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Existentialism and its Message to Indian Thought Pattern

MUNDUVEL V. GEORGE

Soren Kierkegaard, whose prodigious writings were first translated into English only after a hundred years of their original appearance in Denmark, should not remain unknown in Indian Theological Seminaries. Though he lived only forty-two years (1813-1855), he has succeeded in bringing down, for all time to come, philosophical idealism from its pedestal of glory. Fourteen volumes of his writings are available in the Danish language, and many of them have been translated into English and several other European languages. The following are some of his major works available in English:

Book	Year of writing	English translation
<i>Either/Or</i>	1843	1944
<i>Sickness Unto Death</i>	1849	1941
<i>Concept of Dread</i>	1844	1944
<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i>	1846	1941
<i>Training in Christianity</i>	1850	1941
<i>Edifying Discourses</i>	1844	1946
<i>Stages in Life's Way</i>	1845	1940

There are besides his Journals, some of which have appeared in English in 1938, *The Point of View*, which was translated into English in 1939, and a few other books.

Kierkegaard was influenced by Schelling (1775-1854), whose lectures he attended at Berlin. He was also a good student of Greek Philosophy and Hegelian Idealism. He had a very high respect of Socrates and the Socratic Method. He was sent by his father Michael Kierkegaard, a rich wool merchant, to be trained for the ministry. But his primary interest being in philosophy, although he completed his theological studies, he was never ordained. The breaking of his engagement with Regine Olsen in 1841, in spite of his ardent love for her, caused in him a deep change in mental attitude. 'Before God we are always in the wrong', he used to insist, and like St. Augustine he had a profound insight into the reality of sin. Being very critical of the State Church in Denmark, he believed his mission to be to 'introduce

Christianity into Christendom'. As he continued to be unpopular till his death, he made no income from his books. Having fainted on the side of a public road, he died in a hospital. When asked whether he wanted to receive the Sacrament, he replied, 'Yes, but not from a priest'. There was a hubbub even about his burial, because he was a pungent critic of the established church.

By common consent Kierkegaard is the father of modern Existentialism. This line of thinking is traceable in the writings of St. Augustine, Pascal, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and others.

Existentialism may be described as the opposite of Idealism. Descartes with his *Cogito, ergo sum*—I think, therefore I exist—inaugurated the Cartesian age in philosophy. But Kierkegaard reversed the starting-point and ushered in the age with the maxim 'I exist, therefore I think'. Rejecting the primacy of the rational, the ideal, Existentialism assigns primacy to decision, which often-times would be irrational. The very basis of Existentialism is that existence precedes essence, and that the totality of existence is more than ideas or definitions of existence. H. R. Mackintosh 'speaks of "existential thinking" as "a mode of thought which concerns not the intellect merely but the whole personality of the man who awakens to it and adopts it. To think existentially, therefore, is to think not as a spectator of the ultimate issues of life and death, but as one who is committed to a decision upon them" . . . Kierkegaard would have said that the chief defect in Hegel's philosophy is that definite lack of such thought'.¹ Carl Michalson, one of the theological existentialists of America, has published in 1956 a symposium entitled *Christianity and Existentialism*. In its Introduction he gives a few definitions of Existentialism, stating clearly that Existentialism cannot be defined in the proper sense but can only be experienced in total commitment.

1. 'Existentialism', says Michalson, 'is a way of life which involves man's total self in an attitude of complete seriousness about himself'. If Idealism demands objective, impassionate, cool thinking, Existentialism appeals for subjective, passionate, life-affirming thinking.

2. 'To exist is to be unique.' 'Animals do not exist', asserts Michalson, 'for they cannot self-transcend, God does not exist for he need not self-transcend'. Man alone exists, because he can and does transcend himself. All the same, this emphasis on man has, contrary to Kierkegaard's expectation, paved the way to the atheistic Existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre (1905-) and Martin Heidegger (1889-). By his philosophical writings, particularly his novels, Sartre has popularized Existentialism in France more than anybody else.

3. Existentialism stresses individual freedom and decision so much that it has been made a target of attack both by the conservative leadership of the Roman Catholic Church and by the

¹ Quoted from *Types of Modern Theology* by Leslie Paul in his *Meaning of Human Existence*, p. 163.

Marxists. Thus in his Encyclical *Humani Generis* Pope Pius XII has accused Existentialism of believing that 'a man who cannot make up his mind what is the true answer to some intellectual problem needs only have recourse to his will', and exclaimed, 'A strange confusion, here, between the provinces of thought and of volition'. Marxists see in Existentialism 'the disability of capitalists to prevent wars and crises.

It is his Existentialism that has led Nicolas Berdyaev to see in the concept of the Meonic Freedom the solution for the problem of evil. In it may be seen that Protestantism and Eastern Orthodox Berdyaev find for them a common ground. Jean Paul Sartre says that 'Man is condemned to be free'.

4. 'To exist is to realize that man can be nothing.' The threat of non-being, of which Paul Tillich has a great deal to say, is an emphasis on which the atheistic and theological Existentialists do meet. That there is much truth in this emphasis cannot be denied. For contemporary man does not accept the idea of progress prevalent in the last century, according to which 'in every way on every day we are getting better and better'. That Existentialism is truer to facts than either Hegelian Idealism or Marxist Utopianism has also to be granted. The former speaks of an eternal process of spirit as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; and the latter of a movement of history which will bring in heaven on earth. Existentialism is a challenge of pessimism on both these systems. Only ideas can be systematized, says the Existentialist; existence cannot be brought under a system, for it is every minute faced with the threat of non-being. 'The existential man is absolutely alone and absolutely free and must make the most absolute decisions, a void of nothingness all around him'.²

5. Paradoxicality of the rational and the fact of the leap of faith are referred to by theistic existentialism. In his *Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard makes the thesis of Hegel as a target of attack. Discarding the maxim 'real is rational and rational is real', he argues for subjectivity. Subjectivity is truth and truth is subjectivity, asserts the Danish philosopher. Abraham, he argues, would have lost faith in God had he started with a scientific investigation of the revelation which he had. The Patriarch's faith was so real that he did not mind the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' demanded of him in sacrificing Isaac, his son. Religion belongs to the faith-dimension and is above the ethical. 'Jesus Christ', says Kierkegaard, 'is the Supreme Paradox'. It is not historical and scientific investigation whether Christianity is true that makes one a Christian; but it is the leap of faith into the darkness of the Religion of Revelation. In this leap there is involved an utter despair of the aesthetic, the ethical and the Religions of the search for God. Jesus Christ, the God-man, can never be squeezed into a rational system; neither can the Revelation of God in history be understood by reason alone. Christ is fact to

² Leslie Paul, *Meaning of Human Existence*, p. 165.

faith, but paradox to reason. 'God is Subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness'.³ Jesus Christ is 'the unrepeatable unique personality of an existential centre'.⁴

The two schools of modern Existentialism, namely Christian and atheistic, have some of the best minds of the present day among their supporters. Though Karl Barth left Existentialism at a crucial point (see *Hibbert Journal*, April 1961), he admits that he has absorbed the best out of it. Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, and many others have been deeply influenced by Kierkegaard and Existentialism. Gabriel Marcel (1889-) thinks that Existentialism is not incompatible with the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Buber, though a Jew and does not accept the doctrine of Incarnation, shows a tremendous Existentialist insight in his great work, *I and Thou*. N. Berdyaev, a thinker of undisputed eminence, does belong to the galaxy of Existentialist thinkers.

H. P. Richman, in reviewing Sartre's novel, *The Flies*, in the *Hibbert Journal*, writes: 'For Existentialist thought with its emphasis on choice and subjectivity, was a matter of historical fact evoked by the crisis of religion in the nineteenth century. Existentialists, according to whether they met the challenge by a Biblical re-interpretation or a secular replacement of Christianity, divided into Christians and atheists. The former sought truth of religion, which neither rational argument nor the existence of the Church could any longer sustain, in subjective faith. The latter, Sartre among them, set themselves grimly to the task of giving dignity and meaning to a life without God'.⁵

Existentialism is here to stay, at least as a critique of Idealism. 'The Philosophy of human existence', says Berdyaev, 'is a Christian theandric philosophy. Truth is its supreme criterion. But truth is not an objective state nor can it be apprehended like an object. Truth implies above all man's spiritual activity. Its apprehension depends on the degree of community between men, on the communion in the spirit'.⁶ This is a point which theological Existentialism has yet to develop in order to ward off the criticism that it is individualistic and unable to give room for the doctrine of the Church, the Ministry, and the Sacraments. In an age when man is considered to be a product of circumstances, Existentialism has done a great service by asserting the primacy of the personal over against the materialistic mode of thinking. 'At the present time, it is imperative to understand once more that the rediscovery of man will also be the rediscovery of God. That is the essential theme of Christianity'.⁷

The rediscovery of God in Existentialism tends to move in the direction of God as Dynamic Becoming rather than as Static Being.

³ Leslie Paul, *Meaning of Human Existence*, p. 166, where Leslie Paul quotes Kierkegaard.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵ *Hibbert Journal*, April 1961.

⁶ N. Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, p. 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

'Existence', says Berdyaev, 'is synonymous with becoming'.⁸ The concept of paradox, which has been made central by Existentialism, will lead to the affirmation that God is the Supreme Paradox of Being and Becoming at the same time. Thus the God rediscovered by Existentialism is Supra-rational, though not irrational.

A word may be said here about the Hindu religious thought pattern in general as compared to Existentialism. On the whole the Hindu way of thinking is primarily idealistic. Nicol Macnicol is definitely right in saying that 'Indian thought has almost always in its quest for final truth taken it for granted that whatever was not of pure intellect was gross and unworthy of the Highest. The way to God is a way to an atmosphere ever growing rarer, to a region that only pure knowledge can attain. It is a way of continual abstraction until that One is reached which is so abstract as to be universal'.⁹ This is the reason why the monistic *Advaita* of Sankara has more following among intellectuals of India than the theistic *Visishtadvaita* of Ramanuja. The various *bhakti* cults of India may be understood as a natural reaction to such an abstraction. Ramanuja himself defines *bhakti* as 'only a particular kind of knowledge of which one is indefinitely fond and which leads to the extinction of all other interests and desires'.¹⁰

To revert to Berdyaev again, he divides all philosophical types into two categories on the basis of the fundamental principles of philosophy:

<i>One</i>	<i>Two</i>
1. The primacy of freedom over Being.	The primacy of Being over freedom.
2. The primacy of the subjective over the objective world.	The primacy of the objective over the subjective world.
3. Dualism.	Monism.
4. Voluntarism.	Intellectualism.
5. Dynamism.	Static.
6. Activism: and the sense of creation.	Passivity: contemplation.
7. Personalism.	Impersonalism.
8. Anthropologism.	Cosmologism.
9. Spiritual Philosophy.	Naturalism.

Having drawn the distinction, Berdyaev adds, 'I personally have made the choice; I have resolutely chosen the first series of theses which maintain the primacy of freedom over Being... To eliminate the primacy of Being over freedom is to eliminate tragedy; to affirm the primacy of freedom over Being is to postulate it'.¹¹ It

⁸ N. Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, p. 54.

⁹ Nicol Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, p. 242f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹¹ N. Berdyaev, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

goes without saying that Hinduism in its main thought pattern falls in the second category, which the Existentialist Berdyaev has resolutely rejected.

Another valid message of Existentialism to Indian speculative philosophy is the importance of decision which it emphasizes. To quote Karl Jaspers, 'The decision for Reason, which is also a decision for freedom, truth and unconditionality of existential decision, is against nature, occurrences and necessity . . . I become free only in so far as I am conscious of my guilt ; otherwise I remain enslaved to nature ; I become free only by an act of decision which is like a rebirth, a transformation, a revolution in my whole way of thinking. This is how Plato, the Bible and Kant saw it'.¹² According to Jaspers, 'Reason does not exist by nature, but only by decision'.¹³

The emphases on guilt, freedom, and decision are not an inherent part of Hindu Monism, although it accepts the theory of *karma* and rebirth which vests responsibility on the individual. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, for instance, is reported to have made the following observation : ' Once someone gave me a book of the Christians. I asked him to read it to me. It talked about nothing but sin. (To Keshab) Sin is the only thing one hears at your Brahma Samaj too. The wretch who constantly says " I am bound, I am bound " only succeeds in being bound. He who says, day and night, " I am a sinner, I am a sinner " verily becomes a sinner'.¹⁴

The point where *Advaita* philosophy of India and Existentialism seem to agree is in the assertion of the subjectivity of truth. At the same time, it is precisely here that the two also disagree most radically. In the former it is the negation of the Ego and in the latter it is the assertion of the Ego that constitutes the central emphasis. Whereas Existentialism is emphatic on the ontological gulf between God and His creation, Hindu Monism holds to the doctrine of *Aham Brahmasmi* and *Tat tvam asi*, whereby insisting on the identity of *jivatman* with the *Paramatman*. Berdyaev's assessment of Buber's interpretation may be relevant in the present context. 'Buber', writes Berdyaev, 'very rightly maintains that the Ego has no real existence outside of its relationship with the Other Self or the Thou ; but he envisages the relationship between the Ego and the Thou as one uniquely between man and God, as expounded in the Bible'.¹⁵ Again agreeing with Buber, Berdyaev writes : ' From the ontological standpoint, solitude implies a longing for God as the subject, as the Thou. The divine agency is the only one capable of surmounting solitude, of making man aware of a sense of familiarity and relationship, and of disclosing a purpose commensurable with his existence'.¹⁶ Thus while Hindu

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time*, p. 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁴ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 68.

¹⁵ N. Berdyaev, *op. cit.*, p. 106f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Monism puts the emphasis on the identity of the empirical ego with the Supreme Ego, Buber lays his stress on the longing of the former (subjectivity) for the latter (Subjectivity with a capital S). Hindu Monism advocates self-realization, but Christian Existentialism insists on self-consecration for the Supreme Self, the Personal God.

Many of the points on which Kierkegaard attacked the Hegelian system of rational philosophy may be applied in evaluating the Hindu mode of speculation. For instance, the primacy of subjectivity over objectivity, of faith over reason, of religion over philosophy, of choices over synthesis, of a leap of faith over speculation, and of existence over essence—all these are points on which Existentialism calls in question the adequacy of the essentially Monistic thought pattern of Hinduism.

Kierkegaard, writes J. Heywood Thomas, 'perceived that the synthesis that Hegelianism offered really took too much for granted, and did not face up to the enormous qualitative difference between genuine faith and its speculative philosophy. The aim of Hegelian philosophy was synthesis and its method the mediation of opposites . . . On the contrary the distinguishing feature of Christianity is that it asserts the infinite difference between God and man, whilst maintaining that Jesus is both God and man'.¹⁷

¹⁷ J. Heywood Thomas, *Subjectivity and Paradox*, p. 10.

When we consider the ideas of the ministry expressed in these quotations, it is clear that the starting point with reference to the ministry is the commission. The Lord himself has given this commission, in the first place, to His Apostles who thus have a special position, but also through them to all those who during the centuries have been authorized as the messengers of Christ in the footsteps of the Apostles. This means that the commission of Christ is continually given through the Church, and that, from the point of view of faith, the ministry is maintained in the Church through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

GUSTAF AULEN

From the first century to the twentieth the foe of Christian unity and true catholicism has been within the Church itself. Persecution from without drives Christians together. Selfishness, heresy, schism and hypocrisy from within drive them asunder. Paul knew the disease and the remedy. 'For ye, brethren, were called for freedom; only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh, but through love be servants one to another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another' (Gal. 5 : 13-15).

SAMUEL M. ZWEMER