

## Notes from the Philosophy Meeting 19<sup>th</sup> February 2015

**Topic:** - "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

**Background:** - Nietzsche was writing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> C when the enlightenment had broken the hold that religion held over what people believed and how they behaved. Science had shown that the earth moved round the sun and evolution had thrown a different light on creation. Nietzsche was concerned that, without God and religion, the world would descend into chaos and nihilism. He set the foundations of existentialism. He also suggested that man had not finished evolving and that a future Overman might develop cerebrally without the constraints of religion.

Nihilism - The belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. Existentialism - A philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

Richard L. Rubenstein is an American Rabbi, born 1924, who questioned the existence of God after the holocaust and the death of an infant son. He said "The death of God is not something that has happened to God. It is a cultural event experienced by men and women, many of whom remain faithful members of their religious communities". He quotes Swami Muktananda of Ganeshpuri "Religions are like the fences that hold young saplings erect. Without the fence the sapling could fall over. When it takes firm root and becomes a tree, the fence is no longer needed. However, most people never lose their need for the fence". Rubenstein describes God as the ocean and we the waves. Each wave has its moment, but no wave is distinct from the ocean. Our knowledge of the ocean depends the way it manifests itself in the waves.

### Thoughts about God and Man's place in the universe

What is God? How can we know that God is dead if we don't know what God is?

The earth is no longer the centre of the universe.

What is the purpose of life? – Life is the purpose – Reproduction is the role of the species

Maybe God made us like a child builds up bricks and then knocks them over.

Could there be other forms of existence that we are not aware of?

It is arrogance to think that we are alone in the universe.

We think in 4 dimensions including time. Mathematicians say there are 28 dimensions.

We no longer believe in a god with a beard in flowing robes.

What caused the Big Bang? What was there before God?

### Thoughts about morality

If you take God away, what happens to the moral code?

Do we need some kind of moral code?

### Positive aspects of religion

Religion gives us something to hold onto.

God gives an element of certainty.

A religious community can be like an extended family.

### Negative aspects of religion

Of those who go to church, synagogue or mosque, only about 5% understand the teachings.

Many Muslims recite the Koran and attend Mosque but have no depth of understanding.

Many go to religious studies when they are young, but leave when able to decide for themselves.

In the past the landed gentry expected their employees to attend church.

The violence between Sunnis and Shias echoes that between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland

Many young people are seeking spirituality but are not attracted to the main religions.

### **Religion and welfare**

The economically poor tend to go towards God for security, the wealthy don't.

Roman Catholic Church is changing with more emphasis on bishops from poor communities.

The Archbishop of Canterbury had experience of life and is prepared to tackle political issues.

Many religious leaders are more in touch with ordinary people than most politicians.

Could you have a building where those of all faiths and none could meet?

The Society of Friends (the Quakers) have no set religion and work for peace, justice, equality.

### **Secular society**

We have become secular and atheistic.

Colonialisation has played a part in self-determination.

Does anyone have the right to use violence to achieve freedom?

"Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent". Isaac Asimov

Hitler came into power when Germans felt resentment after WW1. Elections were border line.

Politicians still decide who will live or die with spending on drugs and 3 parent babies etc.

### **Children, education and racial intolerance**

Education is moving from religion to secular teaching.

The influx of faith schools may lead to the teaching of morals.

Faith schools that exclude other religions can cause problems.

Very young children mix well ignoring colour.

Some very young children display prejudice though whether due to nature or nurture is unclear.

In the past there were few people from other ethnicities. Now they seem a majority in some areas.

We are frightened by difference.

### **Conclusions**

We found this a difficult subject to discuss. It seems that the ancient philosophers didn't tackle the question as they were surrounded by so many gods. Now we struggle to understand God in the light of scientific discovery and the evidence of cruelty and suffering in the world. Traditional religions give security and identity to some and alienate others. Whilst the old idea of God may be dead, we each have our own thoughts about the universe and our place in it.