



God or No God? Purpose after God. What does it matter?

Pete Lowman

NOW THERE'S NO GOD, IS IT SURPRISING... that we don't know where we're going?

'Maybe there's a God, maybe not. It doesn't matter too much.'

So we hear. Meanwhile, all around us, things are falling apart. And we wonder why. Maybe we have an explanation: they're falling apart partly because we've lost God. In _____

And it's not the only one...

Purpose after God

The philosophers saw it coming first: the contemporary crisis of pointlessness, of directionlessness, after the loss of God. 'Up till now, man derived his coherence from his Creator', wrote the French philosopher Albert Camus. '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.' 'A single sentence will suffice for modern man', he added elsewhere: 'he fornicated and read the papers. After that vigorous definition, the subject will be, if I may say so, exhausted.'

'The passing days, the wasted sensibility': to what extent is that our contemporary experience? One of the greatest British novelists, Joseph Conrad, described our destiny bleakly in Heart of Darkness as a 'mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose'. What is worth doing? What am I living for? I have the privilege maybe of getting a qualification, getting a job,

working for money for food to have energy to go back to work again, to earn money for more food to go on working... around the circle for 50 years; then what remains goes into a box, and the box into the ground. If we believed in God, we could believe in a Father with a plan that makes our direction in life - our calling, or 'vocation' - significant. But if there is no such purpose?

Our society has sometimes recognised its reflection in Beckett's tramps in Waiting for Godot; waiting for something that never happens, living tediously from day to day, going nowhere. In another of Beckett's plays, only lasting a few minutes, the character climbs out of a bag, performs a few odd actions, climbs back into the bag. Waking and sleeping? Birth and death? That, in its pointlessness, says Beckett, is existence. 'It is meaningless that we live, and it is meaningless that we die' (Sartre). We have no story worth telling: 'I invented it all', says Beckett in his novel The Unnameable, 'in the hope that 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.'

Maybe the French put these things more directly; but it can be hard to escape the sense of, at least, sceptical disappointment, on our side of the channel too. On the other hand, we know too much for a final surrender to the simple lusts of materialism ('He who dies with the most toys wins'), or sex or power. Romance, the arts, hints of the supernatural (astrology, new age, the occult) seem possible sources of something more transcendent. Yet the sheer difficulty of fulfilling relationships haunts so many contemporary discussions of romance (for example in magazines like New Woman); in the arts, the dominance of 'post-modernism' is undermining the very idea of 'great art'; and much of new age seems, in the long run, short on authenticity and real fulfilment. So we hang on, as Pink Floyd concluded in Dark Side of the Moon, in 'quiet desperation' - perhaps via the standard opiates: non-stop dreams from the media, busyness, alcohol.

So what do we live for? Is there anything 'worth doing' - any reason for hope, for idealism and working to make things better; or are (for

example) hunger and environmental degradation part of the inevitable directionlessness of it all? Matthew Parris suggested in the Times that the reason why so many MPs have gotten into hazardous scrapes in recent years was their realisation that political life ultimately offered little that could be achieved besides personal advancement. Neil Ascherson likewise wrote in the Independent of his sense that, in contemporary society, less and less people believe enough to try to put anything right. We aim for 'cool', because nothing else is really worthwhile...

Or maybe aiming for 'cool', unimpressed, detached - but out of fear. 'It's inevitable that very grave damage is going to be done to this world', Prince Philip told Woman's Own; 'The older I get, the more cynical I get, in the sense that I just think things are going to get worse.' Panorama described our era as the 'age of fear': anxiety over possible joblessness; insecurities generated by the ubiquitous business culture of audit and evaluation, of retaining your place just so long as the 'bottom line' shows you successfully perform; anxiety and fear at unpredictable street violence; fear of contracting AIDS; fear of unavoidable environmental collapse or biological terrorism; fear of the uncontrollable erupting upon us, individually or collectively, in a universe bereft of the caring, purposeful sovereignty of God...

And what about personal hurt and suffering? What can it mean if we get cancer or MS? What does it mean to grow, visibly, old? Without God, is that just the final defeat (Charles De Gaulle: 'Old age is a shipwreck')? Is there any meaningful direction in our accumulated experiences that could lend value to terms like 'experience' and 'maturity' ('a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists', as one of Kurt Vonnegut's characters defines it); or does 'old' basically just mean 'obsolete'? And does it mean anything for us to die?

Where is it all going? At the very least, it clearly matters whether there is a God who offers somehow to lovingly shape our future; or whether we face the battles with disillusionment and fear, and the slowly-unwinding pointlessness, on our own. To the believer, the contemporary crisis of directionlessness is not something horrifyingly inexplicable. It's worth talking about, because it

results logically from a tragic mistake of belief.

But that mistake brings with it a still heavier price; in the loss of ethics after the loss of God.

*A greatly expanded and documented version of this article is now available on **bethinking.org** as Chapter 2 of Pete Lowman's book *A Long Way East of Eden*.*

The other articles in this four part series are:

Part 1 'Identity After God' can be found here

Part 3 'Ethics after God' can be found here

Part 4 'Love after God' can be found here

© 2005 Pete Lowman