

## The Antichrist: Nietzsche on Religion and Morality

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The 19th century in Europe was marked by rapid change and the decay of traditional societal foundations. Secularism swept across Europe, most prominently in France, which had just undergone the Enlightenment, a movement that emphasized logic and rationality over the old traditional, religious ways of thinking.<sup>1</sup> The French Revolution, which emphasized Enlightenment ideals over the religious ideas of the Catholic Church, greatly accelerated the decline of institutional religion.<sup>2</sup> As parts of Europe rapidly industrialized, traditional rural life gave way to urban labor, and the common man was thrust into unfamiliar social and economic structures. The uncertainty of the future was reflected in the gradual change from traditional to modern values in Europe. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) was one of the many philosophers who responded to the situation. Nietzsche was born to a Lutheran family and studied theology for a short period of time before deciding to switch to philosophy.<sup>3</sup> At the age of 24, he became the youngest professor to become the Chair of Classical Philology at the University of Basel. Despite his early academic achievements, later in life Nietzsche was limited by his bouts of ill health; in 1879, he resigned his professorship and focused on independently

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<sup>1</sup> John Merriman, "HIST 202: European Civilization, 1648-1945," lecture presented at Yale University, New Haven, CT, 2008, video, Yale University, posted 2008, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://oyc.yale.edu/history/hist-202/lecture-5>.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Beales, "The French Church and the Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 1 (2003): [Page 2], JSTOR.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jones, "Searching for Answers: Examining Historical Christianity in Nineteenth Century Europe Through Kierkegaard & Nietzsche," University of Missouri-St. Louis, last modified December 2020, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://irl.umsl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1399&context=thesis>.

writing and publishing his works. He eventually developed dementia, and succumbed to pneumonia and a stroke in 1900.<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche wrote extensively on Christianity, a religion he believed was false and represented the decay of Western culture. *The Antichrist* was published in 1895, and was a culmination of Nietzsche's thoughts on the problems of modernity, stemming from Christianity. Modernity, for Nietzsche, refers to the cultural and spiritual condition of society in which traditional religious beliefs—especially Christianity—have lost their authority, but the moral values rooted in them persist in secular forms. Another pertinent definition is nihilism, which is the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless. Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God" is not simply a rejection of religion, but a critique of modern society's failure to replace religious values with a viable moral or existential foundation, revealing the heart of secular culture. This is outlined most forcefully in the *Antichrist*.

Nietzsche believed that modernity was undergoing a crisis—by abandoning one of the fundamental pillars of humanity, Christianity, society was fated to fall into nihilism without the introduction of what he called the "Übermensch," an ideal that replaces values and prioritizes human potential. Religious values, he argued, are needed, and the Übermensch was the solution to a world that was increasingly turning away from Christianity.

Christianity had a complex role in society for Nietzsche. As a religion, it emphasizes weak values, of pity, humility, self-denigration. He says, "under Christianity the instincts of the subjugated and the oppressed come to the fore: it is only those who are at the bottom who seek

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<sup>4</sup> Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, "Friedrich Nietzsche," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified 2024, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=nietzsche>.

their salvation in it.”<sup>5</sup> The persecuted use Christianity to further their own agenda, but in doing so, introduce a shaky scaffolding to society. He also believed that the cultural rejection of Christianity was incomplete, that while European societies had secularized, they still held onto Christian values. This is apparent in the heart of modernity’s crisis. Nietzsche believed he still lived in a post-religious society that thought morally like Christians. Christianity was not yet deposed, but present under new aliases. He says, “our politics is sick with this lack of courage!...if belief in the “privileges of the majority” makes and will continue to make revolutions—it is Christianity, let us not doubt, and Christian valuations, which convert every revolution into a carnival of blood and crime! Christianity is a revolt of all creatures that creep on the ground against everything that is lofty: the gospel of the “lowly” lowers....” These tired, negative values have seeped into the fabric of society, and until the rejection of Christianity is complete, will continue to harm humanity. He elaborated, saying “Christianity is called the religion of pity...A man loses power when he pities...Pity thwarts the whole law of evolution, which is the law of natural selection.” Christianity makes humanity weak and dependent. The values that Christianity produces go against human instincts and our natural biology. However, Nietzsche doesn’t see the cultural rejection of Christianity as a solution — rather, it leads directly to a spiritual vacuum. Without something new to take its place, humanity is left without moral grounding.

Perhaps one of Nietzsche’s most famous and misunderstood ideas was the death of God. The idea is present in many of his works. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, he says, “God is dead: of his pity for man hath God died.”<sup>6</sup> He is not referring to the actual death of God but a

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<sup>5</sup> F. W. Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," The Project Gutenberg, last modified September 18, 2006, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19322/19322-h/19322-h.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "FOURTH AND LAST PART," in *Thus Spake Zarathustra A Book for All and None* (Project Gutenberg, 1999), accessed May 2, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>.

fundamental collapse of what once was the pillar of modernity. Christianity and other faiths are what prevented humanity from falling into nihilism in the past. The world is inadequately prepared for a world without the framework that religion provides. Nietzsche feared deeply for a world without religion, in part because Christianity lends humanity morals and ethics. Humans cannot live without values, but not all value systems are equal. To remove religion with nothing to replace it leads to nihilism. Humanity needs strong values that emphasize human potential, rather than accepting and submitting to our own inferiority.

To fill this vacuum society needs a value system that is life affirming, rather than life-denying. Nietzsche “saw Christianity as embodying the worst in slave morality, a joyless religion that denies the value of life, the body, instinct, the passions, and beauty.”<sup>7</sup> The value system that was to replace Christianity, he argued, had to be one that promoted human growth and individualism. He developed in the *Antichrist* a kind of binary, between what was necessary for positive human evolution and what wasn’t. He said, “what is good?—Whatever augments the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man. What is evil?—Whatever springs from weakness...The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of *our* charity. And one should help them to it”<sup>8</sup> The weak and the botched refer to these flawed Christian ideas. This dichotomy between good and evil, passive and active, spurs his creation of the *Urbemensch*.

The *Urbemensch* is an ideal Nietzsche created to fill the void that Christianity would leave. It is sometimes translated as the superior-man, and means exactly that. The *Urbemensch* is “superior individual who overcomes the decadent values and is able to create new life-affirming

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Irving Mitchell, "Nietzsche's Great Reversal: Overview & Comprehension Questions," Dallas Baptist University, accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/early-modern-resources/nietzsches-reversal.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, "The *Antichrist*," The Project Gutenberg.

values and a stronger and more life-affirming culture.”<sup>9</sup> This ideal fills the space left by the "death of God." With no divine source of meaning, the *Urbmensch* must generate values from within—values that affirm life, vitality, and creative force rather than deny the body or worldly existence. It is the creation of a man who is not restrained by modern notions of possibility, a man who might resemble humanity before the introduction of negative value structures. The *Urbmensch* is directly related to his idea of the will to power. Central to the *Urbmensch* is Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power—the drive toward self-mastery, creative self-overcoming, and exercising freedom without herd-conformity. The *Urbmensch* is, at its core, about “turning away from moralities based on a universal code of behavior...call[ing] for individual exploration of the self, relative to one’s environment, in the hope of producing unique and original beings.”<sup>10</sup> It is about looking at human potential without the limitations that society devised for itself. Nietzsche believed that “some individuals could exert their will to power to create higher, more refined selves and one key to Nietzsche’s ideal is his overcoming of the mind/body dualism and his interpretation of freedom as liberation from societal determinism. In particular, Nietzsche’s free individual must be free from morality, religion, and society and free to fully develop one’s own potentialities.”<sup>11</sup> The will to power is about self-overcoming—the constant struggle to surpass one’s own limitations. In this sense, the *Urbmensch* is the embodiment of the will to power, as he continuously redefines himself and rejects imposed values in favor of his own creation. The will to power and the *Urbmensch* was Nietzsche’s answer to “Christianity’s affectation of humility and self-sacrifice; eternal recurrence was his

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Modernity and Its Discontents: Nietzsche's Critique," UCLA School of Education & Information Studies, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/FNmod.htm#>.

<sup>10</sup> David Payne, "TRANSLATING NIETZSCHE'S UBERMENSCH," McMaster University, last modified September 2004, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/13762/1/fulltext.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Kellner, "Modernity and Its Discontents," UCLA School of Education & Information Studies.

mocking criticism of Christian optimism and millennialism; the superman was his candidate for the place of the Christian ideal of the “good” man, prudently abased before the throne of God.”<sup>12</sup> This idea, Nietzsche proclaimed, can replace Christian values and make humanity stronger and more complete. It will replace the pillars of society that the rejection of Christianity will denigrate, and is the solution.

The persistence of Christian morality in secular society, Nietzsche argues, hinders the emergence of a truly life-affirming culture. To move forward, humanity requires a radical reevaluation of values—one that embraces the will to power and the ideal of the *Übermensch* as pathways to overcoming spiritual decline and reclaiming human potential. Nietzsche remains deeply relevant today: his call to create meaning in the wake of collapsing traditions, his emphasis on self-overcoming, and his critique of passivity and herd mentality resonate in an age marked by political polarization and cultural uncertainty.

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<sup>12</sup> F. W. Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," The Project Gutenberg, last modified September 18, 2006, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19322/19322-h/19322-h.htm>.

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