

*[Speech given at Reformed Episcopal Seminary at Graduation in 1966. At this time Dr. Clark was granted a Doctorate of Divinity]*

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it is idolatrous and, one may say, polytheistic. At the present time, the successful publicity given to the Pope's visit to the United States, the impact of its ecumenical council and the attraction its politics exercises on people who only religious ideal is a unified organization, requires us to be particularly aware of our ancient foe.

Now, whereas these four hostile forces are found generally outside the Protestant churches, there is a fifth force inimical to the Gospel that is found inside. There are doubtless other troubles also within the Protestant churches, but the one for the present discussion is existentialism. For some years now seminary professors, popular preachers, and religious writers have been reshaping the Gospel message to conform to the philosophy of existentialism.

Existentialism, whether secular or religious, holds that there is no rational explanation of anything, and that the values of life are whatever each individual chooses them to be. God has imposed no moral law on humanity, and each individual is utterly free.

Although Jean Paul Sartre is a secular, rather than a religious, existentialist, some attention must be paid to him both because of his preeminent position in the movement and because he has important things to say about theology.

The basic principle of existentialism, says Sarte, is that "existence precedes essence." This anti-intellectualistic phrase means that the Aristotelian That precedes the Aristotelian What. For example, if a carpenter wishes to make a cabinet, he must first know what a cabinet is and what particular size and shape of a cabinet he intends to make. That the What precedes the That: essence precedes existence. So, too, the Christian idea of God includes the notion that God knew what he was going to create before he created it. The doctrine of Providence ascribes to God a knowledge or plan of history that antedates the events. This is what Sartre denies. There is no pre-existent plan of history, nor even a determinate human nature made in the image of God, that all men must have; and of course, there is no original sin that makes us sinner before we are born. On the contrary, each man makes himself what he becomes. The What follows the That.

The world then is a lawless chaos into which man is thrown. When first thrown into the world, man too is a chaos, a That without a What. Thus human existence originates in a nothingness and culminates in another nothingness – death. Man's being therefore is an anticipation of death or nothingness. For this reason the basic category of being is anxiety or dread. This dread of death may

lead a man to seek refuge in unauthentic being. That is to say, a person tries to forget death by sinking himself in the custom and hypocrisies of society. He becomes a mass-man instead of becoming an existing individual. He satisfies himself in slavery, in mediocrity; he accents the level of everybody else and thus escapes the need of making decisions and being responsible for them.

Against this mediocrity, the existentialist calls on us to decide, to make a choice to live authentically, to become an individual, to commit ourselves to being.

In this choice man is completely free. Without a human nature and without God, there is nothing to bind man. There is no moral law; everything is permitted. Man is the sole source of his own values. He chooses his own motives. Even after a man has created his own essence by choosing values, he is still completely free and can choose again and alter his general sin. He can always become another man by a total conversion. Man therefore is always free and never determined.

Let us now for a moment stop and think. If I created values by my free choice, then does not even mediocrity or hypocrisy become a value if I choose it? How can there ever be bad faith, if I deliberately choose; and how can there be self-deception if my choice creates the values?

One suspects that existentialists are not so free as they claim. If they were so completely free, we should find one existentialist choosing to be a monarchist in France, another choosing to be a communist, and so on for all the varieties of politics.

But when we see that existentialists are almost always left-wingers, we are forced to suspect something other than complete freedom to be the explanation of this near uniformity.

Let us turn now from secular to theological existentialism. In general the religious existentialists also agree that science and philosophy cannot give a rational explanation of the universe. But more to the point they insist that neither can theology or the Bible. God himself is irrational and cannot be grasped by human thought. For example, Brunner asserts that because of the evil influence of Greek philosophy the early Christians came to think of revelation as a communication of truth from God. Just imagine: it was because Barnabas and Aquila and Apollos and Timothy and the noble Bereans had so diligently studied Plato and Aristotle that they thought God had intended them to take the fall of Adam as truth, to take the resurrection of Christ as truth; to take revelation from God as a communication of truth. If they had not been under the evil spell of Greek philosophy, they would never have supposed that God, revelation and Christianity have anything to do with truth.

Brunner himself, we may infer, does not study Greek philosophy and therefore does not assign much value to truth. He continues saying, "All words have only an instrumental value. Neither the spoken words nor their conceptual content are the Word of God itself, but only its framework"

This means that the Bible gives no intelligent account of history of the world. Not only does the theory exclude the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection from religion, it also excludes creation and providence. It means that none of the Biblical verses, none at all, is the Word of God. All the teaching of the Bible is merely framework, and the Word itself is some unknown non-intellectual something or other hidden, well hidden, between the lines.

Therefore Brunner and similar theologians stress Paradox and Contradiction. Faith and logic are incompatible. This is not inimical to religion, so they say, because religion does not consist in accepting and understanding God-given information. True religion, they say, is a matter of feeling or emotion, or anti-intellectual passionateness. What one believes is of no importance; how one believes it makes all the difference in the world. The man in whom Buddha arouses great passion is more religious and stands better before God than the man who with less emotion believes that Christ rose from the dead. Whether the doctrines of Buddha or of Christ are true makes no difference; for, to quote Emil Brunner again, "God can reveal himself even in false propositions."

More definitely the resurrection of Christ, as also the account of Adam's fall, are not historically true. They are myths or fables. They are true in the sense in which Aesop's fables are true – true pictures of human experience. Therefore Adam's fall and Christ's resurrection must be demythologized and existentialized so as to refer to our own individual experiences of depression and exhilaration.

When therefore a popular preacher proclaims his belief in the fall of man or the resurrection of Christ, and even asserts that these are actual events, we must make sure whether he means that the resurrection took place 2,000 years ago in Palestine or whether it takes place frequently here, now, in our experience.

Existentialism is advertised as a new movement that has supplanted old-fashioned modernism. There are, to be sure, differences; but they unite and agree perfectly on the basic principle that religion must be based on personal experience and not on divinely revealed information. The modernists used to speak of an empirical study of religious consciousness; now the existentialists speak of infinite passion, personal encounter, or authentic existence; all this substitutes experience for revelation.

Many devout Christians talk about personal commitment to Christ, and I hope they mean by it the Biblical acknowledgement of Christ as Lord, as Kyrios, as the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ is indispensable to being a Christian. The thief on the cross said, Lord, remember me.

The objectivity of Christ's Lordship is, however, obscured when emphasis is placed on the

subjective experience of the individual. The danger is that the psychological accidents of conversion replace Christ himself. Modernism, one must remember, began when Schleiermacher made personal experience the basis of theology. We made religion a matter of the emotions, and the doctrines of the faith were obtained by analyzing experience.

So it is also in neo-orthodoxy and Existentialism. The focus is on individual decision, infinite passion, emotional encounter. The How replaces the What.

And because the How replaces the What, one person's experience is as authoritative as any other's. Thus the Beatniks find a satisfactory experience in marijuana, a larger section of our society finds satisfaction in alcohol, and more respectable people center their affections on social position and wealth. When experience is made the basis of religion, what one chooses is of no importance, so long as he chooses resolutely and decisively.

Marijuana and wealth may not ordinarily be called religions, but the argument also sweeps in Buddhism, Zen, Bahai, Unity, Mormonism, and so on. The adherents of these religions not only find emotional satisfaction, but frequently, as in the cases of Buddhism and Bahai, they claim a deeper satisfaction than can be had in Christianity. This claim cannot be dispute, so long as experience is the test.

Dependence on individual experience is the other side of rejection of logic and rationality. Barth spoke of Paradox, Brunner asserts that God speaks in falsehoods, and numerous theologians maintain that all language is metaphorical and has no intellectual content.

Doubtless few devout Christians would say that God speaks in falsehoods; but nevertheless there is a tendency to disparage logic and "mere human" reason. Faith is frequently pictured as anti-intellectual, orthodoxy is always dead, and theology is dry as dust. True religion is said to be a matter of the heart and not of the head – although nothing remotely resembling this contrast is to be found in the Bible. It is thus that what have been apparently slight deviations from Christian doctrine, what even has appeared to be profounder degrees of devotion, have furnished Existentialism with an entrance into the Christian community.

This matter of logic is crucial. The power of the Gospel message depends on it. If faith can curb logic, then Brunner can believe one pair of contradictories, I can accept another pair, and you can curb logic in a third place. You cannot say that I am absurd, nor can I say that you are absurd, since we both retain the right to contradict ourselves at any point we wish.

Here is relativism in all its viciousness. Nothing is absolutely true. Nothing is true for all people. Everybody is free to create his own truth and value. Even orthodox Christianity can be true for a few medieval minds! But if each individual makes his own "truth by passion and emotion, free

decision and personal encounter, all becomes chaos and anarchy. Christ died and he did not die; he rose and he did not rise; there is a life beyond the grave, and the grave is our final doom. This, my Christian friends, is insanity.

Into such a theological world these graduates now go forth. Their parishioners may not read Bultmann or Heidegger, but the ideas of these men permeate popular publications. Few congregations escape their influence. Similarly few congregations escape the influence of communism, the new morality, scientism, and Romanism. These graduates go forth therefore into a hostile world. They are to be shepherds of sheep in the midst of wolves. There is no possibility of being carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease.