

SERVANT OF ALL

The blood-and-guts philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche can't be blamed for the Holocaust just because Hitler admired his work. Nor you can blame the Beatles just because Charles Manson was inspired by their music. Still, it's not hard to see why Hitler was drawn to Nietzsche's ideas. For Nietzsche, life is a struggle in which the strong dominate the weak. There is no overriding moral order, only the conflicting moralities of masters and slaves.

According to Nietzsche, the masters are beyond conventional notions of good and evil. They make their own rules in accordance with their natural will to power. Slaves value the Christian virtues of kindness, humility and submissiveness to authority. These qualities aid their survival in their powerless condition. Nietzsche regarded Christianity as a double-edged sword that aided the strong in subjugating the weak. But it could also limit their dominance.

Jockeying for position has proven to be as prevalent in the church realm as in any other. Go back to the very beginning. In the Gospel of Mark, two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, asked that they be allowed to sit at places of honor on his right and his left. When the rest of the disciples heard about this, they were indignant. Jesus decided to use this incident as a teaching moment. He called them all together and said, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."

The early church was organized along egalitarian lines. All property was held in common. For centuries, Christians were a persecuted minority, so there was little attraction for the high and the mighty. Then the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the established religion of the Roman Empire. The church was retooled according to the Roman imperial model. Now priests began parading about in aristocratic finery. By the Middle Ages, the church had accumulated enormous wealth. Its vast land holdings were the envy of secular monarchs.

Jesus would hardly know what to make of a church hierarchy that is now referred to as "princes of the church." They are called that because church higher-ups historically occupied a place in society equivalent to the nobility. Their ranks were often drawn from the same aristocratic families as their secular counterparts. So much for not lording it over people the way the Gentiles did!

Joseph Stalin once dismissed the Vatican's influence by sneering, "The Pope? How divisions has he got?" In fact, the church over the centuries has been able to call upon much more than moral force to fight its battles. Popes during the Middle Ages launched a series of crusades to reclaim the Holy Land from the Turks. Initially successful, these military campaigns eventually ended in defeat. However, a precedent had been set. There were later forays against the Moors in Spain, against pagan people in the Baltics, against Mongols and various heretical Christian sects. The Reformation opened the door to prolonged religious strife between Protestants and Catholics, notably the Thirty Years War in the early 17th century.

When I was a child attending services at a 1950s suburban Episcopal parish, some of the hymns we sang still reflected a sense that religion was warfare by other means. Halfway through the morning prayer service each Sunday, the children trooped off to Sunday school as the congregation sang "Onward Christian Soldiers." The hymn fit right in with the temper of the Cold War. Our nation was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against godless communism. A disturbing number of my contemporaries who marched off to the War in Vietnam came back in body bags. When the Episcopal hymnal was revised in 1982, "Onward Christian Soldiers" was left out.

So, was Nietzsche right about Christianity? Yes and no. Certainly there is been nothing servile about the princes of the church. They have generally conducted themselves in a manner befitting their elevated rank. Yet when it comes to masters and slaves, there is little doubt where Jesus' sympathies lay. When his disciples began jockeying for position, he told them they should not lord it over one another like the Gentiles but become like slaves.

If by this Jesus meant his disciples should knuckle under to authority, he did not always practice what he preached. Take his confrontation with the money changers at the temple in Jerusalem. He overturned their tables and drove them away with a whip. He did not defer to anyone, least of all the devil, who promised Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if only he would fall down and worship him. Jesus told him to get lost.

What was the source of Jesus' power? Was it any different from that of the ancient pharaohs who were regarded as gods or the kings who ruled by divine right? There was one critical difference. As St. Paul expressed it, Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

This was the power that Jesus promised to his disciples before Pentecost, the power to become children of God. Once possessed of this power, you understand, as the Quakers do, that there is no need to bow down to anyone. But even more important, based on Jesus' example, you understand that no one need bow down to you.

It's important to listen carefully to what Jesus actually said to his disciples when he told them not to jockey for position. He didn't tell them to become like slaves because slavery was good for the soul. He told them if they wanted to be first they must become like slaves. This was Jesus' little secret. If you want to gain mastery over life, you must learn to become its servant in every situation. He said this knowing it was the one thing the devil and his minions were absolutely unprepared to do. And so the kingdom of God will forever be denied them.

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