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Finding God in the meaning of life

Chase Nordengren | Jul. 4, 2013 Young Voices

I was sitting with some philosophically inclined friends, many of whom are somewhat committed atheists, one weekend when the topic of a meaningful life came up. The problem of trying to identify a "meaning" to life, one argued, is that such a meaning doesn't exist. There is, he went on, no objective or outside guide to how all human beings should live their lives, and finding grounds for human action requires asking a different question. No doubt his objection is the objection of contemporary life.

What does Christianity do when the idea of a God-given meaningfulness, a vocation, begins to ring hollow? This question is central to *Honest to God [1]*, a short and polarizing text by Anglican bishop John A.T. Robinson. As modern physics forces modernity to re-evaluate its notion of God as someone "out there," modern Christians, he argues, must increasingly regard such a frame of reference as a stumbling block to belief in the Gospel. Rather than a fierce opponent, the atheist who destroys the idea of the old man in the sky, or the old man in another dimension, may be destroying the idol keeping Christianity from contemporary relevance and meaning.

Robinson begins again the process of rediscovering God, starting with the reality we see and experience. "God is, by definition, ultimate reality. And one cannot argue whether ultimate reality *exists*. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like." Weaving together the works of Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Robinson comes to identify with God as what Tillich calls "the ground for our being." Neither up there or out there, God is here now, to be found within a deeper immersion in our own experience.

The destruction of what Robinson calls an idol and its replacement with God as love (an idea that no longer feels heterodox in most any Christian circles) redefines without destroying the idea of God as personal. When God is no longer apart from us but with us, our individual relationships with him become all the more vital. "To believe in God as love means to believe that in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality." It is we, in this case, who hold the power to acknowledge and uncover God or to ignore him.

In action, Robinson argues, that uncovering occurs in personal relationship with one another. Here lies a seeming dilemma. If religion lies within the context of personal relationships, what is left to keep God "other" from us or to keep church as something set apart from our everyday? Here, Robinson suggests, lies our central paradox. God is both completely removed from the shallow surface of our lives and closer to "us," properly understood, than our own selves. Robinson seeks to understand Christ in this context, as a being undifferentiated between person and work, man reconciled to himself just as God reconciled the world to himself. Our worship, our church, is there to sensitize us to this pure yet complex idea.

Having had the conversation, I now strongly suspect the largest gulf is not between theist and atheist, but between those who go looking for meaning in the clouds and those who go looking within the context of their own lives. The idea that a person of faith is one who prays to a man with a long white beard is reductionist and undermines the arguments of a few prolific contemporary atheists. But the frequent theist response? that sin blocks the atheist from seeing the self-evident creative force in the universe? is equally reductionist. It would do

us all more good to look inward, to critically self-examine our own sources of action, to ground our actions in the ground of our being.

I'm unlikely to ever come around to believing meaning, or something related to it, is completely absent from our lives. On a level I cannot deny there seems something common to the human experience, even if I can't identify it. Perhaps that idea is an article of faith. So be it.

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