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ALBERT CAMUS AND THE DILEMMA OF THE ABSENT GOD

Eamon Maher

THE CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH of the French-Algerian writer Albert Camus took place in November 2013. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, he died in a tragic car crash in the south of France a few years later, in 1960. As often happens when an attractive public figure dies in the prime of life, there is a tendency for people to remember only the positive aspects of the deceased. In the case of Camus, however, I believe it is the authenticity of his value system and the beauty of his style that have earned him such a loyal following, rather than his film-star good looks and premature death. The fact that he had the courage to criticize the Soviet gulags, comparing them to the Nazi concentration camps, and to denounce the Red Army's atrocities during the Hungarian workers' uprising of 1956, placed him on the margins of French intellectual life. With the value of hindsight, the positions he adopted are accepted as having been both insightful and courageous, unlike those chosen by his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, who could never have envisaged life outside the comfortable fold of the French Communist Party.

I should like to examine Camus' treatment of religion in two of his best known novels here, *The Outsider* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947). I shall show how the writer's view of God was dominated by the deity's failure to intervene in the affairs of this world, even when apparent divine inactivity resulted in the suffering and death of little children. Jean Onimus captures Camus' position succinctly:

Even if he had not been, for other reasons, full of preconceived ideas with regard to religion, the scandal of Evil would probably have been enough to divorce him from it. Caught in the trap, he was never able to untangle this dilemma: either God does not exist and the world is absurd or God exists and it is He, then, who is evil.¹

¹ Jean Onimus, *Albert Camus and Christianity*, translated by Emmet Parker (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), 45.



Albert Camus, photographed by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1947

This statement is thought-provoking and we will see that its concerns are, in fact, at the core of Camus' rather strained relationship with God. It would appear that the writer's God was more the all-powerful and unfeeling figure of the Old Testament than the gentle and caring one of the New.

Camus did not receive any formal religious instruction at home. His mother suffered from a hearing deficiency and was probably illiterate. After the death of her husband, Lucien, in the trenches of World War I, she worked as a cleaner in Algiers to support herself and her two sons. She was stoical and admirable in her younger son's eyes but, equally, was largely incapable of showing him any visible sign of affection. In the posthumously published and highly autobiographical novel, *The First Man*, we read the following account of the hero Jacques Cormery's family:

Actually religion had no part in their lives. No one went to Mass, no one invoked the Ten Commandments, nor did anyone refer to the rewards and punishment of the hereafter. When someone's death was reported in the grandmother's presence, 'Well', she would say, 'he'll fart no more'.²

² Albert Camus, *The First Man*, translated by David Hapgood (London: Penguin, 2001), 127–128.

Someone growing up in such an environment would naturally tend to seek spiritual nourishment in places other than at home or in a church. Camus' Mediterranean upbringing gave him a heightened appreciation of nature, which largely satisfied any transcendent longing he had. Because he saw the ravages of death all around him, he chose as his first gods the sun and the stars, the beauty of the landscape, the joys of the world's simple sensual pleasures—a world he looked on as replete with abundance. We read, once more in *The First Man*:

She [his mother] never spoke of God. In fact, that was a word Jacques never heard spoken throughout his childhood, nor did he trouble himself about it. Life, so vivid and mysterious, was enough to occupy his entire being.³

When someone is exposed, as Camus was during his youth and early adulthood, to a physical world that is dazzling in its exquisiteness, traditional religion may find it difficult to impinge on that person's consciousness. In the essay 'Nuptials at Tipasa' we read of how, as a young man of twenty, Camus was enraptured by a visit to this ancient city on the Mediterranean coastline:

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Landscape at Tipaza

³ Camus, *First Man*, 129.

Everything here leaves me intact. I give up nothing of myself, I put on no mask: it is enough for me patiently to acquire the difficult knowledge of how to live which is worth all their arts of living.⁴

What Camus achieves in this moment of interior revelation at Tipaza is something that others seek from religion: 'the difficult knowledge of how to live'. The strong Mediterranean influence is essential to any understanding of Camus' vision of Christianity, a religion which he admired in many ways:

If Christianity has touched us so deeply, it is through its God made man. But its truth and its greatness end at the cross and at the moment when he cries His surrender. Tear out the final page of the Gospel and you have a human religion, a cult of solitude and of greatness is offered to us.⁵

The inability to follow Christ beyond the grave into eternity caused Camus to reject the gospel message, which places great emphasis on the resurrection and the eternal happiness that ensues for those who live up to the ideals of Christianity. For Camus, God withdrew from the affairs of humanity through his death, leaving men and women to cope alone with what could be considered unjustified anguish and pain.

The two novels highlighted here offer subtly varying depictions of God and religion. They are, in many ways, Camus' central attempt to comprehend these complex and vital issues.

The Outsider

The Outsider is part of a trilogy of works which, for Camus, represented an attempt to work out his theory of the absurd—the other two being *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Caligula*. The writer wanted to see if there was any way of making sense out of a world where everything seemed devoid of meaning. Sisyphus is required by the gods to roll a rock up to the top of a hill and allow it to slide down again—a hugely frustrating task. Instead of attempting to elicit our pity for this futile assignment, Camus suggested that his readers should imagine Sisyphus being happy. In the same work, he also intimated that the only serious moral decision facing human beings

⁴ Albert Camus, *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, edited and translated by Philip Thody (London: Penguin, 1970), 72.

⁵ Cited by Onimus, *Albert Camus and Christianity*, 49.

was whether or not they should commit suicide. This early period of Camus' work is not renowned for its optimism and it is quite philosophical, like most of his oeuvre.

Set in the North African city of Algiers, *The Outsider* introduces us to a *pied-noir* (as a descendant of the original French colonists in Algeria was known) called Meursault, who earns a living working in a shipping office. The opening line of the novel announces the death of the protagonist's mother and his immediate departure for the home in Marengo where she has spent the final years of her life.

From the moment he arrives in the home, Meursault fails to live up to the role of grief-stricken son that is expected in such circumstances. He is uncertain about his mother's age, declines the opportunity to gaze on her corpse before the coffin is closed for the last time, smokes cigarettes and drinks coffee in the mortuary where she is laid out and falls asleep during the vigil. There are reasonable explanations for these perceived failings: his mother and he had little in common before the decision was taken for her to move into the home; Meursault had a long bus journey from Algiers to Marengo; and the weather is stiflingly hot. However, as the elderly people file in to pay their last respects, the hero, or anti-hero, feels uncomfortable: 'For a moment I had the ridiculous impression that they were there to judge me'.⁶ This is an accurate assessment of the situation, as we shall see later. The vigil and the funeral pass in a haze, and soon Meursault finds himself on the bus returning to Algiers. He admits that nothing major has changed in his life as a result of his mother's death.

The following day he heads to the port, where he meets up with a former secretary from his office, Marie, whom he has always found attractive. He invites her out to a comic film that evening, and she accepts. He notices that she 'recoiled slightly' (24) on seeing his black tie and discovering that he had buried his mother the day before.

Meursault is a child of nature, someone who loves the sounds and smells of his native Algiers, making love to Marie, observing people passing on the street below his apartment. He is obviously an intelligent man, but he refuses to feign emotions he does not feel. This will cause him problems when, at the end of the first section of the novel, he shoots an Arab dead on the beach and is subsequently tried and sentenced to death for murder.

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, translated by Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin, 2000), 15 (subsequent page references in the text).

Meursault and Marie have been invited to spend the day at the sea by Raymond, a shady character, reputed to be a pimp, whose friends own a cabin on the beach. They are followed by a group of three Arabs, including the brother of Raymond's former mistress, whom he had beaten up after making love to her one last time. Meursault, as a favour to Raymond, had helped to entice the woman into that situation. At the very least, Meursault would appear to be a very poor judge of character. But this does not account for the fact that he knows Raymond is an unsavoury person and still continues to be his friend.

Meursault gets himself into trouble for speaking the truth when it would be more astute to dissemble. When Marie asks him to marry her, he agrees, but then freely admits that he would probably respond in the same manner if another woman asked him in similar circumstances: 'she mumbled that I was peculiar, that that was probably why she loved me but that one day I might disgust her for the very same reason' (45). Meursault's capacity to 'disgust' people intensifies as the narrative develops.

Camus is at pains to highlight the exceptional circumstances surrounding the day of the murder and emphasizes that the crime was not premeditated. The sun is shining vertically on to the red-hot sand as Meursault stumbles towards a rock behind which one of the Arabs is sheltering: 'There was still the dazzling red glare The heat was pushing against me as I tried to walk. And every time I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face' (58). This hell-like vision is accentuated by the knife the Arab is holding—'a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead'—and the sun 'like a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gauging out my stinging eyes' (60). A shot rings out, then four more: 'And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness' (60).

The rest of the novel is taken up with the consequences of Meursault's act. Normally, a *pied-noir* would not be found guilty of murder in such circumstances. After all, the jury would be composed exclusively of other members of the colonial class, who would be reluctant to convict one of their own for killing an Arab. Also, Meursault has a reasonable case for self-defence given that the victim was carrying a knife and had been involved in an earlier violent incident with Raymond.

What ultimately seals Meursault's fate, according to Camus in the afterword, is his refusal to play the game:

In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual

... he refuses to hide his feelings and society immediately feels threatened (118–119).

Things go badly wrong from the outset of the trial, when the examining magistrate brandishes a crucifix in front of the prisoner and exclaims in an excited tone: 'that no man was so guilty that God wouldn't pardon him, but he must first repent and so become like a child whose soul is empty and ready to embrace everything' (67–68). Meursault's lack of remorse for his crime and his refusal to pretend that he believes in God leave the magistrate in a state of bemusement: 'I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours. The criminals who have come before me have always wept at the sight of this symbol of suffering.' (69)

Had Meursault reacted differently to the magistrate and during his trial, it is likely that he would have been acquitted. But the prosecuting lawyer is able to build a case around how the accused showed no emotion at his mother's funeral, how he left immediately without paying his respects at her grave, and met up the following day with a woman who accompanied him to a comic film. In short, he presents Meursault as an unfeeling monster who buried his mother 'like a heartless criminal' (93). It soon becomes clear that the jury are turning against him. The concluding address of the prosecuting counsel emphasizes the hideous nature of the man in the dock: 'He said the truth was I didn't have one,



Marcello Mastroianni in Visconti's film adaptation of The Outsider

a soul, and that I had no access to any humanity nor to any of the moral principles which protect the human heart' (98).

Religion is not presented in a positive light in *The Outsider*. Both the magistrate and the prison chaplain seem to be seeking their own spiritual comfort from their attempts to convert Meursault. The chaplain, whom the prisoner has refused to see on three separate occasions, still insists on visiting him to speak of God's mercy and love: 'Every man that I've known in your position has turned towards Him', he says to Meursault. The latter finally shows some emotion only in railing against the priest, telling him that his celibacy means he is living like a dead man. Afterwards, there is a moment of catharsis:

As if this great outburst had purged all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world (117).

There is no wavering here, no conversion to a faith in God that Meursault continues to see as meaningless. He concludes that everyone has to die at some stage, so it makes no real difference when it happens. The result is the same: a guillotine awaits us all. Meursault, like Camus himself, is attracted to the physical world, but knows that his relationship with it is a transient one. Happiness, for him, does not come from belief in a transcendent being, but rather from the simple pleasures of life. Jean Onimus identifies this as a typically Mediterranean mindset: 'That is to say his attention was first drawn and held by the beauty of sky and sea, physical pleasures, and the flowering of the simplest kind of happiness'.⁷

The Plague

The Plague has more obvious allusions to God than *The Outsider*. It relates how the coastal city of Oran is thrown into turmoil by the gruesome proliferation of dead and dying rats: 'They came up from basements and cubby-holes, cellars and drains, in long swaying lines; they staggered in the light, collapsed and died, right next to people'.⁸ After a while, the disease spreads to people and the city is cut off from the outside world.

There are different explanations of, and reactions to the plague. Some, such as the Jesuit priest Paneloux, see it as a punishment visited

⁷ Onimus, *Albert Camus and Christianity*, 7.

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, translated by Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2001), 14 (subsequent page references in the text).

on the population of Oran by God. The man of science, Dr Rieux, does not accept this assessment, and continues to work on developing a serum that will counter the disease. An agnostic, Rieux cannot comprehend how an all-loving God would allow the type of carnage that occurs in this world. When asked by his friend Tarrou if he believes in God, the doctor replies: 'No, but what does that mean? I am in the darkness, trying to see the light.' Later in the same conversation, he adds that if he believed in the God of religion, he would stop healing people and leave it to God:

But since no one in the world believed in a God of that kind—not even Paneloux who *thought* that was what he believed, in this at least Rieux felt he was on the right path, in struggling against the world as it was (97).

Fr Paneloux, on the other hand, exhorts those who come in ever-increasing numbers to the religious services he organizes to change their ways before it is too late: 'My brethren, a calamity has befallen you; my brethren, you have deserved it' (73). He continues: 'He has turned away His face. And we, deprived of the light of God, will languish for a long time in the darkness of the plague!' (74) Despite their differences, doctor and priest continue to struggle with the tools at their disposal to help the victims of the epidemic. The tension between them comes to a head when they both witness the horrific death of a young child, an event that shakes them profoundly:

Of course, the pain inflicted on these innocents had never ceased to appear to them what in truth it was, an outrage. But until then they had been outraged abstractly, in a sense, because they had never looked face-to-face for so long a time at the death throes of an innocent child. (166)

Rieux, in an uncharacteristic outburst, declares that the child was the innocent victim of an indifferent God:

'I understand', said Paneloux. 'It is outrageous because it is beyond us. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.'

Rieux sat up abruptly. He looked at Paneloux with all the strength and passion he could muster and shook his head.

'No, Father', he said. 'I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured.' (169)



© Roderick Parks

Santa Cruz, Oran, Algeria

These sentiments are an echo of Camus' own feelings on the subject. The exchange highlights an essential difference between believer and unbeliever. 'Loving what we cannot understand' forms the basis of Christian faith, which demands a blind acceptance of the mystery of God's will.

Rieux sees religious faith as disabling in the fight against the plague: 'perhaps it is better for God that we should not believe in Him and struggle with all our strength against death, without raising our eyes to heaven and to His silence' (98). Action, opposing himself unselfishly to the massive suffering all around him, is the only worthwhile role the doctor can see for himself in the crisis. His friend Tarrou surprises Rieux by declaring that what interests him is how one can become a saint. When reminded by the doctor that he doesn't believe in God, Tarrou exclaims: 'Precisely. Can one be a saint without God: that is the only concrete question that I know today.' (180)

Rieux has no taste for heroism or sainthood: 'What interests me is to be a man', he says (197). The question of 'how to be a man' preoccupied Camus throughout his relatively short life. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, he outlined two elements that constituted the greatness of a writer's task: the service of truth and the service of liberty. Ultimately both are covered by Rieux's statement. 'Being a man', in Camus' sense, requires a commitment to truth and liberty. It requires facing down whatever challenges these key values. The plague—a metaphor for

France's capitulation and collaboration during the Nazi occupation—is significant in so far as it reveals the true character of those forced to live with its ravages. Tarrou observes:

But what is true of the ills of this world is also true of the plague. It may serve to make some people great. However, when you see the suffering and pain that it brings, you have to be mad, blind or a coward to resign yourself to the plague. (96)

Rieux certainly achieves a certain grandeur at the end of the novel. But Paneloux is also an example of a life lived according to a particular set of values. He faces his death with resignation, refusing the ministrations of the doctor and claiming: 'priests have no friends. They have given everything to God.' (180) Rieux ultimately finds more to admire in human beings than to despise. This could be construed as a positive conclusion were it not for the two warning notes struck by Camus: 'the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely' (237); 'perhaps the day will come when, for the instruction of misfortune of mankind, the plague will rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city' (238).

Attachment to the Sacred

The problem for Camus was existential rather than religious, summed up in his oft-quoted disclaimer:

I am not a philosopher. I do not believe enough in reason to believe in any system. What interests me is how a man can carry on when he doesn't have faith in God or in reason.⁹

Camus was a believer in the dignity of humanity, a dignity that was poignant because of the fragility and precariousness of the human condition. Mortality, for him, rendered meaningless the quest for love and life, and induced in him an existential revolt that never subsided. In his introduction to the Pléiade edition of Camus' plays and novels, his former teacher Jean Grenier made the following¹⁰ observation:

If his opposition to faith was absolute, it should nevertheless be borne in mind that this opposition constituted a homage to faith itself. It also revealed that the writer took seriously, or rather tragically, depending

⁹ Cited in Michel Onfray, *L'Ordre libertaire: La vie philosophique d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 207 (my translation).

on the circumstances, the problem posed by suffering and death It should be said first and foremost that if what is referred to as religiosity has no place in his work, there is nonetheless an intense attachment to the sacred.¹⁰

It is precisely this 'attachment to the sacred' that gives Camus' work its special resonance. Although the apparent absence of God in the world caused the writer to distance himself from formal religion, he nevertheless maintained a fondness for Christianity when it was lived out sincerely and when it encouraged people to lessen the suffering of others. A hundred years on from his birth, Camus' message is perhaps even more relevant today than it was during his own time.

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¹⁰ Jean Grenier, 'Introduction', in *Albert Camus: Théâtre, récits, nouvelles* (Paris: Pléiade/Gallimard, 1962), xiii (my translation).