

# Three Thinkers, Two Poets, One Teacher

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## Introduction

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced a number of thinkers, philosophers, theologians, and scientists whose thinking, writings, and discoveries did much to create the world that we call modernity, which is now supposedly giving way to post-modernity. The field is so full of eminent figures, often following and replacing one another with astonishing rapidity, that it may seem much too arbitrary to choose from among them only three and to argue that they paved the way for much that is best and for much that is worst in the contemporary world of religion, philosophy, and culture.

At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, there were two poets: one looked back to the simpler and happier world that was vanishing, the other looked into what the world was becoming. The insights of those two poets will help us understand why it is the work of three thinkers can stand as a lighthouse beacon shining to enable us to reach a safe haven across a tempestuous sea.

Of our three thinkers, the names of two will be known to most college students, whether or not they have actually read anything by them. The third name will be more familiar to Christians, but unfortunately they too may know his work better from hearsay or from films. His influence has spread more widely through motion pictures and video than through his writings. Our three thinkers are the Dane Søren Kierkegaard (1818-1855), the German Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900),

and the American, for many years an exile in Europe, Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1985). The First World War brought an end to the nineteenth century's European dream of endless progress, of *la belle époque*. If people had listened to the Dane as he attacked the massive structures of the idealistic philosophy of the early nineteenth century and its consequences for true Christianity, Christendom might have recovered before plunging into that dreadful war. But they did not listen to Kierkegaard; later, they would pay attention to Nietzsche, to their loss.

One of the two poems mentioned below symbolizes what kind of world would end in 1914; another indicates what was about to come. According to legend, during World War I young British soldiers often carried A. E. Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad* in their rucksacks;<sup>1</sup> Germans carried Nietzsche. If Danish soldiers had been involved, perhaps they would have carried Søren Kierkegaard's *With Fear and Trembling*, a book that surely seems more suited to the situation in which hundreds of thousands of young men were condemned to mass slaughter in the face of mechanized weaponry being used for the first time in large-scale combat.

Although Houseman's work is not our subject here, we may conclude that the British made a better choice than Germans of the same age; the Germans too would have done better to carry Houseman's book than the one they actually took: Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Perhaps almost any other book of

poems would have been better than *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, for in it Nietzsche evokes the vision of a world in which God is dead. Another poet, a German this time, would publish a poem on the eve of the war that would express what the world was becoming even better than Houseman's depicted what the world had been.

Did American, British, German, and Russian soldiers carry books of poetry in their packs during World War II? No, by that war the time of poetry was past, and with it much of the human dream of man's unspoiled glory. One poet predicted with awful clarity what the end of *la belle époque* would bring. Before we hear what he had to say, let us look at the situation into which this second poet was born.

We might characterize the late eighteenth century, the high point of the age of Enlightenment, as a time of tremendous ambition, aesthetic enthusiasm, and philosophical productivity in Germany, the country that "ruled the clouds."<sup>2</sup> While the British were making colonies and the French revolution and war, the Germans thought and wrote. In Germany Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), with his three massive critiques,<sup>3</sup> brought the Enlightenment to its logical conclusion, dismissing the biblical revelation of his own Pietistic upbringing and proclaiming *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). He was followed by three more "idealists," each of whom sought to explain the ultimate meaning of the life of God and man without reference to biblical revelation. Each was determined to preserve the highest standard of morality, ethics, and aesthetics, equal to or superior to anything accomplished by Christianity in the past. The French Revolution did not warn them sufficiently of the peril of such an ambition. They survived Napoleon and were

not to see what the twentieth century would bring: Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1761-1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), and the most ambitious of all, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

### Fichte and Hegel

Let us look first at Fichte for a moment. He wrote *The Critique of All Revelation* in his early thirties, symbolic of the conceit of his age, arguing that God and the Bible had become superfluous. It was published anonymously by Kant's publisher and was thought at first to be by Kant himself. Its immediate success gave Fichte instant fame when he was identified as the actual author. Like so many who were no longer interested in the God of the Bible, he turned to morals and edification, and made the ominous mistake of looking to the State as a moral force. His *Speeches to the German Nation*, a course he taught in Berlin during the winter of 1807-1808, inspired Germans to a nationalistic revival against the conqueror Napoleon. The Enlightenment (and the religious movement that was contemporaneous with it, Pietism) had stressed individuality, even agreeing with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that liberty demands the abolition of "all particular dependencies," on family, church, monarch, and even God. One consequence of this concept of liberty was the French Revolution, of which no more need be said here.

Far from being a radical individualist, Fichte taught that man is truly free only in human society and came to see the need for a State to encourage men in the development of the highest virtue, altruism, of living for others. If he had simply listened to Scripture, in which Jesus pointed to the Second Great Commandment, "Love thy

neighbor as thyself" (Matt 22:39, Lev 19:18), he would have had a good foundation for his project. Instead, like Kant he looked to reason alone. In his *Instruction on the Blessed Life* (1806), he taught that true blessedness does not lie beyond death, but can be experienced as eternity in the temporality of this life. What we must do is to shuck off the illusion of particular existence and live wholly for the divine that is within us.

While Fichte encouraged people to find the meaning of existence in altruistic living for the community, assisted when necessary by the State, Hegel offered intellectual rather than practical fulfillment. He offered an understanding of all things as the outworking of the purposes of God (as he conceived of him) and explained the whole history of ideas and of institutions, the development of the state, morals, justice, art, and religion (in short everything) in terms of an abstract necessity. Missing was any sense of the importance of individuals or chance. History is not shaped by men (a strange thought in the light of what Napoleon accomplished), but instead develops on the basis of an idealistic dialectic. This refers to the dialectical encounter of thesis and antithesis to produce a synthesis, which then becomes the thesis of the next stage of the dialectic. Like his predecessors, Hegel spoke of God, but his conception differed radically from that of biblical religion with its infinite-personal God; instead, he saw God in pantheistic terms. What he called God comes to himself (itself) in the development of human thought. Hegel's abstract notion of God apart from all propositional revelation as a force that develops itself in the intellectual-spiritual dialectic of human history, was reversed, half a century later. Karl

Marx (1818-1883), a baptized and fallen-away German Jew, turned Hegel on his head, repudiating all thought of deity and the spiritual to produce dialectical materialism, envisaging an inevitable process in the economic structures of society, rather than in the realm of ideas.

### **Kierkegaard**

Long before Marx upended Hegel, Kierkegaard had recognized the atrocious emptiness of Hegel's religion of an inexorable, necessary, spiritual development. It is as an individual, a person, that one can encounter the infinite, personal God and Father of Jesus Christ. An essential difference between biblical religion, both Jewish and Christian, and other religions and philosophies lies in its emphasis on God as personal as well as infinite. The God of the Bible has made himself known to us in the words of Moses and the prophets, in the Person of Jesus Christ and the teachings of his apostles, all of which is preserved for us and made accessible in reliable biblical revelation. But the reliability of Christian revelation was benumbed by the Enlightenment and dismissed by the idealists, who sought to do on their own what revelation teaches that God had offered as grace.

For Kierkegaard the infinite-personal God, transcendent but also immanent, speaks to individuals with an authority that challenges their very being, as he did to Abraham, the central figure of *With Fear and Trembling*. God does not explain the meaning of life and the world; it is rather in obeying him that this meaning becomes evident. Kierkegaard's life work may be called a testimony against the impersonal false god of idealistic philosophy and against the ethic and morality that is based on human thought rather than on the

Word of God. Unfortunately his contribution was overlooked and so it neither corrected that tendency nor impeded the collapse of the philosophies of idealism in the face of materialism after mid-century—of which Karl Marx was only the best-known representative.

Kierkegaard pointed to each individual's responsibility to the personal God, a responsibility not deduced from idealistic metaphysics but laid on one by the very Word of God himself. The response does not consist in the creation of philosophical systems, but in decision and the "leap of faith." In contrast to metaphysical necessity this was long understood as calling for an irrational "leap in the dark," a misunderstanding that caused Schaeffer, more than a century later, to see in Kierkegaard one of the forces that led to effectual banishment of the personal God from the prevailing world and life view of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

### Nietzsche

To turn from Kierkegaard to the thinkers he rejected, we see that each of these idealistic philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sought to preserve the morals of Christianity without its basis in the reliable divine revelation of Scripture. This effort ultimately collapsed under the blows of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and others, resulting in the triumph of materialism. Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual, on decision, and on the instant was to have an impact he did not envisage when it was taken out of the context of the personal God: it gave an impetus to the development of existentialism, the better-known representatives of which, such as Jean-

Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960), were atheistic. Like Kierkegaard, they called for authenticity; but while his was a Christian authenticity, theirs was abstract and intensely individual.<sup>5</sup>

The high ambitions of idealistic philosophy, like the romantic nostalgia of Houseman, could not long survive the end of the nineteenth century, called as we remember *la belle époque*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the ideal of progress, the rejection of revelation, and the dismissal of the concept of a personal God, indeed often of a god of any kind, culminated in the unprecedented carnage of 1914-1918. Rather than trying to explain this in historical and philosophical terms, let us look at an untitled poem (published 1914) by Stefan George (1868-1933), who predicted with awful clarity what the end of *la belle époque* would bring:

You felons are the first to murder  
God,  
Carve out an idol not resembling  
Him,  
Hailed by sweet names and gruesome as no other,  
And hurl the best you have into its  
jaws.  
You call it your own way and will  
not rest  
In torrid frenzy running, till all  
venal  
And base alike, instead of God's red  
blood,  
The pus of idols courses through  
your veins.<sup>6</sup>

Stefan George's lines apply not only to the mass slaughters of the years 1914-1918 but to countless other atrocities of this last and bloodiest century. Søren Kierkegaard's warning against the replacement of the personal God of the Bible with historical necessity had gone unheeded; what issued was neither Kant's sense of moral

duty nor Fichte's state-promoted altruism, but Darwin's "survival of the fittest," Nietzsche's "will to power," and George's "pus of idols."

English soldiers took Houseman's *Shropshire Lad* with them on the way to die, and Germans went with *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. More appropriate would have been *With Fear and Trembling*, and even more appropriate, a book not yet written, Francis A. Schaeffer's *Escape from Reason* (1968).

### Schaeffer

With the name of Francis Schaeffer, we come closer to our own day. He is the only one of the three personally known to anyone alive today, this writer among them. Those who met him at his chalet in L'Abri, heard him lecture, or read his early books, may wonder at the thesis gradually emerging in this essay, namely, that Kierkegaard was more of a forerunner of Francis Schaeffer than Schaeffer himself wanted to believe. Kierkegaard reintroduced the importance of personal decision, in his case, a decision of faith and obedience, which was not enough for Schaeffer if decision was emphasized with little or nothing said about a full and true biblical and doctrinal context. Kierkegaard's warning that we must listen to God rather than to any human philosophy went unheeded in the nineteenth century, until in the mid-twentieth, it was brought up in a fuller and clearer way by a man who long considered Kierkegaard an adversary.

One thing that ties Schaeffer to Kierkegaard is his repudiation of man's philosophical speculations and his emphasis on personal authenticity; the thing that really distinguishes them is that Schaeffer, after witnessing the horrible consequences of

human thought "emancipated" from Scripture (the term is Kant's, who thought it a good thing, the precondition for the Enlightenment), summoned us not merely to an authentic Christian life but to an authentic Christian world and life view.

At a little chalet in the Swiss canton of Vaud, not far from the city of Lausanne, a small community grew up around Francis Schaeffer, his wife Edith, his children and their families. Switzerland was the home of Karl Barth (1886-1968), a man who courageously opposed Nazism and was promptly expelled from Germany, where he had been a professor of theology. Barth, one of the founders of the school variously called dialectical theology, positive theology, or more commonly, neo-orthodoxy, was considered for a time the man who would rescue Protestant theology from over a century of liberal dissolution. Barth repeated Kierkegaard's challenge to hear and obey the authoritative Word of God, but he did not rebuild the foundations undermined by decades of theological criticism. Consequently, his influence faded; where it remains strong, it is usually among evangelicals who have kept the foundations and who appreciate Barth's call to doctrinal orthodoxy.

It was precisely to Switzerland that Francis Schaeffer came, not to challenge Karl Barth, but initially to bring a Protestant and Reformed witness in the Roman Catholic canton of Valais. Expelled from that canton because of the opposition of the Catholic clergy, he found a refuge in the neighboring Protestant canton of Vaud. The little village of Huémoz-sur-Ollon became the center of a movement that restored the academic viability of historic Protestant orthodoxy among those who wanted to believe in it but who were perplexed and intimidated by the commit-

ted skepticism of most of the intellectual world. Schaeffer was convinced that Barth's emphasis on hearing the Word without the support of a comprehensive world and life view in which it makes sense to hear, believe, and obey it (like that of Kierkegaard before him) was a blind alley for Christianity. Thus for several decades much of his emphasis was placed on showing the inadequacy of Barthian attempts to revitalize the church without rebuilding the foundations and putting everything into the context of a Christian world and life view. If he had only succeeded in breaking the charge of the liberal Protestant theologians who were reducing Christian orthodoxy to fables, his work would have been significant. But there was more, much more.

Is it fair to speak of Schaeffer as one who fanned a spark struck by Kierkegaard into life? Was he not the opposite of the man of the "leap of faith"? Many will remember his denunciations of Kierkegaard and his charge that that leap was a "leap into the dark." Despite his hostility to Kierkegaard and his view of Kierkegaard's influence as he saw it, Schaeffer had one very important thing in common with him: a firm commitment to faith in Christ. On first encountering the man and his work, before it had made an impact on the North American scene, the present writer predicted another potential commonality, writing to friends that the influence of "Dr. Schaeffer" (as he was always called) would be like Kierkegaard's: living in relative obscurity and not much read during his lifetime, Kierkegaard's significance really began to be appreciated more than half a century after his death. It seemed plausible that Francis Schaeffer's work, limited to a self-selected group of miscellaneous students and other

wanderers, would take decades to have a significant impact on the general Christian culture, even after beginning to take on written form in *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who Is There* (both 1968).

This prediction proved wrong, for Dr. Schaeffer and his work came to be widely known in North America soon after the publication of those early books. The impact of his writings and lectures on the small number of self-selected visitors to L'Abri was solidified by his remarkable gift for personal encounters. Students and others who talked with him personally quickly discerned that he was not merely lecturing to them but understood them and was prepared to deal with them individually, not merely with philosophical or other objections they might put forward. A small but influential group of future scholars and religious leaders learned from Schaeffer that Christian truth need not be hidden from public gaze, but can and should be prepared to be "shot at," to use his expression. If it could be justly said of C. S. Lewis that he made morality respectable, Schaeffer made orthodoxy respectable. In a day when too many Protestants were willing to sacrifice doctrinal commitments lest they be called fundamentalists, Schaeffer was ready to accept and embrace that word in its original sense of being committed to the fundamentals of biblical revelation and faith. Later, towards the end of his career, he came to prefer the word evangelical, which was in great danger of becoming devoid of content as evangelicalism became increasingly socially acceptable.

His work, particularly through personal contact, had already begun to have a significant impact when the two film series produced by his son Frank burst into the American evangelical and student

world: *How Should We Then Live?* (ten episodes), followed by *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (five episodes). In its totality, Schaeffer's work includes his lectures, his books, and his spiritual and theological guidance at L'Abri and elsewhere, but it was the film series that brought him to the attention of a truly broad public, including Christians who before him would never look at a work on philosophy or social criticism. For many individuals, Schaeffer pointed the way to faith in Christ and a redirected life; it was his film cycles that awakened large numbers of Americans, often whole congregations, to understand our rotting culture and to see the need to make active efforts to stop the rot. He inspired thousands with the moral courage to confess their faith openly and to be "willing to get shot at," and perhaps for the first time since the Enlightenment, he caused them to recognize that the gospel is more than just the plan of salvation: it is set in the context of a radically distinct world and life view.

### Conclusion

Each of these three thinkers, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Schaeffer, stood at the beginning of a new world view or *Weltanschauung*, a distinctive way of looking at the world and at life. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for different reasons, reacted against Christianity, or rather against what Christendom had become. Schaeffer reacted too, but more than either he pointed to a new beginning for the thoughtful worshiper of Christ, a recovery and new departure for what he liked to call "biblical Christianity," or "historic Protestantism."

Without having sought to found a philosophical movement, much less a

school, Søren Kierkegaard gave the first impulse to the spiritual and intellectual movement that was to dominate the middle decades of the twentieth century, existentialism. Although he himself was deeply Christian (albeit of a perplexing sort, as Schaeffer saw it), most representatives of existentialism after him, unlike the Dane himself, were atheists. With the more widely celebrated existentialists mentioned above, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Kierkegaard had in common a quest for authenticity, but with the significant difference already mentioned. Unlike them, the authenticity he sought was Christian authenticity; what they sought could better be called authenticity in the abstract. In contrast to the reigning German philosophical idealism, which thought of God largely in pantheistic terms, an impersonal force coming to consciousness in the history of the world, Kierkegaard saw God as omnipotent, omniscient, and intensely personal. Such a God confronts every individual with a challenge like that he gave to Abraham: "Take thy son, thy only son, and offer him to me." For the great minds of the nineteenth century, the idealists Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and their predecessor Kant, such a command is irrational, unworthy of God as they conceive of him. For the materialists, Nietzsche, Darwin, and Marx, it is totally meaningless to talk about such a command, as no God at all exists to give it. For Kierkegaard, God's commands must be heeded and obeyed, but he did not endeavor to place them in a comprehensive structure of Christian truth. Francis Schaeffer did this, and it is to him that many of us owe our conviction not only that the Word of God is true, but that it makes sense, and that the real world in which we are born and live,

work, love, suffer and ultimately die, makes sense as God's world, created, fallen, and ultimately to be made new, and we with it.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Houseman's nostalgic verse is emotionally moving, and many readers will resonate with lines such as these:

"With rue my heart is laden  
For golden friends I had,  
For many a rose-lipp'd maiden,  
For many a lightfoot lad."

I remember young Harvard oarsmen in the spring of 1958 reciting Houseman's "Ode to an Athlete Dying Young" as they prepared for the Eastern championships (which, incidentally, they won).

<sup>2</sup>A proverb of the time observed that "The British rule the sea, the French the land, and the Germans the clouds." It would have been better for the world if the Germans had confined their intellectual ambitions to the clouds, rather than engaging in two world wars, but they did not, and in the twenty-first century we live in a world struggling to deal with the heritage of death and destruction from the twentieth.

<sup>3</sup>*Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

<sup>4</sup>A century later, Francis Schaeffer would reject the leap of faith in favor of a "step of faith." In private conversation towards the end of his life, Dr. Schaeffer agreed with this writer that Kierkegaard does not exhort his readers to leap into an unknown abyss, but to "step out" expectantly. In so doing one can dis-

cover, as Karl Heim (1874-1958) would later assert, that in the realm of persons, faith is not a substitute for knowledge but rather a means to knowledge, and as the God of Scripture is personal, this step is necessary if we are to know him (Heb 11:6).

<sup>5</sup>According to oral reports of individuals who knew them personally, both Camus and Sartre were turning towards God at the end of their lives. Sartre's quest was supposedly hindered by his mistress, Simone de Beauvoir, who feared that if he abandoned his atheism, the market value of his works would plummet. Allegedly Camus had actually been converted and was preparing to be baptized when he was killed in a motorcycle accident.

<sup>6</sup>Stefan George, *Poems*, trans. Carol North Valhope and Ernst Morwitz (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943) 191, slightly amended by this writer.