

### A. Introduction

The last topic concerned international politics. This topic will treat some apolitical aspects of contemporary thinking. The course goal is **to evaluate the intellectual life of the Western world** according to time, person, place, and degree of certitude warranted. This is the topic after which the third section of the course is named.

### B. Environment

The new characteristic of Twentieth Century thought is existentialism, which is not a school of thought, because existentialism is not a system of philosophy that can be worked at and taught. Existentialism is anything but systematic. Existentialism focuses more on process than on content. Existentialism is that type of philosophy which focuses on the present and treats the past and the future only as related to the present.

Kierkegaard (d. 1855) and Nietzsche (d. 1900) were the revolutionary heroes of existentialist thinking. For these men, the philosopher was a representative man of his time, who said what the problems really were as he came to grips with them in his own life. Existentialist thinking was conditioned by three Nineteenth Century situations.

First, Kant (d. 1804) had shown that reason was not able to know the object in itself. Hegel (d. 1831) disagreed. Hegel said that reason could know the object in some form. Positivists, e.g. Comte (d. 1857), going somewhat further, said that if a thing could not be measured, it did not exist. A return was required from abstractions and reductions to existential realities.

Second, by not readily admitting the validity of the movement from sensual to intellectual knowledge, Nineteenth Century Christianity was unable to legitimate the validity of knowledge by Faith. That at least is how Professor Jirran, as a Thomistic Christian Existentialist, considers the matter.

Third, the drive toward equality, taken together with the objectivity of the sciences, the division of labor, and the efficiency of machines, threatened a deflation of personality, human sand, in Nietzsche's language. The perils to and the requirements of the person involved in these situations, insofar as one reflects upon them, raise the question of human reality: one becomes a question to oneself, and this is a main preoccupation of existentialist thinking.

### C. Characteristics

In regard to philosophy, religion, and society, existentialism is characterized by a refusal of the alternatives posed: abstract or concrete; faith or reason; individualism or collectivism. The solutions achieved in practice--religious faith, loyalty to civilized values--are not achieved once for all nor by one for all: they remain forever decisions or their opposites of variations to be made and remade for one and all. The incompatible inseparables suit this mode of thinking.

### D. Evaluation

The value of existentialism is that it sharpens differences at the same time it brings together those on both sides of the division. According to existentialists, it is the condition of people to live with enduring, irresolvable tensions. Other philosophers would establish a harmony which existentialists maintain does not and cannot exist. This is embellished in the Supplement.

Existentialists are devoted to the rescue of human reality. There are two ways for this rescue to occur. The first way existentialists reject, namely, by trying to conserve human values in a world hostile on all fronts. The existentialist approach lies in demonstrating that human reality is in its constitution transcendent, free, and responsible. For a Thomist, the name used to designate a subscriber to Saint Thomas Aquinas, existentialism is the inevitable breaking up in philosophy, which must follow from an acceptance of Kantian agnosticism.

If for a Thomist, Protestant theologians can rejoice in their freedom, Protestants can do this absolutely only so long as they are on easy terms with intellectual chaos and moral anarchy. As best the professor can tell, Protestant television evangelists, evangelists, charismatics, and fundamentalists have no tolerance for existentialism. To Protestant and Catholic alike, however, the divisiveness of Protestantism is the great scandal of Christianity. The distinguished Hungarian critic, Georg Lukacs (d. 1971), like other Marxists, has seen existentialism as the last redoubt of middle class philosophy, trying to establish a third way between or beyond idealism.<sup>i</sup>

#### E. Secularism

Some may want to identify this existentialism with secularism. Secularism is that approach to reality which focuses on this world. The professor considers secularism as but one aspect of existentialism. Secularism is the most distinctive aspect of modern thought.<sup>ii</sup>

Current scholarship does treat secularism as a new religion, replacing the old. Secular belief systems, such as Nazism and Leninism-Stalinism exhibit four dimensions of religious experience: mythology, rites, communion, and faith. Modern secularism, by worshipping specific time-bound objects, becomes idolatry. Hope for the future replaces eternal hope.

The twofold function of religion has been to proclaim the truth and to promise salvation. Secularism proclaims the truth; e.g. the Holocaust must never happen to anyone ever, again. The secular promise of salvation lies in progress, science, and liberation. So, we are about to blow up the whole planet.

#### E. Conclusion

By studying the Introduction, Environment, Characteristics, and Evaluation, the student is better able to evaluate the intellectual life of the Western world in the Twentieth Century. Students are reminded to read, study, and think.

### Supplement

#### E. Existentialism Expanded

Professor Jirran thinks that existentialism is that philosophy which holds sway in academia. The professor likes the following scenario. After and because of World War I, existentialists concluded that life itself was absurd. After World War II, existentialists like Sartre (d. 1980) and Camus (d. 1960) cried out that the Jewish Holocaust must never happen again, all the while organized religions remained silent. This silence convinced academia that the hope of survival rested with existentialism, as absurd and atheistic as existentialism can be, rather than with a logical, but fundamentally insipid, religious outlook.

The purpose of this Supplement is to expand on the existentialism described in the major lecture. This expansion considers, first, some pertinent antecedents to existentialism, which Chambers cites as "one of the most influential movements of the postwar (Second World War) period." This expansion also relates contemporary philosophy with racism.

Chambers writes about pre-existentialist philosophers on page 1147<sup>iii</sup>. Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), as one of those who helped to establish Analytic Philosophy, is particularly interesting. Analytic Philosophy and Logical Positivism both tried to identify philosophical matters with precision. The U. S. psychologist, Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904-1990), with whom many students must deal, is a leader of the Positivist school.

Dr. Jirran feels a lot in common with Whitehead in that Whitehead would be seized by an idea, and then search for the words in which to express it. The good friend and man who fell in love with Whitehead's wife, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), simply thought in words to begin with. Whitehead once said to Russell, "You think the world is what it looks like in fine weather at noon day; I think it is what it seems like in the early morning when one first wakes from deep sleep."<sup>iv</sup>

To move from Whitehead to Sartre, as influential as Sartre was in condemning the Holocaust, he was unsettlingly silent about racism. Sartre would not acknowledge that there was a racial dimension to the Vietnam War, a dimension patently clear to workers in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee at the time. To SNCC, it seemed evident that the world was polarizing into the White West and the everything else everywhere else. For SNCC, the War in Vietnam was only a rehearsal for what was coming by way of protesting U. S. interests both at home and in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.<sup>v</sup> One of the remaining problems of the civil rights movement, both at home and abroad, is to enlist a thinker of the caliber of Sartre to invest the civil rights movement with a firmer theoretical foundation.

#### F. Liberation Theology

Dr. Jirran likes to refer to liberation theology as the moral answer to the problem inherent in the fact that capitalism is poor theory but good practice and that socialism is good theory but poor practice. Liberation theology is far more comfortable with communism than is traditional theology.

Liberation theology is an outgrowth of Vatican II, which some see as a devastation of faith,<sup>vi</sup> but which Dr. Jirran sees as an answer to faith. Dr. Jirran sees Neo-Scholasticism as fulfilled, rather than made obsolete, in Vatican II and liberation theology. Dr. Jirran does this as a member of the Catholic community, rather than as a member of the clergy. The clergy used to think that faith had no history, but Dr. Jirran never had any such illusion. So who cares? Anyone who might be trying to figure out the underlying principles which Dr. Jirran uses to make sense out of the past.

Liberation theology has roots in Latin America, where the church hierarchy has become overly committed to upholding secular politics. This means that some of the hierarchy welcomes liberation theology, though other members of the hierarchy denounce liberation theology. Rome has generally opposed liberation theology.<sup>vii</sup> One scholar has characterized liberation theology with "the usual total neglect of anything that might hint that the author has the slightest notion of what produces wealth in the first place."<sup>viii</sup>

Before 1990, liberation theologians simply predicted a future revolution. By 1990 there was a need to participate, rather than simply predict. Peaceful, democratic revolutions were possible.<sup>ix</sup>

The theoretician of liberation was Gustavo Gutierrez. The 1968 Medellin meeting of Latin American bishops in Columbia was the political turning point, at which the hierarchy endorsed the legitimacy of liberation thinking. The idea "that theology should be a `scripturally-based critical reflection on experience (praxis)' of the poor, using social science tools of dependency theory and Marxist analysis."<sup>x</sup> The name that frequently gets in the news is Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan theologian, silenced for a while by Rome, who then left the priesthood and later married.

Evangelical churches pose a serious threat to mainstream churches that support liberation theology. The Protestant evangelicals often call for immediate revolution, whereas Catholic liberation theologians often support the status quo. The evangelicals polarize, rather than bring peoples together. Their strength varies from country to country.

#### Footnotes

<sup>i</sup>The professor has not seen Constanzo Preve, "Viewing Lukacs from the 1980s" [r. art.], *J. Mod. Hist.*, 59 (Dec. 1987): 751-60 as cited in Recently Published Articles, Vol. 13, No. 2, just before "ANCIENT."

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<sup>ii</sup>W. Warren Wagar, review of Harry J. Ausmus, The Polite Escape: On the Myth of Secularization and Jean-Pierre Sironneau, Secularisation et religions politiques in The American Historical Review, Vol. 88, No. 2 (April 1983), pp. 358-9.

<sup>iii</sup>Page 1039 in the fourth edition of Chambers

<sup>iv</sup>Victor Lowe, Alfred North Whitehead: The Man and His Work Volume 1: 1861-1910, page 223, as cited in George Feaver, review of Lowe, The American Historical Review, Vol. 92, No. 2 (April 1987), p. 422.

<sup>v</sup>Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), page 273.

<sup>vi</sup>Thomas E. Wangler, review of Philip Gleason, Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present, The Journal of American History, Vol. 77, No. 3 (December 1990), page 986.

<sup>vii</sup>Anne Motley Hallum, review of Paul E. Sigmund, Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution? American Political Science Review, Vol. 85, No. ?, pages 615-616.

<sup>viii</sup>James V. Schall, S.J., review of Werner Levi, From Alms to Liberation: The Catholic Church, the Theologians, Poverty, and Politics, The Catholic Historical Review, 76, No. 2 (April 1990), page 323.

<sup>ix</sup>Anne Motley Hallum, review of Paul E. Sigmund, Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution? American Political Science Review, Vol. 85, No. ?, pages 615-616.

<sup>x</sup>Paul E. Sigmund, Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution? page 29 as cited by Anne Motley Hallum, review of American Political Science Review, Vol. 85, No. ?, pages 615-616.