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SOME ASPECTS OF EXISTENTIALISM AND THEIR
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

A Research Paper Presented to the
Faculty of Concordia Seminary,
St. Louis in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Divinity

by

Carl A. Nielsen

May 1967

51417

Advisor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Shakespeare formulated Hamlet's castle soliloquy, he emphasized the role of human involvement by construing the thought as a question. "To be or not to be, that is the question."¹ There are at least two implied assertions contained here. First, man is aware that he has an option, either to be, to exist, to live or to negate this, to bring his existence to a close, to cease to exist, to will not to be. Secondly, the context of Hamlet's soliloquy indicates that if one exercises the option "to be", he becomes involved in "being" for something, for some purpose or non-purpose, for some reason.²

In a variety of different approaches most philosophies and theologies treat these two foci of individual existence and the purpose or meaning of individual existence. Among twentieth century philosophical trends, existentialism has centered concern around the question of individual existence. Existentialism, by definition, signifies that all meaning is derived when an existing subject begins to become aware not only of this existence but of one's own potentiality to develop the way one chooses, even in the midst of anxiety and paradox and uncertainty.

Along the same tack the Christian Church through its preaching and teaching, either explicitly or implicitly,

has concerned itself with the significance of individual existence. At a minimum existentialism and the Christian Church find a correlation in that they share the inquiry into the nature of human existence.³ In this paper (the author intends to examine) some aspects of existentialism and their implications for Christian education. *are examined*

The format is outlined according to the following procedure. Part two examines existentialism as an historical movement, the way in which it grew and developed, the men who shaped and formed its concerns, and the present Sitz im Leben of existentialism in the world. Part three provides an amplified definition of existentialism along with its main concerns and emphases. Part four, the main section of the paper, includes the basic understandings of existentialism according to the following categories: reality; authenticity; man and his values; religious and moral values; freedom, choice and responsibility; and educational theory and methodology. Included in each of these sections is an application and correlation of existentialist understandings for Christian education. Part five concludes with a brief summary as well as a few suggestions for continued investigation in this area.

method
The methodology used throughout the paper is bibliographical. Secondary works are extensively used in the study under consideration. Footnotes appear by chapter at the end of the paper.

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CHAPTER II

HISTORY OF THE EXISTENTIALIST MOVEMENT

In mythology Minerva springs full-grown and mature from the head of Jove. Such is not the case in the history of existentialism. Existentialism developed and grew under the aegis of historical factors. Men have shaped, formed and patterned existentialism according to their interests. The section which follows includes both the contributing factors of historical conditioning and the formative influence of seminal thinkers in determining the present Sitz im Leben of existentialism in the world.

Beginning with the historical movements that conditioned existentialism, one finds the phenomena of the age of reason, the advent of the modern discipline of science, the development of total war and the breakdown of absolutes.

The age of reason, beginning around the seventeenth century and continuing onward, created a need in philosophy which existentialism attempted to fill. In reference to the age of reason, ^{in fact} Kenneth R. Merrill, addressing the Focus on Philosophy Conference, Oklahoma College for Continuing Education, has said, *one can say that*.

For the philosophers of that age, who prided themselves upon being reasonable and rational, overstated their case in one particular respect. Reason was seen not only as man's highest faculty, capable of solving all problems and of providing knowledge, but also as entirely positive and flawless and thus as the highest product of creation. In other words, reason was considered to be absolute. †

(4)

Existentialism, then, can in part be understood as arising as a corrective to any system of thought which attempts to be absolutist without giving a full meaning and definition to the role of emotion and feeling in the individual.

The rise of science during the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries created a society geared to the objective and the verifiable. Science, through applications, brought about the Industrial Revolution and the industrial society with its tendencies to think of the individual as a "mass" man. Existentialism can be understood in part as a reaction against attempts to objectify the individual by making him part of an objective "mass" man society.²

Closely connected with the advent of the scientific age was the breakdown of absolute standards and values. Science demonstrated that earth was no longer the center of the universe. Anthropological and sociological studies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasized the relative nature of each person's morality and position in life. Freud initiated a discipline that questioned the basis for behavior by postulating a hidden agenda that each person possesses in his subconsciousness.³ In philosophy the inability to provide a universal system of truth is "...evidenced by the failure of rationalism, positivism and pragmatism..."⁴

The focus of the breakdown of absolutes is the total war experiences of the twentieth century. Dachau and Hiroshima provided realities that could not be comprehended or explained by most men.⁵

(5)

Economic, emotional, moral and political devastation and chaos left many old values shattered. Existentialism can be understood in part as an attempt to face this breakdown and general devastation and provide a method to live in the midst of the realities of life.

Turning from these historical factors to the individuals in existentialist thought, a number of leading figures dominate the scene: Blaise Pascal, Soren Kierkegaard, Fydor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Satre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Karl Jaspers and Rudolph Bultmann. Each of these authors contributed concepts and emphases to the existential way of thinking. Pascal (1623-1662) anticipated the coming threats of the results of science and began to form what later became the existentialist emphasis on the individual. Soren Kierkegaard, in the midst of what Pascal had seen two centuries prior, and feeling the urgency for communicating what he considered to be the Christian answer to his age, worked out the main concerns on which existentialists center their thought.⁶⁾ Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) brought existentialism into the twentieth century with a radical atheistic existentialism aimed "...against the cult of mediocrity and conformity."⁷⁾ The twentieth century has brought about a galaxy of existentialists from all corners of the intellectual world. Sartre and Camus, among others, particularly have used the genre of literature to present

their non-theistic existentialism. Heidegger and Jaspers have used more traditional philosophical methods to present their non-theistic existentialism. The Jew Buber, the Roman Catholic Marcel and the Protestants Tillich and Bultmann have contributed to the existentialist approach from their own particular backgrounds and theological persuasion.

In summary, existentialism can be seen as a personal movement against the objectifying influences of science and reason; as an attempt to provide a semblance of meaning against the devastation of total war; and as a flexible meeting ground in which men of very diverse intellectual and spiritual commitments find a core of common starting points. Chapter three examines these starting points in spelling out a definition of existentialism.

CHAPTER III

EXISTENTIALISM DEFINED

Many articles treating existentialism begin by noting the difficulty that one has in trying to define the exact nature of existentialism. This difficulty develops because of a number of factors. First, existentialists write out of their diverse personal contexts as atheists, theists, agnostics, Jews, Protestants or Roman Catholics. Secondly, existentialism can be either optimistic or pessimistic in tone, depending on the viewpoint of the particular existentialist. Thirdly, existentialism "...cannot be studied objectively from without, but requires the student to identify himself with its doctrines from within."¹ Fourthly, many of the writings of existentialists "...bristle with stylistic difficulties."² Fifthly, existentialism has become associated in the popular mind with a left-wing beatnik type of thinking that is foreign to everyday life; that existentialism is "...somehow...a clandestine wedding of nordic melancholy with Parisian pornography."³ Sixthly, existentialism is difficult to define because of the ambiguous nature of its inquiry; that is, into human existence and subjective experience. *The problem can be expressed as an awareness of the limits of man* Kenneth B. Merrill, in the address mentioned above, expresses the problem as follows,

4 In a word, the existentialists are acutely aware of the absolutely central problem of communication and of the concomitant temptation to try to achieve a

certain specious clarity at the expense of fidelity to lived experience.⁴

Following this line of thought the same author says,

"...to try to nail down or freeze the essence of human life is at once treacherous and impossible—or, perhaps more accurately, treacherous because it is impossible.⁵

Finally, more extreme existentialists argue that the very nature of the starting point of existentialist thinking denies the possibility of definition to existentialism.

Those who accept this extreme position maintain that no words can do justice to a definition of existentialism because the use of words in a definition is already an attempt to give the essence of an idea or thing, whereas existentialism is the concept that existence precedes essence.⁶

However, even if one retains these obstacles to definition, a general consensus of opinion presents itself in a few key concepts. First, as mentioned above, the hallmark of every existentialist is the phrase "existence precedes essence." It is difficult to overstate the importance that this concept holds for anyone who thinks as an existentialist. (Oswald O. Schrag, in Religion in Life states, "The common ground upon which...existentialists can agree is that subjectivity is the starting point, and this is to say that existence precedes essence."⁷ (John Macquarrie, speaking to the same point, says, "By 'existentialism' is meant the type of philosophy which concerns itself with human existence and which tries to understand this existence out of the concrete experience which, as existents, we all have."⁸

This concept, the positing of existence of the individual before the individual ever defines himself in terms of experience and developing personality and interests, marks the starting point of almost every existentialist.

Developing from this core concept is the emphasis in existentialism on the concrete over the abstract, the personal and subjective over the impersonal and objective. Personal encounter and commitment occupy a prominent place in existentialism (as the following four authors demonstrate. George F. Kneller, in Introduction to the Philosophy of Education, says,

Philosophy should not objectively contemplate traditional philosophic questions; rather, it should become a passionate encounter with the perennial problems of life and, in particular, with the inevitability of death, the agony and joy of love, the reality of choice, the experience of freedom and the futility or fruitfulness of personal relationships.

Oswald O Schrag, in an article from Religion in Life, states,

...existentialism, in contrast to speculative thought which primarily stresses objectivity in the sense of the rational and universal, is thinking that is more concerned with the structure and destiny of the human being than with being in general. It is thinking of human experiences in terms of voluntarism, the subjective, and the inescapable deeply personal decisions and commitments. It asserts that ultimately in every mental and physical event there is more meaning than can be expressed in a human rationale.¹⁰

David E. Roberts, in Existentialism and Religious Belief, explains,

It drives us back to the most basic, inner problems: what it means to be a self, how we ought to use our freedom, how we can find and keep the courage to face death. And even more important, it bids each individual thinker wrestle with these problems until he has grown into personal authenticity, instead of simply taking his answers from someone else.¹¹

Gerald F. Kreyche, in an article titled Impact of Existentialism on Christian Thought, says,

It has issued an important and clarion call for a reemphasis on mystery over problem; on being over having; on living over philosophies of life; on the quality of life over life's longevity; on love and affective experience over¹² abstract knowledge; and on faith over reason.

Subjectivity; that is, the meaning of man and his life, is the basic consideration of the existentialist.

A corollary of this emphasis on existence and subjectivity is that "...reason is denied the power to give a coherent account of reality."¹³ This does not imply, in most existentialist patterns of thought, that reason is castigated or allowed to languish. Rather, reason is regulated to a position of service to the "subjectivity" which is not definable. Referring to existentialism, "It stands for the meaning that existence is, and it rejects the theory that man has available adequate instruments of knowledge to reduce existence to what is."¹⁴

Finally, a further corollary of the precedence of existence over essence is that "...this precedence is the rudiment of freedom."¹⁵ The concept of "becoming" sums up the implications of "existence precedes essence." Every

individual, according to this view, throughout his life becomes what he wills to become. This is a continuing process toward a potentiality which one envisions for oneself. The responsibility for this personal "becoming" rests solely with each individual.

In summary, existentialism is a way of thinking and a basis for acting governed by the principle that "existence precedes essence"; that the personal and subjective elements of life are of the highest priority; that reason is subservient to personal involvement and subjectivity; and that each individual, on the basis of his prior existence, is free and responsible to act in "becoming" the individual that he wants to be. With this understanding of existentialism as a basis, chapter four comprises an examination of the traditional categories connected with education, and specifically Christian education, in the context of the existential thought world.

CHAPTER IV

BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF EXISTENTIALISM

Reality

Reality, according to existentialism, is defined in terms of what it is not and what it is. Negatively, reality is not a platonic-like concept of being something "out there to which the things down here, the world of experience, might correspond."¹ Reality is "not like Aristotle's realism, the thing in itself which confronts man in the everyday naive experience."² Reality is not, according to existentialism, a "thorough going naturalism", nor does it find its exemplification in the scientific method and its results.³ "Reality, it is believed, is not reducible to the /rationally coherent and therefore there is no basis for speaking of the essence of a thing or human nature."⁴ In other words, reality cannot be spoken of in the usual categories, especially not in the category of rationalism in any exclusive sense. As David Roberts points out, in reference to existentialism, "It is a protest against all forms of rationalism which find it easy to assume that reality can be grasped primarily or exclusively by intellectual means."⁵ Static definitions of reality come under existential criticism.

"Existence is not the static essence of man's being but that dynamic quality which provides him the freedom to move from the present moment into the possibilities of the future."⁶

Positively, reality as defined by existentialism is primarily a dynamic encounter of an individual with any thing or person in one's environment. The emphasis is on the encounter element. "The thing in itself is not real but one's experience with it makes it real."⁷ As noted earlier, the principle of subjectivity is pivotal for understanding the existential position. Robert E. Webber, quoting George F. Kneller, says,

The principle of subjectivism is reality for the existentialist. When a thing takes on personal meaning through an encounter with another person... We can describe the essence of a thing but in order to really know it to be genuinely alive or real we have to personally meet it, have an experience with it, become authentically involved with it... one may say that the really real is one's experience... What matters is that an individual has come in contact with, involved with, and committed to something, and this is real.⁸

According to existentialism, that which is outside one's own experience is more of a theoretical nature than within the confines of reality. That which is not experienced in the life of the individual is not real for him. Kenneth R. Merrill states,

My life is first-personal, not third personal. The concern of the existentialist, then, is with experienced reality rather than with the collection of qualities by which he is defined or the external relations by which his position is plotted; and with his own participation in the situation rather than with the inaccessible view of its eternality.⁹

Existential reality is sometimes expressed as a sequence with the statement "existence precedes essence" being the basis. The starting point and unprovable reality is the existence of the self. Van Cleve Morris, an educator at the University of Illinois, writes, "The priority of the existential 'I' is therefore a starting hypothesis. It is a hypothesis only, since there is no conceivable way to verify it."¹⁰ All subsequent reality, defined in existentialist terms as "essence" becomes "real" through the experience of personal involvement by the self. "A man's essence is his history and is complete only when he is dead."¹¹ In existential thinking reality is basically existence plus the experiences of the existing subject. And this reality is as diversified as the existing subjects represented in the world.

Implications for Christian Education

Reality, according to existentialist understanding, presents a number of options to Christian education. Two of these are no absolute system of reality and no absolute system of truth.¹² The Christian Church traditionally has asserted that its proclamation is absolute and true, in the sense that it is for all men despite their personal experience of it. The reality of the Christ event, Christian doctrine declares, stands as a reality outside the experience of the subjective self and this reality is actual without personal validation.

However, the doctrines of the Church have also traditionally emphasized the pro nobis character of the Christ event.

The Christ event, the Church says, is of no avail unless the event is for each person as an individual. The element of personally experiencing the knowledge and reality of God and the encounter with Christ has been a central element in the preaching and teaching of the Church. Although there are basic disagreements, existential insights into reality find a degree of correlation with the doctrines of the Christian Church, especially those which emphasize the need for a personal relationship with God through Christ.

In summary, reality for the existentialist begins with the existing self and continues with the personal encounter of the self with things and persons. Reality for each individual is one's own experience. The existential elimination of the absolute presents problems for Christian education while the existential emphasis on reality as something experienced by each individual finds a close correlation with the personal element in the preaching and teaching of the Church.

Authenticity

Authenticity, as defined by existentialists, refers to one's awareness of oneself as a person and the increasing distinction one makes between being a person and being a thing. The distinction made and the resulting awareness of personhood, the existentialist asserts, offers the

possibility of growing into one's fullest potentiality as a person and thereby realizing a high degree of authenticity.

"Authenticity refers to the development of man's own self-being. A self which is concerned about his freedom to be a 'person' rather than a 'thing'."¹³ Implicit in being a person, for the existentialist, is the correlary that each person, whatever his ability or potential might be, has the possibility of realizing his full measure of authenticity. Van Cleve Morris writes,

Each one of us wants to know that in some genuine sense we belong to and in the world: we want to know that our existence is justified, that we are not...excess baggage, a useless surplus in the world; we want to know that our existence is not a chance event, not an accident, not an error or some kind.¹⁴

According to some existentialist thinkers, authenticity is quantitative in nature in the sense that different individuals are at different stages of being aware of themselves as authentic persons. As Van Cleve Morris states,

As it turns out, it is awareness of one's own freedom which helps explain who can and who cannot claim to be an existentialist. That is to say, what differentiates people, in an existential sense, is the degree to which they exhibit such awareness as authenticity.¹⁵

Authenticity, as used by the existentialist, has a polemical or corrective thrust in that it asserts the uniqueness of each person as opposed to the conformity associated with a mass technological society. Gerald F. Kreyche, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at De Paul University, states,

"The most specific protest usually registered by the existentialist is against the ever recurring threat of a de-personalization of human existence."¹⁶

According to the existentialist it is the responsibility of the individual to realize his own authenticity in as high a degree as is possible for him. The goal of any educational system is in terms of assisting development rather than fitting persons into a society's pre-set pattern. Robert E. Webber, quoting George F. Kneller, says,

For the individual, the existential approach is toward the stressing of the responsibility of developing a mature self. For most educators agree that the prime purpose of the school is to enable the student to fulfill his highest potential. For society, the principle that education is regarded...as an antecedent principle which shapes the destiny of man...is contradictory to man's freedom and as such cripples authentic development of self.¹⁷

A final factor in the existential concept of authenticity is the high degree of responsibility that is placed on the individual for the development and condition of his own person and personality. Existential authenticity means, "total responsibility for one's own existence."¹⁸

Implications for Christian Education

John R. Williams cautions against too free a Christian adoption of this type of existential authenticity.

Christian faith, to be sure, is concerned about ~~man~~ and his salvation, but not first of all that man may be free, but that God may freely act through him; not that man may live authentically, but that God who alone is truth may work

authentically through him; not that man may affirm himself, but that, forgetting self, the glory of God may shine through in all that he does.

The Church has traditionally taught an exclusive doctrine that man by himself could realize nothing and that only through God's creative acting in a man can authentic and meaningful selfhood realize itself. The Church has continually emphasized the initiative of God in any kind of growth process which involves the individual in a realization of his highest meaning, potential or authenticity in life.

Briefly stated, existential authenticity signifies the awareness by oneself that one is distinctly a person and not a thing, and this awareness continually broadens as a man increasingly experiences his own personal potential. The correlation with Christian education is possible so long as the initiative of God is recognized in leading the person to full authenticity.

Man and His Values

The question "What is man?" is the central inquiry of existentialism. The diversity of proposed answers runs the gamut of existential opinion from the left to the right. The following section of the paper comprises an examination of a representative sampling of existentialist thinking on the nature of the human being. However, a few authors stop short of attempting to define man existentially.

For example, Kenneth Merrill states,

A man's essence is his history and is complete only when he is dead. It follows that it is not possible to define man finally and with precision. The only acceptable definition of man would be that he is that creature which cannot be defined.²⁰

Most of the existentialists who attempt a definition of man do so in terms of person, process, paradox and subject.

Historically, there have been at least three general interpretations as to the nature of man. First is the intellectualistic view of man. According to this position, "man is essentially a mind enclosed in a mortal body. The essence of his being resides in his rational and logical processes."²¹ Secondly, the naturalistic view "...sees man as a biological and psychological organism acting and reacting to his environment."²² The third view, the personalistic as advocated in general by existentialists, posits that man "...is to be seen as a dynamic person meeting other persons in the context of life and history."²³ In this third position man exists as an entity, complete and indivisible.

A number of observations present themselves if one studies the concept of man as a person within the context of existential thought. Every person, according to one writer, is a unique person capable of description at three levels. Each person has a unique history, each person is able to enter into an 'I-Thou' relationship with other persons, and each person "...has the ability to transcend or rise above himself, to live his life in terms of an ultimate

concern, and to have a faith relationship with an object of supreme loyalty."²⁴ This threefold description, taken from a theistic approach within existentialism, exemplifies the aspect of the dynamic quality of personhood in most existential thought.

The existential consideration of man as a person stresses the unique and unrepeatable nature of each individual. As Kenneth Merrill states,

...the pronounced existential emphasis on individual responsibility and freedom runs directly counter to many tendencies to assimilate the individual to some sort of system or to submerge him in some sort of collectivity...For the existentialist, the man is more than a collection of characteristics, more than an instance of a universal; he cannot be identified with any or all of his objectively determinable properties. He is a unique, irreplaceable, historical person.²⁵

Concerning this emphasis on the uniqueness of the person and the necessity of a development of a personal existentialism, Gerald Kreyche remarks,

If existentialism is a personal affair,...then, unlike other systems of philosophy, it can never be a 'hand-me-down.' It must arise anew in each thinker. As more than one philosopher has noted, the existentialism of each existentialist must die with that man.²⁶

The uniqueness of each person is "...a protest against all views which tend to regard man as if he were a thing, that is, only an assortment of functions and reactions."²⁷ Dignity, in existential thought, is a close correlary of the worth of each person. John Hutchison explains, "...here ...man acquires true dignity. He is not an object as all philosophy, materialistic and idealistic alike, regards him."²⁸

Man begins to know himself as a person, some existentialists say, in the crisis situations of life when one grows aware of himself in liminary positions. The meaning of life is drawn from five crisis moments. These are "...death, suffering, conflict, chance, and guilt."²⁹ Some existentialists postulate that these crisis moments help to make the person what he is.

Instead of approaching man as a person, some existentialists employ the concept of "process" or "interval" to describe the nature of man. Man here is not static or even molecular in nature but rather, according to Carl Michalson,

He is a being who is not what he can be. But philosophy has rarely defined man as that interval itself. Man is not a substance which is constantly undergoing tension and revision. Man is the tension. He is the process of revision. His is not the beginning and he is not the end. He is the tight-rope dance between ...Man is when he relates, when he acts, when he decides. And if he does not act at all? Then he evaporates.³⁰

With a similar concern, Raymond E. Anderson writes,

Existentially, a person is always seen as being in a particular situation. Here he often is facing alternative courses of action, and he always is in process, moving forward in time, and in a sense coming into being every moment.³¹

In the third place, some existentialists picture man in terms of paradox. The paradox may be outlined as Van Cleve Morris describes,

The one side is the uniqueness of me. The other side, my existence is a big joke, a huge delusion. Each of us recognizes, when we reflect on it for a moment, that we count for absolutely nothing...

In ten, or a hundred, or five hundred years, all residual effects of my existence shall have disappeared, all motions shall have expended their last quantum of energy, and the fact of my presence, while still a fact, shall have been emptied of significance, my meaning in the world finally exhausted and spent.³²

The paradox is that one is of absolute value in the world and one is of absolutely no value whatsoever. Central to the paradoxical understanding of man is the ambiguity, absurdity and irony that enter the lives of many men.

Finally, many existentialists define man as being subject. Man is on his own to work out the "essence" of his life without either guidance or rules. "Indeed, existential man is on his own. He alone is responsible for his nature and for his choices, and hence for his destiny."³³

Turning from the concept of man to his values, one finds in existentialist thought that human-values are dependent on the preceding concepts of man as a person. The individual is the beginning and continuing ground of values. Values for the existentialist are freely adopted, result from the personal choosing of the existential subject, and are unique for each individual. Completely free choice is the basis for establishing any kind of personal value system. George F. Kneller states,

If the basis of morality is freedom, we cannot expect the individual to embrace moral standards that have been laid down independently of him and to which he is told to conform irrespective of his personal feelings. Values that are not freely chosen are valueless.³⁴

Robert Webber, quoting George Kneller, spells out the latter principle:

The existentialist does not believe that values exist apart from the free acts of man. For this reason the highest value is the recognition of freedom and the lowest morality is the subjection of the individual consciousness to standards or principles which have been pre-ordained.³⁵

Values for society as a whole, according to the existentialist, are stronger as a result of individual commitment rather than those developed by enforced obedience to an outside system. Van Cleve Morris states this problem in the following way: "In short, do we understand man in relation to the world or the world in relation to man?"³⁶ Existentially, the second option produces the strong individual commitment and personal responsibility that characterizes the goals of most existentialists.

A final characteristic of the role of values in existential thought, especially non-theistic existential thought, is the baseless origin of these values. As Morris writes, "The hard part comes in accepting personal responsibility for the authorship on one's own values and, specifically, accepting the notion that they are without base but are instead original with one's own life."³⁷

Implications for Christian Education

The personalistic concept of man corresponds rather closely to the New Testament picture of the whole or complete man.

Existential emphasis on the centrality of the person can be applied to the Christian emphasis on the direction of God's activity in and toward men. Restraint is exercised by a few authors in regard to the existentialist position regarding man. Webber stresses the doctrine of original sin in opposition to the existential emphasis on freedom of individual development.

The existentialist while stressing the necessity of freedom for the individual seems to take a naive view of man. He believes that each person, given an opportunity to be completely free to be himself will be of benefit to society. Surely freedom for some men would result in actions detrimental to the whole of society.³⁸

Another author, John A. Hutchison, a Jewish rabbi, finds what he considers to be a weakness in the existential location of all values in the realm of the individual consciousness instead of allowing the past and future some degree of prominence.

On the other hand, is not optimism more likely when man can look to the past for guidance, to heaven for direction, to his fellow man for assistance and to the experiences of the ages for support and encouragement.³⁹

Positively, the existentialist concept of man as a developing individual fully responsible for his own position and growth in the world corresponds closely to the Christian emphasis on the individual's responsibility for living his life fully in obedience to God. The element of difference occurs in that some existentialists deny that the individual can be obedient to a power outside himself and yet claim to be a fully autonomous deciding individual.

In summarizing the existential understanding of man and his values, it is noted that man is defined in a number of ways; as person, process, paradox or subject; and that the existential concept of man's values is closely tied in with one's understanding of man. The main existential concept of man as person, although there are significant areas of divergence from the traditional Christian definition of man, correlates closely to the Christian understanding of man as a whole non-segmented individual.

The following section examines specific understandings of the religious and moral values within the existential context.

Religious and Moral Values

Religious and moral values within existentialism provide the widest range of diversity of all the categories considered. Basically the diversity of opinion can be classified according to three characteristics. First, the vast majority of existentialists affirm that God is not necessary. This is not to say that God does or does not exist but rather that one cannot prove or disprove this possibility of existence. "It is true that there is not a single existentialist who affirms that God is necessary. Some call that atheism. Others regard it as the way to let God 'be.'"⁴⁰

Secondly, the theistic existentialist accepts God while the non-theistic existentialist does not. In each

In each case this acceptance or non-acceptance is in terms of complete personal commitment.

But the same quality of passionate personal involvement is present in each position. For if God were necessary you could neither deny nor believe him. He would be a fate requiring submission.⁴¹

In the third place, many existentialists avoid dogmatically ruling out the possibility of God's existence. Carl Michalson states it more strongly, "all existentialists agree in affirming that God is possible..."⁴² For the theistic existentialist, "To talk about God in objective terms or scientific terms is really a sin. God is only rightly spoken of as one who has a claim on us."⁴³ For the non-theistic existentialist, "No creed either of science or religious dogma is able to validate moral decisions. They are only accepted or rejected by the individual as he stands before his own responsibility."⁴⁴

Even the non-theistic or confessedly "atheistic" existentialists, such as Fredrich Nietzsche, have opposed the concept of God but in a special sense.

What is rarely understood about existentialism is that its obituary at the grave of God is meant to be the testimony of a witness. Deicide has been committed. Existentialism is not the murderer. It is simply the witness to the crime. As Nietzsche said, it is the churches which are the tombs of God, and God is dead not because He never existed, but because people have killed Him with belief. The very manner of the church's credance is the murder weapon.⁴⁵

A unique educational institution, the Educational Center of St. Louis, employs insights of the existentialist discipline in treating religious questions and their answers. According to the Education center the basic religious question of man, in an existential context, are:

- a. Who am I? Who is the person who is my self? Why do I respond to life as I do? What is the true shape of my personhood? What is the meaning of me?
- b. Who are you? What is the meaning of you? In relation to me? Are our lives inextricably interwoven? Who are my people? What do we mean to each other?
- c. Where do I live? Where is my place in all this, my true place? Where do I belong? Where is home for me?
- d. What's around the corner? What is life? What is my destiny? In what can I place my faith? Am I tossed around by fate, or is there an eternal destiny for me?⁴⁶

In summary, existentialism is necessarily neither positive or negative in its position or attitude toward God. However, whichever position an existentialist takes, it is characteristically strongly personal.

Implications for Christian Education

The existentialist approach, especially the nature and depth of the questioning of the nature and meaning of human existence, provides a common ground upon which the Church can approach people with its answers to these questions. The wide diversity of positions toward theology and the Christian faith is such that no general implications can be reached. In an alerting and assisting function, the inquiry and philosophy of the existentialist movement could prove valuable both from the internal standpoint of trying to understand the message of the Christian faith and the external effort at understanding the concerns of those outside the faith so that the Christian message can

be communicated meaningfully.

A significant part of the values that have been mentioned to which more detailed attention is now given is that of the role of freedom, responsibility and choice in the existential concept of life.

Freedom, Responsibility and Choice

Three facets in existentialist thought go back to a common root concept. This basic concept is the autonomous nature of man in the world. By this is meant that the highest bar that each individual stands before is the bar both of one's own freedom and one's own judgment. There is no basis for judgment higher or more existentially relevant than that of a person's own evaluation of personal action and speech. With this autonomous base as a starting point, the areas of freedom, choice and responsibility can be seen as telescoping out of each other. As an autonomous individual man is free to make choices which involve him in responsibility for his choices. This relationship may be clarified by examining each concept singularly.

First, each individual is completely free. In existentialist terminology this signifies that each man of necessity develops the way he wills to develop and that the sole responsibility for success or failure in this endeavor lies with the individual. Van Cleve Morris describes this as follows:

But here is just the problem. If man's essence were

already given, then we wouldn't be free; we would merely be acting out the destiny of man, speaking lines on a vast super-Shakespearean stage which had been written in advance for our utterance.⁴⁷

The term "essence" is used in the sense of whatever potentialities lie within the grasp of the individual during his time on earth. In this type of thinking each person's life is viewed in its totality as time to be used in developing what one personally feels to be one's own unique personhood.

In various existencialists this freedom takes the implications of either condemnation or blessing or shades in between. Illustrative of the first, Simone de Beauvoir, a leading French existencialist, has said:

Freedom is, then, a terrifying burden, a burden of a desperately serious lack, a burden so terrifying it has become the source of an endemic human sickness recognized in life today as anxiety.⁴⁸

In a similar vein, Oswald O. Schrag has said in describing existencialism: "Men are condemned to be free, and it is the kind of freedom which makes man a homeless creature."⁴⁹ As a source of positive attitudes, freedom in an existencialist sense affords each individual the opportunity to develop as far as one wishes in the direction one wishes. "Involved in the whole existencialist approach to life is the necessity of the freedom to choose or to project a life for oneself."⁵⁰

Existencial freedom is not singular in nature but

according to some existentialists, such as George F. Kneller, it is closely related to social goals for humanity.

Since man is free, the philosopher must expose, not as an observer only but also as one passionately committed to his own point of view, those tendencies in the twentieth century which act to dehumanize man by undermining this freedom, such as the exploitation of human units by the mass media, the subordination of individuals to machines or to an economic system, the tyranny of the majority in the democratic process and of the group in social affairs.⁵¹

Extending out of this freedom and inextricably bound up with it, choice and its correlary responsibility, are placed. In existentialism choice is the instrument or the process whereby one individual (one existent) grows into an essence (one's own potential as determined by oneself). As Kenneth R. Merrill formulates this process:

What sets man off from other beings whose essences predetermine their existence is his power of choice; and this rests, of course, on his consciousness. By the very act of becoming conscious of himself as this or that, man transcends being just this or that. Man is perpetually becoming what he was not, and this by making decisions.⁵²

The basis for determining what particular choice to make in a situation varies from person to person but the emphasis in existentialism is the need for the person to exercise the choice and so fulfill his own personhood.

Existential choice is impregnated with responsibility of a two fold nature, responsibility to self and the implications of this for others. The primary center of responsibility is the self and the self is the only center of appeal for the consequences of any choice.

With the self all responsibility finds its criteria for realization or denial. Merrill states:

Man is responsible, awfully...responsible, for what he does. And this fact is closely related to the insistence on freedom. What a man is cannot be attributed to anyone else; he alone is finally responsible for what he is and what he becomes.⁵³

This responsibility is not limited to the self as Merrill further states, "But a man is responsible not only for the consequences of his choice for himself; he is responsible for these consequences for all mankind."⁵⁴ Since it is especially true of existentialism that one becomes involved with the varieties of experiences of life, the aspect of responsibility for one's actions in terms of effects on others is stressed.

In summary, freedom, choice and responsibility are all interlinked and arise from the existentialist position that man is an autonomous being in the world. With this as a starting point the individual seeks to live his life in working out his own "potential" by exercising his free choice ever mindful of the personal responsibility that he has in doing this.

Implications for Christian Education

The common ground between existentialism and its implications for Christian education is the basis for man's freedom, choice and responsibility. The Church teaches that

a man becomes truly autonomous by a relationship to God through Jesus Christ, although this is in a different sense from that spoken of by existentialists. This provides an area of approach. These three terms and their meanings are common to both existentialism and Christian teaching and fruitful discussion could center on the basis of autonomy.

Existential thought has only recently entered the area of educational theory and methodology. The number of publications in this area is still quite restricted. However, a number of newer works have begun formulating concepts in this area. It is this endeavor which is examined in the final section of part four.

Educational Theory and Methodology

Once again a basic difficulty in examining this area of existentialist thought is the diversity of opinion that is found. However, certain guiding principles are common to the majority of existentialists. These principles are assessed below as well as a number of methods that embody these principles in working educational situations.

In educational theory the role of the individual is central for the existentialist. George F. Kneller states,

Instead of fitting into the society the existentialist would stress the need for the individual to develop for the sake of the individual. Individuality and differentness vs. conformity and cooperation...these observations lead us to describe existentialism's

understanding of education as the creative attempt to solve the problem of the relationship between the individual and society.⁵⁵

Closely correlated with this role of the individual is the concept of freedom. Kneller states,

The uncompromising affirmation of authentic freedom and individual uniqueness is the stirring message of existentialism for the philosophy of education today.⁵⁶

The school must encourage the growth of free, creative individuality, not "adjustment" or the insidious pressure to conform, which lurks beneath the bland exterior of that over-venerated concept, "team spirit."⁵⁷

The polemical spirit of this emphasis on individual freedom as opposed to adjustment principles is to be noted in many positions taken by existentialists.

A third emphasis in educational theory as formulated by an existentialist is the need for involvement in the educational process. Van Cleve Morris says,

To the existentialist, involvement means the experience of getting personally implicated in the situations of life. In education, it means the learner's experience of getting personally implicated in his subject matter and in the situation around him.⁵⁸

The role of the teacher in the educational process is one of being the midwife to the development of the child's or student's personal growth. As Van Cleve Morris explains,

...there are three constituent awarenesses which make up the psychological content of "self":

1. I am a choosing agent, unable to avoid choosing my way through life.
2. I am a free agent, absolutely free to set the goals of my own life.
3. I am a responsible agent, personally accountable for my free choices as they are revealed in how I live my life.

The teacher's imperative is to arrange the learning situation in such a way as to bring home the truth of these three propositions to every individual.⁵⁹

The emphasis here is to make the student aware of his own personal existence and responsibility for his life.

The aim of the educational process as presented from an existential viewpoint stand out when the existentialist criticizes current educational theory and processes. For example, Van Cleve Morris states,

...each viewpoint makes the same mistake, the mistake of believing that the young are things to be worked over in some fashion to bring them into alignment with a prior notion of what they should be. The young, in these conceptions of education, are to be used; they are to be employed on behalf of (1) a prepared, precertified idea of "human nature" which they are expected to fulfill, (2) an objective body of extant subject matter which they are expected to absorb, (3) an objective concept of a culture's ways and means of living which they are expected to assume, or (4) a set of dispositions, deemed fundamental, which are to be formed in them and for which they are expected to become the living vehicles.⁶⁰

For the purpose of fulfilling these existentialist goals in the educational setting a number of approaches have been presented. These are basically four. The Socratic method is highly valued because it seeks to instill in the student the critical faculties for determining whether or not something is meaningful in the life of a person. Secondly, play is valued highly by the existentialist because it tends to reveal and open up the true self. Thirdly, the existentialist is not anti-curriculum but emphasizes the encounter of the student with the curriculum. Fourthly, the existentialist promotes the search for truth as a passionate meeting rather than as information to be mastered and memorized.⁶¹

Implications for Christian Education

The Church and existentialism begin in much the same manner, with an emphasis on the personal. The Church, with its doctrine of the personal God and its chief manifestation in the doctrine of the Incarnation has a rich source and background to incorporate the findings of the personal elements in existentialist philosophy. The emphasis in existentialist education on the personal nature of education fits well with the whole pro nobis character of Christian education.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Existentialism centers its concerns around the individual and it is from this starting point that all additional concepts and attitudes are developed. The summary statement "existence precedes essence" explains this central understanding of existentialism. The fact that a person is, that one exists per se, precedes the fact that a person develops into an individual with different characteristics from all those around him. Existentialists hold that reality is that which one personally encounters, authenticity is established by coming aware of oneself as an existing individual, man as the unique center of consciousness, and the autonomous nature of man places both a wide freedom and heavy responsibility on each person.

In relation to Christian education there is a great deal of common ground found in the areas of personal involvement in the experiences of life, in the responsibility that each one has for leading a free and responsible life, in respect for the worth of the individual against an idea or power that would make man less than he is, a unique individual of infinite worth. Problem areas lie especially in the existential emphasis on the need for each individual to set his own standards, on the relativity of all truth and

value, and perhaps foremost, the belief on the part of many existential thinkers that man will act in a responsible way if given the freedom and opportunity.

In conclusion, there is significant correlation in the concerns of both existentialism and Christianity and the insights of both thought worlds could well be synthesized in a constructive manner so that a meaningful message could come forth, from the Church's point of view a better presentation of the Gospel.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

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¹Paul Roubiczek, Existentialism-For and Against (New York: Oxford University Press, c. 1964), p. 1.

²Donald Jerke, Reality as a Basis for Religious Education (Unpublished Research Paper: Concordia Seminary Library), p. 1.

³Kenneth R. Merrill, Existentialism (An unpublished lecture delivered to the Focus on Philosophy Conference, Oklahoma College for Continuing Education, c. 1964), p. 4.

⁴Robert Webber, Summary of Existentialism and Education (Unpublished Paper: Files of Professor John Damm, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, c. 1965) p. 2.

⁵Merrill, p. 4.

⁶Roger Shinn, Existentialist Posture (New York: Association Press, c. 1959), p. 42.

⁷Ibid., p. 43

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¹George Kneller, Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., c. 1964), p. 56.

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- ³Merrill, p. 6.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 8.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 7.
- ⁶Oswald Schrag, "Main Types of Existentialism," Religion in Life (1, 1953), p. 103.
- ⁷Webber, p. 1.
- ⁸Macquarrie, p. 177.
- ⁹Kneller, p. 54.
- ¹⁰Schrag, p. 106.
- ¹¹David Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief (New York: Oxford University Press, c. 1957), p. 4.
- ¹²Gerald Kreyche, "Impact of Existentialism on Christian Thought," Religious Education (60, November, 1965), p. 426-442.
- ¹³Schrag, p. 106.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 103.
- ¹⁵Carl Michalson, "Christian Faith and Existential Freedom," Religion in Life (21, Number 4, c. 1952), p. 15.

CHAPTER IV

- ¹Webber, p. 3.
- ²Ibid.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Schrag, p. 106.
- ⁵Roberts, p. 6.
- ⁶Jerke, p. 5.
- ⁷Webber, p. 2.
- ⁸Ibid., pp. 3-4.

- ⁹Merrill, p. 22.
- ¹⁰Van Cleve Morris, Existentialism in Education (New York: Harper and Row, c. 1966), p. 13.
- ¹¹Merrill, p. 10.
- ¹²Webber, p. 3.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 5.
- ¹⁴Morris, p. 33.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 47.
- ¹⁶Kreyche, p. 424.
- ¹⁷Webber, p. 5.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹John Williams, Contemporary Existentialism and Christian Faith (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., c. 1965), p. 174.
- ²⁰Merrill, p. 10.
- ²¹Jerke, p. 19.
- ²²Ibid., p. 20.
- ²³Ibid.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 5.
- ²⁵Merrill, p. 14.
- ²⁶Kreyche, p. 423.
- ²⁷Roberts, p. 7.
- ²⁸John Hutchison, "Religious Use of Language," Christian Scholar (38, September, 1955), p. 53.
- ²⁹James Sellers, "Five Approaches to the Human Situation," Theology Today (15, January, 1959), p. 521.
- ³⁰Carl Michalson, "What Existentialism is About," Union Seminary Quarterly Review (13, January, 1958), p. 7.

³¹Raymond Anderson, "Kierkegaard's Theory of Communication,"
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³²Morris, p. 17.

³³Hutchison, p. 50.

³⁴Kneller, p. 65.

³⁵Webber, p. 6.

³⁶Morris, p. 57.

³⁷Ibid., p. 41.

³⁸Webber, p. 12.

³⁹Hutchison, p. 54.

⁴⁰Michalson, p. 5.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Webber, p. 7.

⁴⁵Michalson, p. 4.

⁴⁶Jerke, p. 8.

⁴⁷Morris, p. 45.

⁴⁸Schrag, p. 106.

⁴⁹Michalson, p. 521.

⁵⁰Webber, p. 7.

⁵¹Kneller, p. 55.

⁵²Merrill, p. 11.

⁵³Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Webber, p. 4.

⁵⁶Kneller, p. 58.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁸Morris, p. 119.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 108.

⁶¹Kneller, p. 70.

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