s harder to believe, harder to hold on to faith, and nearly impossible to embrace religion with unjaded innocence. We live in

a time when everything is on fire and the faith of millions is imperiled.

So, is Christian faith still viable in an age of unbelief?

Yes, it is possible. I can bear witness. My own faith has passed through the flames of modernity and is alive and well. I’ve faced the most potent challenges to Christian faith head-on and lived to tell the tale as a believing Christian. A healthy, flourishing faith is possible in the twenty-first century, but we need to acknowledge that we are passing through a time of rising skepticism, cynicism, and secularism. Our age is no friend to faith, and the challenges we face are real. I hear the melancholy whispers of Galadriel at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*: “The world is changed: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it.”¹

“Much that once was is lost”—many of us resonate with that sentiment. The loss has been sudden and precipitous. The Western world entered the twentieth century still tethered to a much older world—a world where people felt the immanence of God. But somewhere along the way through that tumultuous century, the cord was severed and we entered a new world—a world where God seems to have gone missing. The ethos of our age might be described as the felt absence of God. Something has been lost and in the Western world, Christianity is in decline. Most denominations are losing membership and the fastest-growing religious category in America is “none.” For believers who, in their anxiety and frustration, recklessly frame this phenomenon in culture-war terms, this has produced considerable consternation. But their culture-war-induced rage only adds fuel to the fire of post-Christian attitudes. Being angry with modern people for losing their faith is like being angry with medieval people for dying of the plague. Something has happened in our time. Just as something happened in the Middle Ages that imperiled the lives of medieval people,

something has happened in late modernity that has imperiled the faith of modern people. Something has crippled shared religious belief in the Western world over the past century. And no one foresaw it more clearly than Friedrich Nietzsche, the famed German philosopher and vehement critic of Christianity.

In 1882—seven years before his descent into madness—Friedrich Nietzsche published a parable called *The Madman*. In the parable, a madman comes into a village on a bright, sunny morning holding aloft a lantern and crying, “I seek God! I seek God!” This absurdity elicits laughter and mockery from the villagers. The madman then jumps into their midst with a wild look in his eyes,

“Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”²

After his rant, the madman smashes the lantern on the ground before his astonished listeners and says, “I have come too early, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way.”³ The

parable ends with the madman going into churches and singing a requiem for God.

It’s a remarkably powerful and clairvoyant piece of imaginative writing that foresaw the decline of Christian faith in the twentieth century. Nietzsche’s madman smashing the lantern might be seen as something like Mrs. O’Leary’s cow kicking over the lantern in the barn. O’Leary’s cow set Chicago on fire, and Nietzsche’s madman set the Western world on fire. I don’t mean Nietzsche *caused* what is happening to Christian faith in Western Europe and North America, but he foresaw it with such clarity that it’s as if he were present for the first flickering of what has become a raging inferno. In 1882, Nietzsche proclaimed that “God is dead,” though at that time the vast majority of people in Europe called themselves Christian and attended church. But by 1966, things had changed. That year, *Time* magazine put this controversial question on what is probably its most famous cover: *Is God Dead?* What seemed like the ravings of a madman in the 1880s became a legitimate question in the 1960s. In Nietzsche’s parable, when the madman saw that the villagers were not prepared to hear his prophecy, he simply said, “I have come too early, my time is not yet.” But his time has now come. Is God dead? Today, it’s an even more relevant question than when it first appeared on the cover of *Time*.

LUNCH WITH NIETZSCHE

I have a fantasy of having lunch with Nietzsche at some cozy café in Basel, Switzerland. If my fantasy were to come true, I would have to spend the first fifteen minutes catching him up with what has happened over the past century or so—from the rise of mechanized warfare in the First World War to the rise of weaponized disinformation in the digital age and the steady rise of atheism all along the way. I don’t think Nietzsche would be surprised. He saw

most of it coming. I've read much of Nietzsche's work and have to admit I have a fondness for this troubled and provocative philosopher. He was a towering intellect, a tremendous writer, a savage polemicist, and the most formidable critic of Christianity in the modern era. And if one is offended by his hostile disposition toward Christianity, it should be remembered that his caustic assaults were more of an attack on moribund Christendom as a cultural artifact than on a faith centered on the life and teachings of Jesus. Indeed, Nietzsche at times seems to have a begrudging admiration for Jesus of Nazareth.

I readily admit to agreeing with a good deal of what Nietzsche writes. His critique of nineteenth-century European Christianity is often as accurate as it is scathing. Even if in the end, Nietzsche is tragically wrong about many important things, I still respect his analysis of the problem. So what does Nietzsche mean by what is probably his most famous aphorism: *God is dead*? In *The Gay Science* (or *The Joyful Wisdom*)—the book that contains the parable of the madman—Nietzsche says, “The greatest recent event—that ‘God is dead,’ that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe.”⁴

Even though it's now associated with him, Nietzsche didn't coin the phrase *God is dead*. As the son of a Lutheran pastor, he would have heard that line in a Lutheran Holy Saturday hymn. And although Nietzsche had become an atheist, in his aphorism “God is dead,” he doesn't simply mean that God doesn't exist. Rather, he means that he foresees how belief in God will soon cease to be the organizing principle of European civilization. Nietzsche perceived that the Christian bourgeoisie already lived as if God did not exist, even if their religious philosophy had not caught up with their actual practice. PKs (pastors' kids) like Nietzsche are often keenly aware of the hypocrisy of parishioners. Nietzsche understood that

people often live as practical atheists before they come out of the closet as professed atheists. In the 1880s, Nietzsche was saying that Western civilization had already in practice become atheistic, even if most people didn't know it yet. With the prescience of a prophet—albeit a mad prophet—Nietzsche anticipates the rise of a secular age where faith is increasingly pushed to the periphery. And he was entirely correct in his prophecy.

Yet unlike the smug new atheists, Nietzsche did not gloat over the demise of Christianity. Rather, he feared that it would leave nothing but the void of nihilism that he described as “an infinite nothing.” He spoke of the loss of Christian faith as a sponging away of the horizon, meaning that Western culture would suffer a crisis of moral vertigo, unable to define what constitutes the Good. Nietzsche knew that if culture becomes atheistic without supplying a new organizing center to replace what was once occupied by God, that culture is doomed to drift into cold and empty nihilism. He describes it as the earth being unchained from the sun. Unlike the zealous new atheists, Nietzsche didn't say “Hooray! We've got rid of God! Now everything will get better!” Nietzsche was much more sober and feared that life in a world that had abandoned God would become petty and pointless.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche was ready for the world to take the bold step and move on without God. Nietzsche was a kind of John the Baptist preparing the way for a new secular age. Nietzsche *hoped* that this new age would see the rise of the *Übermensch*, the overman, the superman; he *hoped* that through what he called the will to power heroic men (and yes, it would be men) would lead humanity into a new dawn of greatness—a theme the Nazis would exploit to horrific ends.⁵ Nietzsche *hoped* that men as gallant gods would rise to occupy the place previously occupied by the Judeo-Christian God. But he also *feared* that instead of the superman, the

future would belong to what he called “the last man.” In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he writes,

Behold! I show you *the last man*.

“What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star”—so asks the last man and he blinks.

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man who makes everything small. His species is ineradicable like that of the flea; the last man lives longest.

“We have invented happiness”—say the last men, and blink.⁶

For Nietzsche, the last man (his metaphor for the final development of a failed humanity) is an incurious utilitarian who can only see value in terms of commerce. The last man has no grander ambition than a kind of sedated happiness, and Nietzsche thought that making happiness our prime objective was an unworthy goal for human life. The *Übermensch* wants much more out of life than mere happiness. For the *Übermensch*, the struggle itself brings more meaning to life than personal contentment. From Nietzsche, we get the famous saying “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.”⁷ Nietzsche, who was a mountaineer himself, would have appreciated George Mallory’s famous answer to the question of why he was climbing Mount Everest: “Because it’s there.”

But the last man can never understand the value of a noble struggle. For the last man, climbing a mountain or exploring the ocean or creating art or gaining an education can only be worth the effort if it serves a utilitarian end. The last man has no interest in adventure, exploration, art, or education *for its own sake*. The last man will climb a mountain only if he has a corporate sponsor; he’ll explore the ocean only if he can drill for oil; he’ll create art only if it will sell; he’ll get an education only if it will land him a high-paying job. The last man just wants a comfortable life and

some prosaic happiness. I imagine Nietzsche's last man sitting in a recliner, remote in hand, surfing seven hundred channels, muttering, "We have invented happiness," and then blinking stupidly. If Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was a kind of heroic Greek god, his last man is basically an incurious couch potato. That it would not be the Greek gods but the apathetic, entertainment-addled last man who would follow the death of God was Nietzsche's biggest fear.

Nietzsche was a serious thinker and his arguments need to be taken seriously, and I've tried to do so. It's why I've read so much of his work. He was brilliant and perceptive, but in the end, he was wrong. I believe history bears this out. I suppose if I did get to have my fantasy lunch with Nietzsche, I'd have to tell him the bad news that his dreamed-of *Übermensch* turned out to be a monster and that his dreaded last man seems to be the inevitable end of his philosophical trajectory. It would probably be an awkward lunch. Maybe I don't want to have that lunch with Nietzsche after all—it would be just too sad.

As I said, I have a fondness for him. I wouldn't relish telling Nietzsche that his philosophy doesn't lead to a new heroic age but only to the dead end of nihilism—the very thing he feared. I find it easy to forgive Nietzsche's vicious attacks on religion because his criticism of the cultural Christianity he saw in late-nineteenth-century Europe was essentially the same criticism leveled by the Danish philosopher and Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard. The difference between these two existential philosophers is that while Kierkegaard believed that within the dry husk of Christendom there was the living seed of the Word of God, Nietzsche believed that Christianity was nothing but an empty shell. To put it very simply, in his criticism of Christianity, Kierkegaard still believed in Christ while Nietzsche did not. In the end, Kierkegaard took the better road.

THE MASTERS OF SUSPICION

Nietzsche belongs to a trinity of nineteenth-century thinkers that Paul Ricoeur called the “masters of suspicion.” These masters of suspicion—Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud—were all suspicious of the same thing: the possibility of altruistic love as a primary motive. For Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the claim that at the heart of Christian faith is found pure love is met with resolute skepticism—they simply don’t believe that people can be truly motivated by love of God and love of neighbor. Marx says our motives are mostly about money; Freud says our motives are mostly about sex; Nietzsche says our motives are mostly about power. Nietzsche in particular insisted that Christian love was nothing but what he called “slave morality”—a way for the weak to manipulate the strong, a way for the slave to covertly express his *ressentiment* toward his master.

According to Nietzsche, the slave morality of Christian love prevented humanity from rising to its potential greatness. Nietzsche thought that the ideal of Christian love kept humanity weak, ignoble, and sick. He was convinced that it was time for humanity to cast off the pretense of altruistic love and, through a fierce will to power, become supermen who march into a new heroic age unshackled from the ball and chain of Christian slave morality. This is certainly how the Nazis read Nietzsche as they venerated *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and other Nietzschean works as their canonical texts. The Nazis were consciously attempting to live out Nietzsche’s philosophy; they were deliberately trying to be the supermen that Nietzsche imagined. Nietzsche was certainly not a genocidal anti-Semite, but powerful ideas can have consequences—and Nietzsche knew this. In *Ecce Homo*, he writes,

I know my fate. One day there will be associated with my name the recollection of something frightful—a crisis like no other before on earth, of the profoundest collision of

conscience, a decision evoked against everything that until then had been believed in, demanded, sanctified. I am not a man, I am dynamite.⁸

Unfortunately, these words turned out more horrifyingly true than Nietzsche could have imagined in 1889. Of course, Nietzsche did not foresee or intend the Holocaust, but when you play with fire, sometimes it gets out of control and burns everything to the ground. And lest you think I’m being unfair to Nietzsche by connecting him to Hitler and Nazism, allow me to cite French philosopher and founder of deconstruction theory, Jacques Derrida: “The future of the Nietzschean text is not closed. But if within the still-open contours of an era, the only politics calling itself—proclaiming itself—Nietzschean will have been a Nazi one, then this is necessarily significant and must be questioned in all of its consequences.”⁹

Nietzsche was accurate in his prediction that Western civilization was entering an epoch where God would no longer be the assumed center of society, but he was horribly wrong in thinking that the way forward lay with the *Übermensch*. For all of his brilliance, Nietzsche was tragically naive in thinking that his imagined superman with his dark fascination with shaping the world through a violent will to power would lead anywhere other than to death camps and a continent in ruin. Nietzsche was right in his diagnosis of the problem but criminally wrong in his solution.

A CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE OF CHRISTENDOM

Where does this leave us now? The lantern has been smashed, the brazen assertion that God is dead is ringing in our ears, and everything seems to be on fire. What shall we do? Is it inevitable that we follow a path foretold by Nietzsche that leads to the end of Christian faith, or is there a way to take seriously what Nietzsche heralds and

still believe? Nietzsche saw something real looming on the horizon of the twentieth century, but is the madman right when he says, “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”¹⁰ Is that true, or does the church still have a future as a living witness to a risen Christ?

In recent years, we’ve seen believers, pastors, and well-known Christian leaders publicly lose their faith. This phenomenon is happening with increasing regularity. Does that mean we who still believe are simply whistling past the graveyard and stubbornly forestalling our own inevitable loss of faith? Here is the big question: *Is it possible to hold on to Christian faith in an age of unbelief?* The answer is *yes!* Certainly, contemporary Nietzsches are announcing the impossibility of Christian faith, but there are also trustworthy guides who can say with Fyodor Dostoevsky, “I believe in Christ and confess him not like some child; my hosanna has passed through an enormous furnace of doubt.”¹¹

It’s helpful to keep in mind that what Nietzsche critiqued about Christianity, Kierkegaard also equally critiqued—and he could be every bit as polemical as Nietzsche. In 1855, Kierkegaard published *Attack Upon “Christendom.”* Kierkegaard believed that the nominal state-sponsored Lutheranism of Denmark was quite nearly the very opposite of the demanding Christianity set forth in the New Testament, and he attacked it head-on. Here’s an example of the kind of polemic found in Kierkegaard’s *Attack*:

I might be tempted to make to Christendom a proposal different from that of the Bible Society. Let us collect all the New Testaments we have, let us bring them out to an open square or up to some summit of a mountain, and while we all kneel let one man speak to God thus: “Take this book back again; we men, such as we are now, are not fit to go in for this sort of thing, it only makes us unhappy.” This is my proposal, that like those inhabitants in Gerasa we beseech Christ to depart

from our borders. This would be an honest and human way of talking—rather different from the disgusting hypocritical priestly fudge about life having no value for us without the priceless blessing which is Christianity.¹²

Kierkegaard continues in this vein of biting satire for three hundred blistering pages. He may have even outdone Nietzsche in his withering assault on the languid and self-satisfied state-sponsored Christianity of his day. Though Kierkegaard never read Nietzsche (Kierkegaard died before Nietzsche began his career), he is attacking Nietzsche’s last man pretending to be a Christian. Kierkegaard could have written, “The last man says, ‘I’m saved,’ and blinks.” Both of these powerful thinkers despised the easy seduction of lazy groupthink—Kierkegaard called it “the crowd” and Nietzsche called it “the herd,” but they both said the same thing. Nietzsche’s last man follows the herd and Kierkegaard’s Christendom follows the crowd. Both philosophers urge their readers to take responsibility for their lives and act with conviction and courage. But for all their similarities—and they are remarkably alike!—they ultimately reached very different conclusions. Kierkegaard held a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. It’s fair to say that his Christian faith informed *all* of his philosophical work. Kierkegaard was able to make the vital distinction between a failed Christendom and a triumphant Christ.

One of the great tragedies in the history of philosophy is that Nietzsche never read Kierkegaard. (Kierkegaard was virtually unknown outside of Copenhagen before Nietzsche’s mental collapse in 1890.) I suppose my real fantasy is that Kierkegaard could have lunch with Nietzsche. I think they would have thoroughly understood one another and probably enjoyed one another’s company. I can imagine Kierkegaard listening to Nietzsche, nodding his head and saying, “Yes, yes, yes! But have you thought about *this*?” What a fascinating conversation that would be! Nietzsche in conversation

with Kierkegaard; skepticism in conversation with faith; “I’ve lost my faith” in conversation with “I still believe.” That’s what I hope this book can be. I hope it can be my, “Yes, yes, yes! But have you thought about this?” conversation with those who feel like their faith is hanging by a thread. This is my long lunch conversation with those who still hold out hope for an authentic faith but are asking, “What can we do when everything is on fire?”

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/when-everything-s-on-fire