



## Identity after God

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**'You believe in God; that's fine. I don't; and that's OK too.'**

**We've all heard it said. It's non-judgmental; tolerant; pluralistic. But it's also desperately superficial; and not very logical.**

If there really is a being we can call 'God', He cannot be merely unimportant. Logically, if 'God' exists, He must somehow be fundamental to our universe. To ignore Him would be like tossing out the central pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, yet still expecting it to make sense. A few pieces might, here and there; but our carelessness would mean that, as a whole, the thing failed to fit together.

To lose God, if He exists, would be to lose the coherence of life. But that fact holds a stimulating challenge for us as believers. If we really understand the meaning of our culture's loss of God, we may have a key to understanding much in society around us. That would give us plenty to talk about with friends and colleagues who aren't yet believers. It can strengthen our own faith too; as we see the gospel is not something trivial, relevant only to a few corners of life. Rather, it illuminates the deepest roots of our contemporary predicament.

*So what, logically, is the price of the loss of God?*

It's only slowly that we're seeing the longterm results of our culture's move away from a Christian worldview. Human beings are not (in God's mercy) entirely logical. For a long time after a culture has swung away from God, things that logically depend on God for meaning can continue to function for us. But, slowly, they begin to fall apart,

to fade away.

We can see the results of our loss of God emerging in many of the crucial pressure-points in our society. The contemporary crisis in identity and self-worth, for example; the crisis in purposefulness; the crisis in ethics and morality; the crisis of love.

In this article, we're going to look at the first of these.

### Identity after God

It doesn't take a philosopher to underline the pressures many aspects of our culture place on us in the area of self-worth and identity. Who am I? What is my value? Do I have any? And as Christians, we want to ask how far the loss of God underlies the problem.

After all, if we believe in God, then we have solid grounds to believe in our own value. Sometimes it's hard, but it's logical: we know we are worth so much to God, loved so enormously, that the Father sent His own Son to die for us. Not only that: we can look at ourselves in the mirror and know that, with all our follies and weaknesses, we are each, already, a unique masterpiece, from the greatest craftsman in the universe. Just as every drawing by Picasso has tremendous value because Picasso made it, so we as God's unique creations have unimaginable, intrinsic worth. Further, each child of God now has a unique gifting from the Spirit, indispensable and irreplaceable (1 Cor 12:7,21-26). Believers in God have excellent reasons to believe also in their own value.

But now we have learned that all that is myth, and we are products and guests only of a blind, arbitrary process. For millions of years it has bubbled away, and now, for a few short years, we have our spell in the sunlight. What does that say about us? French philosopher Sartre: 'All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man as an object... in no way different from the patterns... which constitute a table or a chair or a stone.' It happens that we can walk and talk, but fundamentally that does not alter what we are: chance objects of no inherent value in a chance universe. Raquel Welch put it more bluntly: 'I am just a piece of meat.' At a

more rarefied intellectual level, the currently-fashionable varieties of post-structuralist psychology (Foucault, Lacan) take matters a stage further - leaving it highly doubtful whether there is any coherent, lasting 'I' inside us to have value anyway.

Where do we get our worth from if there is no God? The question is not just a philosophical conundrum; it has come down to street-level, in a culture that has so many ways of denying our value. The job market underlines how many people there are around us who are just as skilled, as valuable, as we are; the presence of so many competitors trumpets our own lack of distinctiveness. The marriage market can have the same effect. The results of this kind of pressure can be self-hate and depression, if we blame it all on ourselves; or aggressiveness, if we turn the blame outwards. If there are so many people around just as 'good' as me, what is my value? It isn't something 'given', something intrinsic. It is something I must struggle to earn for myself - or be lost.

Thus our 'post-God' culture is marked by the pressures - and wrecks - of the battle to create our own identity and self-worth.

We may seek it in our job ('I have value because of my work'). 'I suppose I am a workaholic', actor John ('Inspector Morse') Thaw told TV Times: 'It's all about needing to work to give yourself some importance, to prove that you exist.' But that leaves us deeply vulnerable: loss of work, through retirement or unemployment, comes to mean loss of identity. And since the one is inevitable and the other a real possibility, to make our work the heart of our self-worth is to put a burden on it that it cannot sustain.

We may seek it in love: 'I have (or would have) value if somebody loves me' ('You're nobody till somebody loves you', to quote one chartbuster; or megastar Whitney Houston on her marriage - 'Women are supposed to have husbands; we validate ourselves that way.') Most people will have experienced the sense of devaluation when a love-relationship ends (or fails to come into being): maybe I have no value after all! Certainly positive relationships - like meaningful work - are important contributions to a healthy self-image. But if our identity comes to centre on the need

to feel loved, damage can follow - even when a relationship is functioning: the danger of draining our partner, putting demands on one relationship after another that destroy them. 'Show me you still love me! Prove to me I am valuable!'

What other paths does our culture offer to creating self-worth? 'I have value because I am busy, because of all I have to do': the destructive self-worth of the workaholic. 'I have value because people like me' - leading perhaps to a different kind of vulnerability and bondage. 'I have value because of my pain' - when a hurt cannot be surrendered, forgiven and outgrown because it seems, actually, the only truly meaningful thing in the person's life. 'I have value because of what I belong to' - because of the party or the regiment, because of a Metallica jacket or a Millwall scarf - even if I don't have value, yet perhaps I receive value by belonging to something that might... Bizarre degrees of loyalty are sometimes the result of that kind of thing; we see it all around us. Or again in youth culture: I have value from how I look - in the mirror are the latest Reeboks, the latest designer labels.

Former communist countries offer many examples of the self-worth of the bureaucrat: I have value because I have power! - I can be reassured about my significance because I can keep other people standing in line for hours... Yet in Britain too we may force people to create self-worth from power exercised at others' expense. Is that a key factor behind street violence? - that people from the 'underclass', to whom society is increasingly saying 'You have no value', respond by proving their significance... If your name is visible in graffiti all over the Bakerloo line - or if you have broken someone's nose - you have shown that you matter, in their life at least. (Such an assailant 'proves their "worth", that they are "somebody", by inflicting fear upon someone else', wrote Tony Blair in an article after one particularly vicious and pointless assault.)

As believers we see there are reasons why these things are so - and why they don't have to be that way. People don't have to be trapped in this wasteful battle to create their worth and identity. Because ultimately they have value; it's intrinsic, something given each of us forever by a God who loved us passionately enough to die for us. We've become trapped in a self-destructive struggle,

because we've lost that God. It really matters that God isn't dead.

But the loss of God doesn't just mean loss of self-worth. It surfaces in our contemporary loss of purpose - and our rediscovery of fear. More about that in my next article...

*A greatly expanded and documented version of this article is available on **bethinking.org** as Chapter 1 of Pete Lowman's book *A Long Way East of Eden*.*

*The other articles in this four part series are:*

*Part 2 'God or No God - Purpose after God - What does it matter?' can be found [here](#)*

*Part 3 'Ethics after God' can be found [here](#)*

*Part 4 'Love after God' can be found [here](#)*