

The Absurd Ionesco

Eugene Ionesco (1912-1994) is no household name in our Reformed circles. Yet the death of this Rumanian-born French playwright should not go unnoticed. In 1938 Ionesco settled permanently in Paris where he remained during the Nazi occupation. After the war he watched from a distance as Rumania was taken over by a communist government.

Dramatist Ionesco's one act play, published in England as *The Bald Prima Donna* and as *The Bald Soprano* in the US, sparked a major revolution in dramatic techniques and inaugurated "The Theater of the *Absurd*." He shared with other authors the belief that human existence is without meaning. This is reflected in the form as well as the content of his plays, by the rejection of logical construction, and the creation of meaningless speeches and silences. They are a retreat from reason.

In *The Bald Soprano* (1948) married couples symbolize the futility of modern life as Ionesco saw it. The play's dialogue is irrational. From the play, this example:

Mr. Smith: Don't be turkeys; rather kiss the conspirator.

Mr. Martin: Charity begins at home.

Mrs. Smith: I'm waiting for the aquaduct to come and see me at my windmill.

Mr. Martin: One can prove that social progress is definitely better with sugar.

In the 1959 *Rhinoceros*, creeping conformism is represented by everyone turning into rhinoceroses. In later years Ionesco's works elaborated especially on the fear and horror of death, revealing his profound uneasiness concerning man's ultimate fate. He felt intensely "the absurdity" of an existence rendered meaningless by death.

Ionesco's works encouraged the feelings of hopelessness, depersonalization and dehumanization so many experience today. If God does not exist and death has the last word then life is absurd. A reporter noted that since Ionesco absurdity has come a long way. It has even gained commercial appeal. And he observed that we see now all kinds of nonsense and some of it is based on the notion that absurdity alone is enough. Can one survive with the idea that life is absurd and without meaning? Even Ionesco discovered that this is impossible. In his later works he wrote more about dreams, visions and the exploration of the subconscious. He became strongly influenced by Freud and by various mystical and religious writers. Through these means he tried to make sense out of life. He contradicted his own writings. Reality shows that everyone tries to find meaning in an age of confusion, uncertainty and discontent. Life is impossible without it.

Victor Frankl wrote in *The Unheard Cry For Meaning*, "Consider today's society: it gratifies and satisfies virtually every need - except for one, the need for meaning! One may say that some needs are even created by today's society; yet the need for meaning remains unfulfilled - in the midst of and in spite of all our affluence." This feeling of meaningless is new. The influence of Ionesco and like-minded authors made the absurd a philosophy of life for many. If we must accept death as final than any meaningful existence is impossible. This feeling leads to despair and fatalism. In the past people

also saw they believed that what one cannot understand is not necessarily without meaning. Because they considered life meaningful they were prepared to suffer or offer sacrifices.

For the Christian life is not absurd. The Gospel judges the absurd. God reaches out to sinners, alienated from Him (Rom. 3:10-12). Through Christ we are reconciled to God the Father. Because of His resurrection death has been overcome and we are heirs to eternal life. And what we do on earth for the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). But the Christian life is also more than a preparatory school for heaven. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, concentrates on our earthly duties. What gives purpose to our existence is the fact that we are God's co-laborers here on earth (1 Cor. 3:9). God's gracious will for our life gives meaning. The relationship between God and man is fundamental. The meaning of my life is that I am a partner in God's covenant. I may live here as a child of God to the glory of His Name.

Not only modern authors speak about absurdity, the Bible also refers to it. Sin is absurd. The Bible calls the unbeliever foolish (Ps. 14:1). The foolishness of sin makes the seeming absurdity of the cross necessary. Paul writes, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18). As Christians we don't have all the answers to life's absurdities. The book of Job deals with the painful questions of suffering, loss and death. Yet Job could still say, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:24f). Over against the pessimism of the "*Theater of the Absurd*" we place the Gospel of Hope, which proclaims, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4).

Johan D. Tangelder
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