

Ecclesiastes, Vanity of Vanities and Meaning and Purpose

Iain Brown – 9th December 2012

“What is the chief end of Man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” So ran the first question of the Westminster Catechism. My mother knew all the hundred plus questions of it and their answers. She had probably been drilled in it by her mother. I read it with interest but never had to learn it.

This Westminster Catechism and, with it, the Westminster Confession of Faith was the very height of Puritan orthodox dominance, written in the middle of the Puritan Revolution in the 1640s by an alliance of English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians. It was the gold standard of an orthodox faith and, of course, the UNorthodox, the Unitarians and the Quakers, never used it.

The catechism is composed of 107 questions and answers. The first 12 questions concern God as Creator. Questions 13-20 deal with original sin and the fallen state of man's nature. Questions 21-38 concern Christ the Redeemer and the benefits that flow from redemption. Other questions discuss the ten commandments, teach concerning the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and explain the Lord's prayer.

The verb ‘to catechise’ described the practice of drilling and examining children and adults in the recitation of the hundred or so questions and answers. Catechising became a part of life in the Scottish Churches with itinerant catechists being employed to instruct the people and even in the middle of the 20th century little boys and girls were being

disapproved of and even physically punished because they could not recite the Gaelic version. Apparently, even today some Free Churches of Scotland still present a Bible to a child who can answer all 107 questions accurately at one sitting.

So “What is the chief end of Man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” That was the meaning and purpose of life given you and you need not bother your pretty head about it thereafter. That’s it! Just do it! Of course, there was a more sinister side to these beliefs and to that Catechism which was embodied especially in the questions on redemption by Christ. The unspoken but widely recognised meaning and purpose of life was ALSO, and certainly more importantly, for all eternity, to be good enough to avoid the punishments of Hell and attain the bliss of Heaven. THAT, when you believed it, gave a much sharper and piquant meaning and purpose to life here on earth. Of course WE don’t imagine that we believe that anymore. But I used to be afraid that on my deathbed my unconscious would jump out at me as if from behind a bush and terrorise me into confessing my sins and seeking forgiveness just in time to avoid Hell. Maybe it still could do that to you too?

But let us look again at what that word ‘God’ in the phrase ‘Glorify God’ might really have meant. In the Old Testament of the Christian Bible there are more than one meanings of the word translated to us as ‘God’ and there could be, and, no doubt have been, whole books of sermons devoted to the niceties of the ways in which those desert tribes developed their notions of their God. ‘Elohim’ was a contender but the dominant one among many others was Yahweh or Jehovah. In a famous passage, that very Jehovah God was asked who or what he was and he replied mysteriously “I am what I am”. Present day existentialists

could see that reply as meaning “I am existence”, perhaps all of life, the Universe and all that is in it and beyond. That idea of the word ‘God’ as meaning ‘existence’ is a very different idea of God from the one rejected by the many atheists among us today who do not believe in the all-powerful interfering, loving and punishing picture of a patriarchal tribal God that is commonly presented in the Judeo-Christian tradition from which we are all derived. Now, if the word ‘God’ is translated as ‘existence’ then we can ALL do as the Westminster Catechism suggests, we can ALL “Glorify God and enjoy him forever” - as the catechism asserted was the chief purpose and meaning of life. So we can sing in praise and in the enjoyment of life, all together, perhaps some still reading the word ‘God’ as the Great Judeo-Christian Jehovah, tribal God which became universal before Allah if we wish - or others reading ‘God’ as existence or all of life itself and all that we know, enjoy and barely understand.

Before you read Ecclesiastes Chapter 1, verses 2 to 18, let me remind those of you who may not be used to the 17th century English of that magnificent Authorised Version of the Bible that the word ‘Vanity’ does not mean a kind of narcissistic self-admiration or an affectation but rather ‘meaninglessness, emptiness, futility..

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

One generation passeth away and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever.

The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose;

The wind goeth towards the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirlleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place from which the rivers come, thither they return again.

All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

The thing that hath been, is that which shall be; and that which is done, is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us.

There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

I, the Preacher, was king over All Israel in Jerusalem.

And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

I commune with mine own heart, saying, Lo I am come to great estate, and I have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

And I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

George Orwell used Ecclesiastes chapter one as an example of the summit of English prose. The American 20th-century novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote of Ecclesiastes Chapter one: "[O]f all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth — and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not, he wrote, given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one I could say that

Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound."

As a teenager of about thirteen or fourteen I used to love that part of the Bible – probably more than any other. Its sonorous language still haunts me, but, looking back, I guess now that its feeling of groundedness and a kind of peace at having touched bottom in the great pool of life, reassured me then. I felt, in my teens, surrounded by so many forms of aspiration and high endeavour and I was so infected with them that I was beginning to feel so painfully inadequate that it was refreshing to feel that my healthy latent scepticism and growing sarcasm about them all were validated by the highest authority, at that time, by the Word of God itself. What a relief to be spared hope and love and righteousness for a change! Also there was probably a certain grandiosity in identifying with the Preacher who seemed to have done it all and won it all when I had, as a teenager, still it all to do. And now, nearing my eightieth year, I still love it for most of the same reasons. What a relief from all that striving to do good and be good! Phew!!

First, let me acknowledge that you can only think like Ecclesiastes if you enjoy good health, if you enjoy a secure place in your society and have a full belly. If you are chasing your next meal or worrying about your children or about to lose your status, you will not identify easily with this passage of scripture. But, if you can reach beyond the immediate *sturm und drang* of everyday life for a moment, then Ecclesiastes Chapter One is, to me, still magic.

I need to pause a moment in the light of my later studies and experience, to ask “Was this writer depressed?” Sometimes a depressive episode will bring out this kind of world-weary ennui and apparent hopelessness. But this Preacher man has a history of achievement and I do not think he suffered from a bi-polar manic depressive disorder and happened to be in the depressive phase when he wrote it, because there are none of the common features of a depression, such as self- punishment and rejection, evident in the writing. No, he was not unbalanced in any obvious way.

Then, is he suffering from what is sometimes known as a particular kind of mid-life crisis? Has he reached the top of his local promotional dung heap and found the view is not worth all the striving? I have at least two friends who found that once they were on the boards of their respective companies, they became unaccountably depressed. For a long time they felt they had nowhere else to go; they had left their friends in the organisation behind and were lonely. Their wives and families had moved to a richer neighbourhood and were enjoying it but paradoxically the men were in mourning. There is no sign of that in Ecclesiastes that I can detect.

Sometimes in late middle age and in old age a kind of slow Norse-like Twilight of the Gods at the end of the world sets in. It used to be recognised and named as Involutional Melancholia, a particular form of depression, but I do not believe that the writer of Ecclesiastes was a victim of a process like that either because no one in that state of mind would enjoin us to eat, drink and be merry - as he does later in the Book.

So, having given The Preacher a twenty first century clean bill of health, next let us examine for a moment what we think we know about the Book of Ecclesiastes and its writer. The writer, translated usually as the Preacher, or given the Hebrew name of Quoholeth used to be widely thought to have been King Solomon - but it is now generally agreed that he was NOT. He is more likely to have been a local Lord, one of many over whom the King of Kings ruled. Apparently the kind of Hebrew he uses comes from an era around 200 or 300BC (much later than Solomon, around 800BC), and his thinking is seen as having been influenced by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome.

Many scholars are surprised that Ecclesiastes was included in the Jewish bible at all. It is interesting that the Preacher never speaks directly to God but always about him, almost as if, like some contemporary Unitarians, he did not believe in the value of prayer. The book of Ecclesiastes is far from orthodox main line Jewish thinking. That line generally follows revelation, a prophetic tradition and the authority of the priesthood. The main thrust of the Preacher's thinking is much more like Greek philosophy, which assumes that the individual can and should proceed toward truth by means of his own powers of perception and reasoning; and that he can, in this, way discover truths. The last verse of the book, "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" seems out of tune with the thrust of the rest of the book, but it probably redeemed it as far as orthodox Jewry was concerned. For that reason, applying the rules of the New Testament Higher Criticism, I, personally, strongly

suspect that those first and last verses were not originally written by the Preacher - but were later insertions to uphold the Jewish tradition in contradiction to the thrust of the rest of the book and so save the book from exclusion.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel of a New York Yeshiva comments that the compilers of the Jewish scriptures were worried that The Preacher of Ecclesiastes might cause greater religious harm than good, and consequently they considered censoring it from the Tanakh, that is from the Jewish scripture officially received as the authentic voice of God. I quote, *“The Sages wished to hide the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching.”*

The Jewish Talmud, commenting on Ecclesiastes, twists the meaning to suggest that, since nothing under the sun gives ultimate satisfaction, we should concentrate on heavenly rather than earthly things, but there is absolutely no suggestion in Ecclesiastes that the Preacher believed in life after death. Indeed another book of the Jewish canon seems to be aimed at Ecclesiastes in refutation. The book of Ben Sira advises: "Seek not out the things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength. But what is commanded thee, think upon with reverence; for it is not needful for thee to see with thine eyes the things that are in secret. Be not curious in unnecessary matters: for more things are showed unto thee than men understand" (Sirach 3:21). So, I interpret, "Just believe and follow".

In my view the ancient Jewish Sages were right to be worried about the corrupting effect of the words of the Preacher. They are quite contrary to the central message of the Judeo- Christian tradition.

A few years ago my children bought me a fridge magnet which says “The Auld yin. Bin a places, done a things, but just canny mind it.” We all thought it was funny – so far. Is that also futility?

So, is this really the way it is? Is life ultimately meaningless? If there is no threat or promise of an afterlife to worry about, is life just vanity, futility, senselessness, pointlessness?

Today we have the intellectual descendants of the nihilists and of the existentialists. And especially we have the Darwinists in more strength than ever before.

Nietzsche, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, is usually seen as the arch-nihilist who saw the world, and especially human existence as empty of meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth or any essential value. Famously, he wrote about The Death of God. For him, as Wikipedia puts it so well, ‘morality presents us with meaning, whether this is created or ‘implanted,’ which helps us get through life’. This is exactly why Nietzsche states that nihilism as “absolute valuelessness” or “nothing has meaning” is dangerous, or even (to quote him directly) “the danger of dangers”. “It is through valuation that people survive and endure the danger, pain and hardships they face in life. The complete destruction of all meaning and all values would lead to an existence of apathy and stillness, where positive actions, affirmative actions, would be replaced by a state of reaction and destruction.’

The existentialists, especially Jean Paul Sartre, are also blamed for post-modern nihilism but, personally, on the contrary, I found Sartre and de Beauvoire to be saving figures. When, in the nineteen sixties, I read Sartre's novels and the novels of the French existentialists, like Camus, they helped me to make the jump to realise that a demand for a grand narrative of sin, redemption and reward and punishment in eternity to make all of life meaningful was a piece of petulant arrogance, a luxury which, if granted, would bring its own imprisonment. What Sartre did for me, then, was cause me to think that we have been spoiled, like children, by an arrogant Judeao-Christian priesthood which offered us a grand narrative of ultimate meaning (incidentally a corrupt and debased one). And they so raised our expectations with regard to meaning and purpose that when the Narrative collapses in the Death of God, we rebound, as a whole culture into nihilism. Sartre led me indirectly to think that humbler, more limited chunks of meaning were all that we can expect to attain and that we should embrace them with commitment and gusto.

For many people all that is necessary to give life meaning to life is relationships and reproduction. Love, in all its many senses, good and bad, is all. For some others, competition and status, even dominance, also give life meaning, each within its own lesser or greater arenas. But a significant, or even a dominant, majority still look for something more. Is this a significant part of what we sometimes refer to as spiritual hunger?

Reproduction and the raising of quality children as the major, if not the sole, meaning in life carries with it serious dangers. Long ago Malthus warned of the human tendency to overpopulate the earth.

World-wide, we are already reaching frightening figures. The ancient Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Conquest, War, Famine and Death are not operating with the same power to limit our numbers because, in our magnificent conquest of some of our environment, we have learned how to stave some significant forces of them off. Climate change and the possible human role in this have received much greater attention than the need to consciously limit our natural pleasures in reproduction and in the rearing of quality children, possibly because any limitation strikes at the root of, not only so much passing human pleasure in sexuality, but also at the primary meaning of life for so many people. Ultimately, as sole, and even a major, source of meaning and purpose in life, that is a limited and downright dangerous one.

Just this summer the Darwinist Edward Wilson published his latest masterpiece, "The Social Conquest of Earth". That book advances the thinking which Dawkins popularised in the nineteen eighties. Dawkins in his classic "The Selfish Gene", summarised and popularised decades of thinking among biologists and geneticists and argued so devastatingly convincingly that natural selection among human populations, as with the populations of all other species under the sun, proceeded according to rules which resulted in two opposed patterns of sexual behaviour, each of which was successful depending on the circumstances. But Wilson contends that Dawkins' generation of biologists were looking only at selection within human groups, not between them.

Those of you who may have listened to me in previous sermons will know that for years I have argued that, based on psychological theories of attachment, humans are overwhelmingly tribal. We

learn our loyalties, our world view and our purposes in life from our families of origin and from the wider small community immediately around us. Now, I see Wilson as bringing a biological perspective which meshes beautifully with my own previous understanding of human nature.

Wilson has spent a large part of his life studying the social insects such as ants and bees. Each colony is a mass of co-operating individuals, sometimes divided into particular casts with special tasks, but functioning as a whole. In this insect world, competition for survival is not much an individual concern as a colony concern. The social insects and the co-operating tribal humans are the two most successful forms of life on earth and Wilson argues that the power of each lies with their ability to co-operate. Evolutionary psychologists have, for a few decades, been concerned with the evolution of the human brain or mind. Much of what they find can be woven into Wilson's psycho-social biology. Much of what we know of human nature is coming together in a convincing fusion of psycho-social biology.

Wilson's concept of multilevel selection involves both the old selection for health, productivity and dominance WITHIN the tribe but also the selection BETWEEN tribes and, learning from the insect world, the tribe which co-operates best within itself has the evolutionary advantage over one which cannot.

This may mean that the altruism, which my colleagues in the University of Glasgow used to study, and which religions the world over have valued, is a vital feature of successful human tribes. It also may mean that the self-sacrificing love and service to the

community, say in the emergency services, in the military or in political or economic leadership, often at the expense of family ties, is extremely valuable for the survival of the tribe in Darwinian terms. If this is accepted, so many other issues fall into place. The role of the gay population as not immediately reproductive but culturally and socially contributory, is valued and is explained.

This perspective, too, goes a long way to explain the peculiar balance within each of us of “selfish competition” of all kinds within the tribe but balanced against the generous altruism of many individuals, expending their lives for the tribe as a whole. Perhaps the eternal fight within each of us which used to be described as that between good and evil, as far back as the Zoroastrians of thousands of years BC, is just this very evolutionarily determined balance between INTRA TRIBAL competition of individuals and BETWEEN tribal competition in which the success of any single tribe depends largely on how well they co-operate internally, not compete internally. If there were no pro-social (or eusocial as Wilson calls them) individuals within tribes or larger human groups and all we were ever concerned with was the reproduction of the species and the preservation of the immediate family, there would be no civilisation as we know it.

The psycho-social biology of tribalism provides some important perspectives on the contemporary problems of our global village, quite apart from the overweening spectre of overpopulation. The most obvious corollary of the new psychobiological fusion is that peace between tribes is not at all the natural product of our evolution but that, with the new powers of humankind, it is essential for the preservation of the human species. The

alternative to peace and co-operation is the domination of a single human tribe or, in present day terms, one nation over all others, perhaps the one that has the best technology or even just the best IT.

The preservation of the environment looks to be impossible without co-operation between tribes at what we would call international level. Is that possible without a world-view shared by all, a view perhaps produced painfully over many decades and probably through many natural disasters before all the tribes of humanity wake up and realise they have to co-operate? Perhaps too late?

Without realising it, or labelling myself as such, I have been a humanist over most of the decades of my life, even when I thought I was actually a Quaker. I have devoted my time and energies to many altruistic causes which benefited my own narrow tribe. Indeed that was what my personal family of origin was mostly about and they gave themselves over many generations unstintingly in a peculiar similarity to many military families. So I have worked in a world-wide community of scientists who mostly tend to be humanists. On a more limited scene I have worked for the well-being of the people of Scotland and latterly for those of Greater Glasgow through the amelioration of the effects of the abuse of alcohol and gambling, both as therapist and as manager. These are all prosocial or “eusocial” activities, as Wilson would call them. All assume a form of speciesism, that humanity or the whole human tribe is best. Ultimately I was working, not just for Greater Glasgow or Scotland, but for humanity.

The continuing evolution of the human species is fascinating, and, if you follow Wilson's discourse, you might see that the process of evolution at its higher stages is a synergy between culture and instinctive and intellectual aptitudes for that very culture.

But this species of ours, although it may command our instinctive loyalty does not have a guaranteed continuing existence. All our idealism and humanitarian commitment may end in long term destruction, or even self-destruction. All the camaraderie and pleasure of working for the good of whatever tribe or mini-tribe I associated myself with can easily be seen as, in the long run, useless, vanity, however much I enjoyed it. If you look closely enough and carry inquiry far enough, humanism is ultimately meaningless too and just as futile as the Grand Narrative or The Preacher's life of good works and pursuit of wisdom.

But that background fact does mean that we should cease to believe in commitment and service to anyone or any cause. A limited, short term meaning and purpose is much better than none at all.

As Sartre somewhere argues, first you make the commitment and then comes the meaning. That may seem paradoxical or irrational to a rationalist, but it works. An uncommitted life IS meaningless and purposeless. You could easily parody my stance here in favour of commitment by portraying it as "Action is all. Just get going, just commit and meaning will come to you." You could point to extremes. One extreme is the constant need of the heroin addict to find a fix, a need which gives life a daily drama as he or she strives to maintain this. Another extreme might be Shakespeare's

Macbeth who, in his final moment of despair, after the crimes he was enticed into by his wife had come home to roost, challenged Macduff to a last commitment to combat. Famously in his last stance he is portrayed as saying, “Yet I will try the last. Before my body I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff, And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough'” That may be seen as a suicidal extreme form of commitment and it is not what is needed any more than the drug addict's desperate searches. The kind of commitment I am talking of here requires only a small degree of connectedness to a person, to people or to a community and soupcons of energy and hope, and courage. Without that connectedness and courage lies the trap of meaningless and likely despair.

Humility is sometimes seen as just the obeisance before powers greater than ourselves. It was cultivated as a virtue by priests and lords who wanted to keep the serfs compliant. But a much better conception of humility is the realistic assessment of our actual position and prospects in the world – even in the face of our narcissistic egos, arrogantly demanding to know ultimate meaning. By analogy, realistically we cannot replace the Grand Narrative, even with an ultimately meaningful humanism or speciesism. But we CAN find many satisfactions in more humble drives to improve our position and that of our dear ones and of our wider community.

So let us not be ashamed of our little limited meaningful projects. Let us celebrate them, large or small, and let us commit ourselves to them with all our energies and abilities. They save us from nihilism and despair. They advance the species that we are an instinctive part of, and perhaps they are life itself.

And then, beyond that, there is always the very slim possibility that the species *homo sapiens* might just survive or even be the vehicle for further evolution into what we can only imagine.

Edward FitzGerald's fanciful and famous translation of the Persian Poet, Omar Kayyam

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,

Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit

Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,

Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

Yes, life has a relentless progression, but do we need a belief in resurrection, in the redemption and the forgiveness of sins to face this existence of our's? Does our life have no meaning beyond the grand narrative of life on earth as a preparation and a trial for an eternity from which we can only be redeemed by the sacrifice of a Christ? Does your life and mine have no meaning and do they peter out in utter futility with the extinction of the species? Or do we commit ourselves in humble realism to what meaning we have and enjoy it.