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Chapter 1: The Sanctification of Nietzsche

It is hardly anything new to present Nietzsche as a religious figure. While Nietzsche was still in some sense of the world alive, spiritual seekers descended on his corpse. His odious sister Elisabeth—whom Nietzsche regarded as his "greatest objection" to existence[1]—ushered the pilgrims in for *darshan*. Rudolf Steiner was amongst those permitted to kneel at the master's feet, and he declared that Nietzsche was "radiating the peace of the sage"[2]. But of course, by this late stage in his mental decline, Nietzsche was no longer radiating anything more than the tranquillity of a turnip.

It is not only cranks and crackpots who have sought to canonise the Antichrist. One serious scholar of Nietzsche's work has claimed that Nietzsche was "*above all* a religious thinker"[3], and many others would agree. In the now expansive literature on the subject, one can find Nietzsche's thought situated in a wide range of religious contexts, ranging from Pietism and Communitarianism through to Neoplatonic mysticism and Mahayana Buddhism.

I understand, and to a great extent share, the initial dismay that some people feel when they encounter scholars expatiating on Nietzsche's philosophy of religion. After all, was Nietzsche not by his own lights an instinctive atheist[4] who saw religions as "affairs of the rabble"[5]? Nietzsche plainly was committed to sounding out the hypocrisy of the holy, who he saw as mendacious decadents motivated by the desire to revenge themselves on the world and on the healthy.

Despite this, I think that there *is* some truth to the view that Nietzsche's thought has a distinctly religious character. But it is a religious character with some striking and at times perplexing features. To begin with, there is nothing pious about it. Nietzsche

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[1] EH "Why I Am So Wise" §3. This and related comments were suppressed by Elisabeth, and consequently cannot be found in all editions. See: F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. A. Ridley and J. Norman, trans. J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 77–78.

[2] In his journal for Jan. 22, 1896, Steiner wrote that Nietzsche was "*Friede des Weisen um sich verbreitend*".

[3] J. Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 201, p. 35, p. 142. On Young's reading, Nietzsche affirmed "a form of pantheism" (p. 35) which involved the "ecstatic identification with the totality of things" (p. 142). One will find much in what follows to support such a view. But one will also find strong reasons to regard as fundamentally misguided Young's contention that Nietzsche advocated a kind of "communitarianism" according to which "the good of the organic, social whole takes precedence over… the good of each and every individual" (p. 165).

[4] EH "Why I Write Such Good Books" UM§2, p. 279.

[5] EH "Why I Am A Destiny" §1, p. 326.

said “I do not want to be a holy man; sooner even a buffoon”, and that he’d rather be a “satyr than a saint”[6]. Indeed, Nietzsche claimed that “ingenious buffoonery” was the “highest form of spirituality”[7]. This sense of humour was not born of an otherworldly detachment—of the sense that this life is not to be taken seriously. On the contrary, it came from a sense that taking this life seriously *demands* a playful spirit.

Nietzsche thought that the value of a man or race could be determined by their incapacity to “conceive god apart from the satyr”, and claimed that a kind of “divine malice” was necessary to perfection[8]. Nietzsche’s consistent praise of enmity, and his claim to have “spiritualised hostility”[9] must not be forgotten. “The peace of the sage” was never Nietzsche’s aim. He was a volatile figure who saw in the embrace of his own internal torment the possibility of a great fecundity[10]. Nietzsche did not seek a way out of the “wicked game” of life and suffering, but wanted an affirmation of life as a whole, including its most questionable and unpleasant aspects.

Of all religious contexts in which to situate Nietzsche’s thought, many scholars have found one or other mystical milieu to be the most appropriate. It is not difficult to see why: the stress is typically not on following a given code of values, or on orthodox professions of belief, but rather on the individual’s direct experience of identity with the whole. But this identification typically has an altruistic upshot: if the other is, in Schopenhauer’s words, “I once more”, then what reason do I have to prioritise *me* over *him*? And it is at this point that the attempt to draw comparisons with Nietzsche’s thought become extremely strained. Nietzsche derided all “moralities of unselfing”, and mounted a striking defence of self-preferencing as a part of his project to “give egoism a good conscience”[11].

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche wrote that “those who want to mediate between two resolute thinkers show that they are mediocre; they lack eyes for seeing what is unique.

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[6] EH “Preface” §2, p. 217. Nietzsche speaks of his “terrible fear” that he would be “pronounced holy”, and says that he wrote the book to “prevent people doing mischief with him”. This fear was quickly proven well-founded, with his close friend Peter Gast making just such a pronouncement at Nietzsche’s funeral.
[7] NF-1888,18[3].
[8] EH “Why I Am So Clever” §4, p. 245.
[9] TI “Morality as Anti-Nature”, 3, p. 488.
[10] C.f. GS§283 on how living at war with oneself is the secret to “harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness”.
[11] NF-1883,16[15].

Seeing things as similar and making things the same is the sign of weak eyes”[12]. Yet this has not stopped certain scholars from concluding that Nietzsche was quasi-Buddhist whose brooding walks were really a form of meditation, and that this unrepentant egotist was truly a renunciate of self and an “advocate of the Bodhisattva ideal”[13].

Nietzsche *did* claim an identification of part and whole, speaking for example of all humans as being “buds on a single tree” and of the need to “experience cosmically!”[14] But in Nietzsche’s mature thought, this identification did not lead to a depreciation of the self in favour of the Self. Rather, it led to a sense of the “tremendously great significance” of the individual[15]. To see why, it is necessary to understand Nietzsche’s conception of the relation of the one to the many, the part to the whole. Unlike most mystical thinkers who imagine a ground—or groundlessness—*beneath* manifestation, an unmanifest aspect to existence, Nietzsche altogether denied the existence of a *beyond*, a whole apart from the parts. On such a view, to deprecate the individual would be to deprecate the whole: where the whole is wholly *in* the parts, the only way to affirm the whole is through the parts.

This way of conceiving of the one and the many owes a great to the philosophical lineage to which Nietzsche claimed to belong. In a note, Nietzsche wrote “my ancestors: *Heraclitus, Empedocles, Spinoza, Goethe*”[16]. It is my view that a focus on Nietzsche’s engagement with these thinkers can be of great help in making sense of Nietzsche’s religious thought. Yet these ancestors have not proved common focal points in existing studies, with scholars preferring to draw comparisons with Christian and Buddhist mystical traditions. My aim in the present work is to show that these

[12] GS§228, p. 212.
[13] Parkes writes “Nietzsche was able to practise a vigorous form of walking meditation (corresponding to the slower kinhin in the Zen tradition) that allowed him to hear the “inner voices” of his thoughts rather than the chatter of his I”. See: G. Parkes, “Nietzsche, Panpsychism, and Pure Experience: An East-Asian Contemplative Perspective”, in A. Rehberg (ed.), *Nietzsche and Phenomenology*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p. 98. Parkes’ claim that Nietzsche advocated a “Bodhisattva ideal” is taken up in chapter 5.
[14] NF-1881,11[7].
[15] NF-1887,9[30] (WP§785, pp. 412–413).
[16] NF-1884,25[454]. This is not to deny that there are other influences of comparable importance, or that Nietzsche made other such lists. For example, Nietzsche wrote that “I have a lineage… that which moved Zarathustra, Moses, Mohammed, Jesus, Plato, Brutus, Spinoza, and Mirabeau is the medium in which I live…” (NF-1881,15[17]) and “When I speak of Plato, Pascal, Spinoza, and Goethe, I know that their blood flows in my veins” (NF-1881,12[52]). It is worth noting that both of these fragments occur in the notebooks shortly after some important discussions of mystical experiences, which I discuss in chapter 4.

attempted mediations are basically misguided, and to offer a more promising context for situating Nietzsche's religious thought.

Each of Nietzsche's self-proclaimed "ancestors" may regarded not only as monistic but also mystic, with each stressing a sense in which all things are one. But those senses certainly are not one, and I spend chapters two and three unpacking their varying conceptions of the one and the many. The second chapter I devote to Goethe alone, and in the third chapter, I discuss Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Spinoza. One reason for granting particular attention to Goethe is that his influence on Nietzsche is not only unparalleled, but has been largely overlooked by scholars of Nietzsche's philosophy of religion.

Of these ancestors, Goethe is easily the least well studied by philosophers. It certainly doesn't help that Goethe's religious thought has been rather radically misrepresented by all manner of Christers and Shysters[17]. Thus I spend part of the second chapter attempting to get Goethe out from under his worst exegetes. I then go on to discuss Goethe's original and challenging conception according to which the one is *symbolic of* the many. I explore the nature of symbolism in Goethe's thought, and show how this conception of the one and the many is developed in both Goethe's poetic and morphological work.

In the third chapter, I discuss Nietzsche's reading of Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Spinoza. Nietzsche emphasised the unitive nature of each ancestor's thought. For instance, he offered a striking interpretation of Heraclitus on which "the one *is* the many". Nietzsche claimed that the view that "all living things are one" to be the essence of Empedocles' philosophy, a view he directly associated with Goethe. I show that Goethe once again plays an important role in Nietzsche's engagement with Spinoza. Nietzsche expressly contrasted Spinoza's "anaemic" philosophy with Goethe's "paganism", and I argue that Goethe's model of a sensual spirituality is central to Nietzsche's transformation of Spinoza's *amor dei intellectualis* into his own ideal of *amor fati*.

[17] This borrows Kaufmann's divinely malicious translation of Goethe's rhyme on "*Laffen*" und "*Pfaffen*" at the beginning of *Faust*. See: GF, p. 93.

The fourth chapter demonstrates Nietzsche's sustained interest in mystical experience throughout his philosophical career, and shows the marked development of his attitudes toward these experiences. I begin by putting the discussions of unitive phenomena in *The Birth of Tragedy* into the context of Nietzsche's reflections on his own experiences from that period. I then explore Nietzsche's discussions of mystical experiences in an important 1881 notebook which surrounds his first discussions of the eternal recurrence of the same. Finally, I take up Nietzsche's mature discussions of mysticism, many of which have never been addressed in the literature on Nietzsche's religious thought.

Previous scholarly attempts to mediate between Nietzsche and mystics from religious traditions of both the East and West are discussed in chapter five. I argue that the principal inadequacy of these studies has been their failure to adequately take account of Nietzsche's egoism. Sometimes these studies conclude that Nietzsche was—in the words of one scholar—a "Zebra": half mystic, half egoist[18]. That is, Nietzsche was at odds with himself—and there is no doubt about which is the better half. Here we get the claim that, to adapt Chesterton's quip, Nietzsche and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism[19]. Against such views, I argue that there is a consonance between the egoistic and mystical aspects of Nietzsche's thought which has not generally been understood. I also consider in some detail Nietzsche's engagement with the thought of mystics such as Meister Eckhart, and show that Nietzsche criticised the lack of "self-esteem" that came from their mistaken conception of the relationship of part and whole[20].

Nietzsche spoke of the possibility of standing in a "Dionysian relationship to existence"[21], and defined this Dionysian state as the "temporary identification with the principle of life"[22]. I argue that Nietzsche saw these transitory unitive experiences as facilitating an embrace of all aspects of life, including egoism and hostility. Nietzsche conceived of his Dionysian spirituality as "the religious affirmation of life, life whole

[18] See B.W. Davis, "Reply to Graham Parkes: Nietzsche as Zebra: With both Egoistic Antibuddha and Nonegoistic Bodhisattva Stripes", and G. Parkes, "Reply to Bret Davis: Zarathustra and Asian Thought: A Few Final Words", both published in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 46, 2015.
[19] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, The Bodley Head, 1909, pp. 238–239: "Students of popular science, like Mr. Blatchford, are always insisting that Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism."
[20] NF-1884,26[442].
[21] NF-1888,16[32] (WP§1041, p. 536).
[22] NF-1883,8[14] (WP§417, p. 224).

and not denied or halved"[23]. Contrary to several scholars of Nietzsche's religious thought, I contend that Nietzsche's criticism of the nihilistic tendencies of religious traditions extends even to the apparently this-worldly mystical traditions, so long as those traditions seek to make to make the individual subordinate to the whole. I show that, on Nietzsche's view, those who think that by rejecting individuality they are "getting back to wholeness"[24] are deluded, and that their one-sided affirmation actually denies life.

Nietzsche described egoism as the "law of perspective" according to which what is nearest appears largest[25]. In the sixth chapter, Nietzsche's defence of egoism as self-privileging is taken up with respect to his claims of the identification of part and whole. In this chapter, I clarify what Nietzsche meant in speaking of a "whole and holy" selfishness. I show that Nietzsche considered the task of certain individuals to be to enrich the whole in themselves. To this end, these individuals must feel the "inner certainty of having a right to everything"[26]. They must also be willing to look away from the suffering of others in order to undertake their own projects, from which pity acts as a constant seduction. I argue that Goethe is Nietzsche's model for a whole and holy selfishness. Goethe's capacity for selective attention is discussed, as are his concerns about the transformation of the world into a great hospital in which each man is the other's humane nurse. With the claim that a society of mutual care-givers and palliators would lead to a diminution of the whole, Nietzsche's infamous criticisms of pity are seen in a new light.

The seventh chapter takes up Nietzsche's conception of fate. I show that these discussions offer some of Nietzsche's most startling claims about the identity of part and whole. I pay particular attention to Nietzsche's conception of the self *as fate*. On such a view, the individual is not conceived of as something *fated*—something *on which* fate acts. Rather, the individual is conceived of as a "piece of fate". I argue that this identification with fate should not be conceived of as an ultimate identity, as opposed to a relative, egoic identity. Nietzsche claimed that "fate is an elevating thought for one who understands that he belongs *to it*"[27]. With reference to the

[23] NF-1888,14[89] (WP§1052, p. 542).
[24] NF-1888,15[113] (WP§351, pp. 191–193).
[25] GS§162, p. 199.
[26] NF-1887,10[128] (WP§388, p. 209).
[27] NF-1884,26[442].

conception of the one and the many articulated in the foregoing, I show how this Nietzschean conception of fate engenders the "self-esteem" which he found sorely lacking in certain mystics.

Finally, in chapter eight, I discuss Nietzsche's reception of the Persian poet Hafez. Throughout the 1880s, Nietzsche sung the praises of Hafez. Yet this relationship has gone almost entirely unstudied in the immense secondary literature on Nietzsche. This neglect is particularly important to address here, as Hafez is example of a mystic with a good conscience in everything sensual and egoistic. My approach is to first make clear the intellectual context in which Nietzsche encountered Hafez. Hammer, Daumer, and Goethe all interpreted Hafez' songs celebrating love and wine in a fairly straightforward manner, as opposed to the sufisticating tendency to turn Hafez into just the kind of "pious prig" that he most abhorred.

I then consider each of Nietzsche's discussions of Hafez in some detail. Far from finding in Hafez the model of piety, I show how Nietzsche positioned Hafez amongst great satirists like Aristophanes, Petronius. Lauding the "blissfully mocking" nature of Hafez' poems[28], Nietzsche found in Hafez an example of that "ingenious buffoonery" that he called the highest form of spirituality[29]. Nietzsche considered Hafez an "artist of apotheosis", setting him in the rare company of Rubens and Goethe. I argue that Nietzsche placed Hafez beside Goethe as a prime example of how "the most spiritual men… are sensualists in the best faith"[30]. Speaking explicitly of Hafez and Goethe, Nietzsche spoke of how the best constituted and most joyful mortals embrace the "unstable equilibrium" of their conflicting inward forces[31]. Rather than finding the tensions between their "animal" and "angel" an argument *against* life, they find them another "seduction *to* life". I argue that in Hafez, Nietzsche found an exemplar of the Dionysian "religious affirmation of life" in even its most questionable aspects.

In closing this introduction, and by way of briefly addressing my approach, I would like to say something about this book's dedication.

[28] GS§370, pp. 329–330.
[29] NF-1888,18[3].
[30] NF-1886,5[34] (WP§1045, pp. 537–538.).
[31] GM.III§2, pp. 98–99.

While Walter Kaufmann's studies of Nietzsche have been improved upon in many non-trivial respects by subsequent scholars, it seems the destiny of anyone wanting to undertake a general treatment to fall rather short of the standards he set. Yet if one has taken Kaufmann at all seriously, one cannot help wanting to situate a study in a broad context—his criticisms of an excessively narrow specialisation are simply too incisive to ignore. One of Kaufmann's common themes was that there are many things which must be seen together if they are to be seen at all[32].

Nietzsche said he deserved readers who read him "the way good old philologists read their Horace"[33]. His writing certainly repays careful attention, but it is also true that features that are very striking at an ordinary scale can easily disappear under the microscope. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche mocked narrow specialisation in the figure of the pedant who proudly declares "the *brain* of the leech: that is my world"[34]. Those who would rather "know nothing than half-know much" might present this as conscientiousness, but Zarathustra knew better.

I hope that my debt to Kaufmann will be obvious throughout, though I can't help feeling that I have short-changed him. My dedication seems bound to invite unflattering comparisons. It is not merely the poverty of my German—it's my English, too. Kaufmann's deft touch is bound to make my every attempted pizzicato sound hamfingered. This is doubtless a feeling that many writing about Nietzsche feel. Many have sought to cast it off by affecting an all too heavy seriousness that can never do justice to their topic. To write *about* Nietzsche *in the manner of* Kant should be a satirist's conceit, yet that conceit has become the norm. It is again to Kaufmann that we owe some of our most penetrating analysis of the disastrous model set by the perennially constipated Kant[35].

It should also be borne in mind that it is largely due to Kaufmann that English speakers have caught a sense of Nietzsche's wit. Most translations, including the ever growing number that have followed Kaufmann's and benefitted from their example, can't touch his for style. And yet this was a man whose earliest scholarly efforts were in saving Nietzsche from the then widespread view that while he was a great stylist, he was no

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[32] For example, W. Kaufmann, *The Future of the Humanities*, Reader's Digest Press, 1977, §72.
[33] EH "Why I Write Such Good Books" §5, p. 266.
[34] Z "The Leech", p. 250.
[35] W. Kaufmann, *Goethe, Kant, and Hegel, Discovering the Mind, Vol. I,* Transaction Publishers, 1991, §31.

great thinker. Kaufmann saw very clearly that understanding Nietzsche's humour is quite inseparable from understanding his seriousness.

Kaufmann did not suffer from the pervasive Perennialism that makes scholars see all things as one. He treated the task of comparison as one of differentiation[36]. I find this approach to be the most intellectually honest, and also the most interesting. If the differences between, say, Nietzsche and Meister Eckhart strike us as less fascinating than their similarities, something has gone quite wrong. It is not because I think that Nietzsche is generally right that I try to bring out these differences. I hope to have learned a lesson from Kaufmann's concerted railing against what he called "exegetical thinking"—the process by which a reader confers authority on a text before projecting his own ideas into it, only to get them back "endowed with authority"[37]. This process might seem inevitable when the texts are Nietzsche's, since they are so crowded with voices that at least one will resonate with one's own voice—and thus be heard the loudest. But this is to make a necessity, if not a virtue, of one's weaknesses. I find much in Nietzsche to disagree with. But it is not by focussing exclusively on the agreeable aspects that we benefit. Rather, I have found that much of the enduring reward of engaging with Nietzsche's thought comes from regarding oneself as the target of his assaults, and not safely in the camp behind him.

Finally, I am indebted to Kaufmann for my belated realisation that understanding Goethe is indispensable to a deep appreciation of Nietzsche's thought. Not only did Kaufmann argue convincingly for a view which Nietzsche simply took for granted: that Goethe was a model of autonomy[38]. He also had a great ability to bring Goethe to life. To get a sense of this, one should read Kaufmann's translation of the great dialogue between Mephisto (posing as Faust) and the student in the first part of *Faust*[39]. Read against Kaufmann's, even the translations of very accomplished poets, like Jarrell, tend to drag. Kaufmann's version has all the agile impetus of Wilbur's *Tartuffe*.

The claim that Goethe can be enjoyed in the way that one enjoys Molière might strike some as plainly false, even indecent. It is my view that those who dismiss Goethe as a

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[36] This comparative approach is evident in virtually all of Kaufmann's works, but see in particular W. Kaufmann, *Religions in Four Dimensions*, Reader's Digest Press, 1976.
[37] W. Kaufmann, *The Future of the Humanities*, op. cit., §21.
[38] See especially W. Kaufmann, *Goethe, Kant, and Hegel*, where the comparison of Goethe's model of autonomy with that of Kant forms a major theme.
[39] GF, pp. 194–207.

stuffed shirt have plainly not caught the tone of the ‘presiding personality’. But I think that the same is true for many who take themselves to be Goethe’s heirs. That is, some who take Goethe seriously take him far too seriously. Jung claimed that *Faust* was too great a book to be *enjoyed*, but was to be studied for its arcane meanings. I will presently argue that such an esoteric approach to Goethe is fundamentally misguided. But it is Kaufmann I must thank for first opening my eyes to the abundant rewards right there on the surface.