

Dangers of Existentialism

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The perils to be found in Christian existentialism are neither obvious nor easily discerned. On the contrary, existentialism's claim to relevancy and involvement of the whole of man's existence in truth offers much that is desirable.

The word "existentialism" is an extension of the word "existence." The crucial issues which face modern man require that he discover the true nature of his existence. For centuries the approach in philosophy has reduced the world of persons, including God and man, to mere objects of thought, as concepts set forth in the categories of language. The result has been the application of man's rational powers to control and direct life on the horizontal plane economically, politically, scientifically, and religiously. The consequence is the dehumanization of the individual. The Christian religion has been emptied of its vital meaning and its relevancy to life. This is due largely to the church's concern with and search for rational certainty, rather than with living truth. Because religious truth has become objectivised, man has been separated from God.

There is much truth to this critical observation by existentialism. The church has long operated principally in the context of ideas and doctrines, giving priority to formal utterances by church and school. It is possible to answer many questions about religion and life without dealing with the main issue: that of being personally involved in the whole of one's being. A rational philosophy of religion can be a substitute for the real thing. In the juggling of words and ideas, it is possible to reduce God to an idea. The effort to formulate a creed can get man nowhere. The God that people claim to believe in may become to them no more than an intellectual abstraction. This is the great tragedy of philosophy according to existentialism.

Existentialism is a revolt against the attempt to get at the meaning of life through ideas. The assertion is that God cannot be made an object of human thought without distorting the truth about God. To deal with truth as an object to be grasped by the logic of mind and language is to lose the vertical relationship with God; that to believe reality is something to be known rather than lived is an illusion, denying to man the true nature of Christian meaning and existence. Man thereby becomes the captive of rational categories, rather than experiencing freedom through a personal relation with God.

Existentialism is a philosophy which shatters all rational security. It condemns all claims to truth which avoid or abdicate personal involvement. To interpret the Christian religion in terms of ideas and doctrines is to distort the truth and make participation in it impossible.

How does truth become relevant? Existentialism aims to answer that question. What is at stake is the very nature of man's being. The reality of truth is experienced when man faces decisions that constitute in essence a matter of life and death. Existentialism is a philosophy of crisis, where man is driven to vital decisions, thus penetrating to the inner meaning of life, facing up to the crises and anxieties that confront one's very existence.

The contrast is between being a participant and being a spectator. One may state his belief objectively about the nature of man, that he is mortal, subject to death. He can write that statement down, put it in doctrinal form, argue it as the basis of his own logical conclusions about man, all this without being involved. But let the doctor declare a man a victim of terminal cancer. He is now involved in death itself. Death is no longer a theory to be discussed. It is now part of man's very existence. Consequently, truth must fail if it stops short of securing the involvement of the whole man.

What Is Truth?

The crucial problem in Existentialism centers in the question of how to arrive at truth. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, regarded as the father of Christian Existentialism, wrote that "Truth is Subjectivity."

Here is such a definition of truth: an objective UNCERTAINTY help fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. . . . Truth is precisely the venture which chooses an OBJECTIVE UNCERTAINTY. . . . The paradoxical character of truth is its UNCERTAINTY is an expression for the passionate inwardness, and this passion is precisely the truth.[1]

According to this, man discovers truth, not by the certainty of objective knowledge, but only by personal decision, a "passionate inwardness." Man's involvement comes first. Truth depends for its validity upon man. Truth comes from within, not from without. Man's decision creates out of itself what is existentially true. The rational consistency of biblical content as doctrine is not essential in order to know the truth. Truth is not objectively given in the Bible so that it is eternally true. The Word of truth has never been given once for all. Truth is always contemporaneous. Only the Word today, existentially, can be the Word of God. The same word tomorrow could be demonic once the encounter and the involvement with God is lost.

The crucial question is: at what point are men actually confronted with truth? at the point of knowledge or at the point of decision? At the point where the objective truth of Scripture is brought to bear upon the mind, or at the point of personal involvement through an act of decision? What is the basis of a right decision? At what point is a man able to tell whether or not he has made the right passionate commitment? If a Biblical concept or doctrine is not truth until man becomes involved by personal commitment, then what is it? Is the falsity or

the truth of the idea or doctrine no longer relevant to the intrinsic meaning of truth itself?

The objectivity of the truth of Scripture, fixed by the very nature of divine revelation and inspiration, is incompatible with this subjective approach. Existentialism is unwilling to be bound by the normative character of the Word of God. Is the truth of Scripture autonomous? Existentialism denies this. What is prior, says traditional Christianity, is the knowledge of and from God, not the decisions of men. The latter is tested by the former. Truth stands apart from man's decision. It possesses a pre-established harmony with the God of the Bible and His Son Jesus Christ. Consequently, belief on a knowledge basis is essential to and prior to personal involvement in truth. It can be depended upon regardless of man's participation in it.

To believe that the source of truth can be found in the human situation, in the decision of man, rather than in the movement of God towards man through the apostles and prophets is perilous in the extreme. God alone is responsible for the gift of truth. God nowhere leaves sinful man to grope around within himself for the norm or the experience of truth. Existentialism shatters faith in objective truth, moral absolutes, and eternal principles revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

The traditional Christian position states that belief in the Bible as the revealed Word of God is, first, a statement, not about human existence in a contemporary situation, but an objective knowledge of truth given by God existing in and of itself. Granted that existentialism has a point in warning against abstract intellectualism. Undoubtedly, the vital importance of deciding for truth cannot be overestimated; but how shall man know that what he decides for is in reality the truth? In Scripture, the principles of truth, morality, God, and man, are fixed for all time and for all men. Here God tells man about Himself, who He is, what He has done, is doing, and what He will do, and what He requires men to believe and do. This is the given knowledge content of truth. He addresses man personally and calls for an intelligent personal response, an involvement in harmony with the knowledge given and present to the mind. True involvement requires obedience to that which is objectively given.

The knowledge of Biblical truth involves more than mere thinking. It requires the bringing of man's whole life into captivity to and harmony with the revealed truths of God's Word.

Subjectivism can lead only to a moral relativism and an irrationalism without a firm foundation.

When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. . . . When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship. . . . **THE INDIVIDUAL IS IN THE TRUTH EVEN IF HE SHOULD HAPPEN TO BE THUS RELATED TO WHAT IS NOT TRUE. . . .** The paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty.[2]

Thus there is no universal truth for all men. The discovery of truth for each man is unrepeatable in anyone else. The truth for one man constitutes no norm for another. The peril here is that man will attach himself to that which is false. Here exists the unbridgeable gulf between existentialism and the traditional Christian religion. For existentialism refuses to be bound by the eternal truths of the revealed Word of God.

The traditional Christian view is that the historical events and doctrinal truth of the Bible have significance for men in every age on the basis that they constitute the eternal and fixed truth of God. A trustworthy approach to the truth is both objective and existential. If men are to discover the truth for heart, mind, and life, harmony between the given Word and the existential experience is essential. When only the latter is required, truth and knowledge have passed over into sheer subjectivism.

If Christian existentialism is to become aware of its responsibility to make truth relevant to life, it must speak with the voice of certainty. But this is the one thing it cannot do, and denies, as a possibility.

The paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty . . . without risk there is no faith, and the greater risk the greater the faith; the more objective security the less inwardness, and the less objective security the more profound the possible inwardness.[3]

In direct opposition to this, the Christian church says to men everywhere: There is the sure word of God. No man lives by what appears to be right in his own eyes and in his own experience. God has spoken both in His Son and in His Word. Life in commitment to this Word alone has real meaning and certainty. If the Christian Church of today ever does anything to make the Christian religion meaningful, it will occur only by a return to revealed truth as given by God; for a given truth from God alone is sufficient to give birth to spiritual life and to awaken in man an existence that is in harmony with God.

Shattering of an Objective Authority

Existentialism's dependence upon and appeal to the subjective repudiates the authority of any body of beliefs, or the fixity of the eternal truths of Scripture. It is a revolt against fixed systems and doctrines on the basis that such a set formula tends to separate thought from life. Absolutes, universals, are simply verbal expressions, and do not possess actual reality. Only the existential word is real and relevant. The word of truth is always contemporaneous. It has never been given with finality for all men.

If Christianity were a doctrine, the relationship to it would not be one of faith, for only an intellectual type of relationship can correspond to a doctrine. . . . The realm of faith is thus not a class for numskulls in the sphere of the intellectual, or an asylum for the feeble-minded. Faith constitutes a sphere all by itself, and every misunderstanding of Christianity at once may be recognized by transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual.[4]

If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I

cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.[5]

In existentialism, faith and doubt belong together. In Scripture, faith depends upon the certainty of what one believes. The principles of truth in Scripture are certain for all men, believers and unbelievers. If they are not, then how can one communicate with an unbeliever at all? If truth cannot be understood without faith, all discussion with unbelievers would be impossible. Truth is truth for the believer, because it is knowable and valid for all men irrespective of personal faith.

For existentialism it matters little what a man believes so long as he believes it with passionate involvement. In the light of the sinfulness of man, extended to the whole of man's being, personal decision needs some moral and spiritual context, some authoritative norm, some guiding principle to test and try every claim to have experienced truth. How is one to distinguish between "I choose" and "I feel" since truth is subjectivity? In shifting the emphasis from objective truth to the individual's inwardness, who or what is going to correct any deviation from truth or save from self deception?

Immediacy

Existentialism involves a return to immediacy with God in terms of an intensity of feeling, passion, and often ecstasy. These emotional involvements are claimed to have significance for man's relationship with God, bringing man into the very presence of the divine. This achievement of a religious faith is by way of ontology (being), which affirms that man possesses deep within his being the capacity for immediate access to God and religious reality, an inner awareness whereby man can know God directly. Immediacy magnifies the

miracle of some immediate encounter with God.

Martin Buber declares:

What is the eternal primal phenomenon, present here and now, of that which we term revelation? It is the phenomenon that a man does not pass, from the moment of the supreme meeting, the same being as he entered into it. . . . At times it is like a light breath, at times like a wrestling bout, but always, it happens. . . . Man receives, and he receives not a specific "content" but a Presence, a Presence as power.[6]

Emil Brunner asserts:

Revelation, as the Christian faith understands it, is indeed, by its very nature, something that lies beyond all rational arguments . . . which can be attained only through divine self-communication.[7]

We know God only through personal confrontation, no longer identified with concepts of any kind. "Truth is encounter." [8]

The problem raised by existentialism is not an easy one. The Bible speaks of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as an essential factor in Christian experience. The chief concern of the Church, however, is for the genuineness of fellowship with God. Why should the Church oppose the claim to immediacy if it leads to an encounter with God?

Since encounter with the supernatural is the claim common to all religions, including those which are non-Christian, how shall man determine what is true and what is false?

Existentialism does not relate itself to the categories of the infallible Word of God. It therefore sets forth a view of man's relationship to God far different from that revealed in Scripture. The God of the Bible is the speaking God. Communion with God is possible only between persons as rational beings. Once it is insisted according to the Bible that human

reason must think harmoniously with the revealed truth of Scripture, the necessity for a given objective truth becomes obvious. God confronts us, not in ecstasy or emotional passionateness, not only as subject, but as object in terms of the revealed will and Word of God. Any claim to fellowship with God that dispenses with the rational category of fixed truth in the Word of God is open to the charge of demonic confrontation.

And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not the people seek unto their God? . . . To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.[9]

In rejecting the revealed truths of Scripture and the objective nature of revelation, existentialism deprives man of any criterion whatever to distinguish between truth and error, between the Holy Spirit and a false spirit. If Satan confronts man as an angel of light in some form of immediacy, how would man be able to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of the devil? If Christ is any judge at this point, His appeal to Scripture "It is written" in exposing the devil himself, still holds true for Christians in every age. Any religious philosophy which conceives of man's relationship with God above and outside the sphere of conceptual revelation in Scripture lays men wide open to the deceptions of mysticism, sentimentalism, spiritualism, and every form of questionable supernaturalism. Instead of recovering the relevance of truth, it involves the surrender of the eternal truth of the Word of God. Existentialism is the rallying ground for the growing trend of our day towards a professed supernaturalism which could easily substitute the Spirit's witness to the truth of Scripture for extremes of emotional and psychological fantasy.

Traditional Christianity has always insisted upon the personal and intimate nature of God's relationship to man. But this relationship is not born of uncertainty about the truth of Scripture. All the "passionate inwardness" of man's initiative alone cannot attain to the God

who speaks to man through his Word.

Any claim to immediacy apart from the fixed word of truth in Scripture easily becomes deceptive, unrelated to the reality of truth at all. If there is no fixed truth in Scripture, what guarantee can men have that the immediacy they claim to experience corresponds to the reality of truth itself? By what standard are men to test and correct this "passionate inwardness?" How are men to know that these involvements constitute the truth?

Obviously, existentialism's only standard for testing its "passionate inwardness" is its own passionate commitment. But since sinful men are prone to pervert the truth, this immediacy can only leave man in a state of utter uncertainty. Unless man has direct access to truth normatively given by God by which men may test and correct their own fallible feelings, they are left to their own devisings. When existentialism asserts that the only certainty man has in his own passionate involvements, it exposes him to a thousand and one false claims to know God in some other way than that revealed in Scripture.

The very nature of sinful man involves restrictions and limitations to the nature of divine-human communication. One of the chief concerns of the Christian church must be for the genuineness of communion with God, because of the possibility of a counterfeit at the very point where truth and trustworthiness are so essential. The church must not countenance any immediacy which cannot stand the test of the Word of God. The Biblical communion with God brings the mind and life into harmony with the given truth of Scripture. Here man gains his true being and the purpose of God's revelation is realized. Here exist eternal categories that need no demythologizing. These categories belong to men in every age.

In Scripture, when God condescends to draw near to man through the Spirit, the prophet, or the apostle, the mind's grasp of rational knowledge given by God is both heightened and clarified. Everywhere the Spirit confirms the Word. It insists that the God man claims to encounter be the God of Scripture.

Existentialism rejects the *a priori* knowledge of God in Scripture in favor of an inward

immediacy. In so doing, it is in grave danger of becoming the victim of other supernatural powers that fight against God.

Men come to a true relationship with God within a conceptual frame of reference by the inspired Word of God. God comes to man in His Word through the Holy Spirit. The rational categories of truth are not belittled. Rather is the mind exercised so that, by means of a trustworthy knowledge of God, man can choose truth intelligently and become involved to his ultimate salvation.

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- [1] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Book Two, Part Two, Chapter II, "Truth Is Subjectivity."
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Book 2, Part 2, Chapter 3, "The Subjective Thinker."
- [5] Kierkegaard, "Truth Is Subjectivity."
- [6] Martin Buber, *I And Thou* (Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Edinburgh, 1937).
- [7] Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1946, p. 206.
- [8] Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1944, pp. 46-47.
- [9] Isaiah 8:19, 20.