WESTERN LITERATURE AND THE DEATH OF GOD

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This essay attempts to do two things.

Firstly, it seeks to offer a brief tour of some of the developments in western literature, particularly English literature, that reflect the way our culture has thought about God, and about His absence and what can replace Him. Secondly, on this basis it attempts to define some of the crucial issues and questions that arise for us at the start of the twenty-first century, in a culture that has lost God.

Why are these issues of importance for a Russian reader? I believe they are of critical importance: because the question must now be faced in Russia, in a way that was not necessary until recently, of what it means to be a part of the west. For we can certainly say that Russia is now, or is becoming, a 'western, European' culture to an extent that we could not have said in the past. Of course Russia must and will always have its own great heritage, its own contribution: and there is much that is unique about Russia that can never be contained under the heading 'European'. But obviously there is now more common ground between Russia and countries like England than there was in the past. Yet a 'western country' is something that has its own problems and dilemmas. So one of my hopes for what follows is that it will enhance our understanding of the issues that face us all in the years to come.

What I would like to do is to embark on a swift tour of some of the literature of the west, particularly Britain, and to offer a way of thinking about how that history has developed. I offer it a little like a scientific hypothesis, a shape or theory which my reader can set against his/her own experiences of reading this literature and see if it matches them.

I want to begin with the Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries; because that was a crucial point in the consciousness of Britain and Europe, and therefore of their literatures. The Reformation was the time when the Protestant churches first came into existence; and particularly it was the time when the Bible first became available to ordinary people. During the middle ages, religion in western Europe had been controlled by the Catholic church authorities. The Bible was not available to ordinary people in their own language: it existed only in Latin, and was read only by the priests. So, if you wanted to know what God had to say to you, you had to ask the authorities. But then there came a time when the Bible started to be translated into English and German and other languages, and printed in large numbers - with the authorities, religious and political, often trying to stop it: because this was a very revolutionary thing to happen.

Why? Because so long as you could only find out what God wanted for your life and for society from the authorities, it gave them a very real power. Only they could really say what was right. But the moment you could take a Bible and find out for yourself what God wanted, then you could understand

God's purposes for yourself. And that was a very radical thing! So in Britain, for example, there were times when the authorities were trying to prevent the translation of the Bible into the language of the ordinary people, and the translators were doing their work in hiding, attempting to stay one step ahead of the police. Some of them were executed in the process. But eventually their work was complete, and the Bible became available in the language of the ordinary people.

And this was part of a whole historical movement where authority was moving more into the hands of ordinary people. One thinks of men like Martin Luther, the arch-revolutionary who stood up against the system and insisted that what was absolutely crucial was that each individual person should come to know God by faith for themselves. He and those who followed him insisted on the importance of people being able to see for themselves, in the Bible, the truth of what God had to say. 'Scripture alone' became their slogan, sola scriptura: no religious authority had the right to a position of equal importance to God's Word: each person has the right and responsibility to hear and obey the Word of God for himself.

Now what does all this have to do with literature? In fact a great deal. In a Christianized culture, the change in religion was going to have many results. For example, we see the effects of the reformation in the growth of democracy. If people began to believe that God could reveal His ways to them as individuals, and not just to the authorities somewhere in Rome, then they had value as ordinary men and women. And if the most important thing in the world was for ordinary people to come to know God themselves, by faith, it meant that God was vitally interested in them as ordinary people. It was not just the king or the authorities of the church who were important. That had considerable implications for the growth of democracy in western Europe. It is not by accident that the rediscovery of the Bible and the growth of democracy go together in western Europe.

There are implications for art as well. If you study the painting or the poetry of this period, you see a shift in what is considered to be worth depicting. Where in earlier centuries painters had been creating pictures of the saints, or of the great heroes of Greek legend and history, now they begin to paint pictures of ordinary people. One thinks of artists like Jan Steen, or indeed Rembrandt, in the Protestant culture of Holland, who love realistic scenes of ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. Why? Because they are working within a culture that has grasped that God is deeply interested in ordinary people, not just in the heroes and the saints. So too when you look at the English literature in this period you see writers emerging who reflect that kind of value for the life of the ordinary person. One thinks of poets like John Donne or George Herbert, writing about their experiences of love or of worship as they are for ordinary people.

It is in this context, indeed, that the novel arises. One might say that the novel begins to emerge in England with the work of the radical Protestant preacher John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress and The Life and Death of Mr Badman; and then more plainly with the journalist Daniel Defoe, also writing very clearly from a Protestant background, as we see in his masterpiece Robinson Crusoe. Earlier on, the great literature had written

more about 'epic' concerns; but now there begins to develop a form of literature that deals with ordinary people, and their loves, their worries and their struggles towards God. For the same reason we must take into account the background of Protestantism as we think about Shakespeare's plays. We see Hamlet standing alone on the stage, struggling with crucial personal choice: `To be or not to be'. And it is not by accident that Shakespeare changes the Hamlet story to make him a student at Luther's university in Wittenberg; this, says Shakespeare, is man as we now know him to be since Luther, an individual whose choices about life are supremely important. Nor is it accidental that Shakespeare centres The Merchant of Venice on the apparently insoluble clash of justice and mercy that is also so basic to the Reformation's understanding of the Christian gospel. These were issues of compelling importance, and we must understand them to understand the art of the time.

This is to be expected. 'God' is the name we give to that which is of the most overwhelming importance in the universe. Obviously our relationship to that God will have implications and consequences for everything else we do. If we believe that the most important being in the universe is a God we as ordinary people can and must know and follow, then our lives - and the works of art we create - will move in a particular direction as a result. And if, for us, there is no such God at the centre, then there will be a different pattern or mosaic to our lives, and everything they contain, literature included. Thus it seems that we can look at the history of the past 300-400 years since the Reformation, and see a movement in the development of the novel form and of poetry that reflects - among many other things - what their authors thought about God.

We may see the Reformation as the first phase in this process. But at the end of the seventeenth century there came a strong reaction against much that the Reformation had stood for. Thus we move into the period we call the Enlightenment. What was the Enlightenment? Very generally, we may describe it as a period in which many key thinkers turned away from building their thought on what God said in His revelation, and instead put a great emphasis on human reason, and also on what is 'natural'. Now, Christians who worked on the basis of the Bible (and particularly in the Reformation tradition) have always insisted that human reason has a fundamental problem. The idea is a little like the Marxist concept of 'ideology': there is a deep bias in our thinking that affects our beliefs. And so it is very hard for us to think clearly and accurately about God, because as we do so we tend to try and protect our independence; ideologically, we want to believe whatever will preserve our autonomy from God. But what the thinkers of the Enlightenment were doing was denying that the problem existed. (Indeed, when we come to Kant we find 'autonomy' exalted into a principle that is absolutely good.) Human rationality will lead us into a new dawn of civilisation, they suggested; if we live according to what is reasonable, we can expect our society to work out right.

We can see this optimistic philosophy reflected particularly in much of the work of the great poet Alexander Pope, perhaps the most important British poet of the early eighteenth century. There is the same easy confidence in a novelist like Henry Fielding, author of Tom Jones, and other writers, painters and musicians of the movement that is known as 'neo-classicism'.

The rediscovery of the Graeco-Roman classical heritage tended to function as an alternative to Christianity's insistence that man needed a radical rescue: it was basically humanistic in tendency, reinforcing the optimistic confidence in human rationality and in his ability, just operating naturally, to build the society that we need.

But as the 18th century wore on there begin to be doubts as to whether it is true. There begin to be bad dreams. At the end of Pope's Dunciad, indeed, we find a nightmare of chaos overcoming human society, and the closing words are 'universal darkness buries all'. Where there should be rationality, where there should be the clarity of the human mind working out all our problems, we find that people are not reasonable, and ultimately night falls on humanity. The terrible final book of Swift's Gulliver's Travels is a parallel nightmare: human beings, devoid of reason, turn out merely to be animals wallowing in the mud. At the end of both these 18th century masterpieces we sense the same fear: what if people are not and cannot be trusted to be reasonable? What if we are, by nature, inherently destructive?

So as the 18th century continues we begin to find writers looking elsewhere for a principle or foundation or value around which to orient their lives. There is the 'sentimental movement', putting its emphasis on feeling (Sterne, for example); there is the attempt to go back to pre-Roman values in Macpherson's Ossian. In fact at this point the west could have gone back to a full-blooded Christianity. Instead, we began to look more widely for what would be truly significant. So at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th we find the emergence of what we call the Romantic Movement. Again, this is a movement with partial parallels in painting (Goya, perhaps), or music (Beethoven, from one perspective). But in English poetry we would think of poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats. Where do they look to find that which is ultimately significant? Perhaps to childhood, considered as something pure before it is spoiled by society (Wordsworth's Prelude); or nature, considered as something wild, untamed, beyond humanity; apocalyptic prophecy, in Blake; visionary experience through drugs (Coleridge's Kubla Khan); the imagination (Keats). Romanticism offers to find what is worth writing about, what is truly significant and worthy of celebration, beyond the world of rationality.

To the Christian, the impulse to look beyond our human world for what was ultimately worthwhile was a step in the right direction: if there really is a God, then we obviously need to hear what He has to say. But it seems that the marginalizing of the God of the Bible that began in the Enlightenment continues in the mainstream of Romanticism. Instead of going back to God first, Romanticism turns often to the world of the imagination. But therefore there is always a tragic question beneath the romantic vision: Are we really finding a higher truth in all this, or are we just wandering in our own daydreams? The question is put powerfully at the close of Keats' famous Ode to a Nightingale. Keats listens to and celebrates the beauty of a bird's song. But at the end of the poem the bird is gone, and Keats asks, 'Was it a vision, or a waking dream?' Was it a vision, a momentary glimpse of ultimate beauty, or was it the kind of fantasy such as comes between sleep and waking? Have I something truly significant here, or am I just

playing games with myself? As the 19th century goes on the question becomes more and more urgent. In Tennyson, for example, we find the end of this development: the sadness of a man who deep in his heart can hardly hope that what he is talking about has any reality.

But the nineteenth-century crisis is more serious, because this was also the time when the major intellectual challenge was posed to Christianity. Up until now the Christian framework was still there at bottom, giving some basis for social values; the West had been moving away from commitment to biblical faith, but no fundamental crisis of belief had occurred. But in the nineteenth century comes the intellectual assault, from two sources. First, German biblical criticism, which argued that the Bible was not a very reliable guide after all; and secondly, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

The development of evolutionism at this point is very interesting. C.S.Lewis observes that in fact the scientific theory of evolution comes after, not before, the artistic expression of the evolutionist idea. We might expect that, first, scientists would formulate the theory, and then the artists would start to work with the idea of higher coming from lower. But the opposite is true. In Keats' poetry, and Wagner's music, we find the idea of the stronger succeeding the weaker, and the superior the inferior. Now of course the Christian picture is that God made humanity perfect, but then the first people rebelled and fell, leaving us as their descendants with the problem of getting back to the glory and beauty we once enjoyed. But the evolutionary picture is the opposite: you start off with the worse and weaker, and work up naturally to the better and stronger - an idea very attractive to us, of course, as the 'latest and best'! But the interesting thing is that the artists had begun working on this idea before the scientists: it was something people wanted to believe, and then fortunately Darwin came along and gave us reasons to do so.

And that, of course, made a major impact on western European Christianity. In America it was not so: many American Christian leaders did not find it difficult to relate evolution to their faith. But many western Europeans did. Thus in the nineteenth century we find the foundations of western European Christianity apparently in a state of collapse: it is the age of the 'loss of faith'. Just when the romantic dream was proving to be just a fantasy rather than something you could live by, so too the Christian framework appeared to be collapsing.

As Christians in the twenty-first century we may look back and wonder a little what the fuss was about. We find it hard to be convinced by the arguments that were used against Christianity in those days. But at the time they seemed very strong to many people. And so one senses in many writers of this period a doubt as to what foundation is left for value and significance, and a doubt too as to whether goodness is something with any real basis, any real power. The desire for goodness is there, but there is a deep uncertainty as to whether it connects with any source in the universe that can give it strength. We see this in the novels of Charles Dickens. His evil characters have tremendous vitality; but his good characters seem weak and pale (in Oliver Twist, for example), and it is hard to understand why in the end they are victorious. The reason for this, one suspects, is

that Dickens himself did not really know. Dostoevski's The Idiot raises the same question, perhaps: Is it realistic to hope for goodness to work in a world like this?

And so we find the great literature of the nineteenth century reflecting something of a quest for other ways to live or to look at the world. Some looked back to the middle ages, as in the Pre-Raphaelites - William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Others looked to science as the key to what the world was about. In the French novelist Zola, for example, we see the universe presented as a machine, impersonal, pursuing its inevitable, deterministic purposes, with no care for human beings trapped in the process. The result can be grim: at the end of L'Assommoir, for example, the heroine is found dead and 'turning green already'. For Zola, and those like him in the Naturalist movement, science is truth; but science without God shows us only a heartless machine. Yet others said that, even if there was no God and no immortality, still we must hold to a concept of duty to live by; we must still try to do what is right, even though there is no God to help us to do so. The great English novelist George Eliot is an example.

But towards the end of the century a different alternative appears, among the first precursors of the modernist movement. Even if there is nothing to live by in this world, they seem to be saying, at least we can construct something meaningful and significant in the separate universe of art. Art can give meaning to a meaningless life. And to some extent we are heirs to this tradition: art, particularly music, functions in this way for many people in our modern culture. You have a meaningless existence at work, but at the end of the day you can go home and you have access there to something really worthwhile, to Stravinsky or John Lennon or whatever your taste may be. It is in the modern period that art begins to assume this almost religious role (along with friendship, love and sexuality), as the thing that is supremely meaningful. We see this kind of approach emerging late in the nineteenth century in France with the Symbolist poets, and in Britain with the aesthetic movement, whose slogan was 'Art for Art's sake'. Out of this development emerged the modernist movement, which includes some of the great masterpieces of English literature. In different ways Joyce, Yeats, Woolf, even the early T S Eliot are seeking to construct an autonomous artistic universe that will somehow make sense of this one, or contain its own order and beauty and meaningfulness that this one lacks and that is truly valuable.

But of course modernism contained within it a problem. What is beauty? You are building a separate universe, but how do you know what is beautiful and significant and worthy of record? When we believed in God we could go back to the beginning of the Bible and see that there is a God who makes things and then declares that they are very good. And we see God making the first man and woman and taking them to a place where there were trees that were good to look at and food that was good to eat. So we learn that there is a God who creates beauty, and beauty has meaning because it comes from God.

But now we have a culture that does not believe in God. So what is beauty? Is it purely subjective? You happen to like listening to Beethoven, I happen to like listening to the sound of a concrete mixer making concrete. Is there any difference of value between the two? Can we have any real idea

of what beauty is? What, if anything, is of value, what is worth celebrating? And so in the last 30 years we have seen the emergence of what is called post-modernism. Post-modernism has many forms, but one of the things that often characterises it is precisely this doubt. The American artist Andy Warhol asked this question in many ways. He once produced a sculpture that was an exact replica of a box of Brillo pads, soap pads that you can use for washing up dishes. In the past, he might have said, we made sculptures of human beings. But what is special about human beings? They are just chance products, they are not more special than anything else. So why should we not equally meaningfully make a replica of a box of Brillo pads? More recently, another American artist, Jasper Koons, has made a name for himself with (among other things) a giant inflatable rabbit. Earlier in the century, Marcel Duchamp presented a toilet as a work of art. One wonders how many times such things can be done, and whether we have now reached a situation where it will be very difficult to `believe enough' to create great art.

A not dissimilar question is posed by the music of John Cage. Beethoven might write symphonies for violins, clarinets, flutes; but why are these sounds more 'privileged', more significant, than anything else? Cage once wrote a famous piano piece of music that posed this question, where he does not even play the piano. He simply sits at it. Why, after all, should we give the term 'music' to the sound of pieces of wood striking pieces of wire? The sounds of people laughing or jeering, people walking out or arguing or even demanding their money back, would be as much an expression of music as the sound of bits of wood and wire. The reasoning is not quite the same as Warhol's, but it is logical enough. Cage once wrote, 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry.' All that is left at that point is the act of speaking, of words without meaning. It is the last extremity of formalism. We might also think here of the Irish dramatist and novelist Samuel Beckett, many of whose writings present just a voice speaking in the dark, with nothing to say, wanting indeed to stop but unable to do so and therefore going on speaking, meaninglessly, hopelessly, for page after page. That endpoint is all that is left in the universe. And we have to ask: if there is no God, is there any logical alternative to postmodernism?

I offer these summaries as a hypothesis, a theory of the general shape of what has happened in the West and been reflected in western literature; from the tremendous excitement of the Reformation, with the rediscovery of the Bible and the enormous importance of the ordinary man and woman before God; through the turning away from God in the Enlightenment in the name of human reason, then the swing to more non-rational sources of significance in romanticism; on through the searchings of the crisis of belief in the last century, through the modernist era with many of the great writers of the century seeking to build meaningfulness in separate universes of art (while at the same time often struggling with their experience of the inadequacy of life in this universe, particularly in the relationships from which we might hope for so much (eg in Conrad, James, Lawrence or Forster)). And now that separate universe too is crumbling, and we have nothing left to say except to go on saying nothing. We in England stand as the heirs to that process. Russia is very different - neither the Reformation nor the Enlightenment happened in the same way here, and many other, different things have; yet

now, more and more, the stream of Russian cultural history is likely to merge in with that of western Europe; and Russia too must struggle with the issues arising from the loss of God.

What are those issues? What does it mean for our culture to have lost God? In Britain many students will say to me, 'It doesn't matter. You believe in God, and that's fine; I am happy for you. But I don't, and that's OK too.' I believe this is very superficial logic. Let me try to explain why.

It is only very slowly that we are coming to see the results of the loss of God for our culture. For a long period after the loss of God, the concepts that actually depend on God for meaning continue to function for us. But we have seen one example of the problems that are emerging, in the questions raised by artists like Cage or Warhol as to what is art and what is beauty. We no longer know what beauty is, and what is significant and worthy of record, because we no longer have faith in the God who gives these concepts meaning. But there are other crisis-areas too. One major one, that many Russian students tell me is very important here, is the issue of identity. Who am I? What am I worth? What is my value? If you believe in God, then obviously you have reason to believe that you are a person of incredible value. You are worth so much that God sent His own Son to die on the cross for you: that is what you are worth. Not only that: you can look in the mirror and say to yourself, With all my follies and weaknesses, I am a unique masterpiece made by the greatest artist in the universe. And just as every little drawing by Picasso has tremendous value because Picasso made it, so you and I have enormous worth because we are unique creations of the greatest artist in the universe. That is the biblical view of our value, and we see it reflected in the art of the Reformation.

But let us take that away. Instead, we can say that we are the products only of the chance evolutionary process. For millions of years it has bubbled away, and now, for a few short years, here we are on top of the pond. What does that say about us? Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher-novelist, said: 'All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man as an object in no way different from the patterns which make up a table or a chair or a stone.' We are only chance products, Sartre is saying. It happens that we can walk and talk a bit, but fundamentally that does not alter what we are, chance objects of no particular value in a chance universe. Edmund Leach, the British thinker, says likewise that there is no sharp break between what is human and what is mechanical. Ultimately we are just machines: intrinsically we are worth no more than a complex pocket calculator or a personal computer.

And this is a major issue in our culture. Because our society has so many ways of saying to us, 'You have no value'. You look for a job, and the rejection letters come in saying they have no place for you because there are hundreds more like you out there in the job market. The marriage market can have the same effect. And when you discover that there are many people around just as good as you, and nobody wants to hire you and nobody wants to marry you: then what is your value? We are just products of a chance universe; there is no God, and we are like the tramps in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, hanging around, living from day to day, but going nowhere in particular. The filmstar Raquel Welch said, 'I am just a piece of meat.'

Where do you get your worth from if there is no God?

What do we do if we lack identity and self-worth? We have to create our own value. For example, 'I have value because of the work I do.' Many people do indeed derive their self-confidence, their self-worth, from the job they do. The problem comes when they retire. In Britain you often see that when you take a man's job away, through retirement or unemployment, it is almost like destroying him: his whole selfworth was bound up in what he did. Our work is not enough to support the burden of our identity. So maybe we say, 'I have value because somebody loves me.' Some of us know the feeling of utter devaluation when a love-relationship ends, or fails to come into being: maybe I have no value after all! And if our identity depends on being loved, there is always the danger of draining our partner, putting a demand on the relationship that can in fact destroy it: 'Show me that you love me! Prove to me that I have value! Prove your love to me!' What else is there? 'I have value because I am busy (look at all the things I have written in my agenda!)': the cry for self-worth of the workaholic. 'I have value because of what I belong to' - because I am a Party member, because of the regiment whose medals I wear, because I am a fan of Metallica and wear their t-shirts, because I support Liverpool or Moscow Spartak... even if I am afraid I am a nobody, yet perhaps I have importance if I belong. Or a popular one in western youth culture: I have value because I look smart - I can look in the mirror and see the latest Reeboks on my feet, the latest designer labels on my clothes. Or there is the self-worth of the bureaucrat: I have value because I have power!- I have importance because I can keep other people standing in a line for two hours. There are many variants on that. But it can be dangerous for society if people have to build up their self-worth from power exercised at other people's expense. I believe that in my own country this is one reason why we have so much street violence. There are teenagers, particularly black teenagers, to whom society has in effect said, 'You have no value'; and they have replied, 'We will prove we are significant' - because when you have broken somebody's nose, you have proved your significance, in their life at least...

This is just one of the questions we are dealing with if there is no God: if we are just the chance objects we find in the novels of Sartre or the plays of Beckett, what is your value? What is my value?

Then there is the question of purpose after the loss of God. Albert Camus, another French philosopher-novelist, said, '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 psssing days, to the wasted sensibility.' He illustrated that waste on another occasion by remarking, 'A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers. After that vigorous definition, the subject will be, if I may say so, exhausted.'

Is it true? Joseph Conrad, one of the very greatest of our English novelists, described our destiny as a 'mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose'. What am I living for? I have the privilege perhaps of obtaining a university qualification, going out, getting a job, working to get the money to buy the food to have the energy to go back to work to earn more money to buy the food to have the energy to go back to

work again to earn more money... round and round for 50 years, then they put you into a box and the box goes into the ground.

And that, essentially, is it. If we believed in God then we would believe in a Maker who has a purpose that makes our life worth living. But what if there is no such purpose - just 'the passing days, the wasted sensibility'? Beckett displays this so powerfully. In one of his plays, only lasting a few minutes, the character climbs out of a bag, does a few odd things, climbs back into the bag. Waking and sleeping? Birth and death? That, in its pointlessness, says Beckett, is existence. So where are we going? What am I living for? What does it mean if I get cancer? What does it mean for me to grow old? Is it anything but disintegration, whatever my 'experience' and 'maturity'? And what does it mean for me to die?

A third area of crisis is the area of ethics. Obviously, in a culture based on the Bible, if we wanted to know what was right or wrong we could go back and find out what God had ordained. God Himself had given us the principles for understanding what was right and wrong. Then we lost God. What happened then? Generally, the dominant answer in the education system of the West has been that right is that which is best for other people, or at least for the greatest possible proportion of other people. You do what is good for society, and that is right. But this was always vulnerable to the challenge raised last century by the philosopher Nietzsche, and then more drastically by Hitler: What if I do not choose to play the game? Suppose I say, What I will call good is that which fits, not the needs of society or of other people, but my personal interests? I am an evolutionary creature, and the evolutionary struggle is a matter of the survival of the fittest, of the strong pursuing what they want at the expense of the weak. Wasn't this what Hitler was saying? That the Jews were a weak and degenerate race, and therefore the Germans as the stronger master-race will pursue their interests and the Jews will be destroyed, and that is all right and in tune with nature? Evolutionary ethics?

What are we to say when people start to live like that? Twenty years ago we had riots in many of our British cities. In one case I read how the children were looting the shops and the parents were coming with prams to drive the loot away. Similarly in Los Angeles more recently, when the looting took place in the big riot, one mother who had been looting a store sent her daughter back to pick up some nappies that she'd forgotten to grab. And if you had said to these parents, 'Stop! This is not good for society!', surely you would have seemed to be talking nonsense. If they had bothered to reply, the parents might have said, 'Have you seen the house society has given me? Have you seen the school society has given my kids? Why should I care about society?' Dostoevski foresaw the problem in the 19th century, the crisis of the collapse of ethics after the loss of God: but now we are seeing it in the streets.

So what do we say to this? Some Marxists would reply that the ethic we should live by is a class ethic: what is right for my class is what is right for me. But that does not answer the question either. It leaves open the same problem: why should I care about my class' needs any longer than they coincide with my own selfish interests? I have a personal theory that you can only have a socialist revolution in a country with a strong religious

background (though not necessarily a Christian background): because socialism depends on people putting the interests of their class above their own interests, and historically that doesn't seem to happen without a religious background. In Britain in the 1980s the British trade union movement had a major showdown with Margaret Thatcher, and was decisively defeated. Why? According to one of our leading newspapers, it was because class loyalty no longer works; when the miners went on strike nobody backed them: 'Your problem is not my problem unless it affects me as well.' God is dead, and the class ethic is dead too.

All that that leaves as basis for ethics is the family: 'What is right for me is what is right for my family.' Personally, I think this is the ethical base for many British people now - and maybe for many Russians as well. One of our leading sportsmen went to South Africa while the country was still under a United Nations boycott because of apartheid. When challenged about this, he said, 'I don't know much about apartheid... I did what was best for my family and therefore for me.' An extreme example was a man shown on television who made a living by kidnapping children in divorce cases: when the divorce court gave the child to the mother, he would kidnap it for the father. The television people suggested this was an unpleasant way to make a living. He replied, 'My family have to eat.' What is good for my family is right; what is bad for my family is wrong. And it does seem that that is a sufficient basis for many people's lives in these days. The only problem is that the family is in crisis too. In Britain, one marriage in three now ends in divorce. So when that last shelter is collapsing, we are losing our last basis for ethics. If there is no God, Dostoevski said in the nineteenth century, everything is permitted. If there is no God, there is no alternative basis for right and wrong.

But what then is left? If we have no other basis for ethics, surely all that is left is the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest. Evolution: the strong survive, the weak perish. What do you expect, logically, to happen in such a society? The weak in our society might include the women and children. You would expect the rape rate, and the child abuse rate, to grow. And that is exactly what is happening.

Let us be clear. We talk as if the loss of God doesn't matter, as if it were just a sophisticated philosophical problem. One person believes in God, another doesn't, either way it's fine. But that is because we have not yet realised the consequences: that without God our self-worth, our purpose, our ethics are all in jeopardy. And, last of all, there is the question of how far we can hope to have love without God.

Time and again, as our best writers grapple with these questions, they present the love-relationship as that which survives when everything else has collapsed. Matthew Arnold, not a Christian, writes about the loss of faith in 'Dover Beach'. The 'sea of faith', he says, 'was once... at the full'; '...but now I only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar...' And so he turns to his woman:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Love, let us be true to one another; that will be left when everything else is gone. Lawrence makes one of his characters in Women in Love say the same: if there's no God, all that's left is to aim at a perfect relationship with a woman. The pattern recurs in Lennon's Imagine, the haunting title track of which was perhaps the most beautiful anti-Christian song ever written. `Imagine' didn't stand alone; other Lennon songs demonstrated profound unbelief, not only in Jesus and the Bible but in many other kinds of ideals besides. One thing, however, he still expressed particular faith in, his relationship with Yoko. `Love, let us be true to one another' (Arnold): that is where we seek shelter when everything else is gone.

But again comes the problem. God is dead; what is love? In the countries of the West we see an epidemic of broken marriages. Years ago I read a Moscow social psychologist saying you also had a high divorce rate here - and, interestingly (because this was still the communist time), he said that the reason was we no longer have either God or neighbours, and so there is nothing to keep our marriages together. Certainly you could argue that case in the West with some credibility. But if our love-relationships are the only shelter left us in the darkness, and then they disintegrate, what then? And what is left?

The famous actress Joan Collins once said, 'I've never been able to figure out what love means.' And so she has been through a series of broken relationships. Now the Christian goes back to the Bible, and particularly to Jesus' life and Jesus' death, to find out what love means. Saint Paul wrote that husbands should love their wives the way Christ loved His people: Christ poured out everything He had and was for His people. Obviously if that is the kind of love you receive as a wife from your husband, it will increase your marriage's survival chances! So there is a model in Jesus for what love means - and, Christians believe, a power available too in Jesus to begin to follow through that model in everyday life. But suppose all that is gone. What is love? Is it just a bargain whereby both of us get fulfilment? And what happens when one of us does not get so much fulfilment from the marriage? The husband is under heavy pressure at work, or the wife is pregnant - and they're not so much fun to be with. Your partner gets a disease and is confined to bed for years, or has a severe psychological or emotional crisis. What is love then? If it is just a matter of your own fulfilment, you may feel that the time has come to leave your depressed partner, because you no longer feel anything for her, she doesn't turn you on any more, there's no more fulfilment, it's gone cold. I suspect that among students in my country one of the biggest problems in relationships is that the man and the woman mean different things by love; and there is no way to know who is right.

Indeed, more and more the term begins to disappear. As we lose God, there do seem to be certain words that disappear: 'joy', for example, is a word

you seldom hear used except by Christians (except, significantly, in the context of sex). Perhaps 'love' is going the same way. Recently I watched a television programme where about seven people discussed their experience of adultery. After about half an hour I suddenly realised that none of them were using the word 'love'. They talked about meaningful relationships: but love, perhaps, was too much to hope for. We might dream, briefly, that it was attainable - but no, love as something that lasts is just not possible. When we had a God we had a reason to believe in the reality of love. But that is past. George Steiner, one of our leading literary critics, points out that love poetry, as a form, seems to be something that can die out. Do we have a basis for talking about love any more? Or has that died with the death of God?

So what do we conclude from all this? We stand as the heirs, as the culmination, of a long tradition that has deliberately turned away from God and looked for alternatives. And now we have real problems knowing who we are, what we are worth, where we are going, what is right and wrong, and what is the meaning of love. And these are not just topics for the philosophers and poets: many of us know all too well what it is to wish we had some self-worth, that somebody loved us so that we could feel good about ourselves... And the result of this kind of pain can be different kinds of depressive problems, if we blame ourselves, or problems for other people if we turn the blame outwards. All these issues are real issues for the everyday; and all of them are logically related to the loss of God. It matters enormously whether or not He is there.

As a Christian, therefore, I would like to conclude this survey by summarizing the Bible's response to these issues. The Bible tells us that our predicament, our alienation, is caused precisely by our loss of the presence of God. In the beginning, the first human beings were different from us: they had a perfect relationship with God. So not only did they have a clear understanding of God, but also the power of the love of God was continually present in their lives. But there came a time when those first human beings declared their independence of God - as I have done and as most of us have done: they insisted on running their own lives, in being gods of their own world. That is the crucial temptation that we find, three pages from the start of the Bible: the first human beings insisting on determining for themselves what is good and bad, insisting on running their own world.

And the Bible tells us that God allowed them. For we are not robots: God has made us free agents, able to choose whether our world is run by ourselves or by God. But the moment that the relationship with God was broken by our active rebellion, by our insistence on going our own way, we no longer had the power from God to make our other relationships work. The vertical, man-God relationship breaks: immediately the narrative shows the man-woman relationship coming into difficulties. Mutual support is replaced by passing the blame; love is replaced by domination and desire struggling with each other. Next, the man-nature relationship is broken. Then follows the first murder, the story of Cain and Abel. Genesis 4 tells us of a whole civilisation being built, with advances in agriculture, metallurgy and music - but it is all constructed on the wrong foundation, and the account ends with increasing violence, and finally the ecological catastrophe we call the flood. The man-God relationship breaks, and little by little

everything else breaks down too. As a Christian, I believe the West has lived through that process again in the last few hundred years. Our economy may be strong (at least for now; how our loss of God will affect that is another question), but our hearts are empty. Our poets, our novelists, our painters are many of them crying out in the dark. The technological advances are real, but they are built on the wrong foundation, and the end is violence.

But what if there really was a God? Then the logic, surely, would be that there could be nothing more important than to know Him for ourselves: to reestablish our relationship with God, to bring our lives back in line with His will; so that we could know where our lives are going, could know God's purposes for us, could experience real self-worth and real value because we are back in relationship with the Father who loves us and gave Jesus to die for us; could have Him help us understand how we can make our lives work, and Him to give us the power of love to make our relationships work. Knowing God means rediscovering all these things: rediscovering identity, rediscovering purpose in life, rediscovering the way to live, rediscovering love in our lives. Christians believe it is real.

I would invite you to explore all this for yourself. We are not just talking about philosophical abstractions here; we are talking about day-to-day issues of how to make our lives work. I know in many Russian universities you have groups that meet to explore the Bible. You might be interested in joining one of these groups to find out for yourself. What would it mean for you to get to know God? What has Jesus to say to your life? Because if what Christians say is true, then as you start to read the Bible, looking sincerely for God to show you His ways and His desires, you will find that His book is alive, and that He is speaking to you daily through it. As Chesterton says, it will be like meeting Plato or Shakespeare every day at breakfast. There could be nothing more significant in the world.

Dr Peter Lowman

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