A Long Way East of Eden 2: Purpose & Desire After God

Pete Lowman

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Purpose & Desire After God
'Are we not wandering through an infinite nothing?'

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What are we living 'for'? Where are we wanting to go, what is there worth doing? *'Are we not wandering through an infinite nothing?'*

It's Nietzsche's 'post-death-of-God' question; and it recurs in various forms throughout our contemporary culture. It's embodied for example in the alien Wowbagger journeying through the 'infinite nothing' in Douglas Adams' outlandish and hilarious *Life, the Universe and Everything*:

Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged... was a man with a purpose. Not a very good purpose, as he would have been the first to admit, but it was at least a purpose and it did at least keep him on the move. Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged was – indeed, is – one of the Universe's very small number of immortal beings. He had had his immortality thrust upon him by an unfortunate accident with an irrational particle accelerator, a liquid lunch and a pair of rubber bands...

To begin with it was fun. But things began to pall for him... This was the point at which he conceived his purpose, the thing which would drive him on, and which, as far as he could see, would drive him on for ever. It was this. He would insult the Universe. That is, he would insult everybody in it. Individually, personally, and (this was the thing he really decided to grit his teeth over) in alphabetical order.

Wandering through the emptiness, finding a purpose for the life I've got to spend. What is worth doing? Similar questions echo through Generation X novelists like Douglas Coupland and movies like *Slackers*. What is to be done? Can we do no better than divide our lives between McJobs that are meaningless, and relationships that reach the summit of desire one April and bitter disillusionment the next? What has gone wrong with us? Why is there so little left to dream for?

In any place, any century, anyone has to handle frustration. Yet now a deeper logic seems to underlie our sense of pointlessness; our feeling that so little is really worth doing.

French existentialist Camus, writing as an atheist, summed up the problem in *The Rebel*: *'Up till now, man derived his coherence from his Creator. But from the moment that he consecrates his rupture with him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment, to the passing days, and to wasted sensibility'*. Camus' point is simple. Earlier in our culture's journey, we could feel deep confidence in a purpose that was in the truest sense a 'given': a God-created design for life that was knowable and worthwhile. Now, things are different, and pointless. *'A single sentence will suffice for modern man'*, Camus added in *The Fall*: *'He fornicated and read the papers. After that vigorous definition, the subject will be, if I may say so, exhausted'.*

'From the time that he consecrates his rupture with his Creator, he finds himself delivered over to wasted sensibility'. Again we're facing a theme crucial to the turbulent Reformation, with its rediscovery of the Bible. In the biblical worldview, we as human beings (no matter how infinitely prolonged) needn't struggle to construct our own purpose, wandering through a God abandoned void. Rather, each of us can know what the Reformers termed a God given 'calling'. The Latin for 'called' is *vocatus*; it's from the idea of God's specific 'call' that we get the term 'vocation', to describe any substantial sense of direction in our

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working lives. To Reformation thinkers, a job wasn't just a job: you were 'called' to it by God.[1] Purposeful direction in life was the birthright of anyone within sound of the 'calling' of God. (A Californian expression of the same theme, popularized by the missionary organization Agape, runs: *'The first spiritual law is: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'*. The expression may sound crude, but the sentiments are historic enough.)

But things have changed. Now that design cannot be accessed; those 'callings' are vanished, inaudible. What results might we expect to follow?

This chapter explores that question. We'll see some of the powerful ways it's been raised in literature and music; also, some of the ways it's been answered. Then, we'll look at some of the alternatives that could replace God for us as 'sources of transcendence' and desire; and we'll consider what 'life-strategies' may become common if these solutions in turn prove unsatisfactory. Finally, we'll glance at the practical challenges all this is bringing to our lives.

The Songs Of The Wanderer

Once again, it was the artists and musicians who saw the problem coming. The sense of loss is a mark of the arts of modernity.

'Droll thing life is', says the narrator of Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, *'that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late'*. *'Man's a useless passion'*, wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. Elsewhere he added, by way of diagnosis, *'A finite point has no meaning without an infinite reference point'*: if we have nothing eternal to measure our journeyings by, it becomes hard to perceive whether we are actually doing any meaningful travelling at all. In *The Sirens of Titan*, absurdist SF novelist Kurt Vonnegut offers the notion that the whole of human history has been masterminded to enable a stranded alien to get a spare part for his spacecraft; after that he can be on his way, and leave us (like Adams' Wowbagger) to our wanderings in the void.

Vonnegut and Adams are humorists and present Absurdity as comedy: the tragic Absurd can be found in (for example) Ionesco's brilliant play *The Chairs*. The old couple who are its central characters are cardboard cutouts, scarcely human beings.[2] They are approaching the close of their lives, and the play's action concerns the arrival of an orator who will pronounce to the world their message, their whole lives' work. The orator arrives and the old couple jump into the sea. But the orator is incapable of anything but -inarticulate grunts; and what he writes on the blackboard is jumbled rubbish.

If there is no meaningful shape to life, what stories have we left to tell? In France, this question has surfaced in a loss of faith in the whole notion of 'plot' – the idea that events can be depicted as a meaningful process that actually leads somewhere. In *Nausea*, Sartre makes his narrator Roquentin abandon his life's work on a historical biography for precisely this reason. However, later writers have accused Sartre of inconsistency: his own novels (*Nausea* for example) really do have plots; something meaningful does happen, even if it is only the gradual discovery of meaninglessness. More consistent might be a *nouveau roman* writer like Robbe Grillet [3], whose fictions resolutely refuse to tell any discernible story. In the film *Last Year in Marienbad*, for example, for which Robbe-Grillet wrote the screenplay, it is impossible to know what is really going on. Or we might turn again to Beckett in *The Unnamable*: *'I invented it all'*, the narrator says of his story, *'in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway. All lies'*. *'Nothing to be done'*, says Estragon in the opening words of *Waiting for Godot*; and, when the play ends, little or nothing has been.[4]

In the postmodern decades, that sense of 'plotlessness' has moved out into wider society. The ancient God-beliefs presented life as having a meaningful shape; with that gone, the value of almost anything we do becomes problematic. In an unexpectedly bleak finale to one of the Agatha Christie movies, the detective, having solved the murder, is leaving town. En route he encounters a Scottish policeman who has consistently hindered his investigations. *'You are right'*, he tells him. *'It wasn't worth it'*. That doubt creeps into the thriller

too from John Le Carre onwards. *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* closes with the killing of the girl who is the only lasting source of meaning in agent Leamas' life. In the chilling final sentence, Leamas' dying mind flashes back to an autobahn accident, a car full of laughing children crushed by blind and heedless forces: *'As he fell, Leamas saw a small car smashed between great lorries, and the children waving cheerfully through the window'*. (The fatal loss of the lover in the story's closing moments is a powerful image in contemporary TV thrillers, conveying forcefully the ironic pointlessness of the whole activity.)

At the end of Bob Geldof's autobiography, Geldof tells the story of the magnificent Live Aid concerts that raised enormous sums for famine relief and were watched by more people than any other event in history. When it was all over, as everything was being cleared away, a kid shouted up, *'Hey! You! Is that it?' 'I wonder'*, wrote Geldof. *Is That It?* was the title of his autobiography.

In the absence of any end point, anywhere to journey towards, the journey itself becomes the only purpose remaining. *'To travel hopefully is better than to arrive'*, wrote Robert Louis Stevenson. Early last century, *The Journey, not the Arrival, Matters* was Leonard Woolf's version.[5] The pilgrim-figure that embodied the ancient Christian image of life is replaced by the wanderer, the tourist, the sightseer. As far as any real point to the journey goes, you ain't goin' nowhere.

Desire And Modernity

Modern bureaucracy has its ways of turning the knife in the wound, of making our emptiness evident to us. Futility attaches to so much of our experience of employment. We have a job enabling us to work for money for food, to have energy to go back to work, to earn money for yet more food to go on working..... For as long, downsizing and unemployment permitting, as we are a useful tool for someone else; then, after traversing that circle a few thousand times, what remains of us goes into a box, and the box into the ground. If we believed in a God, then we could believe in a purpose that made this activity 'vocational'. But if there is no such purpose, then the main function of work (for many of us) becomes securing a salary;[6] worthwhile activity we must seek elsewhere.

Other changes in society focus increased urgency on that search: the changes in retirement where many people finish their careers and still have energy requiring a meaningful outlet; the increase (for some) in leisure time; but also widespread unemployment. All these pose the question: If and when my life is not given direction by someone else's assignment of tasks, what is worth doing with it?

'You ain't goin' nowhere'. Unfortunately, of course, we are; to the six-foot wooden box, if nowhere else; and most of us dream of doing at least something worthwhile on the way. (*'They give birth astride of a grave'*, says Pozzo in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; *'the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more'*. *'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth'*, adds Vladimir. *'Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps'*.) But 'worthwhile' implies some clear notion of 'worth', something that transcends its alternatives; something that is in its very nature worth doing. What can be transcendent in this way, what is there that deserves our desire? *'What to apply my strength to'*, says Dostoevski's Stavrogin, *'that's what I've never seen and don't see now'.*

An inability to answer these questions of meaning can put heavy strains on our emotional integration. Therapist Victor Frankl insisted that the *'psychological health of individuals (and by extension, groups and even nations) depends on the degree to which they are able to discover the pattern of meaning ... of their experience'*.[7] Jung was making much the same point when he reported that *'Among all my patients in the second half of life – that is to say, over thirty five – there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life'*.[8] But where are such a pattern and direction to be found? What is it that is truly 'worth doing', worth living for? In which quarter should we seek the transcendent?

Surprisingly few authors have attempted a serious response to this question. One who did try to map the contemporary answers is Colin Wilson, whose fascinating bestseller *The Outsider* came out in 1956. (Reading Wilson, one becomes sharply aware of the difference between his anguished

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modernity, hunting for answers, and our ironically cool postmodernity, *'incredulous towards metanarratives'*, simply giving up on the big questions.) Surveying different areas of art and thought, Wilson attempted to summarize their approaches to the problem *'What should we do with our lives?'*[9], and so define what gives life the sense of 'authenticity', of true 'freedom'. The result is a classic presentation of modernity's responses to the question.

Wilson points to music, dance and aesthetic experience, in Sartre, Hesse, Nijinsky, Van Gogh. Then, he examines sexual desire and experience (Barbusse); moments that make possible *'intensity of will'*, that offer *'a course of action that gives expression to that ... part of himself that is not content with the trivial and unheroic'*, for example in situations of danger, betrayal, or death (Sartre again, writing about the wartime resistance movement: *'Freedom is terror'*); courage, expressed in war, hunting, or deep sea fishing (Hemingway – to the point of *'Nobody ever lived their life all the way up except bullfighters'*); and, indeed, sheer commitment for its own sake (Hemingway again: *'the feeling of unreality disappears as soon as he plunges into the fighting'*).

In his subsequent 1978 preface, Wilson comments on his earlier explorations. First, he draws a comparison between his own quest for authenticity and the notion of Desire in the Christian writer C.S. Lewis. 'Desire', or 'Joy', is a key theme in much of Lewis' work.[10] For him, it is a joyous yearning embodied in our responses to (for example) birdsong, far horizons, love, mythology, erotic or magical or aesthetic desire, and above all memory. But fundamental to Desire is the fact that it is never finally satisfied in any of these expressions; it points always to some further fulfilment, lying beyond. This dilemma leaves us with three alternatives, says Lewis:[11] to attempt to 'have again' the experience where we had it before, thereby discovering the anticlimax that 'joy' slowly vanishes with repetition; or, growing trapped in cynicism, to deny the possibility of fulfilment, and debunk the whole experience in psychological or biochemical terms; or finally, to follow the *'dialectic of Desire'*, through its partial embodiments, to its only ultimate and total fulfilment in God himself. For Lewis, the unattainability at any earlier stage is precisely the point.

Wilson's self comparison to Lewis is not surprising, given his earlier definition of the issue as *'the fundamental religious idea of how to "live more abundantly"'*[12] – alluding to Christ's *'I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly'*. Wilson, like Lewis, has a sense of 'unattainability', that nothing human beings encounter in this world can ultimately prove capable of *'fully satisfying [their] desires'*. But Wilson, unlike Lewis, cannot see desire as pointing towards a transcendent that has real embodiment. And so we find a deeply depressing remark in the 1978 preface where Wilson suggests that the whole quest for authenticity, freedom, 'abundant life', was fundamentally only an expression of sexual desire, which itself faces anticlimax in the moment of consummation.

A comparable sense of the unattainable dominates others among modernity's best writers: the sense of futile longing for something that will be an adequate embodiment of what we have dreamed. One of the great expressions is Scott Fitzgerald's simple but brilliant novel *The Great Gatsby*. Its central figure is a man with *'something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life ... an extraordinary gift of hope, a romantic readiness'*, whose dreams do almost come true. He has 'made it', he has a marvellous house where he throws all kinds of glittering parties, and above all he meets again the girl of his fantasies whom he had lost years earlier, and seems about to win her back. But there is no reality anywhere that is adequate to the grandeur of his dreams. Ultimately they all turn out illusions, a *'rock ... founded securely on a fairy's wing'*; Gatsby cannot escape from a *'foul dust'* that *'floated in the wake of his dreams'*, eventually destroying them all.

At the close, with Gatsby shot dead and his girl, Daisy, disappeared back into an unsatisfying marriage, Fitzgerald broadens his panorama. The narrator compares the *'green light'* that Gatsby saw on Daisy's dock to the *'fresh, green breast of the new world'* that greeted the first sailors coming to America and encountering *'the last and greatest of all human dreams'*. The missed fulfilment of the whole western vision is present, as well as Gatsby's personal tragedy, in the book's moving final sentences:

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I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him... Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further.... And one fine morning –
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.[13]

The dreams don't come true. *Gatsby* is arguably the archetypal novel of the American 1920s, the first decade of modernity in the USA; and so it poses starkly the issue of purpose and desire in a world bereft of God.[14]

Restating the Christian option

Wilson's citation of C.S. Lewis leads us to an interesting question: Have we lost our way partly because of the contradictions of what was done by many Christians during the Reformation?

Lewis' vision of Desire is forever, by its very nature, 'on the move'. Desire always points away to a different order, longing for things to be *'on earth as it is in heaven'*. By its nature, such a life-stance must be dynamic; it cannot be static. Indeed, because God's glory is infinite, heaven itself must be a further exploration, not a static conclusion. The vision of the otherworld climaxing the last of Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles* embodies that dynamic in the clarion-call of Farsight, *'Farther up and farther in!'*[15] (It is a note repeated in much recent Christian spirituality: Graham Kendrick's songs, for example – *'We are marching, in the great procession / Ever further and deeper into the heart of God'*.)

Now it's hard to avoid a sense of something much more static in the ethos that often came to dominate the Reformation.[16] What hymn, after all, better expressed the Reformation ethos than Luther's *'A Mighty Fortress'*? We must be cautious here: first, because this highly influential image is primarily about God, not the church; second, because any complex vision has to be expressed by blending different images; third, because within the tradition that resulted there was scope for all kinds of highly purposive radicals.[17] But one cannot help sensing, in the retreat into a static *'mighty fortress'*,[18] a different concern from Lewis' ever-ongoing, purposive, adventurous Desire.

And perhaps a major problem with the Reformation was that, in the end, its reassessment of medieval religion was often seriously incomplete? Many of its dominant figures could as little resist the heady attraction of power on earth as had medieval Catholicism. The result, right across Europe, was the rise of the 'state church'. The notion of the 'pilgrim church', radical, dynamic, on the move because not really at home here, marked the Anabaptist 'left wing of the Reformation'; but across Europe their activities tended to be suppressed by force. (Wherein surfaces another fatal contradiction: in using the state's forces to suppress, by violence, those they disagreed with, some of the 'static' Reformation churches[19] were extraordinarily at variance with Christ's words about encountering evil and loving your enemies (Matthew 5:38-48). Disastrously so: the Europe-wide turn away from Christian faith that followed in the 'Enlightenment' was in good measure a nauseated reaction to decades of wars between religious armies.) Inevitably, the connection with political power led to the church embodying the dull, static conservatism and alliance with the *status quo* for which it has become stereotyped. What such a stereotype offered was a call to quiescence, rather than to prophetic, pilgrim radicalism shot through with a sense of specific purpose. Even the crucial concept of 'calling' became a tool for conservatism (and dullness), if understood only through a static vision of church and society: *'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate / God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate'*.[20]

Strange, when one considers that much of the self-image shaping the new testament church was thoroughly dynamic. We don't find much there about fortresses. Rather, the notion of a journeying 'pilgrim church' comes straight out of Hebrews 11:13 (and 1 Peter 2:11 in the classic King James translation). The one New Testament book that depicts the history of the church – Acts – is set in the shape of a journey, in which Jesus' gospel is carried from Jerusalem, across the eastern Mediterranean, and finally to Rome. That

in turn reflects the last words of Jesus, sending his followers out to be *'my witnesses ... in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'*; or Matthew's simple summary of Jesus' last six weeks of teaching: *'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; therefore, go!'* (Matthew 28:19). (And when the journey had taken in all the *'ends of the earth'*, said Jesus, the end of history would come (Matthew 24:14); ultimately its goal is heaven, the *'city that is to come'*.[21])

Two observations are in order. First, within the Christian tradition, the sense of purpose and direction seems clearest where that 'dynamic' summons to outgoing mission is felt most decisively and personally. Second, as a matter of historical fact, the Reformation synthesis was surprisingly weak in producing this sense of mission. Something was absent. There were numerous famous exceptions, of course, but in general the great 'journey' or 'outburst' of the Christian church that turned it into the largely two-thirds-world organism it is today began only in the nineteenth century, under the influence of rather different kinds of spirituality.

Considering that much of Lewis' theology was far from Anabaptist, it is striking that his art often embodies such a non-traditional, pilgrim spirituality. Most of his fictions are stories either of journeys, or of characters who subvert the *status quo* they find themselves in, or both.[22] (The paradox is even more evident in Lewis' friend and fellow-believer Tolkien; his theology was even less Anabaptist, but what gripped his imagination, in fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings*, was that salvation lies always in the quest into the open country;[23] not, for example, in the *'mighty fortress'* of Minas Tirith.[24]) And this non-traditional spirituality was in fact the archetypal one: the authentic image of Christian life, one that gives the impulse of purpose to the imagination, is always journeying – going somewhere with God, with a destiny, always in motion.

It has to be so. In the nature of things – and this is why the whole notion of a comfortable alliance between state and church is problematic – Christ's community is not meant to fit in this world. (*'Here we have no continuing city'*, says Hebrews 13:14, *'we are looking for the city that is to come'*.) To the biblical worldview, the world as a whole was condemned to purposelessness by the first humans' assertion of independence from God that we call the Fall. The results were meaninglessness, futility, entropy. Ecclesiastes 1 presents them in the passage made famous by Hemingway: *'The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to his place where he arose; all the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun'*. If this sounds like the fatalistic vision of eastern religion, in bondage to cycles of meaninglessness where all action is futile,[25] that's because it is. *'Subjected to frustration ... in bondage to decay'* is how Paul describes the natural, alienated order of things (Romans 8:20-21).

But now there are two competing systems in our universe: the natural, deterministic system of entropic purposelessness ('going nowhere') that is our natural habitat, and God's alternative system or 'kingdom' that is breaking into it since Jesus. The blind Cornish poet Jack Clemo defines the Christian proclamation in these terms: *'Your fate is unspeakably tragic,* but you need not fulfil it. *Surrender the self that would fulfil that fate and the fate itself collapses. You become a new creature with a new destiny'*.[26] Where entropy multiplies decay and disorder, bringing nothing out of something, the new alternative of grace multiplies creativity, bringing something out of nothing (*'God's jazz breaking into the mournful music of the spheres'*, Clemo calls it). Peter told his readers that they had been *'born again'* through something within them that was beyond all corruption, the *'living and enduring word of God ... All men are like grass; the grass withers and the flowers fall'* (entropy), *'but the word of the Lord stands forever'* (1 Peter 1:23-25).[27]

It is in these terms that we see Jesus as the classic model of divine purposiveness. Unlike, say, the narratives of David or Solomon,[28] the whole shape of Jesus' life is a journey. Luke calls it an *'exodus'*, paralleling the archetypal journey of the Old Testament (9:31): with Jesus marching first through the opposition of the contemporary system to Jerusalem, then on via the cross and resurrection into the otherworld.[29] And where he went, the new 'kingdom' went too:

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me' (Jesus announced) *'because he has anointed me to preach good*

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news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19).

And, his Old Testament original adds attractively, *'to bind up the broken-hearted, to comfort all who mourn, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes … a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair'*.[30] These are the works of the new 'kingdom'; and these are what he did. The Gospels narrate a triumphant, messianic advance, healing the sick, driving out forces of occult evil, helping his followers discover their life-direction, dealing with guilt, introducing truth, transforming legalism and dead religion, enabling forgiveness, raising the dead – *'proclaiming'*, says Mark, *'the good news of God'*, that his purposive *'kingdom'* was right there to hand.

If in his life Jesus embodied – in the phrase Colin Wilson alludes to – *'life in all its fullness'*, then his death becomes even more crucial. It dealt with the sin-barrier between humanity and God, reopening the way for the transforming power of grace, enabling us to be *'born again'* into the alternative order of the presence of God. That power, or presence, now re-enters our universe; and surrendering the autonomy that led to emptiness reconnects our destiny with both. Jesus pictured God's Spirit as life-giving *'rivers of living water'* flowing out now from each person who genuinely believed (John 6:38).

That image – channelling life-giving water into a desert world – underlies the whole Christian life-stance of 'dynamic' purpose and desire. A spirituality based on passion first to *'love the Lord with all your heart, mind and strength'*, plus an equal passion to *'love your neighbour as yourself'*, will never lack for something worth doing. Clemo is relevant again for his exuberant assertion of the 'personal covenant'. Each individual, he insists, is being
trained for a specific place in God's redemptive strategy. This is the next step beyond surrender. God takes the former rebel into his confidence and allots to him some stretch of existential territory where he can practise the divine presence.[31]

In other words, for everyone there is some unique sector of the 'kingdom's' frontier across which (s)he can desire, pray, and carry the presence of the 'kingdom' – creatively finding a way to add to the 'love', 'truth', 'respect', 'joy', present in that situation. (The fact that it is hard to write that sentence without inverted commas underlines the seriousness of our cynical situation. Yet can we imagine any place worldwide where no scope could exist for such creativity?) *'In everything'*, says Paul, *'God works together for good with those who love him'*.[32] Because God is loving, there is at every point some creative purpose forward, if we choose to partner with it.

Paul insists that in the Jesus-community, each member is indispensable.[33] There can be no such thing as redundancy. The twin aspects of spirituality, the worshipper and the activist, extend to infinity together. There can be no end, ever, to our discovering and responding to the depths of God and his self-revelation (*'ever further and deeper'*); nor to our being reshaped, as gateways through which the powers of heaven break more fully into this world. So too there can be no end, ever, to people or situations where we can show respect, truth, or affection; and no completing the task of bearing Jesus-style love, gentleness and justice wherever it may be needed in a world like ours. By definition, genuine love is always reaching out, always open to expression, always purposive, always 'on the road'. To our last gasp there will be someone nearby worthy of affection, and truths and realities worth sharing.

It would be a huge (if common) mistake to see such a lifestyle primarily as 'sacrifice'. One finds that the everyday reality of this 'mission' lifestyle – whether for a businesswoman, a missionary or a housewife – is that its practitioners seldom wish any other destiny. Empirically, there is tremendous dynamism in the sense of shared purpose, and, purely and simply, a great deal of fun. Indeed, people living by this vision carry as many scars as anybody else: the impulses of 'needing to be needed' may be present still, the seductions of holy conceit, the possibilities of corruption by money, status or power. Yet it is striking to anyone in contact with communities inspired by such a lifestyle how unreal, or at least unusual, the Elmer Gantry caricatures seem. Rather, it has struck me how often agnostics who

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are close friends with people active in mission will remark wistfully, *'They're lucky to have a purpose like that'*. Somehow, mistaken or not, it feels authentically human.

But if that is the credit-side of their life-stance, the tension in it is a very simple one. In postmodernity, we simply don't believe it's true; nobody believes all that any more. All the sacrifice, all the passion, is motivated by statements about Jesus that are, ultimately, lies. It is on that basis that the issue of purpose has to be faced.

Bertrand Russell, one of Britain's key twentieth century philosophers, phrased his loss of hope like this (in *Why I Am Not A Christian*): *'That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labour of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system... all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built'*. (To our postmodern ears he sounds oddly like a liberal bishop having a rough time at a high-school assembly.)

Alternative Transcendence

'Get a life', snarled *Star Trek*'s William Shatner (Captain Kirk) at an embarrassed group of Trekkie fans in a famous *Saturday Night Live* interview. But how and where? What kind of 'life' has value, in a way that mastering the nerdy details of *Star Trek* does not? What (switching to St Paul) is the *'life that is truly life'*?[34]

What, post-God, are our options? (What kind of person am I?) One is to try to find something genuinely transcendent, something inherently of value: for example, in the arts, romance, or a religious alternative that omits God. Or, we may finally assume that no genuine transcendent exists. In this case there are at least two possibilities: to overlook the issue, making the game of life as comfortable as possible while ignoring its ultimate meaninglessness; or to take the deliberate, 'tough-minded' alternative, giving ourselves consciously to our material drives.

In Gatsby's world, the most promising embodiment of the transcendent is romantic – Daisy Buchanan. In our post religious culture, the search for fulfilment, for something truly worth desiring and living for, tends often to embody itself in romantic terms (and the advertising and music industries recognize that well). Yet contemporary discussions of romance – *Cosmo*, *New Woman* – seem haunted by the sheer difficulty of maintaining fulfilling relationships. *'The cult of intimacy conceals a growing despair of finding it'*, argues Christopher Lasch,[35] adding, *'Personal relations crumble under the emotional weight with which they are burdened'*. This whole issue of the viability of romance – and the extent to which God's disappearance affects it – deserves a chapter (chapter 5 below) to itself.

What other routes to transcendence seem prominent? What else is there (or is the phrase outmoded now?) to 'live for'? Matthew Arnold suggested, as the loss of God grew evident last century, that poetry could take the place of religion. (American poet Wallace Stevens: *'After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence which takes its place as life's redemption'*.) For many of us, artistic experience offers a gateway into something of major, inherent value. The programme of the first Edinburgh Festival expressed the hope that visitors *'will find in all the performances a sense of peace and inspiration with which to refresh their souls and reaffirm their belief in things other than material'*. Music, in particular, whether classical or rock often performs this function. One of Anita Brookner's characters finds in music *'a world of feeling which she recognised as superior to anything she had ever known in life'*. *'Some people pray, some people play music'*, said rock'n'roller Chuck Berry; *'Rock'n'roll was my religion for a long time'*, was Pete Townshend's version. *'I used to go to Sunday school. But the only thing I believe in now is music'* was Jimi Hendrix's; *'I used to be a devout Catholic. Now I'm a devout musician'* was Sting's.[36]

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In one field after another, the last years of the twentieth century heard many voices (by no means mostly reactionary) debating whether entire art-forms had died. Year after year the Turner Prize triggered discussion about the perceived irrelevance of modern painting. *'The line "the day the music died" echoes now through concert halls and opera houses'*, wrote Geoffrey Wheatcroft in *Prospect*; *'Has [classical] music anywhere to go, or is it the end of an old song?'* Writers from Philip Larkin to Eric Hobsbawm bewailed the inability of contemporary jazz to match its past, while in rock *New Musical Express* triggered a major debate by declaring the *'great rock'n'roll dwindle'*. V.S. Naipaul, perhaps least plausibly, announced the death of the novel; in cinema, the respected critic David Thomson argued that the day of the great directors was past, indeed that we now face 'the death of film'.

For me, an especially striking example was Simon Callow's explicit comparison of the declining arts to declining faith, since Callow is a major figure in Britain's theatre and cinema scene. *'"We must maintain the arts," cry all civilized commentators'*, he wrote.[37] *'But these cries have the forlorn quality of the Lambeth [Anglican bishops'] Conference's resolution to return to traditional morality; the empty pews no doubt glow with self-righteousness, but the rest of the world goes merrily on its wicked way'*. In his lifetime, he added, he had lived through *'the streamlining and glamorisation of the museums and galleries; the death or retirement of the generation of great musicians whose concerts were almost religious events and their replacement with non-threatening chaps with flawless techniques and wonderful cheekbones; the steady journey down-market of radio; the gradual abandonment of serious television arts coverage. It has, on the whole, been a gloomy journey … Time is running out, faster than any of us know'.*

'Forlorn quality'? The *'day the music died'*? The *'end of an old song'*? Yet few of these voices can be dismissed as *'diehard conservatives'* …

But there is a problem, and again it has to do with the loss of God. First, if there is no God it becomes increasingly difficult to know what we mean when we say great art is 'spiritual' or 'transcendent', in a way that (say) great cookery is not. Secondly, the whole area of aesthetic experience is currently in disarray. The question is whether the loss of God doesn't radically affect our whole sense of 'great art'. For the notion of 'great art' doesn't make sense automatically; and consciously post Christian theory has become sceptical of the very idea. In particular, the radical postmodernists deny any 'canon' of supreme artistic masterpieces, insisting there is no timeless 'artistic' quality that is present in Shakespeare and not in, say, a TV soap. Andy Warhol's famous presentation of an exact copy of a Brillo carton as a work of art raised the same issues. Many of the more recent controversies over 'art' (Damien Hirst's dead cows, Carl Andre's bricks at the Tate Gallery, Helen Chadwick's cast of her urinations in the snow, Jeff Koons' giant rabbit; or, at the most extreme, junk artist Piero Monzoni who filled ninety cans with human excrement and sold them as art) have likewise had to do with the impossibility of defining what 'art' or 'beauty' are.[38]

'It was only in the nineteenth century that we became aware of the full dignity of art. We began to "take it seriously" ... But the result seems to have been a dislocation of the aesthetic life in which little is left for us but high-minded works which fewer and fewer people want to read or hear or see, and "popular" works of which those who make them and those who enjoy them are half ashamed ... By valuing too highly a real, but subordinate good, we have come near to losing that good itself'. This is C.S. Lewis;[39] was he right?

But the question goes deeper. Of course we have no definitive list that determines, for all time and all people, what are the 'greatest works of art'. To that extent the postmodernists are right. But the question is whether we are deluded, and talking nonsense, in affirming the objective reality of something outstanding in those few masterpieces whose glory we personally have been able to catch. If there were a God who created things and (as Genesis puts it) *'saw that they were good'*, then it would be meaningful to describe some things we humans create as likewise objectively 'good' or 'beautiful', in ways that other things are not. But God is dead. Then perhaps the statement that a Tolstoy novel or Bruckner symphony is 'good', in some profound way that a raunchy airport paperback or bubblegum single is not, conveys only a subjective preference. Perhaps it

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says more about the biases of our brain chemistry, and our personal background, than about the artwork itself. But somehow, in that process, the aesthetic experience is devalued. We no longer reach beyond ourselves, we no longer touch something of absolute value. So be it, the postmodernists would insist. But then in this area too, experience of the transcendent slips beyond our reach.[40]

I'm standing in a St Petersburg church. It's an October Sunday. I'm feeling massively uplifted as the gospel choir swings into worship with enormous gusto and commitment. And the thought comes: In the Christian system, anything beautiful or truthful is worth expressing yourself strongly about. But for a truly atheistic postmodernist, how many things are intrinsically worthy of praise or indeed of strong feeling? What is worth saying? As a result, postmodernist artistic expression usually tends to be flavoured by the artificial, the casual, the cool, the ironic. But what, ultimately, does that do for art?

Yet the thirst for the transcendent will not be denied. We see the growth of religion-substitutes and 'alternative spiritualities' – certainly in the US, Germany or Scandinavia, and to a significant extent in Britain. 'New Age' attitudes tend often to be monistic, seeing all reality as one, and all reality as God. Consequently, they might seem to offer a route to the transcendent in the everyday. Whether they can deliver or not, they certainly offer a *terminology* of transcendence, enabling aficionados to think of themselves as 'getting into another reality' through, say, jogging, or even American football. (*'You can get into another order of reality when you're playing, a reality that doesn't fit into grids and coordinates that most people lay across life'*, said ex San Francisco 49ers quarterback John Brodie.[41]) Indeed, we might define 'New Age' as a collection of miscellaneous enthusiasms that have to do, one way or another, with finding transcendence: whether in Celtic or Native American mysticisms, holistic psychotherapy, Eastern meditation, *feng shui*, past-life therapy or outer space. In its sheer ecumenism, its ability to take on board all manner of resonant sources without worrying how they link together logically, 'New Age' might be well placed to challenge for the position Christianity used to hold, underpinning the sense of transcendence in Western culture.

The issue between the two might appear to be one of truth. Was Christ really who he claimed to be, and did he rise from the dead, guaranteeing his presence as the personal source of transcendence now? Or have, say, the paraphernalia of 'New Age' crystals a more trustworthy claim? With the more coherent 'alternative spiritualities', this issue can be faced. All too often, however, the truth-question doesn't seem to matter; the bizarre fantasies of a Shirley MacLaine can take centre-stage despite their blatant improbabilities; and there are all too many other examples. That kind of inauthenticity seems a merely touristic spirituality,[42] and can hardly be expected to be meaningful as a long-term source of transcendence. It now appears that the cultural high-water mark of 'New Age' may have passed, leaving behind (among other things) a monument to the way our hunger can turn into gullibility. (At the end of 1994, a major feature in Germany's *Der Spiegel* declared that the *'idea of a "New Age" has sunk out of sight'*, giving way to an 'Instant-Mystik' immediately attainable in a two-hour session or five weekend workshops. *'The new "Age of Light" is marked by "lightness" in the sense of Coca-Cola Light'*, it concluded caustically.) But the story is not over yet.

The urge towards the transcendent may also be expressed in the desire for direct encounter with the 'other', with what is 'beyond'. Is this a reason for the attractiveness of vast numbers of cults and fringe religions in our apparently secularized society? The Kevin Costner movie *Field of Dreams* presented a character receiving instructions through supernatural voices and visions, prophetic utterances from his infant daughter, and so on (*'If you build it, he will come'*). He remarks at one point, *'When the primal forces of nature tell you to do something, the thing is not to quibble about it'*.[43] There is a sense of both relief and fulfilment if, at last, the 'beyond' speaks clearly. (The problem the film never faces is that the voice might be a deception.) The more comfortable arrangement is when the 'beyond' offers some direction to our lives at minimal expense in terms of disturbance or commitment. This seems to occur with many people loosely involved in 'New Age'; it may be the (optimistic?) hope of the dabbler in the occult; it is certainly true of the average horoscope-reader, from Nancy Reagan downwards. ('Of course' we don't

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believe it, but the illusion of significance is the vital anodyne.) In a different mode, the fascination with *The X-Files*, or Stephen King's novels, or the accounts of alien abduction, witness to a desire, yet fear, of encounter with the beyond. It is not much to live on, but it is what we can find to hand.

Playing the game in postmodernity

The sense of dissatisfaction hangs over our era. *'I don't know what I want, but there's got to be more'*, to quote Bob Geldof in his punk phase.

There is in humankind a space in the shape of God, said Pascal three centuries ago. A Christian analysis of our culture might argue that, having lost God as the goal of our desire, we continually seek to fill that space with other things. We turn these things into idols, then find they aren't adequate, and that forcing them into such a role destroys what they might have been. (*'We may give our human loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God'*, writes Lewis in *The Four Loves*. *'Then they become gods: then they become demons. Then they will destroy us, and also destroy themselves'*.[44]) But now this realization is being read the opposite way: in the end, there is nothing of ultimate, transcendent value to be found. The approaches we reviewed in the previous section might be described as classically 'modernist': the influential philosopher G.E. Moore suggested early last century that aesthetic pleasure and relationships were the two things genuinely worth living for. But now we have taken the 'postmodern turn'; the whole tendency in recent years has been towards the steady erosion of all structures of value or transcendence.

So be it, then. Think of it this way: You do not have to have a 'point to life' to go on living. Mid-century modernism tried to identify things that were ultimately worthwhile, even if there were no God. Now we know that things are worthwhile only insofar as we give them value ourselves. All is DIY; nothing is, in itself, worth doing, but life goes on.

And you don't have to know what's worth doing to go on living. It can help, mind. We all know the feeling of mundane, 'stupid' activities sucking away our disposable time (Parkinson's law: any task can expand to fill all the time available, unless there is something more significant that intervenes); leaving us with a vague feeling of rebellion, of never quite spending our time in ways we would have wanted. To solve that problem, however, we need to know what is 'significant', what it is we really value.

Guessing at our future is perilous, but nonetheless tempting. Now that we're 'beyond' both Christianity and its 'modern' alternatives, how will these issues be expressed? What might we logically predict to become the most widespread ways to respond?

A common solution, we might expect, would be to opt consciously out of the whole question; for our culture simply to stop thinking in terms of 'meaningful living'; to forget Wilson's question *'What shall we do with our lives?'* We might likewise predict a change in attitudes towards drug legalization, since from a basically pointless universe it makes sense to escape to Prozac or Ecstasy or their successors.[45] And there are other narcotics besides chemical ones. Media offer us a nonstop narcotic too (*'Rent a little happiness from Granada TV Rentals'*), filling our attention with alternative worlds where worthwhile things are happening, even if not to us; in which life is fundamentally happy and fulfilling (Australian soaps such as *Neighbours*)[46], or where there is the excitement of vicarious danger, of crimes to be solved and evils overcome by proxy; the illusion of meaningful activity. A further narcotic would be simple busyness: the more or less deliberate choice to work enough or party hard enough to forget the pointlessness awaiting us at the centre.

Meanwhile, out in the 'public' world, 'cool' would conclusively displace 'joy' as the keynote of our self-presentation: there's nothing left to get excited about, and to do so would be inexcusably gauche and naive. (*'How I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm'*, says Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*. *'Just enthusiasm – that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I'm alive! ... Oh brother, it's such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything'*.[47]) Indeed, one senses that it is becoming hard even to use the word 'joy' in the contemporary situation. Is the concept dying along with God? When do we see it used outside the contexts either of faith or eroticism (*The Joy of Sex*)? 'Happiness' and

'pleasure' we can contemplate; but maybe 'joy' is slipping out beyond our reach?

A second trend we could predict might be the spread of 'games' that have no intrinsic value, but can give some shape to life: mastering the artificial complexities of bridge, chess, or fantasy role-play, or the cutting-edge intricacies of computer technology. They may represent a narrowing world, but they can be taken incredibly seriously if they are all we have. (The German novelist Hesse predicted this option last century in *The Glass Bead Game*.) Art, too, may function in this way – no longer as a glimpse of universal transcendence, but as a bigger, if ultimately pointless, game to keep meaninglessness at bay. British painter Francis Bacon put it clearly:

Man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. I think that even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities, which man now, you could say, has had cancelled out for him. Man now can only attempt to beguile himself for a time... You see, painting has become – all art has become – a game by which man distracts himself. And you may say that it always has been like that, but now it's entirely a game.[48]

The humanness in this 'game' approach lies in the skill, the mastery, no matter the narrowness of the arena. The tension lies ultimately in its sense of nerdiness (and if objective transcendence has disappeared from the arts, nerdiness is as much an issue for the denizen of the Tate Gallery as for the train-spotter on Waterloo Station); of living the sad life of the anorak. Yet the anorak might be right. Does 'maturity' really mean learning to be free from all such disproportionate attachments? Or is such a 'maturity', by definition, an equally sad loss of all enthusiasms and purpose, a loss of romance? But then again we face Lewis' question: is the whole meaning of 'game' slowly undermined by the pressures that ensue when what began as play has to carry a central role in life – when it is elevated to the place of an idol?[49]

A third possible trend: with the loss of purposiveness and the disappearance of transcendence, should we expect to see increasing numbers of people living simply and consciously by the basic biological drives? First among these might be the 'nest making' drive towards security, the happy family in their DIY house. Ever since Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, the goal of an island of private relationship amid surrounding anarchy has been a commonplace of both art and popular culture. What challenges this objective may face after the death of God is a question we shall turn to in chapter five. Again, there may be a slow fuse of disappointment smouldering under so narrowed a world: a number of films in recent years have asked how far this kind of 'getting by' amounts to dehumanization. *Educating Rita* is one, *Shirley Valentine* – with its fantasy of throwing everything aside, having an affair, making a fresh start – is another.

But should we also expect in the next few years to see a much more overt acceptance of basing life on the simple motivations of money, sex and power? (This is explicit in many of the high-selling, Grammy-winning hits of hip-hop; rap sex-symbol Lil' Kim summarized what she believed in as *'money, power and respect'*.) Would that be crudity, the reduction to the 'animal option', or will it increasingly be presented as tough-minded realism? A feature of the last decade is the increasing tendency to define worthwhile experience purely in terms of brain chemistry – witness the emphasis on adrenalin rushes and 'endorphin buzzes' in the discourse of activities like aerobics and snowboarding. If 'joy' has vanished from our vocabulary, maybe the most we can hope for is stimulus for our physical drives;[50] if we no longer know what *is* good, let's at least ensure we *feel* good. Fabricate the feeling... (In such a culture the therapist reigns.) But after all, we can view the last century of western intellectual development as resolving all our activity down to the basic drives. J.P. Stern, for example, presents the three key 'modern masters' as Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, and argues that each *'directed his thinking toward a single leading idea... which was to unlock the secret of all that men do... These leading ideas are: motivation through material interest'* (Marx); *'sexual motivation'* (Freud); *'the will to power'* (Nietzsche).[51] A third 'unsentimental' trend, then, might be simply to 'face reality' in what we live for: *'Get rich, get famous and get laid'* (Bob Geldof again in his punk-rock days), because

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that's all there is.

It may be – hard though we might find it to say so to our kids. Each of these needs some sublimation, some ornamentation. Few people can consciously live solely for the amassing of money, but it comes more easily if we express the materialistic drive in general terms: *'He who dies with the most toys wins'* seemed quite acceptable as a slogan of the late '80s. The power-drive, again, is more acceptable if combined with an ostensible quest for rightful recognition and status. And the hunt for sexual fulfilment (rather than love) raises few eyebrows in its own right (*'And you kiss the dames, but you don't ask their names; that's living alright' – Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*). *'You only go around once in life'*, said a Schlitz beer ad, *'so you've got to grab for all the gusto you can get'*.[52]

The issue might be how far disillusionment is inevitable when money, power or sex cease to be means towards some broader goal or relationship, and become an end. Do they then leave us feeling empty, needing ever more stimulus? (Why do we often feel dissatisfied at the end of a shopping spree? Why can cocktail sex feel so meaningless?) Diminishing returns, decreasing pleasure; Lewis would say that the 'idol' is being transformed to the point of destruction. One thinks of gay icon Robert Mapplethorpe, who proclaimed that sex was *'the only thing worth living for'*, but ended up having to seek his stimuli in bizarre extremes. (*'So Mapplethorpe liked to photograph naked black men eating his faeces? OK'*, wrote the *Independent*'s art critic ironically). If there is no higher goal, then at a purely logical level all there can be to aim at next is more money,[53] more shopping, more sex, more power. And yet that solution seems to betray its own emptiness;[54] with boredom, even anger, the results?

(It might have drastic implications in a society that continues to lose its ethical basis. As we'll see, a recurrent feature of postmodernity is pleasure through power.[55] Already Brazil's notorious 'corridor balls' take Europe's consciously-organized football violence one logical step forward, where Rio's underclass youth (girls as well as boys) go to fight in organized teams. The 'balls' attract thousands; the evenings start with high-energy funk and a dance style explicitly simulating sex (in the *Danca do Sexo* girls are paid to have sex with several men during a lengthy track, while other dancers mime their moves); then the DJ gives the signal for 'Mortal Kombat', where the aim is to drag members of the opposite side across the 'corridor' into your own territory and beat them, often to unconsciousness. Police believe such events may have seen dozens of deaths, besides other participants (female and male) paralyzed or blinded; but Rio's yuppie clubbers have been driving downtown in force to experience what they call a *'taste of reality'*.[56] Alternatively, 'more sex' plus 'more power' lead easily to the sado-masochism that fascinates so many in Britain's media, arts and fashion; and in a culture where elements on the political right are already wanting to ensure that criminals are 'made to hurt', it's not impossible to foresee a scenario where elements disliked by the government actually become fodder for these drives. Let's not imagine that the equivalent of Roman gladiator circuses are inconceivable in our society – given, say, forty years' extrapolation of current trends. You only have to be in the home Shed of a London football club, hearing the savage chant of *'Let him die, Let him die'* at an injured player on the visiting team, to know the old bloodlust is alive and well.)

One of the most famous songs of US west-coast rock is the Eagles' 'Hotel California'. This is Eagles founder-member Bernie Leadon:

Ultimately [the Eagles' songs] *offered no answer... In the end we do want the things we can't get. Are we ever going to be satisfied? The ultimate answer must be no. In 'Hotel California' they ended up saying we're stuck, we can't get out. We're victims of our own appetites. We're on a treadmill where we just try to satisfy our physical desires or our emotional needs and so we need more sex, more money and more food. Then we need more exciting sex and better tasting food. I've heard people say, 'Give me more of everything and then I'll be satisfied.' But ultimately you're not.*[57]

Pressure points

All this comes to a head in our culture in five key pressure areas, where the non-existence of a

divinely given purpose makes a major difference to our life-experience.

First, there is the issue of hope. With good reason, *Panorama* described the '90s as the decade of fear: anxiety over possible joblessness; insecurities generated by the ubiquitous post-Thatcherite culture of audit and evaluation, by the struggle to retain your place through the 'bottom line' proving you a successful performer; anxiety and fear of AIDS, date rape, joblessness, street violence. (*'Wherever you are, there's always a danger of a maniac in the shrubs'*, John Peel remarked.) And there are the broader fears: of ecological breakdown, anthrax-wielding terrorists, genetically-modified food, vaccine-resistant superbugs; the uncontrollable erupting on us in a world emptied of God's control. *'The only thing we can know with certainty is uncertainty'*, says management guru Charles Handy. In a paper on '90s Europe, Nigel Lee recalled the widespread '60s fear of the Bomb, and suggested there was a difference in our more recent concerns. At least the Bomb was under human control till the moment when it was fired, he said: *'Now, however, we are facing... a "greenhouse effect" resulting from ozone destruction that will turn some of the planet's best food producing areas back into dustbowls, the destruction of tropical rain forests that will seriously deplete the world's oxygen supply, and the melting of polar ice caps producing a water level that threatens to overwhelm some countries like Bangladesh. And there is no one to blame or to whom we can complain. We are locked into a destructive process'.*[58] Pressure for ecological responsibility is imperative, but we know that irreversible harm may already have been done: and there could be yet other areas where fatal damage will occur before we even notice. And our collective consciousness can no longer fall back on a caring, divinely guaranteed purpose which will ensure it will ultimately turn out right. *'Fear'*, concluded Lee, *'is coming back'.*[59]

A second pressure-point might be silence. Our generation, an American friend commented recently, longs for silence, but has no idea what to do with it. To Christian faith, silence, the *'still point of the turning world'*[60], can be the presence of God, the possibility of meaning. I will not forget Koichi Ohtawa of Japan, coordinator of the IFES-linked Christian student movements in east Asia, challenging his hearers at a retreat in the Malaysian mountains to step out into silence and listen for the ongoing direction of their lives: *'What is the* meaning *of today? What has been the meaning of this month? What has been the meaning of this year?'* But if no such purposes exist, silence can be painfully empty – whether at New Year's Eve or mid-afternoon without an MP3.

'Silence has become a very fearful thing', writes Henri Nouwen. *'For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up'*. For Nouwen as a Christian, however, *'Out of eternal silence God spoke the Word, and through this Word created and recreated the world… The Word of God does not break the silence of God, but rather unfolds the immeasurable richness of that silence… Silence is the home of the word. Silence gives strength and fruitfulness to the word…'*[61]

But thirdly: what does the non-existence of God mean for our experience of loss and suffering? If sunburn melanoma becomes an epidemic among our children, for example; or if we ourselves are diagnosed with cancer or multiple sclerosis? The Christian worldview held that *'in everything God works together for good with those who love him'*.[62] That isn't to be mistaken for the blithe conservatism of deism, which held that God had designed the universe perfectly before retiring, so that now *'Whatever is, is right'*. Rather, in the biblical picture, our repeated insistence on autonomy has turned our planet into a 'fallen', drastically broken world, full of futility and evil. But into this brokenness, as we have seen, erupts God's loving, creative purpose, always offering to bring something out of nothing, light out of darkness. It is up to us, says Paul, whether we opt into that new order: it is *'those who love him'* who find God *'working together for good'* with them in everything.[63]

This is not an easy creed. The biblical books of Job and Habakkuk deliberately show us faith being tested to the very edge of destruction. The words *'The just shall live by faith'*, so central to Christianity,[64] first crop up in Habakkuk as God's challenge to his prophet to stay faithful at a time of apparently unrelieved agony. Indeed, at the centre of Christian faith is a Man hanging on a

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cross shouting, *'My God, my God,* why*?'*[65] But what such faith represents – if we have opted into the new 'kingdom' – is a trust that somehow, in whatever situation, God desires to 'work together' with us to bring something permanently meaningful out of black anguish. It is striking how often the New Testament writers – who knew brutal persecution very well – set 'suffering' and 'glory' immediately together, as if they were guaranteed to be two sides of the same coin.[66]

But all this is gibberish if there is no God.[67] What happens then to the experience of suffering? *'Pain is bad, so why should we suffer in heroic silence?'*, Sean French titled an article in the youth section of the *Guardian*. *'When we describe people* [who are suffering] *in ennobling terms we believe that we are paying them a tribute, but in reality we are making things easier for ourselves. Bravery is the language of choice, and by describing victims in these terms we somehow convince ourselves that the suffering has a purpose'*. And as it does not, he argued, we should choose to avoid the language of *'brave hostages or the brave families of hostages'*, *'heroic survivors... noble victims'*. The only *'appropriate reaction'* to such suffering is *'rage'*. Yet even rage is pointless unless we are crying out against the betrayal of an underlying order; if the universe is indeed impersonal, rage is a petulant demand for an order we know is lacking. There is a striking moment in the Australian movie *The Man from Snowy River*, where the central character's father is killed by a runaway stallion. He lifts his face to the sky and the camera pans upwards as he screams out, *'NO!'* But if there is no God, the scream is wasted breath; there is no one to see your pain, no one there to notice your agony.

Without God, do we have any language for suffering? New York psychology professor Paul Vitz notes the inability of 'human-potential' therapies to speak to this area. In the absence of any notion of divine purpose, the keynote of humanistic therapy has been militant affirmation of the self's unlimited potential;[68] and, Vitz comments, the *'selfist position sounds optimistic and plausible particularly when advocated during materially prosperous times. But... millions who enthusiastically endorsed optimistic selfism in the prime of life are now beginning to experience the ancient lessons of physical decline, of loss, sickness and death – lessons that puncture all superficial optimism about the continued happy growth of the wonderful self... What does one tell a chronically overambitious man who learns at age forty that further advancement is over and that he has a serious, possibly fatal, illness?... What does one say to the older worker who has lost his job, whose skills are not wanted? What does one tell the woman who is desperately alone inside an aging body and with a history of failed relationships? Does one advise such people to become more autonomous and independent? Does one say, "Go actualize yourself in creative activity"? For people in those circumstances, such advice is not just irrelevant, it is an insult'*.[69] Meanwhile, postmodernism has been so shy of profundity that it has little vocabulary to handle the seriousness of suffering (gay responses to the AIDS epidemic being the most obvious exception). In an earlier period, suffering could be viewed as tragic, but tragedy demands a framework against which things might have been otherwise. Amid the meaninglessness of atheistic postmodernity, suffering is just *'stupid'*, to quote Douglas Adams' Random Dent; stupid, but little more.

A fourth pressure point, if there is no external, divinely-given purpose available to us, is the area of aging and maturity. In our society it is poor manners to publicly remind someone of their age; extra years are something to be concealed, pretended about. (*'She has been thirty five ever since she arrived at the age of forty'*, says Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell of an acquaintance, *'which was many years ago now'*. Cary Grant received from a fact-checker the cabled query *'How old Cary Grant?'*, and returned the immortal reply *'Old Cary Grant fine how you?'*) We are so used to this habit of denial (*'I'm in middle youth'*) that we forget how culturally bound – and personally destructive – it is. How, in contrast, can the biblical writer of Proverbs see advanced years as a cause for deep thankfulness (*'Grey hair is a crown of splendour'*[70])? Has our society, with its loss of the spiritually transcendent, elevated sexual fulfilment and the 'body beautiful' to a point where aging can mean nothing but the slow loss of power to do everything that is truly worthwhile?

In a context shaped by belief in a divine purpose working itself out in our lives (*'The Lord is my Shepherd'*), extra years become something of

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which to be proud. They represent an extra degree of accumulated experience that is valuable because God given; they represent further progress in the divine moulding and sculpturing. Age is not something to be denied (*'I'm young at heart, really'*). But once we lose the God who underwrites such a process, does 'old' merely come to mean 'obsolete'?[71] Does old age become the final defeat (President de Gaulle: *'Old age is a shipwreck'*), rather than the final harvest?[72]

Sunday afternoons I visit my mother in the old folks' home. The strength has gone, and the mind has gone. Most of the time she 'talks' complete gibberish, repeating the same meaningless syllables: *'Radla radla radla radla radla'*, and so on and on all afternoon. The bad thing is when she apparently asks a question, but you've no idea what it is so cannot respond; that makes her furious. (But it's preferable to her haggard neighbour, who spends all her energy cursing.)

'Radla radla radla radla radla…' She used to be a poet, and a good one. Sometimes I think of a footballer laid up with a broken leg. Well, but he hopes to be back on the team in a year's time. But she? There's no God. She'll never be back.

'Maturity' likewise becomes a notion under pressure, now there is no meaningful direction in our lives to lend value to the 'experience' we accumulate. In limited areas of *savoir faire*, technique, or behaviour, the value of 'experience' is still credible. Used more broadly, however, the notion becomes vulnerable, because of our lack of certainty as to what the personal growth presupposed by 'maturity' really means. (*'Maturity'*, says Kurt Vonnegut's prophet-figure Bokonon, *'is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists'*.[73]) And adulthood may simply mean the moment when one abandons the attempt to keep in touch with the cutting-edge. The contemporary teenager is more likely than any previous generation to have greater expertise than their parents in the areas they care about (computer literacy? video games? nuances of style?). Traditionally, this would be offset by the elders' accumulation of experience; but that has lost its value. Canadian youth worker Mary Dewar describes students she works with as having *'knowledge but not wisdom– they have facts but they don't have experience to know what to do with the facts'* . But 'wisdom', like 'joy', is a word that seems to be disappearing from use; it implies some lost framework offering us a basis to organize the 'facts' and experiences we acquire, and so it gets used less and less except in Christian or 'New Age' contexts. Since there was no God leading us purposefully through life, what basis have we, as time goes on, to think we are any the 'wiser' or 'maturer'?

If we can't define maturity, then we find it harder to know what it means to 'grow' into an 'adult'.[74] *'To ask the question "What is an adult?" seems to put everyone at a disadvantage'*, says psychotherapist Adam Phillips. *'I know life has gotten so boring so quickly in so many ways – and that neither of us planned for this to happen'*, reflects the narrator of Coupland's novel *Life After God*. *'I never thought that we would end up in the suburbs with lawnmowers and swing sets. I never thought that I'd be a lifer at some useless company. But then wasn't this the way of the world? The way of adulthood, of maturity, of bringing up children?'*[75] What else, with the disappearance of the loving and maturing purposes of God, is the *'way of adulthood, of maturity'*? Not surprisingly, a number of feminist writers have complained that the contemporary male is a permanent adolescent. From the male side, Robert Bly (whose *Iron John* was a key text in the start of the debate on masculinity-) agrees: *'Adults regress towards adolescence, and adolescents – seeing that – have no desire to become adults. Few are able to imagine any genuine life coming from the vertical plane – tradition, religion, devotion'*. *'Perpetual adolescence – informally attired, developmentally-arrested and blithely irresponsible – seems to be the ideal state for young to middling adults'*, wrote Oliver Bennett in the *Independent on Sunday*.

And whatever 'maturing' might come on the journey, at its end stands the final, unavoidable pressure point: death. With God gone, death often seems to have become today's pornography, the ultimate unmentionable. (One of Noel Coward's characters demands honesty about death in the face of collective evasion: *'She didn't pass on or pass over or pass out – she died'*.) *'Civilisations before ours looked death in the face'*, wrote former French President Mitterrand. *'For society and the individual they mapped a way through it. But now in this age of spiritual drought, never*

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perhaps has our relationship with death been so deficient'. The ancient 'way through' is well summarized in the title of a Christian Medical Fellowship publication, *Dying: the Greatest Adventure of my Life*;[76] T.S. Eliot expressed the same sense of death as springboard as he climaxed 'East Coker' with *'Old men ought to be explorers'*. But this sense of adventure is grounded in faith in God and in an ongoing purpose that moves us on, *'farther up and farther in'* (*'Death is going home'* – Mother Teresa). What happens now that is gone, what have we left but anger? *'Rage, rage against the dying of the light'*, wrote Dylan Thomas in one of the most famous poems of the mid-twentieth-century.[77]

It matters whether God is dead, and his purposes illusory. If they are, how should we describe what is left for us of aging and death? Anticlimax, struggle, termination, the cessation of hopes and dreams? At the end, perhaps, in our death as in our suffering, rage?

In Summary….

The loss of God inevitably made a major difference to our ability to feel a sense of meaningful 'purpose' and direction in life. So a feature of our culture is 'untargeted desire' – an unsatisfied hunger for something worthwhile or transcendent. Obvious alternative sources include the arts and romance; but these too have become problematic as a result of the 'disappearance of God'. Many 'alternative spiritualities' remain unconvincing in the longterm, while demonstrating the depth of our hunger. We surveyed some of the responses to this dilemma that may become increasingly common in the next few years – deliberate escapism, the growing importance of 'game-playing', and the conscious self-surrender to the 'brute drives' of money, sex and power. Meanwhile, serious pressure-points have resulted from our loss of the sense of God's loving purpose in areas like the meaning of adulthood, maturity, aging, suffering, death, and hope in a time of ecological crisis.

Once again, these pressures result logically from the disappearance of God from our worldview; it matters whether there is a God or not.

[Go to Chapter 3]

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References:

[1] Pre Reformation Catholic Europe had been weaker in this area; the importance of celibate monastic orders tended to make 'vocation' something for that elite only. Even today, in Catholic cultures, 'vocation' often means 'joining the priesthood'.

[2] George Steiner, in *The Death of Tragedy*, argues that tragic drama becomes impossible after the loss of all systems of belief such as Christianity, in terms of which human activity could have a tragic dignity. In general terms he has a point; as we saw in the previous chapter, human dignity becomes logically problematic after the death of God. But *The Chairs* offers us a different and powerfully tragic possibility. Watching Ionesco's characters, we become deeply aware, even by contrast, of the nobility that might have been.

[3] Raymond Brazeau summarized Robbe-Grillet's stance in these terms: We now believe that *'Man and his factual world are the results of simple chance, arbitrary occurrences which happened to form a world. There is no substructure of order, no coherence... All schematizations are falsifications, because they presuppose... the ability to interpret through language the existence of a universal reality'*. Therefore, *'No longer is the novel a box in which various elements which appear merely to be heaped together reveal a neat order before the lid goes down'*. There is no 'interrelation or unification'; ultimately the truth of what is going on 'neither matters nor exists'. The question is for how long art consistently building on the logic of postmodernity, and novels shunning any meaningful plot, can be worth reading, or whether (like tragic drama) the form dies. Brezeau comments that, as Robbe-Grillet's development continues, his novels become *'somewhat stiff and stereotyped'*, even *'ultimately sterile'*. (*An Outline of Contemporary French Literature* (Toronto, 1971), pp.40-42, 46.)

[4] *Act Without Words II* perhaps gives Beckett's presentation of life in its starkest terms: two figures clamber out of bags, perform a few trivial

actions, clamber back into their bags.

[5] Thom Gunn's famous bike-gang poem ‘On the Move' strikes the same note brilliantly; so does Bob Dylan’s ‘Like a Rolling Stone’.

[6] It was, I believe, Emil Brunner who suggested that the unique thing about the view of work derived from God centred Christian faith is it gives a motivation for work as craftsmanship (‘*Do all things to the glory of God*') that is more than purely economic. In contrast, both capitalism and Marxism tend in practice to view work largely as a means to economic and material gain.

[7] The summary of Frankl's position is Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen's, in *The Sorceror's Apprentice* (1982), p.121.

[8] Quoted in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (1973), p.330.

[9] Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (1956), p.70.

[10] Some of the clearest statements are in *Surprised by Joy*, the preface to *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and ‘The Weight of Glory' in *Screwtape Proposes A Toast*. In *Surprised By Joy* Lewis describes the inmost essence of Joy as desire, *‘an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction'.* Henri Nouwen agrees: *‘In every satisfaction, there is an awareness of its limitations... In every embrace, there is loneliness. In every friendship, distance... But this intimate experience in which every bit of life is touched by a bit of death can point us beyond the limits of our existence... Expectation brings joy to the centre of our sadness’*. (*Out of Solitude* (1974), pp.52, 60.)

[11] Cf. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1972 edition), pp.117-19. The *‘trap'* appears in the dwarves at the end of *The Last Battle* who *‘refused to be taken in'*, and the prisoners who will not come out of the pit at the start of Book Four of *The Pilgrim's Regress*. *‘But suppose infinite happiness is there, really waiting for us? Suppose one really can reach the rainbow's end? In that case it would be a pity to find out too late (a moment after death)'* (*Mere Christianity*, p.118).

[12] Wilson, p.70, citing John 10:10.

[13] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1950 edition), pp.8, 106.

[14] The only eyes watching over the *'valley of ashes'* (p.29) are the unthinking, heedless eyes of a forgotten advertisement for an oculist; the man who appeals to them as divine authority (at some length, p.166) goes off and kills Gatsby by mistake as a result. (The point is Henry Dan Piper's, in *The Great Gatsby: a Study*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman (New York, 1962), p.333.)

[15] Or cf. Lewis' Teacher in *The Great Divorce* (1946), p.66: *‘Every one of us lives only to journey further and further into the mountains'.*

[16] It should be added that at its best Reformed spirituality was, and is, something very deeply life-giving. For fine recent expressions, see for example Francis Schaeffer’s *The God Who is There* (1968) and *True Spirituality* (1979), Edith Schaeffer’s *Hidden Art* (1971), and Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs’ *Being Human* (1978).

[17] Wilberforce's Evangelical ‘Clapham Saints', for example, who campaigned tirelessly for the abolition of slavery, and many others to this day. In general these remarks do not apply so much to the state church's evangelical wing, with its stronger commitment to mission. Anglicanism is highly diverse; Lewis was, of course, an Anglican.

[18] Related, perhaps, is the image of the church (or even church-state) as ‘city', which Alister McGrath sees as *‘of central importance to Reformation spirituality'* (*Roots that Refresh: a celebration of Reformation spirituality* (1991), p.114).

[19] It should be said that, while we normally associate the Anabaptists with pacifism, parts of their movement fell into precisely the same trap of using physical violence for supposedly spiritual ends.

[20] As Calvinism's spiritual passion dwindled, much of the dynamic inherent in the concept of divine ‘calling' went into the emergence of capitalism: cf. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926).

[21] Hebrews 13:14. St Peter emphasises this *‘shape to existence'* repeatedly in his first epistle, the classic ‘pilgrim' letter.

[22] At least the first two of Lewis' science fiction trilogy, four of the *Narnia Chronicles*, and *The Pilgrim's Regress*, are journey-narratives; at least five of the *Chronicles*, and *That Hideous Strength*, have to do with characters exploding the *status quo* in which they find themselves.

[23] Time and again, powers for good in Tolkien are powers of the open road: the Rangers, the Nine Walkers, the Eldar or ‘Wandering Companies', Gandalf the ‘Grey Pilgrim', the Riders of Rohan.

[24] This is the crucial choice at the close of book two of *The Lord of the Rings* (cf. chapter 1 of my *Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled*, elsewhere on bethinking.org.) The quest into the open country is however motivated by a strong sense of calling,

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undergirded by prophecy.

[25] Cf., for example, the classic Hindu teacher Shankara: *'By ceasing to do good to one's friends or evil to one's enemies, one attains to the eternal Brahman by the yoga of meditation'*. (Quoted in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (1973), p.224.)

[26] Jack Clemo, *The Invading Gospel* (1972 edn), p.116. This exuberant, poetic, jubilant statement is one of the great out-of-print classics of contemporary spirituality, to which Clemo's own blindness and deafness give profound credibility. Clemo's powerful, earthy first novel *Wilding Graft* (1948), with its defiant insistence that the dream ultimately finds fulfilment, needs to be read alongside *Gatsby*'s moving depiction of unattainability referred to above.

[27] Where Peter embodies the kingdom in the Word, his fellow-apostle Paul expresses it in terms of the Spirit of God, looking forward to a time when the *'creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom'* already possessed invisibly by *'the children of God... who have the firstfruits of the Spirit'* (Romans 8:21-23).

[28] There is a difference here between the patterns expressed in the New Testament and the Old (at least once the 'exodus' is completed). In the Old Testament, God's 'reign' or 'kingdom' becomes embodied physically on earth, in Jerusalem, its king and its temple. So the Old Testament pattern of 'mission' is almost never to go out, Acts-style, but rather to invite the nations in to see the glory of God. The narratives of David and Solomon, climaxing in the building of the temple and the visit of the queen of Sheba, stand at the heart of this pattern. But see also, for example, Isaiah 2:1-4.

[29] Cf. David Gooding, *According to Luke* (1987).

[30] Cf. Isaiah 61:1-4.

[31] Clemo, pp.43-44. Clemo himself relates this concept of the *'personal covenant'* to Lewis' *'immortal longings'* of Desire. Blackaby and King, in their stimulating book *Experiencing God* (Nashville, 1994), speak in terms of sensing the divine invitation to become involved with God in something he is *already* doing (p.79). This is a helpful way of phrasing it, since the authentic Christian sense of calling stems not from an abstract doctrine that God has certain general concerns, but from relationship with a God who is active in specific and personal ways.

[32] Romans 8:28.

[33] Ephesians 4:16.

[34] *'In order to make minimal sense of our lives… we need an orientation to the good, which means some sense of qualitative discrimination, of the incomparably higher'*: that which we desire for our lives, and sense ourselves moving towards or away from (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity* (1989), p.47.)

[35] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), p.320.

[36] Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven* (1988 edition), pp.26, 13, 17.

[37] *Independent*, 15 August 1998.

[38] In passing, the loss, post-God, of all notions of objective value also tends to undermine the idea of artistic self-expression as a life-goal, since in the absence of other values any expression tends to become meaningless. The act of 'self-expression' cannot *in itself* have value, unless joined with some other 'good'. (For example, the inherent value of the 'beauty' of what results.) If self-expression itself is ultimate in meaning, says Taylor, then the *'modes of life which this outlook encourages tend to a kind of shallowness... Our normal understanding of self-realization presupposes that some things are important beyond the self, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs. A totally and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfilment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment'* (p.507). In practice, personal growth and self-realization probably come at times when they are not our prime goal (eg. in parenthood). But if we deify self-realization and deny (or are unable to find) the reality of any other supreme value, we render meaningless our own self-realization.

[39] C.S. Lewis, in *God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, 1970), p.280. Lasch agrees, p.218: *'The trivialization of art was already implicit in the modernist exaltation of art... The modernist aesthetic guarantees the socially marginal status of art at the same time that it opens art to the invasion of commercialized aesthetic fashion – a process that culminates, by a curious but inexorable logic, in the postmodern demand for the abolition of art and its assimilation to reality'.*

[40] The Christian would assume that, as men and women are made in God's image, they will continue to receive deep fulfilment from

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experiences of the creative gift their Creator has put within them, whatever orthodoxies dominate their thinking. But it will be interesting to watch how these intuitions are affected, long-term, by the current hostility to any expectation of the transcendent. In British arts television, for example, *Omnibus* editor Nigel Williams noted that *'There are now fewer and fewer arts programmes'*, adding, *'I and my fellow workers… must bear a fair share of the responsibility'*, because of their postmodernist *'refusal to be reverent before the canon'* and choosing instead to do *'programmes about things like the Ford Cortina'*. During this process, he says, the *'arts programmes'* began to vanish: 'Dejeuner sur l'herbe *gave way to the Ford Cortina. And after the Ford Cortina came a very large number of cookery programmes'* (*Independent on Sunday*, 10 August 1997).

[41] Quoted in James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (1988 edition), p.164.

[42] John Drane cites Carol Riddell of Findhorn expressing discomfort with the 'New Age' label (with which Findhorn has normally been identified), because of its association with *'sensation seekers… whose interest lies less in seeking spiritual transformation than in dabbling in the occult, or in practising classical capitalist entrepreneurship on the naive'*. ('Methods and Perspectives in Understanding the New Age', *Themelios*, February 1998, p.23.)

[43] Where cinema is concerned with science fiction or the fantastic, it often has to offer some kind of statement as to where transcendence is to be found. Options in recent years have included ultimate technology (*'Jim... this is* transcendence*!'*, says Spock at the climax of *Star Trek: the Motion Picture*; the 'Genesis Project' has a similar function in *Star Trek III*); the mystical (the 'Force' of Lucas' *Star Wars* series); or even quasi Christian content (*Tron* or *The Black Hole*).

[44] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1977 edition), p.13.

[45] Or a 'harder' escapism, into suicide. Almost certainly the crisis of purposelessness is one of the key factors in increased suicide rates; the rate among American 15 to 24 year olds has apparently risen by 300% over 20 years. A Samaritans survey of 16,000 British teenagers reported that 8% of boys and 17% of girls aged between 13 and 25 said they had made at least one suicide attempt, while just under half had felt there was no point in living.

[46] The combination of media and drugs as twin narcotics was forecast years ago by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*.

[47] Cf. *Generation X* author Douglas Coupland in *Life After God* (1994): *'I was wondering what was the logical end product of this recent business of my feeling less and less. Is feeling nothing the inevitable end result of* believing *in nothing?… I had been raised without religion by parents who had broken with their own pasts and moved to the West Coast – who had raised their children clean of any ideology in a cantilevered modern house overlooking the Pacific Ocean – at the end of history, or so they had wanted to believe'* (pp.177-78).

[48] Quoted in H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970), p.174.

[49] Lasch has an interesting analysis of how the *'attempt to invest sport with religious significance'* ends up giving *'rise to its opposite… ends with the demystification of sport, the assimilation of sport to show business'* (pp.218-19).

[50] Lewis missed the point here. In *Surprised By Joy*, p.136, he wrote that the essence of the experience he terms 'Joy' is that *'You desire not it but something other and outer. If by any perverse askesis or the use of any drug it could be produced from within, it would at once be seen to be of no value. For take away the object'* (that is, *the external source of 'joy'), 'and what, after all, would be left? – a whirl of images, a fluttering sensation, a momentary abstraction. And who could want that?'* The answer is: anyone or any culture that has lost confidence in the value of anything external, and has nothing left for commitment but the internal 'rush'. (But if the 'rush' is indeed the name of the game, it can be obtained in more destructive ways too: pornography and loveless eroticism, occultism, the excitements of danger or crime or football violence.)

[51] J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche* (1978), pp.14 15. Cf. also Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power* (1985).

[52] Quoted in James W.Sire, *How to Read Slowly* (1978), p.15.

[53] The 5 October 1997 *Independent on Sunday* quoted Paul Beresford, who had been researching the behaviour of Britain's wealthiest families, as concluding, *'Money can never buy happiness for the future generations. You spend your life trying to get rich and when you get there you discover it's not worth it. You are even more*

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insecure than when you were poor, you're fearful of losing it all, of being kidnapped and you worry about the effect it has on your kids'. Few children of postwar self-made millionaires managed to handle their riches successfully, he added. Geraldine Bedell wrote in the same newspaper a year earlier that the *'many studies of quality of life undertaken both in Europe and the United States all suggest that above the poverty line – say, for some 80% of the population – there is no correlation between increased income and increased happiness'.*

[54] *'I am absolutely convinced that meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain'*, declares Indian Christian writer Ravi Zacharias; *'meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure'* (*Can Man Live without God?* (1994), pp.178-79).

[55] John Alexander offers another angle on how violence fits into what Ecstasy historian Matthew Collin (*Altered State* (1998 edition), p.316) sees as the *'restless search for bliss'* underpinning rave culture. *'Where do you get intense feelings?'* asks Alexander. *'The obvious first answer is falling in love. The next answer is sex. And when sex fails, try drugs. And when drugs fail, try guns. And when guns fail, try death'* (*The Secular Squeeze* (Downers Grove, 1993), p.101.) The 'drive-by' violence of gangsta-rap culture shows how far along the process has already gone. Yet can you just step out of the 'search'?

[56] This may sound implausible, but the corridor balls have been featured in various parts of the British media, including a thoroughly-documented piece by Nicole Veash in the 5 March 2000 *Independent on Sunday* and elsewhere.

[57] Quoted in Turner, *Hungry for Heaven*, p.112.

[58] Nigel Lee, 'The Challenge: Europe in the '90s', in *Evangelicals Now*, January 1990.

[59] Of course this interplay of fear and the absence of faith may have health implications. In 1998, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* reported a Duke University (North Carolina) study of four thousand over-65s showing that the stronger an elderly person's religious beliefs, the better they handled stress and depression, *'independent of medical intervention and quality of life issues'*. Those with religious faith had 40% lower blood pressure than those who did not – significantly lowering their chances of a stroke or heart disease. Project leader Harold Koenig, himself not a Christian, saw this as resulting from the way their faith enabled them to deal with problems and stress.

[60] T.S.Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'.

[61] Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope* (1998 edition), pp.55, 57-58.

[62] Romans 8:28.

[63] For a vibrant and moving expression of all this, see again *The Invading Gospel* by the blind and deaf Cornish poet, Jack Clemo, particularly chapter 7, 'The Rout of Tragedy'. Other deeply meaningful expressions are the quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada's books, *Joni* (1976) and *A Step Further* (1980); also Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction* (1978). Clemo in particular sets out to establish an approach to suffering based around the finality of the resurrection rather than the crucifixion, and around *'exuberance'* rather than *'wistfulness'*.

[64] Hebrews 10:38, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11; Habakkuk 2:4.

[65] Jesus' words in Matthew 27:46. Cf. also the 'sealed book' of war, famine, imperialism, economic injustice, disease and religious persecution described in Revelation 5 and 6: it is something 'sealed' to all – except Christ, *'because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God'* (Revelation 5:9). Christ alone went to the utter heart of the darkness, Revelation implies, and he alone can understand all our suffering.

[66] Eg. Romans 8:17-18, 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, 16-17, 1 Peter 1:6-7, 11, 4:13-14, 5:1,10.

[67] As Paul himself was well aware. If the resurrection never happened, he says in 1 Corinthians 15, *'We are to be pitied more than all men... If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."'*

[68] Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship* (1994 edition). Vitz instances the work of Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Erich Fromm, and Abraham Maslow.

[69] Vitz, pp.139 40.

[70] Proverbs 16:31; cf 20:29.

[71] Ronald Sider cites a Colorado state governor who suggested in a public speech that terminally-ill elderly persons *'have a duty to die and get out of the way'* (*Completely Pro-Life* (1987), p.39).

[72] Compare, again, Henri Nouwen's confident affirmation: *'Aging is the turning of the wheel, the gradual fulfilment of the life cycle'* (p.185). Nouwen has an entire book titled *Aging: the Fulfilment of Life* (1974).

[73] Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), p.125.

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[74] Our culture's puzzlement at this question is a factor in the booming but confusing ‘personal growth’ industry (what is ‘personal growth’? If I’ve taken courses in yoga and Moroccan cookery, does that constitute ‘growth’?); and likewise in our inability to decide what education is ‘for'.
[75] Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (1994), p.151.
[76] A famous expression of the Christian confidence regarding death is the book David Watson wrote while dying of cancer, *Fear No Evil* (1984).
[77] Dylan Thomas, ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night'. Jack Clemo responds to Thomas directly in a poem in his 1988 Bloodaxe *Selected Poems* titled ‘I Go Gentle', where he insists that this *‘terminal rage gets us nowhere'* – it leads only to the *‘wrong grave, the dead end...'*

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