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Debating God: conversations about God in Albert Camus' *The Plague*

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This piece considers the narrative of Albert Camus' 1947 novel The Plague, *in which a team of doctors led by Doctor Rieux, and other helpers, combat the plague at Oran in North Africa. After a consideration of Camus' religious (or a-religious) views, a number of episodes from the novel are explored in detail, to reveal Camus' own journey of understanding throughout the novel. The recent assertion of Giles Fraser that many have misunderstood the nature of God's power is always kept in mind. The appropriate response to suffering is a commitment to loving service, rather than an attempt at explaining the reasons for suffering's existence. Even when God appears to be 'hidden', compassion and love may be considered marks of his presence.*

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Introduction: God and power

In his article 'God Is Not the Puppet Master' Giles Fraser writes about the answers some Oxford undergraduates whom he was teaching gave to the question, 'If God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can suffering exist?' Typical answers were: 'Suffering makes us better people', 'Without suffering the world would become the sort of toy world where nothing has moral weight', and even 'Devils are responsible, not God.'[1] After some discussion Fraser attributes the students' responses to a false understanding of the concept of 'power'. He writes with characteristic pungency: 'The idea of an omnipotent God who can calm the sea and defeat our enemies turns out to be a part of that great fantasy of power that has corrupted the Christian imagination for centuries.'[2]

However, the problem facing so many Christians is that miracles involving the avoidance of suffering feature so much in our Christian traditions and teaching. If we consider only the first written Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, there are at least 14 miracles of healing, plus the feeding of the 5,000, the 4,000, the calming of the storm, the walking on water and the withering of the fig tree. Many of these miracles are also recorded in other Gospels. The miracles of healing are performed mainly in direct response to the pleas of sufferers whom Jesus meets. The first miracle Mark records is even in the opening chapter of the Gospel. It looks to many Christians as if people Jesus meets only need to be present and open their mouths for him to heal them. In our day the impression is that such miracles rarely happen now, and that when a Christian witnesses the acute suffering of a loved family member she is destined to be disappointed and feels either that she has not sufficient faith or that God is uninterested or impotent to meet the fervent pleas of his followers.

In this study I wish to consider the issue of unwanted or unwarranted suffering in the light of Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, written in 1947, the iconic statement of the problem in twentieth-century literature. Through a study of key scenes in the novel, I will consider whether, in Camus' view, God exists and is present in the sufferings of the victims and the heroic endeavours of the team of doctors and their assistants in the fight against the plague.[3] There will be no consideration of the suggestion that the novel has political implications as an allegory of the French nation's entrapment during the 1939–45 war. Instead I wish to retain contact with Giles Fraser's assertion that Christians have misunderstood the notion of divine 'power' and to consider his alternative view that, as he says, enables him to keep his Christian faith.

God, *The Plague* and some antecedents

The plague takes place in Oran, an Algerian coastal city, where Camus had lived for several years and which he describes in a 1939 piece not only as 'this extraordinary city where boredom sleeps',[4] but also as 'a city where nothing attracts the mind, where the very ugliness is anonymous, where the past is reduced to nothing'.[5] Oran is geographically isolated and cannot have been infected from outside. The plague first appears in hundreds of rats that emerge into the daylight and die, and then it spreads to human beings and the rats suddenly disappear. Doctor Rieux, the main character of the novel, and his team of doctors, administrators and volunteers strive tirelessly to stem the spread of the plague. Medicines, serums and other means of prevention are in very short supply.

Rieux cannot understand how the city could have been infected: it seemed to defy all reason. When he meets Grand, an eccentric citizen attempting to become an author constantly writing and rewriting the first sentence of his book in order to achieve perfection, who becomes a volunteer in the effort to contain the plague, Rieux 'couldn't picture such eccentricities existing in a plague-stricken community, and he concluded that the chances were all against the plague's making any headway against our fellow-citizens' (p. 42). However, his optimism is soon confounded, though he is cautious in declaring absolutely that the plague has indeed arrived. He is able to devote himself totally to his task, as his sick wife had been moved to a sanatorium away from the city and his mother, who plays a significant part later, has arrived to care for him. Incidentally, Rieux's wife is not a victim of the plague.

At this point religion becomes an issue in the thoughts of the characters in the novel. It is generally thought that Camus did not believe in God. However, his experience of Christians gave him a good knowledge of the doctrines of the faith and a great deal of respect for Christians he knew from his days during the Occupation. Writing about *The State of Siege*, the play that he wrote immediately after *The Plague* and on the same subject, he says: 'In my novel, I had to do justice to those among my Christian friends whom I met during the Occupation in a struggle that was just.' On the other hand, in the play that he sets in Cadiz in Spain he is very critical of the Spanish Church, which he describes in the next sentence as 'odious'.[6] We know that in 1936, at the University of Algiers, he studied Christian metaphysics and St Augustine, reading Pascal and Kierkegaard among others, and that after the completion of *The Plague* he read Simone Weil and edited several of her works.[7] Differences

of opinion have arisen about his exact position in relation to Christian belief. Philip Thody, the Camus scholar, talks of 'Camus' agnosticism',[8] with 'agnostic' defined in the Oxford Dictionary as 'a person who believes that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God or of anything beyond material phenomena'.

However, the theologian John Macquarrie, writing frequently of Camus' atheism, states at one point Camus' belief that 'There is no God … man is entirely abandoned to fixing his own norms and determining his values and what he will become.'[9] Yet he too admits the greater complexity of the issue when he writes that 'the unfaith of Camus has elements of belief'.[10] In *The Plague*, Camus' ambivalence in relation to the existence of God is demonstrated and there is evidence that God is more relevant to events in the novel, if only because of the amount of discussion about him and some important observations by the character Rieux.

In his collection of early writings, including *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes about the nature of the absurd and at one point he expresses the familiar dilemma that Giles Fraser poses above: 'In the presence of God there is less a problem of freedom than a problem of evil. You know the alternative: either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible, but God is not all-powerful.'[11] As, according to Camus' statement, God is not all-powerful, humankind must strive to use its strength with maximum effective effort to compensate for God's limitations: 'There is but one moral code that the absurd man can accept, the one that is not separated from God: the one that is dictated. But it so happens that he lives outside that God.'[12]

The futility of speculation and the necessity of concentrating on what can be achieved concretely leads us inevitably towards *The Plague*, which also grapples specifically with Camus' assertion developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* of the futility of repetitive human effort that leads to nothing and means constant repeated attempts at the impossible. At this juncture we need to consider simply one use of the term 'godless' that Camus employs when he writes: 'This absurd, godless world is … peopled with men who think clearly and who have ceased to hope.'[13] The term 'godless' in itself does not confirm that Camus is denying the existence of God. It was used for instance by Dietrich Bonhoeffer several times in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, written in 1944, when he was describing his concept of 'religionless Christianity'.

When Bonhoeffer describes how God is the 'God who forsakes us' at the moment of the sense of abandonment that Christ experiences in Gethsemane and at Calvary, he says:

> Man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world … he must therefore plunge himself into the life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to transfigure it.[14]

Paradoxically, by living a 'worldly' life, a person is participating in the suffering of God. He continues:

> Jesus does not call men to a new religion, but to life … When we speak of God in a non-religious way, we must not gloss over the ungodliness of the world, but expose it in a new light. Now that it has come of age, the world is more godless, and it is for that very reason nearer to God than ever before.[15]

For Bonhoeffer, a 'godless' world is one in which humanity is increasingly dependent on the true God stripped of mere institutional religious affiliation. For Camus, a 'godless' world is one where humanity is reliant on their own efforts, which demand lucidity and intelligence if obstacles are to be overcome, but which are in his view inevitably doomed to repetitive failure. Both are rejecting traditional ecclesiastical allegiance that does not reflect their experience.

Camus always retains his consistent fairness towards the Christians he knew and respected during the Occupation when, in his historical and philosophical analysis in his 1957 work *The Rebel*, he writes about Friedrich Nietzsche's view of 'the death of God'. 'Contrary to the opinion of certain of his Christian critics, Nietzsche did not form a project to kill God. He found him dead in the soul of his contemporaries.'[16] He continues this a little later when he says: 'God had been killed by Christianity, in that Christianity has secularized the sacred. Here we must understand historical Christianity and "its profound and contemptible duplicity".'[17] Camus distinguishes between active, committed Christians and the historical institutionalised Church, which he sees as reflecting the death of Christian service and commitment to the world. Thody sees Camus as recognising that 'religious faith was dead in the here and now, an acknowledgement that fewer and fewer people believed in God in any real sense'.[18]

This brings us back to the qualities necessary to combat the evils in the world as he sees it. Clear thinking or 'lucidity', clearly stated in the sentence 'I establish my lucidity in the midst of what negates it',[19] is the virtue of the one who sees his role as furthering the morality of non-speculation and action in the face of the problems confronting the world. Even in his earliest work, *L'Envers et L'Endroit* (*Betwixt and Between*), published in 1939, 'lucidité' is seen as a prime virtue in the attitude of the enlightened, aware person, a term that occurs either as a noun or in its adjectival form four times in this short work and will be considered in greater detail shortly.

Before we return to consider *The Plague*, we should reflect briefly on some thoughts of the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak, who, writing about the way in which novelists' own personalities and attitudes develop and change in the course of writing a novel, says in a recent article:

> A novelist is always wiser when inside a novel than when outside. Stories shape their storytellers as much as storytellers shape their stories. We are a different person when we start a book and by the time it is completed, something deep inside has shifted for ever.[20]

While it is accepted that Camus was agnostic and highly critical of religious orthodoxy, as Elif Shafak says, a creative novelist develops as the characters and situations in the novel develop, which must allow for significant changes in attitude towards God to take place in the course of the novel. This must be borne in mind as we now return to our consideration of *The Plague*.

The first sermon

When the plague has spread widely within the city, the Jesuit priest Father Paneloux preaches the first of his two sermons that are crucial to our understanding of the issues in our theme. He had already gained a reputation from lectures he had given of being a 'stalwart champion at its most precise and purest' (p. 78). A week of prayer had been organised for the city. In his opening salvo he makes his views very clear to the citizens: '"Calamity has come upon you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it"' (p. 80). This opening is in fact the gist of his entire sermon, which he develops from a historical, biblical viewpoint as follows:

> 'The first time this scourge occurs in history, it was wielded to strike down the enemies of God. Pharaoh set himself up against the divine will, and the plague beat him to his knees. Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees.' (p. 80)

He then divides the citizens into two groups, the just men and the evildoers. The former have nothing to fear, he says. When he states '"this calamity was not willed by God"' (p. 81), he appears to be contradicting what he had originally preached, but his argument becomes clearer when he talks of God's long-suffering compassion and patience. But '"His eternal hope was too long deferred, and now He has turned His face away from us. And so, God's light withdrawn, we walk in darkness, in the thick darkness of this plague"' (p. 81).

When he continues with a lurid description of the '"angel of the pestilence"' hovering over their rooftops, biding its time before destroying them, all the citizens will perish '"with the chaff"' (p. 82). The citizens have failed God in worship and with what he calls their '"criminal indifference"' (p. 82). Yet this does not exclude '"the fierce hunger of His love"' (p. 82). He maintains that '"God wished to see you longer and more often; that is His manner of loving, and indeed, it is the only manner of loving"' (p. 82). Thus God's compassion and love have ordained '"good and evil in everything; wrath and pity; the plague and your salvation"' (p. 83). This, he believes, is the light of God that '"illuminates the shadowed paths that lead towards deliverance. It reveals the will of God in action, unfailingly transforming evil into good"' (p. 83).

This is the consolation that Father Paneloux offers the people, a consolation that he had never felt more strongly, '"the immanence of divine succour and Christian hope, granted to all alike"' (p. 84). It is not clear from this how he sees victims of the plague benefiting from the hope of salvation, unless it is a purely inward, spiritual grace offered to the dying. The author's subsequent ironical comment is that Paneloux ends on a note of faith and hope, 'that our fellow citizens would offer up to heaven that one prayer which is truly Christian, a prayer of love. And God would see to the rest' (p. 84).

By 'love' it is not specified whether it is God's love in healing the citizens of their diseases or a love that is expressed in some other form of response as yet unknown. This will emerge in the course of the novel. In the meantime, the team of doctors, administrators and volunteers have to combat the spread of

the plague. Responses to the sermon differ from an acceptance of the priest's 'irrefutable arguments' to resignation or determination to continue the fight. Tarrou, one of the volunteers who becomes the close friend and collaborator of Doctor Rieux, understands the priest's fervour and the tendency to use rhetoric to make the point especially at the outbreak of the plague, but counsels silence and waiting (p. 98). The response of the people is to grab at any opportunity to lighten their load, either in seeking pleasure or in grasping for any consolation to follow the words of one zealous evangelist: '"God is great and good. Come unto Him"' (p. 102).

Debating God (1)

The reader has not yet learned of Rieux's reaction to Father Paneloux's sermon. This emerges in a discussion with Tarrou in which Rieux minimises the punitive implications of the sermon by saying charitably, '"Christians sometimes say that sort of thing without really thinking it. They're better than they seem"' (p. 105). This is the tolerant and understanding Camus remembering the Christians he knows from the Occupation. While Rieux agrees that the plague '"helps men to rise above themselves"' (p. 106), he is determined that the plague must be fought, and he believes that Paneloux who has never experienced a plague and is a man of learning has little knowledge of the truth in what he says.

When Tarrou asks Rieux if he believes in God, Rieux is evasive, as he says, '"fumbling in the dark"' (p. 106), wanting a definition, unable to answer in terms other than a practical effort to alleviate suffering. When Tarrou is puzzled that Rieux can show such devotion to the cause of healing when he cannot believe in God, Rieux replies that

> 'if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort … not even Paneloux who believed that he believed in such a God.'

Rieux believes that he is on the right road: 'in fighting against creation as he found it' (pp. 106–7). He has stated his position – that it is his job to cure the sick, against all the speculation about Providence, or love or good and evil.

At this point Rieux makes a statement that reveals a crucial strand of Camus' thinking about the nature and presence of God in the world. Having said '"I've

never managed to get used to seeing people die'", and having specifically raised the imminence of death, Rieux continues:

> 'Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heaven *where He sits in silence*?' (pp. 107–8)[21]

Whether Camus is an agnostic or not, this remark put into the mouth of Rieux demonstrates clearly that the doctor sees God as present in the universe, but so hidden from our sight and our efforts that one might as well assume his absence and set to work in our own strength to rectify the evils of the world and strive with our whole wills to bring about as much healing as is humanly possible. Speaking of the rejection of God in our own day, Rowan Williams says in a recent article:

> The violent rejection of a God who has failed to save or protect may open up a new picture of a God who isn't there to save or protect but just as what He is, the silent centre of a moral world.[22]

In Williams' view, while God is present in the centre of our world he is silent, presumably invisible to the agnostic eye, but nonetheless visible in the selfless service of those striving to alleviate the sufferings of the plague-stricken world of Doctor Rieux and his colleagues. Perhaps God, who has created our human faculties for fulfilment of his purposes, stands back deliberately in order to allow us the freedom to use these faculties to the maximum. The philosopher of religion David Pailin even suggests that God has to be largely invisible for humankind to be given the incentive to act autonomously and responsibly:

> It is arguable … that the divine activity must be largely, if not wholly, hidden in order for creatures to be relatively free to fulfil the divine will, that they may be in their own way responsible, autonomous and genuinely creative.[23]

Rieux's sense of God's hiddenness is frequently expressed by God's servants in the Old Testament, but in those instances his absence is usually seen as temporary, alleviated by his return to comfort and strengthen. In the first of just two examples reflecting estrangement from God, Psalm 27 has David pleading with the Lord:

> Do not hide your face from me,
> do not turn your servant away in anger. (Psalm 27:9)

And in Lamentations we read:

> I called on your name, O LORD,
> from the depths of the pit.
> You heard my plea: 'Do not close your ears
> to my cry for relief.' (Lamentations 3:55–56)[24]

In the question posed by Tarrou about whether Rieux believes in God, the answer is evasive, reflecting Rieux's great uncertainty. It is perhaps useful to examine two questions: whether one believes in God and whether God exists. The former might well elicit the answer that God exists, but that he is irrelevant to my life and to the activity of the world. An answer to the latter surely allows for a denial of the very existence of God, in which case humankind is either the product of chemical forces that have arisen by pure chance over billions of years or the product of a relentless evolutionary process, which, however, still presupposes an original prime cause. In any event, Thody's reference to 'the empty protest against a non-existent God which takes up so much time in *La Peste*'[25] is surely misplaced. Rieux is not protesting against a non-existent God, but an absent one, thus accepting that as human beings have been endowed with skills and resources we have to do the very best to achieve a victory over the plague. But, as he then admits, he is facing '"a never-ending defeat"' (p. 108) and reverts to his original point that we cannot speculate on a subject on which we know '"next to nothing"' (p. 109).

When Rieux then questions Tarrou on his motive for helping to deal with this crisis, Tarrou specifies his code of morals, and when pressed to define this his reply is simple but, for the purposes of our study, enlightening: '"Comprehension"'(p. 109).

'Comprehension' might also be expressed as 'lucidity', a virtue that, as said above, is with Camus since his earliest work and underpins Rieux's and Tarrou's approach to the task facing them. 'The evil … in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence', writes the narrator of this novel (who eventually turns out to be Rieux himself), as the attention now switches to Tarrou's attempts to gather a team of workers around him. Camus has stated the vital importance of 'lucidity', an intelligent systematic approach to tackling this impossible task in order to minimise its effects. In

previous works, 'lucidité' occurs very frequently. When disoriented on his arrival in Prague, recorded in *L'envers et L'endroit*, a moment of lucidity cures him of his anxieties over money,[26] but also later when confronting his confusing impressions of the city, he realises that he must exercise the two virtues of courage and awareness, to be 'courageous' and 'aware'.[27] Awareness – intelligent understanding of a problem – needs to be supplemented by courage. These two strengths accompany Camus in his thinking throughout his life and certainly underpin Rieux and his team in their attack on the plague, even when, as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the result is a 'never-ending defeat' epitomised in the gods' condemnation of Sisyphus in rolling the boulder repeatedly up the hill only to see it rolling back again. But 'the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory'.[28] In recognising clearly the futility of his repeated failure, Sisyphus, and in our case Rieux, achieves the fullness of his humanity, what Camus describes elsewhere as 'the staggering evidence of man's sole dignity: the dogged revolt against his condition, perseverance in an effort considered sterile'.[29] In our novel, this doggedness is also reflected in the character of the volunteer Grand, who throughout the story is attempting to perfect the first sentence of his novel and is doomed to failure, but, in Camus' eyes, achieves greatness in the effort. Patrick McCarthy suggests that 'Grand's inability to go beyond the first sentence is a parody of the anonymous narrator's inability to explain the plague.'[30] Repeated persistence is also epitomised in the character of the journalist Rambert, who finds his attempts to escape from Oran constantly frustrated and finally decides to remain in Oran to help the team in its efforts.

At this point love starts to assume greater importance in the fight against the plague. Rieux declares that he is not only concerned with doing his job as well as possible, but he also says: '"What interests me is living and dying for what one loves"' (p. 136), a difficult task now that 'the plague had gradually killed off in all of us the faculty not of love only, but even of friendship' (p. 150). The shift of focus on to love takes us back to the original response of Giles Fraser to the findings of his students. When Fraser dismisses the idea of 'that great fantasy of power that has corrupted the Christian imagination for centuries',[31] he has attempted to respond to the question why suffering exists in a world where God is believed to be all-powerful and all-loving. His response, 'that Christians are called to recognize that the essence of the divine being is not power but compassion and love', raises questions that we will attempt to answer from now on. To approach this, we need to digress into the reflections of some other religious writers and thinkers.

The American scholar Harold S. Kushner gives a clue in the title of one of his well-known books *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He is not answering the question 'Why?' but the question 'When?'[32] This shifts the focus on to one of practical action, as opposed to attempting to find answers to questions inviting God's reasons for causing suffering. Philip Yancey attempts to answer the question posed in the title of his book, *Where is God When It Hurts?* Rhetorically questioning whether God desired the Holocaust and the death of his own Son, Yancey says that since both happened and God, because of his character, could not possibly desire atrocities such as the Holocaust, 'the question then moves from the unanswerable "Why?" to another question, "To what end?"'[33] The implication is that religious people have to focus on the results of the calamity and attempt to deal with what arises out of it and how the situation can be remedied. This means that even if the reasons for the calamity in the first place remain hidden, people of good will may at least seek to apply concrete measures to minimise the effects and possibly prevent a recurrence. And this is undertaken in a spirit of love and compassion, enhanced by clarity of thought (lucidity) and courage. The question of faith does not arise in the response of Rieux and his colleagues. They are showing their love and compassion in their response, even if the results are negative despite their 'flashes of lucidity' (p. 150). The narrator admits that their love, though it persists, serves nothing and often is ousted from all their hearts by 'blind endurance' (p. 152).

Paneloux, Rieux and the second sermon

The next important development in the novel is that Father Paneloux offers to join the team of volunteers and is particularly affected and influenced in his thinking and preaching by his presence at the bedside of the small boy whose death from the plague is so graphically described by the narrator. As the child is dying in such agony, Father Paneloux sees that his fervent prayer, '"My God, spare this child"' (p. 176), remains unanswered. In his ensuing conversation with Rieux after the death of the child, Paneloux has to admit that, contrary to his reproaches in his first sermon, the child was innocent. His exchange with Rieux, from which we have extracted their words, confirms that Paneloux is not able to discard his religious language, but demonstrates that he and Rieux are united in the same cause. Rieux speaks first:

> 'There are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt.'
>
> 'I understand. That sort of thing is revolting. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.'
>
> 'No, Father, I have a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.'
>
> 'Ah, doctor, I've just realized what is meant by "grace".'
>
> 'It's something I haven't got; that I know. But I'd rather not discuss it with you. We're working side by side for something that unites us – beyond blasphemy and prayers. And it's the only thing that matters.'
>
> 'Yes, yes, you, too, are working for man's salvation.'
>
> 'Salvation's much too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with men's health; and for me his health comes first.' (p. 178)

When Paneloux apologises for his outburst of emotion, Rieux confirms the unity existing between them: '"God Himself can't part us now"' (p. 179).

When Paneloux preaches his second sermon, his tone is quite different from his earlier one. He is still absolute in the choice he poses, but he now addresses the people as 'we', whereas previously he had addressed them as 'you'. He now confesses to ignorance and uncertainty concerning the reasons for the plague, but says that the choice is either to '"believe everything or to deny everything"' (p. 183). In his words, he has gained the humility to say:

> 'It was not easy to say what he was about to say – since it was God's will, we, too, should will it. Thus and thus only the Christian could face the problem squarely and … pierce to the heart of the supreme issue, the essential choice. And his choice would be to believe everything, so as not to be forced into denying everything.' (p. 184)

While Rieux would object to this choice, he would probably agree with what Paneloux now says: '"We must go straight to the heart of that which is unacceptable, precisely because it is thus that we are constrained to make our choice."' But he now resorts to the religious language that Rieux finds unacceptable: '"The sufferings of children were our bread of affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger"' (pp. 184–5). Paneloux's next note, however, is of total involvement in the task of healing: '"My brothers, each of us must be the one who stays!"' (p. 185).

While he wishes to be fully involved in the fight against the plague, he trusts fully in God's goodness at all costs and states that there is no middle course between faith and unbelief, even to the extent that if we do not love God we must hate him. '"And who would dare to hate Him?"' the narrator has him ask (p. 186). This is the first and only time that hate has been suggested as a reaction to God, but Rieux has never spoken about hate. Paneloux is unable to resist the temptation to create division and to make the distinction between good and evil into a source of conflict in the response to the crisis. But, fortunately, Camus does not pursue this course and the story continues on a note of compassion and love.

Debating God (2)

Following Paneloux's death, probably from the plague though this is uncertain, Rieux and Tarrou discuss Tarrou's history and motivation in combating the plague and get to know each other as friends. This phase in the story, which becomes an idyllic interlude, is a welcome distraction from the struggle against the plague and represents Tarrou's attempt to find peace in his spirit. Through his upbringing, the influence of his severe father, the Director of Public Prosecutions whose life is dominated by the desire to punish, Tarrou feels that he is part of a general, collective plague pervading society and the human spirit, and he finds himself on the side of the victims. He is dedicated to alleviating suffering and finding peace. While unable to believe in God, he nonetheless is hoping to become a saint, but, he asks: '"Can one be a saint without God?"' (p. 208). The term 'saint' is commonly applied to a particularly virtuous person whose character reflects an almost superhuman goodness. Tarrou may well be in that position, but this does not help us in our understanding of the issue whether God is present in these events and in Tarrou's nature. 'Sainthood' is clearly not a concept that appeals to Rieux, who nevertheless values Tarrou's dedication. When Rieux says, '"Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me"' (p. 209), he is confirming that his concern is with carrying out the task of healing, not cultivating any personal heroic aura. Lev Braun's observation that 'Camus tends … to regard heroism and sanctity as secondary virtues' is confirmed by the fact that Rieux's eyes are set primarily on the unselfish task before him.[34] 'Sanctity' is a spiritual concept, which, like 'salvation' in Rieux's conversation with Paneloux, means nothing to the doctor who is intent solely on physical health. But from this conversation there emerges the important point that the plague may be interpreted as pervading

the entire human race, which a Christian theologian might well equate to the corruption of humanity through original sin. Camus, however, sees this all-pervading plague as the catalyst for a corresponding act of solidarity in our response to alleviate it through collective human effort. The interlude ends with the two going for a swim together. It is almost as if the plague has receded. Perhaps Camus felt the need for temporary relief from the sternly challenging course of his narrative.

When it looks eventually as if the plague is receding and the rats reappear, there is the suggestion that the wheel has turned full circle, and that the reappearance of the rats may signal an eventual return of the plague. Ironically, Tarrou now falls victim to the plague at this late stage. He has shown admirable courage and sympathy during his struggle for the victims, but now in the midst of his illness he finds love, the love of Rieux's mother who tends him and watches over him as he is dying. Tarrou, who has avoided strong human relationships throughout his independent life, now finds a strong affinity with her, 'gazing so intently at her that Madame Rieux rose and switched off the bedside lamp' (p. 234). It is almost as if she is switching off the light of his life and letting him find the peace of final sleep.

When Tarrou dies, Rieux wonders if he has indeed found the peace that he had been seeking. Rieux is as if benumbed by events and this is his state of mind when he calmly hears and accepts the news of his wife's death in the town so far away. With the plague now virtually over, life returns to normal, but there is always the possibility of the return of the plague. The final note recalls *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in that 'the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good' (p. 252). The reappearance of the rats is a reminder that the plague could reappear, even though the people and the medical teams have found some temporary respite.

Conclusion

So how can we assess whether God has been present and active in the events of this story when the author is so sceptical and agnostic? Bearing in mind the words of Elif Shafak quoted above, that 'stories shape their storytellers as much as storytellers shape their stories',[35] in the words of Jean-Claude Brisville, Camus lives with 'an enigma at the centre of his universe, and everyone hastens to interpret it in his own way'.[36] On this basis each reader is entitled to her own view, and one could say that the values are only present when the reader finds

them. Marcel Proust writes: 'We feel that our wisdom begins where the author's finishes, and we would like him to give us answers, but all he can do is give us wishes.'[37] The historian David Reynolds, in his consideration of First World War literature, says: 'There is nothing definitive about an author's intention. Most significant works of art can be read in various ways; their open-endedness is, indeed, what helps make them significant.'[38] Clearly, an author may be unaware of the unconscious influences pervading his work and the impressions created in the reactions of his readers. All the same, if a work is consistently atheistic and amoral, we would probably be unable to find God enshrined in it in any way.

However, Camus is not only understanding of his Christian contemporaries – even if he disagrees with them – but he also indicates in *The Plague* that Rieux acknowledges that God is present in '"the heaven where he sits in silence"' (p. 108). Because he sees God as silent and absent from their immediate situation it is better, in his view, to try to combat the plague without God and simply not believe in his relevance.

Camus believes that our humanity is, for practical purposes, all we have to rely on. Rowan Williams raises the point that other human beings often ask a question that is different from the one that Christians ask. He writes: 'For a great many people, the burning question about faith is not just "Can anyone believe this?" but "Can anyone live like this?"'[39] They feel that the Christian life is for living and, as ultimate values are so uncertain and matters of faith, they must pursue the course of action that meets the specific need. Rieux in his conversation with Paneloux shows his distrust of religious language, and Tarrou too says that '"all our troubles spring from our failure to use plain, clean-cut language"'(p. 208). Paneloux from his traditions, which have become instinctive and ingrained, talks of salvation, while Rieux talks of health and healing. However, Jesus himself healed and still heals and the healing in the Gospels is only occasionally specifically linked with the forgiveness of sins. And in the Gospels we find clear evidence that Jesus regarded practical action and the ability to meet the immediate need as more valuable in his sight than statements of belief alone. When Jesus specifies the two great commandments, love for God and love of one's neighbour (Mark12:30–31),[40] love for one's neighbour is not separated from love for God. Rather, love for God is evidenced in our love for our neighbour. A brief glance at the parable of the good Samaritan is sufficient to demonstrate this.

Having earlier proclaimed that he has come to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah to 'preach good news to the poor' and 'proclaim freedom for the prisoners and

recovery of sight for the blind' (Luke 4:18–19), Jesus speaks specifically, according to Matthew, of the essentially practical ministry of the Christian to her less fortunate neighbour when we are instructed to tend to the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoners, the homeless and the sick as acts that we are performing as to himself (Matthew 26:34–45). Rowan Williams continues the reflection begun with his question above when he says in relation to the Easter message:

> When all's said and done, the call is to every one of us. We need to hear what is so often the question that's *really* being asked when people say, 'How do you know?' And perhaps the only response that is fully adequate, fully in tune with the biblical witness to the resurrection, is to say simply, 'Are you hungry? Here is food.'[41]

It is difficult to attempt to judge the inspiration for loving and caring actions that we see every day and that may or may not be directly related in the mind of the doer to the force of the love of God driving them. In Jeremiah we read that our covenant with God will no longer be a matter of outward observance:

> 'This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
> after that time,' declares the LORD.
> 'I will put my law in their minds
> and write it on their hearts.
> I will be their God and they will be my people.
> No longer will a man teach his neighbour,
> or a man his brother, saying: 'Know the LORD,'
> because they will all know me,
> from the least of them to the greatest,'
> declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:33–34)

It is the ideal of all religion that love should be so deeply implanted in the hearts of the people and that our loving actions should have become so natural and instinctive to us that we become unaware of the very nature of our motivation. This is echoed in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus tells his hearers and his disciples that 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:21). If our deepest desire and our greatest interest is buried deep in our hearts, if it is the matter of the greatest importance to us, it drives and fills our motivation and our actions. This means that a doctor, carrying out his duties and healing the sick, obeying the deepest instincts born of training and

experience, from love of the patient and from the impelling desire to work his best for the patient, could be said to be fulfilling the deepest desires of his heart where his treasure is to be found, whether or not he is specifically aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit within him. Perhaps God is best glorified when we are unaware of what we are bringing to his cause. We are told, again in the Sermon on the Mount: '"when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret'" (Matthew 6:3–4). While it is good to feel the movement of the Spirit of God working in our hearts, and this can happen without spiritual pride, there are many who do his will who, throughout their lives, remain ignorant of how the Spirit moves within them without their knowledge, but simply do what needs to be done and thus further his kingdom.

If we return to the thoughts of Giles Fraser expressed in response to the speculations of his students, he states his position on the undeserved suffering of the innocent and what it says about an all-powerful and all-loving God: 'Christians are called to recognize that the essence of the divine being is not power but compassion and love.'[42] *The Plague* shows abundant evidence of both compassion and love, but it is clear also that God's 'power' is not confined to miraculous demonstrations of healing power or acts that change the workings of nature as in the calming of the storm. God's power is demonstrated in gentle, humble, less obvious ways, countless examples of which can be seen in acts of unselfish and sacrificial service known to us all throughout all time. The 'gentle whisper' that Elijah hears following the powerful wind that 'tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD' and the earthquake that follows it (1 Kings 19:11–12) is evidenced in the quiet determined actions of active faithful Christians who, while uncertain of the beliefs of the Bible, the Church, the priesthood and Jesus himself, know in their hearts that they must respond to the needs of the world about them according to the compelling inner voice of conscience and sheer good sense. From what Camus says, expressed in his writings and in this case through Rieux, the Church's theology of an incarnate Son of God, Saviour of the world, bearing the world's sin in his crucifixion, are tenets to which he is unable to subscribe. However, whether Camus believes in God or not, and whether Rieux and his team believe in God, their sacrificial response to the needs of the victims of the plague could be taken to demonstrate that Rieux, Tarrou and even Camus himself are in the position of the man who comes to Jesus asking: '"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'" When Jesus sees that he has answered with the two key commandments, to love God and love his neighbour, Jesus tells him

'"You are not far from the kingdom of God"' (Mark12:28–34). Just as Rieux demonstrates that his business is not salvation but healing, dealing with the immediate medical needs of sufferers, thus showing his love for them in their plight, so we are inevitably driven to the conclusion that Jesus makes: 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25:40). The person who responds to the immediate physical, material needs of her neighbour is in fact ministering both to her neighbour and to Jesus himself and demonstrating both her faith in him and her love for him.

Notes

1. Giles Fraser, article in *The Guardian*, 8 January 2005, reproduced in Giles Fraser, *Christianity with Attitude*, London: Canterbury Press, 2007, p. 43.
2. Fraser, *Christianity*, p. 44.
3. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (French: *La Peste*), trans. Stuart Gilbert, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1960. As this is the main text in our study, all further references to it will be in brackets in the text.
4. Albert Camus, 'The Minotaur or The Stop in Oran', from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, London: Penguin, 1975, p. 160.
5. Camus, 'Minotaur', p. 149.
6. Albert Camus, 'Documents' to *L'État de Siège* (The State of Siege), Paris: Gallimard, 1998, p. 210. My translation.
7. Jean-Clause Brisville, *Camus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1956, pp. 23 and 25 respectively.
8. Philip Thody, *Albert Camus*, London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 3.
9. John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, London: Pelican, 1973, p. 50.
10. Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, p, 200.
11. Albert Camus, in 'An Absurd Reasoning', from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 55.
12. Albert Camus, in 'The Absurd Man', from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 64.
13. Camus, 'The Absurd Man', p. 85.
14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, London: Collins Fontana, 1960, pp. 122–123.
15. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 123–124.
16. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (French: *L'Homme Révolté*), trans. Anthony Bower, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1971, p. 59.
17. Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 61.
18. Thody, *Camus*, pp. 89–90.
19. Camus, 'The Absurd Man', p. 82.
20. Elif Shafak, *The Observer*, 22 March 2015, p. 47.
21. My emphasis.
22. Rowan Williams, 'Blasphemy can provoke violence – and be a progressive force within religion', *New Statesman*, 4 June 2015, p. 42.
23. David A. Pailin, *Groundwork of Philosophy of Religion*, London: Epworth Press, 1986, p. 154.

24. Biblical references are to the New International Version.
25. Thody, *Camus*, p. 59.
26. Albert Camus, *L'envers et l'endroit*, Paris: Gallimard folio, 1958, pp. 76–77. My translation. The book is also translated as 'Betwixt and Between'.
27. Camus, *L'envers*, p. 94.
28. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 109.
29. Albert Camus, 'Absurd Creation', from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, London: Penguin, 1975, p. 104.
30. Patrick McCarthy, 'The Plague', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Albert Camus*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989, p. 110.
31. Fraser, *Christianity*, p. 44.
32. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, London: Pan Books, 1992.
33. Philip Yancey, *Where is God When It Hurts?* London: Marshall Pickering, 1990, p. 157.
34. Lev Braun, *Witness of Decline – Albert Camus: Moralist of the Absurd*, Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1974, p. 97.
35. Shafak, *The Observer*, 22 March 2015.
36. Brisville, *Camus*, p. 48. My translation.
37. Marcel Proust, *Sur la lecture* (On Reading), Arles: Actes Sud, 1998, p. 32. My translation.
38. David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2013, p. 206.
39. Rowan Williams*, Choose Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 174.
40. Also in Matthew 22:37–39 and Luke10:27.
41. Williams, *Choose Life*, p. 179. Author's italics.
42. Fraser, *Christianity*, p. 44.