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What Ever Happened to Existentialism? Part 2

By Tal Davis

Is this the real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landside,
No escape from reality
Open your eyes,
Look up to the skies and see,
I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy,
Because I'm easy come, easy go,
Little high, little low,
Any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to
Me, to me
"Bohemian Rhapsody" by Freddy Mercury (Far-
rokh Bulsara; 1946-1991)
and Queen

In the first installment of this two part series, we reviewed a bit of the history of Existentialism and discussed several nihilistic presuppositions of that philosophical movement. In this section we continue our discussion of some of the principles of this influential 1960s belief system and how Existentialists attempt to find meaning in the midst of their despair. Read part one at: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2022/08/what-ever-happened-to-existentialism-part-1-tal-davis>

Humans are Free

A key element of Existentialism is that people are absolutely free. That is to say, since there is no deity, or anything or anyone to whom they must ultimately answer, they are truly free to make themselves and their lives whatever they want them to be. Humans are completely autonomous and can choose to do or be anything they can within the limits of time, space, matter, and energy (and, we might add, the civil law). Many athe-

ists, especially those who came out of strict religious backgrounds, declare that when they came to that realization it was the most liberating moment of their lives.

The problem with this position is that if God does not exist, then what we call personal choice is an illusion. If all that exists is the material universe of atoms and molecules, then humans' thoughts and behaviors are the inevitable consequence of DNA and the laws of nature mindlessly at work. Humans only *think* they are thinking and making decisions. Consciousness is an illusion. Existentialists only fool themselves into believing they are free.

It is also important to understand that many people who adhere to the existentialist mindset are not even aware that is what they are doing. Just as most people are totally unconscious of their own worldview, many people unknowingly live out existentialist presuppositions.

People Can Find Meaning in a Self-Authenticating Purpose and Experience

As we indicated, Existentialists certainly know and accept the fact that without God there is no real purpose or meaning to life (eg.: "Bohemian Rhapsody"). Nonetheless, they are determined to overcome that objective reality (as they see it). Therefore, Existentialists, who believe they are absolutely free, decide to ignore their own logical conclusions, pull up their belts, and find their own meaning and purpose for life. It is really the ultimate of being in denial. Often this involves seeking some ultimate personal experience or cause that provides the self-actualizing and authentic meaning they desire regardless of the harsh reality of

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empty existence. This is ostensibly found in various ways by different people.

Those who look for this self-validating experience may try various avenues which they hope will fulfill their need. In the 1960s, many young people, influenced by popular advocates like Dr. Timothy Leary, thought that experimenting with psychedelic drugs would give them the personal experience to make living worthwhile. Many celebrities (especially rock musicians like the Beatles) took the "drugs road" to inner peace. Most soon realized that road led nowhere, and drugs were not the answer. As powerful as the experiences were, they failed to give them the kick they needed to provide any true meaning. Their deep questions were not answered. Unfortunately, many of them did not come to that realization in time and died from overdoses.

For some individuals, the ultimate experience is found in romantic love and/or sex. Many men and women believe that finding "true love" in a romantic relationship with another person is what makes life meaningful. They think nothing could be more fulfilling than the wonderful feeling of being in love. Sadly, many people spend their whole lives looking for that "special one," often moving through multiple failed relationships. For others, just enjoying the physical pleasures of sex is their primary objective in life. They often experiment with various exotic and deviant sexual practices to get that ultimate gratification. This was the essence of what was called "the Playboy philosophy" in the 1960s. Inevitably that quest also fails to satisfy. For many it led to early deaths from sexually transmitted diseases (eg.: Freddy Mercury).

Another way some existentialists search for meaning is in political

and social activism. The late 1960s and early 70s, fueled by the anti-Vietnam War movement, was characterized by calls for radical revolutionary change. That impetus served to validate some people's need for an all encompassing cause to which to dedicate their lives. Like the other movements mentioned above, that kind of militant activism also waned, particularly after the end of the Vietnam War. Modern progressivism is the legacy of that movement – only without the revolutionary militancy of the 60s (though some anarchist and Marxist groups like ANTIFA still take that tact).

Other existentialists look for this authenticating experience in following the teachings of eastern religions. In the 1970s, many western youth traveled to India to study with Hindu gurus who promised them "enlightenment." The Hindu teachers never really defined what that experience was, but that was not really important. Enlightenment, for them, has no rational content. It cannot be described or explained in words or logic. Some of those gurus came to America to peddle their particular version. Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of Transcendental Meditation (TM), was probably the best known. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada exported the Hare Krishna movement. Others included Ram Dass, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (AKA: Osho), and the teenaged "living god," Guru Maharaj Ji, who was eventually demoted by his mother for becoming too worldly (can you fire a god?).

Out of those eastern religious fads eventually evolved the New Age Movements of the 1980s and 90s. Literally hundreds of self-proclaimed gurus, psychics, mystics, and occultists flooded the spiritual marketplace with their own methods for attaining the ultimate meaning and experience for life (usually for a hefty price). All of this reflects the influence of the existentialist mindset.

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Sad to say, in the early 20th century, Existentialism also influenced certain prominent Christian theologians. Liberals like Rudolf Bultmann, along with neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth, inculcated some of the presuppositions of Existentialism into their theological systems. For them, Christianity is not dependent on historical facts, such as the resurrection of Jesus or the events of Bible (or, for some, not even the existence of God). Rather it is based on the personal experience of a person who hears "the word of God" and has an existential religious awakening cloaked in Christian terminology. Bible believing Christians assert that the objective historical facts recorded in Scripture are true whether anyone has an experience or not. The Christian faith is based on facts, not feelings. That being said, when a person comes to faith in Christ, he or she will experience the joy and peace that only He can provide – but that is not the foundation our belief system. We believe and experience it because it is true!

So, what happened to Existentialism?

Actually, Existentialism never really went away. We do not hear a lot about it in popular discourse now in the 21st century. That may be because most of the movement's prominent philosophers and cultural influencers passed away in the last century. Nonetheless, the presuppositions that characterized Existentialism are still evident in many cultural, intellectual,

and moral movements today. Post-modernism, for instance, is similar in that it denies all rational explanations, truth, and morality – seeing them as mere narratives determined by culture. They are only what a person believes they are for themselves. They are all equally valid. This mindset is dominant in modern secular universities and the media. It is also preeminent in leftist political ideology. For Bible believing Christians, the legacy of Existentialism still remains as a major challenge to reaching America and most of the western world with the gospel. Today, most intellectuals are fully committed to Naturalism. And, like the old existentialists, they still struggle to find meaning for their lives despite the nihilism their philosophy requires. So, in most cases, they just go on living – trying not to think much about the finality of their inevitable deaths.

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They are like a passenger train rolling down the tracks with the people inside enjoying the ride while all the time knowing they are headed for a dead end concrete wall.

It is to this hopelessness that we Christians can suggest reasonable answers to the questions of life. We do not despair because we know there is a destination awaiting at the end of the line. We believe there is a Living God who created the universe and sustains it. He created all persons and loves them. We have genuine hope for the future, not because we have had some indescribable subjective experience, but because we know that Jesus Christ lived, died, and actually rose from the dead.

As Paul told the Corinthians: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ only in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied. ***But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead***, the first fruits of those who are asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:17-20 NASB)