



## Ethics after God

Pete Lowman

### **NOW THERE'S NO GOD, IS IT SURPRISING... that we don't know how to live?**

'Maybe there's a God, maybe not. It doesn't matter too much.' We hear it so often from friends and colleagues.

But meanwhile, around us, things are falling apart. They, and we, wonder why. Maybe that God-question is far more vital than it seemed...

In the last two issues we've looked at the huge crises people in our society face - the struggle for identity and self-worth, the loss of purpose and hope. We've seen how, having lost sight of the Creator God who loves us, we've become forced into a destructive battle to create our own self-worth, and found ourselves abandoned to anxiety, fear and directionlessness. And we saw that these cultural trends aren't 'inevitable' or 'inexplicable'. They're often linked, directly and logically, to our loss of God. It matters!

And as we watch the news, we see other pressure-points emerging...

### **Ethics after God**

The British 'crisis of morality' is no longer a topic just for thoughtful vicars and balding schoolmasters. A Gallup survey reported that 'most citizens believe concern for others and public-spiritedness has declined in the last decade' - and, as concrete evidence, showed the high number unwilling to report assault or shoplifting if it was by a friend or relative. The same day's papers revealed the department of trade and industry's 'dirty-tricks' handbook, used

to teach Britain's entrepreneurs how to lie effectively when abroad. What's happening? Do we know what is right and wrong any more?

In a culture more closely based on the Bible, it was possible to know what was right or wrong, what God had ordained. Then we lost God. What followed? Generally, the dominant approach in the liberal education system became that 'right' is what is best for people in general, or at least for the greatest possible proportion of them. You do what is good for society (or 'for your country', as an earlier generation might have put it); and that is 'right'.

Noble enough. But it was always vulnerable to the challenge raised last century at the philosophical level by Nietzsche, then more drastically by Hitler: Why should I play the game? Suppose I base what I choose to do, not on the needs of 'people in general', but on my personal or tribal urges and desires? Why not? More recent anti-Christian writers like Richard Dawkins, celebrating the ultimacy of the evolutionary 'selfish gene', surely play right into the hands of such attitudes. For if the final reality is the evolutionary struggle; and if that struggle is basically about the survival of the fittest, and the strong surviving at the expense of the weak; how far does that leave us with any real moral case against the threat of fascism, as our century closes? Was that not the argument of Nazism: that the Jews were a degenerate people, therefore their destruction by a stronger race was in tune with the course of nature? Why then was Hitler wrong?

Why, in the end, should we care about 'everybody else'? And it isn't merely a fascist question. Some of the forces busy behind the dismantling of the welfare state (on the political right), or the characteristic contemporary tendencies to fight exclusively for one's own 'special interest' group (gay extremists, extreme feminists, extreme racial or ethnic radicals), demonstrate the same collapse of the old liberalism, that based its 'right and wrong' on assumptions about the priority of the shared needs of 'society'. Why, today, should we expect people to 'put others first'?

Or the problem may come home to us in a different way. Twenty years ago we had riots in many British cities. Newspaper accounts described children looting shops and parents

coming with prams to take the loot away (as also, more recently, in Los Angeles). The scene of rioters destroying their own community neighbourhoods demonstrated (among other important factors) the bankruptcy of our ethics. To have said to such a parent, 'This is not good for society', would have been to talk drivel. (Rapper Ice Cube: 'Ask not what you can do for your country, ask what the f\*\*\* it's ever done for you.') God is dead: why, logically, should we expect altruism to survive?

Some marxists would respond that the only workable ethic is a class ethic: what is right for my class is right for me. (What we need, to quote Dennis Skinner MP on one occasion, is people in parliament who 'will fight for our class and to hell with the national interest'.) But a key weakness of marxism was the same as in liberalism: why 'should' I care about my class' needs any longer than they coincide with my own? (It's doubtful whether a socialist revolution ever occurred in a country without a strong religious ethos: idealistic socialism depends on people seeing the point of putting their neighbour's interests above their own, and that doesn't seem to happen without such a background.) In the '80s the trade union movement was decisively defeated by Margaret Thatcher. The Times had an interesting explanation: class solidarity and mutual support no longer functioned, because of 'changes in society at large... My problem is not your problem unless it impinges on you as well.' God is dead, yes - but the ethics of communal solidarity have died too.

But in that case, all that is left as a basis for ethics is the family: what is right for my family is what I should do. One suspects this is the functioning ethics of many British people at present. One of England's top cricketers, challenged about his visit to South Africa in the days when the country was still under a UN boycott, replied, 'I don't know much about apartheid... I did what was best for my family and therefore for me.' An extreme example was a man shown on television who made a living by kidnapping children in divorce cases: when the court gave the child to the mother, he would kidnap it for the father. The interviewer suggested this was an unpleasant way to make a living; he replied, 'My family have to eat.' What is good for my family is right; what is bad for my family is wrong. And it does seem that

that is a sufficient basis for many people's lives. The only problem is that the family is in crisis too; in Britain, at least one marriage in three ends in divorce.

But with the collapse of that last shelter, we may be losing our last basis for ethics and morals. What then is left? A drastic collapse of confidence in the legal system, that is proving so paralysing in America, is one obvious consequence. If we have no other basis, we're left with the law of the evolutionary jungle: the survival and indulgence of the strong at the expense of the weak. What should we expect, logically, in such a society? The physically weaker in our society might perhaps include women and children. Logically then we should expect the rape rate, and the child abuse rate, to grow. And so they do. The lasting wreckage in so many lives is catastrophic; what it is not is arbitrarily incomprehensible. We chose for the darkening ethical jungle a long time ago.

'Maybe there's a God, maybe not. It doesn't matter too much.' But it does matter, enormously. We need to ask God for openings to help our friends and colleagues see that, logically, our loss of God explains a great deal, and is costing us everything.

Hardest of all is that it may even cost us our love-relationships - the things we turn to when everything else is gone.

*A greatly expanded and documented version of this article is now available on **bethinking.org** as Chapter 3 of Pete Lowman's book *A Long Way East of Eden*.*

The other articles in this four part series are:

- Part 1 'Identity After God' can be found here
- Part 2 'God or No God - Purpose after God - What does it matter?' can be found here
- Part 4 'Love after God' can be found here

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