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BOOK PROFILE: THE SHADOW OF THE ANTICHRIST: NIETZSCHE'S
CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIANITY

A profile of Stephen N. Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Press and Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2006. 311 pp. \$24.99 (paper). ISBN: 0801027020

Stephen N. Williams casts a wide net in his study of Nietzsche's anti-Christianity, developing his presentation in relation to the thinker's life and times, the intellectual and artistic milieu of 19th century Germany, as well as his contemporary and posthumous reception. The whole treatment has a biographical slant, but in his first three chapters Williams focuses explicitly on Nietzsche's young years. The traumatic loss of Nietzsche's father (which plays a central role in Williams' interpretation throughout), his early school years, his encounter with Hölderlin Schopenhauer, Wagner and the romanticism of ancient Greek culture informs the first two chapters, whereas the third chapter describes Nietzsche's decisive break not only with Wagner, but also with Christianity.

In the fourth chapter, Williams explores the heart and substance of Nietzsche's indictment of Christianity, and his interpretation of the crucial "madman" passage from *The Gay Science* is particularly rewarding. The rest of the chapter is spent in a theological examination of Nietzsche's critique, and with Barth and Pascal in the wings, Williams forwards the idea that Nietzsche's critique is essentially one-sided, driven by his own misery and the misery he perceived in humanity. The perceived one-sidedness is underscored in Williams' interpretation by Nietzsche's lack of a christology and his lack of hermeneutic attention to the New Testament—the moral elements of which Nietzsche despised in particular.

The final section of chapter four takes up "The Birth of Zarathustra," and chapters five and six are primarily concerned with this central character of Nietzsche's authorship. In chapter five, Williams gives a detailed reading of Zarathustra, emphasizing the Dionysian idealization of the body, the earth and the courage required for the complementarity of creation and destruction. He regards Nietzsche's Zarathustra as a reverse image of Jesus and Plato, and accordingly *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a scripture for all who accept the imperative to will without pity or "smallness." Chapter six takes up the question of how we should react to Zarathustra and his anti-Christianity, and in answering Williams calls upon Barth's *Church Dogmatics* as a "massive theological counter-thesis to Nietzsche's philosophical anthropology (179). In contrast to Zarathustra's "azure

isolation," Williams puts forth a Christ whose love for human beings is not the pathetic Quixotism that Nietzsche sees, but rather the love that lives for others without coercion or "sensitive morbidity" (197).

Williams then calls on Dostoevsky as the appropriate dialogical partner for Nietzsche's anti-Christianity, contrasting what he calls Nietzsche's "melodramatic kitsch" with what he believes is Dostoevsky's more holistic ideas of suffering, love and redemption. In this vein, Williams asserts that Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (which Nietzsche unfortunately never read) presents a forceful critique of Nietzsche's pathetic Christ, insofar as "we bracket the allegation of kitsch" (199). With this, a dialectical relationship is put forward between loneliness and love, joy and suffering, which allows Williams to give a textured account of why such oppositions cannot be taken one-sidedly, and that the real tragedy is that Nietzsche's unilateralism has the potential to close him off from serious Christian consideration.

In the seventh chapter, Williams brackets the explicitly religious considerations of his topic and delves into the moral implications of Nietzsche's godlessness. He elaborates on Nietzsche's philosophy of mind and the advocated response with regard to the amorality of existence. In a section entitled "The Dark Question," Williams tackles the issue of Nietzsche's appropriation by the Nazis, and he emphasizes the German thinker's "aristocratism of authorship" (227) which expunges Nietzsche of any moral consequences for inferior interpretations. The eighth, and, penultimate chapter of Williams' book takes up Bonhoeffer's theological interpretation of Nietzsche, and how the former re-evaluated the notion of strength as fundamental to Christian living. In Bonhoeffer's view which, according to Williams, escapes Nietzsche's critique, the "determination to live by the will of God signifies individual strength, not craven conformity" (247). Further, Williams asserts that a Nietzschean abdication of compassion and shame would be disastrous from a human perspective, arguing among other points that the significance of the mother-child relationship from a biological, social and theological perspective undercuts Nietzsche's notion that compassion is "unnatural" to human beings.

In a final postscript, Williams gives concluding remarks on the notion of truth in Nietzsche's philosophy, and its relation to the question of language and metaphorical transference. He here contrasts it with a Biblical notion of truth as "encounter" and existential confrontation. The Word, as Williams says with Brunner, is an active truth that has its analogy in the meeting between two persons, implying that an equivocation between knowledge in the Greek sense and Christian revelation through scripture is inappropriate. Thus, Williams asserts that we cannot overlook Nietzsche's charge that we confuse grammatical subjects with metaphysical unities, and thus the truth of Christianity, as embodied in Christ, is actually brought out in the understanding of Jesus as a person with whom we are confronted and with whom Christians must reckon personally.

Williams begins the conclusion of his book with a note of apology, initially critiquing the notion that Christian faith in the resurrection implies a cultural or religious exclusivism, articulating the democratic aspects of the New and Old Testaments through their being written in non-sacred languages, and the proximity of God to human beings in the revelation of that scripture. Yet in the end, Williams propounds that a Christian will-to-truth, taken from a perspective within Christianity, actually does imply an exclusivity insofar as it stands and falls on the resurrection. If no one can be "justifiably confident" of this Christian truth, then Christianity itself is exclusive, while at the same time Christian faith in the resurrection excludes the non-Christian. Thus Williams leaves us "in a state of reflective sobriety" (292).

Williams' book is an interesting and richly informative read. His writing is stylistically entertaining even as it sometimes falls off into flourishing self-indulgence. The edition itself, however, is difficult to read largely as a result of editorial choices. Williams includes so many lengthy notes in addition to his references that an attentive reader finds herself reading substantial commentary in the footnotes, detracting attention from the arguments of the main text. There is also no complete bibliography to give the scholar a more comprehensive view of the substantial sourcing. Williams seems to fall prey to a criticism he anticipates in his preface, insofar as "fairly copious reference and quotation has its drawbacks and can be criticized on several scores" (15). While he escapes his exemplary criticisms in this preface—the book is not sophomoric and does not betray a lack of mastery over the material—it is evident in the length and breadth of the book that Williams was perhaps too unrestrained in his scope, and the text suffers from an over-abundance of information which leads its author to make too many qualifications throughout about the work's necessary limitations. The reader is left with a sense of an author who has an admirable enthusiasm for the subject matter, but has not made tough choices with regard to presentation. Nonetheless, for an interested and patient academic, Williams' *Shadow of the Antichrist* rewards a more than cursory read.

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