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Does the Modern World Face a Crisis of Meaning?

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America is currently in the throes of a mental health crisis. The Surgeon General recently warned that loneliness has reached epidemic levels worldwide. While the mounting concern for these issues is laudable, it's also typical of our age that we're translating inherently spiritual problems into the language of modern medicine. This is not to say that the field of medicine has nothing to contribute here. It is to say that if we fail to recognize that estrangement from the living God is at the heart of these matters, all our efforts will remain superficial.

To a significant degree, this crisis is predicated on a widespread sense that life is meaningless. It's safe to say that this sense of meaning has nothing to do with a lack of information. Thanks to our myriad technologies, we know ourselves and others inside out. The problem is not that we're out of touch with our diets, heart rates, sleep, and finances. It's that these details lack a deeper sense of significance. Why? In a word, it is a prevailing nihilism in our culture.

The concept of nihilism has a rich and complex history, but it's fair to say that it centers on the assumption that, at root, existence lacks intrinsic meaning. From a philosophical standpoint, there's likely no such thing as a pure nihilist. Such a person would be completely without convictions and values. Even the most selfish of sadists and sociopaths presumably fall back on a hollow commitment to self-gratification.

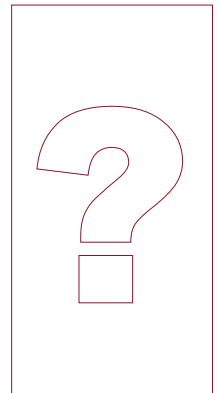
Nihilism also sits on a spectrum: On the passive side, it can underwrite moods of despair. Hence the haunting phrase "deaths of despair." On the active side, we're confronted by acts of terrorism and the ruthless pursuit of power. A recent example would be Luigi Mangione's assassination of UnitedHealthcare's CEO, Brian Thompson. The most eloquent exponent of active nihilism was Friedrich Nietzsche. He was also honest about how the unfettered will to power would shred the culture and institutes that have defined the West. The attempt at recovery would involve a ground-zero redefinition of our way of life and thinking, a "transvaluation of all values."

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Just as there's no such thing as a pure nihilist, there's no such thing as pure cultural nihilism. What we see instead are various shades of it. In his book *Democracy and Solidarity*, James Davison Hunter argues that culture involves our deep-seated assumptions regarding four major areas: metaphysics, ethics, anthropology, and teleology. In less abstract terms, we can boil these four down to a series of questions: (1) What is the nature of reality? (2) How should we live? (3) What is a person? (4) What is the meaning of life?

Even a cursory survey of these questions reveals that we have little to no agreement on any of them. To understand why, let's turn briefly to each of them.

"What's the nature of reality?" The cultural answers here are wildly divergent. We can't even agree on the results of an election, let alone the nature of reality. "How should we live?" animates some of our most vicious culture warring. "What does it mean to be human?" may be the most culturally divisive question of our moment, with some insisting on a human nature that is innate and universal, and others contending for increasingly fluid conceptions of human identity. What's the telos of human life? What are human beings for? Beyond vague notions of love and freedom, we're far from any sensible conclusions here. If you doubt that statement, consider the competing definitions of love and freedom. The tautologous statement "love is love" continues to make an appearance in debates about the nature of marriage. Regarding freedom, the default modern contemporary understanding sees it in largely negative terms—freedom from, rather than freedom for, to borrow Isaiah Berlin's apt phrase.



What does all this division amount to? In a word, varying degrees of nihilism. At its core, nihilism amounts to a rejection of all essential values, intimating that at bottom, all is meaningless. If we want some kind of meaning in this scheme, all we're left with is the meaning we impose on human experience. And if we see ourselves not as citizens and fellow human beings, but rather as fierce rivals seeking to realize our own meaning projects in a politically volatile arena, our culture becomes a battlefield.

Christ and His kingdom may be out of fashion in our cultural moment, but it's worth considering just how deeply it answers each of these crucial questions. To the question, What is the nature of reality?, Christianity answers that it is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God, and the wellspring of all creation. How should we live? According to Jesus, the two central commands for the good life are loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then on the basis of that love, loving our neighbor as ourself. What is a person? A creature made in the very image of God and thus endowed with inestimable worth. What is the meaning of life? It's hard to improve on the lapidary phrasing from The Westminster Confession: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."

At the heart of the Christian response to our crisis of meaning is the assumption that we are made by God for God. The modern world is predicated on grand ambitions of power and control and the perennial temptation is to play God. If the state of our current culture is any indication, we would be wise to direct our worship to Christ—not humanity.