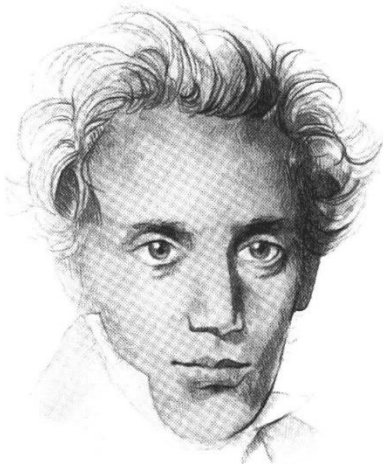


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The Advent of Diffusion: Søren Kierkegaard

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1



“I conceived it as my task to create difficulties everywhere.”

The man who spoke those words produced in the world a wide result that is measurable and yet mysterious. Born in 1813 and dying in 1855, he said what he said, lived as he lived, and wrote what he wrote before the time of most of the other historical provocateurs who are the object of our attention. The others knew little about him; and if they did know, cared even less. Nevertheless, he built a secret tunnel under their lives and years that was to surface and bring his ideas to the fore long after they were gone. The writings of this man were sometimes clear, but more often they were frustratingly cryptic. An interesting fact about the products of his facile pen is that they needed to wait one hundred slumbering and inattentive years before they were even translated into the English language. When they appeared in English, they made a stunning impact, for they were just the ideas for which the world was waiting.

Who was this man?

He was called “the melancholy Dane,” but sometimes that melancholy gave way to what can only be called “divine intoxication.”

His name is Søren Kierkegaard.

This remarkable man was one of the most prodigious writers of his day. Considering the content of his paragraphs and the whiplash nature of his presentations, we find ourselves at least mildly surprised that he was the object of nearly no attention in the English-speaking world until almost one hundred years after the expiration of his short but thoughtful life. A possible explanation of this hiatus in his public reputation may be accounted for by the makeup of Western society during the period in which he wrote.

In the area of religion and its related philosophic views, this century has been as colorful as any and more than most. On the religious side, the impact of Wellhausen’s denial of

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the true inspiration of the Bible and the consequent rise of religious liberalism came sweeping into the West at about the turn of the century. The brand of religion contemplated at that time, if religion was considered at all, was liberal Christianity. From about 1910 through the 1940s, the liberal view was the prevalent mode of thinking in the great denominations, the large seminaries and colleges of the East, and, to a great extent, among the general public. Therefore, groundless human optimism replaced year by year the categoric theological tenets that are taught in the Bible. As the Bible became more and more a human book, it became more and more irrelevant. As the true deity of Jesus Christ was denied, He became merely an interesting teacher and finally almost an imposter who brought discomfort to the natural man in his complacency. The cross, to the liberals, became more and more an embarrassment and less and less explicable. Finally, the death of Christ was virtually denied as a historical fact and became a mythological paradigm for noble sacrifice a man might be called upon to express through the way he lived.

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The need for personal salvation slipped away as education, optimism, positive thinking, good works, and noble ideals became its substitute. In some circles, salvation ceased to mean everlasting life but instead came to mean deliverance from meanness and selfishness, a concept in perfect harmony with the increasingly popular notion of Darwinian evolution. In liberalism, the object of a Christian's hope for the future was shifted from the return of Christ to a hope, and then a certainty, of improving the world. Any idea of Christ's returning to quell evil in a violent battle and then to reign with a rod of iron was thought absurd. For the liberal, the hope of the future was the church's success in its ever-growing mission to improve humanity. If Christ were to return at all, the mission of the church was to so uplift society as to make it a fit place to which the Messiah might without embarrassment return.

Through the '20s and '30s, the liberal view moved from optimism to the near-declaration of a human millennium soon to come. As a custodian of the needed management for the future, the conciliar movements formed the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches in America, and similar counterparts in other nations of the West. There is no doubt that the spirit of this amorphous thing that went under the name of Christianity was that of joyous, albeit slightly nervous, anticipation of a future that simply had to get better and better.

After all, the liberals thought, the world had now reached a level of intelligence so high it would never again see its component nations locked in the deadly embrace of war. World War I was the great lesson. Surely now mankind would reel backwards in horror at the prospect of another massive human conflict and the ghastly results that attended such an event. Even the peace movements of that day took the form of celebrations of

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mankind's new and irenic spirit, which was seen as the sure promise of a millennium of peace now coming as surely as the sun rises in the morning.

It was also argued, even by the religionists, that the financial crash of 1929 carried with it a blessed spiritual lesson. It taught that the people of the world should not lay up treasures that really belonged to the poor nor speculate with their hard-earned money to gain riches apart from responsible labor and valuable contributions to society. The Depression, as well, had reminded thoughtful people everywhere of the need for compassion, sharing, and charitable activity. Thus even financial reverses produced the salutary consequence of people becoming nicer and more caring toward their fellow man.

It was also argued that advances in science, technology, global communication, and related technologies now bursting upon the world would automatically produce comity between nations. During the '30s there was a strong emphasis on global awareness, and there reemerged the concept of one world brought together by the sinews of human brotherhood and understanding. The promise of the future was exhilarating indeed.

But at the same time, clouds the size of a man's hand had begun to appear in various places. The world began to hear reports of a colorful power-seeker on the continent of Europe, who promised a utopia for the people of Germany and the world they would soon have opportunity to rule. Thinking these claims to be merely the ravings of another fanatic, the world looked on with fascination and even amusement at the rise of Hitler and the advent of Nazism, which quickly took control of one of the most important nations in the world.

Germany was exactly that. It led the world in philosophy, theology, medicine, and many forms of technology, including early work on a mysterious process called *splitting the atom*. As the 1930s drew to their close, Hitler, with his thousands of brown-shirted cohorts and millions of loyal troops, was moving once again into the deadly business of war.

From Russia, as well, came enormously disquieting reports. A tyrant by the name of Joseph Stalin, it was rumored, had initiated programs of virtual extermination of the Kulaks and the Ukrainians, and had initiated severe persecutions against the Jews and the Christians of that Communist land. In those days, the world refused to believe the oft-stated intention of the Bolsheviks of bringing their revolution to the entire world. With similar credulity, the nations of the West allowed Communist party organizations to be developed in their own political structures, which allowance they were later to regret.

Something called *fascism* was also developing in Italy with a strutting dictator, Benito Mussolini. Fascism, Nazism, and Communism sounded in the mouths of their respective

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polemicists like very different things. As it turned out, they were merely different names for the same political excuse used by a dictator to grab a country, throttle it into submission, kill everybody who disagreed with him, and then smilingly inform the world that nothing had happened. One wonders at the penchant of Western intellectuals to debate epistemological niceties when in fact they are dealing with cruel brutalities that veil their activities with a mesh of emotional, challenging words that are without meaning.

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All of this led to World War II. The thing that never could happen again was in fact happening, but in a greater, wider, and more deadly fashion than World War I. Millions of troops marched into the cauldron of flame and death, airplanes filled the skies, artillery laced the landscape, and rockets flew across the Channel and then across continents.

The massive explosion of cordite and hatred which was World War II was brought to a halt by the greatest explosion of them all. Hiroshima and Nagasaki disappeared in atomic clouds. The world, stricken dumb by these fearful onslaughts and the nuclear conclusion of it all, reeled in incomprehension, wondering as it does to this day what really happened. Forty million, perhaps fifty million had died. Trillions of dollars' worth of the world's substance had vanished into the consuming flames.

The result was that mankind was wondering anew about history, fate, destiny, and the purposes of the God above it all. They wondered how highly evolved, intelligent, compassionate, and well-intentioned human beings could ever allow such a catastrophe to happen. It was somewhat an ultimate question that was asked in those days: What shall I believe about it all? The world community turned to the church for an explanation.

But the church was not there.

The credibility of liberalism had disappeared in the bloody contest that had just ceased. Yes, the great denominations still gathered people in their churches, but the message to which they had committed their organizational existence was empty and false. So great was this the case that people by the millions felt that they had been betrayed by their religious leaders. They had listened a thousand times to the promise that the world was getting better and better, that days of peace had come, and that a human millennium was upon them. Now, when parents stood in tears by the graves of their fallen sons, they understandably wondered at the promises they had heard of an ever-improving world.

From the liberal establishment came a few mumbled apologies, but that was about it. A few older, sturdy dreamers like E. Stanley Jones traveled among the churches speaking about the need for religious unity, a global ecumenical movement, and a new start toward improving the world. Their speeches had a noxious similarity to those made after World

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War I, and they were received with disinterest and even resentment by those who felt that they had been betrayed by the earlier promise of a transformed world.

The result was that classic religious liberalism died.

The liberal establishment, not willing to return to the Bible as the Word of God, went looking for a new message, a new theology, a new personage whose ideas could replace a defunct and bankrupt liberalism.

The same questing was pursued also by the world of academia and even the world of primary and secondary education. The philosophies of the past seemed insufficient to persons in those arenas; as for those in the church, the theology of the past had been torn to shreds by undeniable reality. Liberalism was a myth that had been dragooned into an alley and mugged by stubborn facts. What to do? was the question. In what shall we now believe?

Into this vacuum stepped Søren Kierkegaard.

This was the time in which the writings of the melancholy Dane were discovered by the English-speaking world and examined with fascination by leaders in religion and philosophy. Kierkegaard wrote many things that are hard to understand to this very day, but it can safely be said that he gave a set of influences that changed the way in which reality is understood and redefined concepts ranging from faith to rationality.

He gave the world what philosophers call *existentialism*. He gave the church what theologians call *neoorthodoxy*. It is as though this man and his views emerged from an unseen direction and gained a foothold in the minds of men so quickly they had no opportunity to resist. His beguiling speculations about philosophy and religion immediately produced a new intellectual percolation and (which is sometimes even more interesting) a new set of fascinating table-talk subjects for the thinkers and the pseudo-intellectuals of the world. Neoorthodoxy, which few theologians understood, became the new set of assumptions behind much preaching. Existentialism, which no one understood, became a way to understand or misunderstand life. Indeed, it did not really matter which.

Søren Kierkegaard, the man who is normally known as the father of existentialism (although he and many others would deny it), was an interesting person. He was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1813, and lived a relatively short and uneventful life, dying in 1855. Uneventful is certainly the word for his outward life, but all who read Kierkegaard must be convinced that inwardly he was frequently at odds with himself, stormy, frustrated, unfulfilled, and melancholy. These conflicting emotions did not come from a

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problematic background. His father was a wealthy merchant in Denmark and finally left his son Søren an estate large enough so that he would never have needed to work. In fact, he never did.

Kierkegaard spent most of his time in Denmark, except for short trips to Germany, and he spent a high percentage of that time in animated conversation with his friends in the coffee shops of Copenhagen. He often talked about the possibility of becoming a teacher or preacher, but he never did involve himself in either of those professions.

Instead, he wrote at great length on many subjects. It is through his writings, which compose many books, that the impact of his life is felt. In his personal interactions, he was not outgoing and greatly preferred solitude to being in a company of great numbers of people. He thought crowds were evil but still professed to enjoy the esteem and flattery which they had to offer to him once he had become a locally famous author. It took one hundred years for him to become internationally famous.

The noteworthy external events in Kierkegaard's life were few. In 1840, on September 8, he proposed to Regine Olsen, which proposal she accepted two days later. The story of that romance appears to suggest a constant equivocation in the mind of this young man. Finally, there came a complete rupture, the engagement was broken in October of 1841, and the day after the event Kierkegaard left Copenhagen for the first of three trips to Berlin. In 1841, he took the Master of Arts, at which time he presented his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*.

In 1834, he seriously gave himself to writing, and for the next ten years books poured from his pen in an uncontrolled torrent. He wrote no less than six books in the first year of that intense period. The response those books provoked was a stimulant to continued writing. And what writing it was! Kierkegaard is at the same time exhilarating and depressing. His writing is on the one hand a call to clarity and on the other a source of confusion. It is doubtful that anyone perfectly understands Kierkegaard, and certainly if someone told Kierkegaard he did, the melancholy Dane would announce that the speaker had not understood him at all.

Kierkegaard's translators, for example, have noted that when his cryptic *Either/Or* was published it produced a great sensation in Copenhagen, although no one was capable of understanding its subtle purpose and thus no one could adequately review it. Although Kierkegaard was the author of this work, he wrote it under a pen name, Victor Eremita, and listed that person as the editor rather than the author. In fact, the number of pen names under which Kierkegaard wrote are so numerous one wonders if the material was not deliberately intended to confuse rather than to clarify. The suspicion that the intent

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is confusion is to a great extent confirmed when one gets into Kierkegaard's writings themselves.

Something of Kierkegaard's ruminations can be detected in this passage from *On His Mission*:

I was seated as usual, out of doors at the cafe in the Frederiksberg garden. ... I had been a student for a half a score of years. Although never lazy, all my activity nevertheless was like a glittering inactivity, a kind of occupation for which I still have a great partiality, and for which perhaps I even have a little genius. I read much, spent the remainder of the day idling and thinking, or thinking and idling, but that was all it came to....

So there I sat and smoked my cigar until I lapsed into thought. Among other thoughts I remember these: "You are going on," I said to myself, "to become an old man, without being anything, and without really undertaking to do anything. On the other hand, wherever you look about you, in literature and in life, you see the celebrated names and figures, the precious and much heralded men who are coming into prominence and are much talked about, the many benefactors of the age who know how to benefit mankind by making life easier and easier, some by railroads, others by omnibuses and steamboats, others by the telegraph, others by easily apprehended compendiums and short recitals of everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age who make spiritual existence and virtue of thought easier and easier, yet more and more significant. And what are you doing?" Here my soliloquy was interrupted, for my cigar was smoked out and a new one had to be lit. So I smoked again, and then suddenly this thought flashed through my mind: "You must do something, but inasmuch as with your limited capacities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others, undertake to make something harder." This notion pleased me immensely, and at the same time it flattered me to think that I, like the rest of them, would be loved and esteemed by the whole community. For when all combine in every way to make everything easier, there remains only one possible danger, namely, that the ease becomes so great that it becomes altogether too great; then there is only one want left, though it is not yet a felt want, when people will want difficulty. Out of love for mankind, and out of despair at my embarrassing situation, seeing that I had accomplished nothing and was unable to make anything easier than it had already been, and

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moved by a genuine interest in those who make everything easy, I conceived it as my task to create difficulties everywhere.¹

One only needs to move through the writings of Kierkegaard to see the extent to which he fulfilled this ambition to create difficulties everywhere.

We must note that the difference between Kierkegaard and the other world changers under consideration in this book is that Kierkegaard was a Christian. He confessed to have had a transforming religious experience as a teenager. One could wish, by the way, that in giving this testimony he would have clearly said, "I believe in the finished work of Jesus Christ on Calvary's cross, that He the God man died for my sins. I accept Him and His gift of life everlasting."

However, it is reassuring to keep his Christianity in mind when he makes such statements as:

Melancholy, incurably melancholy as I was, suffering prodigious griefs in my inmost soul, having broken in desperation from the world and all that is of the world, strictly brought up from my very childhood in the apprehension that truth must suffer and be mocked and derided, spending a definite time every day in prayers and devout meditation, and being myself personally a penitent—in short, being what I was, I found (I do not deny it) a certain sort of satisfaction in this life, in this inverse deception, a satisfaction in observing that the deception succeeded so extraordinarily, that the public and I were on the most confidential terms, that I was quite in the fashion as the preacher of a gospel of worldliness, that though I was not in possession of the sort of distinction which can only be earned by an entirely different mode of life, yet in secret (and hence the more heartily loved) I was the darling of the public, regarded by everyone as prodigiously interesting and witty. This satisfaction, which was my secret and which sometimes put me into an ecstasy, might have been a dangerous temptation.²

Kierkegaard spoke about melancholy and ecstasy and leaves us with that attendant touch of confusion as we read.

One might touch on the essence of Kierkegaard (although this is a dangerous presumption) by suggesting that his reputation is built around a concept summed up in the title of one of his works, *Truth Is Subjectivity*. In this presentation, Kierkegaard spoke informatively of the difference between the subjective and the objective. He said, "The

¹ Walter A. Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1956), pp. 86–87.

² *Ibid*, p. 93.

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objective problem consists of an inquiry into the truth of Christianity. The subjective problem concerns the relationship of the individual to Christianity."³

Doubtless, the Christian examiner will find this statement to be perfectly acceptable. However, Kierkegaard did some of his most exciting writing when he came down strongly on the side of subjectivity. He announced in many ways that the problem with Christianity is not that the Christian lacks knowledge but rather that he lacks passion. That, too, may be an acceptable conclusion, but many of Kierkegaard's interpreters suggest that he seems to be saying that passion is everything.

What was the effect on society of Kierkegaard's theological and philosophical concepts? The best word for that effect is the word *diffusion*. Kierkegaard appeared to take many contradictory points of view. He almost sounded like an agnostic when he denounced the State Church of Denmark and inveighed against religious establishments in general. For Kierkegaard totally believed in the individual and hated even the concept of "the group." "The crowd is the untruth," he said again and again. He inveighed most convincingly against the crowd, insisting that only the individual has significance. Kierkegaard also attacked the traditions of theology, ethics, and metaphysics, saying that they were all self-deceptions.

Kaufmann said: "He was a man in revolt, and even if one quite agrees that a revolt was called for, one may yet regret that he went much too far and that his followers have not seen fit to redress his excesses. Instead of offering a circumspect critique of reason, indicating what it can and cannot do, he tried a grand assault.... Kierkegaard rashly renounced clear and distinct thinking altogether."⁴

There is no doubt that Kierkegaard confirmed and denied many of the same things. On one page, he seems to contradict what he has said on the preceding page. One reads Kierkegaard with compelling interest, but the frustrations of attempting to understand him go on and on.

The result of Kierkegaard's emergence in the middle of the the twentieth century can be described as theological and philosophical diffusion. Thinking moved from the rational to the irrational; reason gave way to feeling. Final truth slipped away, and the thinking of the world became a set of self-contradictions. Theological and philosophic diffusion—that is existentialism.

³ Ibid., p. 112.

⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

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Kaufmann, who wrote convincingly on this subject, gave us perhaps a more elaborate definition of existentialism, but even the use of the word *definition* defies existential philosophy. Kaufmann said:

Existentialism is not a philosophy, but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. Most of the living “existentialists” have repudiated this label, and a bewildered outsider might well conclude that the only thing they have in common is a marked aversion to each other. To add to the confusion, many writers of the past have frequently been hailed as members of this movement, and it is extremely doubtful whether they would have appreciated the company to which they were consigned. In view of this, it might be argued that the label “existentialism” ought to be abandoned altogether.

Certainly, existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets. The three writers who appear invariably in every list of “existentialists” — Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre — are not in agreement on essentials. Such alleged precursors as Pascal and Kierkegaard differed from all three men by being dedicated Christians; and Pascal was a Catholic of sorts while Kierkegaard was a Protestant. If ... Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are included in the fold, we must make room for an impassioned anti-Christian and even a more fanatical Greek-Orthodox Russian imperialist. By the time we consider adding Rilke, Kafka, and Camus, it becomes plain that one essential feature shared by all these men was their perfervid individualism.⁵

Then follows a statement which gets to the core: “The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism.”⁶

The heart of existentialism—now we have it.

But of course, to the thoughtful person, *any* definition of existentialism is itself a contradiction in terms. That is because existentialism implies contradiction, anomaly, fluidity, and a rejection of any imposed and artificial sequence. Therefore, almost anything one might say about existentialism would be in one sense or another true. For the existentialist, “this moment” is the ultimate thing. It has no necessary causes, no automatic consequences. It is significant because it brings that instant of interaction with

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶ Ibid.

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the outer world. That instant of interaction is verified, not by some categoric epistemology, but by the confirming emotion, the feeling.

For the atheist existentialists like Camus, Sartre, and others, existentialism is a denial of any consistent morality. Dress as you will, fornicate with whom you will, infect whom you will, wear clothes or go naked as you will, that's the thing. The only right is what is right for you, and the only wrong is that which produces pain or inconvenience for you. There is no law, no principle, no proper course of action of any kind, so go with the vibes! Whatever is your thing, do it. You have only one time around, so go for the gusto! One could go on and on with an endless collection of incoherencies and be speaking eloquent existentialsese. Nothing would be true, nothing would be false, anything goes. The very book I hold in my hand, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, has in it a penciled remark by, we presume, a college student attending the university where the book was purchased: "All we are is cocaine in the wind, man! Far out, yeah, peace, love, hard drugs."

We may be sure that the writer of those words is an existentialist. One also wonders where that young hand is now buried or where that young mind is continuing to decompose into imbecility.

But there is an astonishing thing about existentialism. While composed minds would agree that it is a form of insanity, it has become the most pervasive philosophy of our time. There is virtually no philosophy department in any major university in Western civilization that is not built on an existentialist base. There are few college students among the millions on university campuses who have not been infected by the permissiveness and the poison of existentialism. This pervasive nonphilosophical point of view has become the intellectual ground of our society. It is a mental contagion raging across the land, and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to root it out and destroy it.

Existentialism produced the raging, resentful youth culture of the 1960s. It gave us boys who looked like girls, girls who looked like boys, and transvestites who looked like both. It gave us raving homosexuals who declared their activities existentially "OK" and launched upon society a salvo of infection that continues to explode. Thousands of these gaunt specters of humanity received graduate degrees and are now the intellectual elite of our time. The flower children of the 1960s wrote the music and hired the rock bands who proceeded to set their contradictory ideas to discordant music. Along came free love, free sex, narcotics galore, the orgy, the séance, the suicide solution, and a thousand other insults to the image of God and the life of man.

This collection of godless nonsense called existentialism has certainly produced the greatest degree of moral, intellectual, and social ruin an incredulous mankind has ever

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seen. But, of course, existentialism is fun! It is the “in” thing. It is saying good-bye to the squares. It is rocking around the clock or gyrating across the floor to the tunes of Eastern mystical music or heavy metal rock groups.

That’s why we won’t soon be rid of it. Existentialism, like Darwinism or Marxism, panders to the lower nature of a degenerate mankind. It is not merely an alternative truth but is reprobation itself. One can at least say about most pagan philosophies that they give truth a new definition and have some form of intrinsic integration. They hold together by some logic, however illicit.

Existentialism is different. It is not simply another point of view but rather is a denial of all points of view. Far from redefining truth, existentialism announces that there is no truth. There is neither final truth nor intermediate truth. There is only this one moment, without causes and without consequences.

We must also recognize that since the 1960s, the counterculture has, for the most part, endured a haircut, taken a shower, put on a suit, and walked into the boardrooms of our corporations, the halls of our schools, and even into our pulpits. It is therefore more dangerous today because it travels in the guise of pseudosophistication. Nevertheless, it is still the same old epistemological nihilism, and the ends thereof are the ways of death.

But the existentialists have had an additional influence other than in the philosophic world of academia. The influence has moved also into the realm of religion, where it even now survives in a number of forms.

As we have mentioned, in the closing days of World War II classic liberalism expired, a victim of its own contradictions. That was when Kierkegaard and the religious existentialists were discovered by the leaders and the educators of the ecumenical denominations in America, Britain, and the European continent. Out of this influence, there was born a form of Christianity to which was attached a most interesting name, *neoorthodoxy*. Neoorthodoxy—existentialism in religion—has been with us since. It had its greatest days in the twenty years following the close of World War II. The emergence of existentialism in the theological world and its subsequent flow into the churches has been an interesting phenomenon to trace. A brief word from an authoritative source, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, may be helpful in examining this phenomenon:

Existentialism, through Heidegger, has influenced and formed existential theology, especially in the work of Barth, Bultman, and Tillich and Macquarrie. This approach stresses the existential moment in hermeneutics and preaching, in which humanity is summoned to respond to the call of God to live an authentic life. Jesus is the perfect example of an authentic existence. The nature of being, as

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outlined by existentialism, has led Tillich to interpret God as the “ground of our being” rather than as a being at all. This affects both theological epistemology and ontology. Existentialist philosophy asks the fundamental human questions of existence. Theology’s task is to provide the answers.

Other writers such as Marcel and Weil have adopted an existential approach to theology in contrast to clinically abstract theology. For them, theology is participative and incarnational, emphasizing the ontological weight of human experience. The key is dialogue and communication as an individual (the “I”) with the eternal “thou.” This leads us to faith and assurance.⁷

This description of existentialism is not an easy one, but it calls attention to something relevant to the discussion of the advent of neoorthodoxy.

What happened in the advent of neoorthodoxy was that disillusioned liberals felt chagrined at the failure of the pseudo-Christianity in which they believed and which they promoted throughout the world. Needing a new foundation on which to stand, they began a swing back toward orthodoxy, much like a pendulum returning to its center point. They were, however, unwilling to return to embrace the traditional, orthodox, “fundamentalist” Christian faith, and so they halted the process short of becoming orthodox.

The emphasis they presented used many words and expressions well known and accepted by believing Christians. The trouble was that they gave those words a new meaning. Consequently many true believers were deceived into thinking that they were listening to the grand old Christian faith, whereas in reality a now form of spiritual subversion came upon them.

One prime example of this redefining of orthodox terms is the neoorthodox version of the doctrine of divine inspiration. For the believer, all Scripture is *given by inspiration* from God. The neoorthodox theologian also uses the word *inspiration*, but, alas, with the meaning stripped away. To the neoorthodox theologian inspiration is not what happens when God gives the Word, but rather what happens when the Word impacts upon the human spirit. Therefore, it is proper to say that the neoorthodox view is not that the Bible “is” the Word of God but that it “contains” the Word of God. More correctly, the Bible “becomes” the Word of God when the Scripture interacts within the questing soul. Inspiration is, therefore, an experience for a believer, rather than a definition of the provenance of Holy Scripture.

⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson et al., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), p. 244.

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Salvation is another debated word. Before the days of the existentialists, salvation meant to be cleansed from sin by the blood of Christ and given everlasting life. It was essentially salvation from sin that came because of the work of Christ on Calvary.

The neoorthodox view has altered this. Salvation becomes basically a psychological experience with the personality of Jesus. It is a transforming relationship rather than a quickening from the dead.

More and more, the neoorthodox view of salvation has tended to incorporate words such as *wholistic* and *realization* into their doctrine of salvation. We are to think of things such as salvation “wholistically,” rather than to believe that salvation is for the discrete human spirit. The emphasis is, therefore, on realization, fulfillment, and shalom in this life, rather than on reconciliation to a holy God.

When listening to neoorthodox leaders explain Christianity, one senses a perverse reluctance on their part to admit their previous bankrupt theology. Reluctance is also evident in their careful neglect of Calvary, the blood of Christ, divine forgiveness, original sin, and other great Christian themes. Salvation becomes experience-oriented, theology becomes contextual, and ultimate truth becomes contradictory. Neoorthodoxy may well be called an improvement over the old liberalism, but the compliment is gratuitous because neoorthodoxy is a far more subtle form of spiritual subversion than was ever possible in liberalism’s overt denials of basic Christianity.

This is not to say that Kierkegaard is to blame for all of these developments. Nevertheless, he still retains the title “father of existentialism,” which makes his views useful data in our examination of the present philosophic and religious conditions.

The best word to briefly describe those conditions is *diffusion*. Even neoorthodoxy has been diffused into the church milieu, allowing a dozen other clever theologies to flourish in the present religious scene. At one point so deteriorated had things become along the way that one so-called theologian announced that “God is dead.” So diverse has the theological scene become that almost any cause is now pressed upon the church in the name of theology. We have urban theology, black theology, liberation theology, hispanic theology, process theology, rhetorical theology, and a score of others. Many evangelical theologians note perceptively that the period of ascendancy of a given theological view grows shorter and shorter with each emergent form of what passes for theology. *Diffusion* is the word to describe all of this.

The advent of theological diffusion has not left the evangelical movement unscathed. Even now the evangelical movement echoes with discussions in which the basic questions of evangelical conviction are being reexamined. In the days following World

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War II, evangelicals in churches, denominations, and especially major movements across the country operated on the basis of a basic, conservative set of theological ideas. As an old century anticipates the beginning of a new millennium, evangelicals are once again in a discussion. Interestingly, even surprisingly, evangelicals are reviewing again the answers to the old questions many thought had been settled a generation ago. Alas, those questions have not stayed settled.

The questions under new review by the evangelicals deal with fundamental tenets of the faith: Why did Christ come into the world? What must I do to be saved? What is the purpose of the church on earth? What form does the kingdom of God take in the world today? A simple comment on these matters may be helpful, for the discussion is certain to be continued in the years to come.

The question of the purpose of the coming of Christ has been partially co-opted by the liberation theologians. They announce that Jesus came into the world to bring economic liberation to the oppressed masses of earth. The old, correct answer is that He came to bring the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before the world began.

In answer to the question about the basis of salvation, the new suggestion seems to be a rewriting of the verse to read, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be put on probation." The doctrine of salvation by faith alone is now under assault by new definitions of faith, imputed righteousness, works, and the like. In this discussion, there are dangers ahead.

The purpose of the church in the world is now newly defined by a group of people who call themselves Reconstructionists. Like the old-line liberals, they hold that the role of the church is to gain control in the world, improve the social structure, and prepare society for the return of Christ. Christians, they feel, should have actual dominion over the political structure.

The prospect of the kingdom of God in the world today calls for an ever-mounting discussion. "Kingdom now" theologies offer instant healing, instant wealth, instant everything if one simply recognizes and embraces the kingdom. With these and other questions newly afloat and unresolved, evangelicals join the theological diffusion which has come upon this generation.

What will be the end of it all? It may well be that a new creative provocateur in the Kierkegaard mold will step into our midst and write another *Either/Or*. This one may call it *Both/And*. The point is that diffusion tends to create confusion, and confusion within a culture creates vulnerability. Affected by that vulnerability, the world may even now be

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ready to accept another global voice, a new and plausible plan, a direction for the future that may be novel but which will appear to be most plausible. The Christian who reads the prophetic Word will have the proper suspicions as to who that man will be and what all-embracing, panacea-style theology he will promote. Yes, existentialism has certainly not yet run its course. There is an ominous sound in the distance toward which these things are leading us. Could that sound be the rumble of another earthquake, the rush of another flood, the roar of another gathering storm? Sooner than we think, the answer may be upon us.

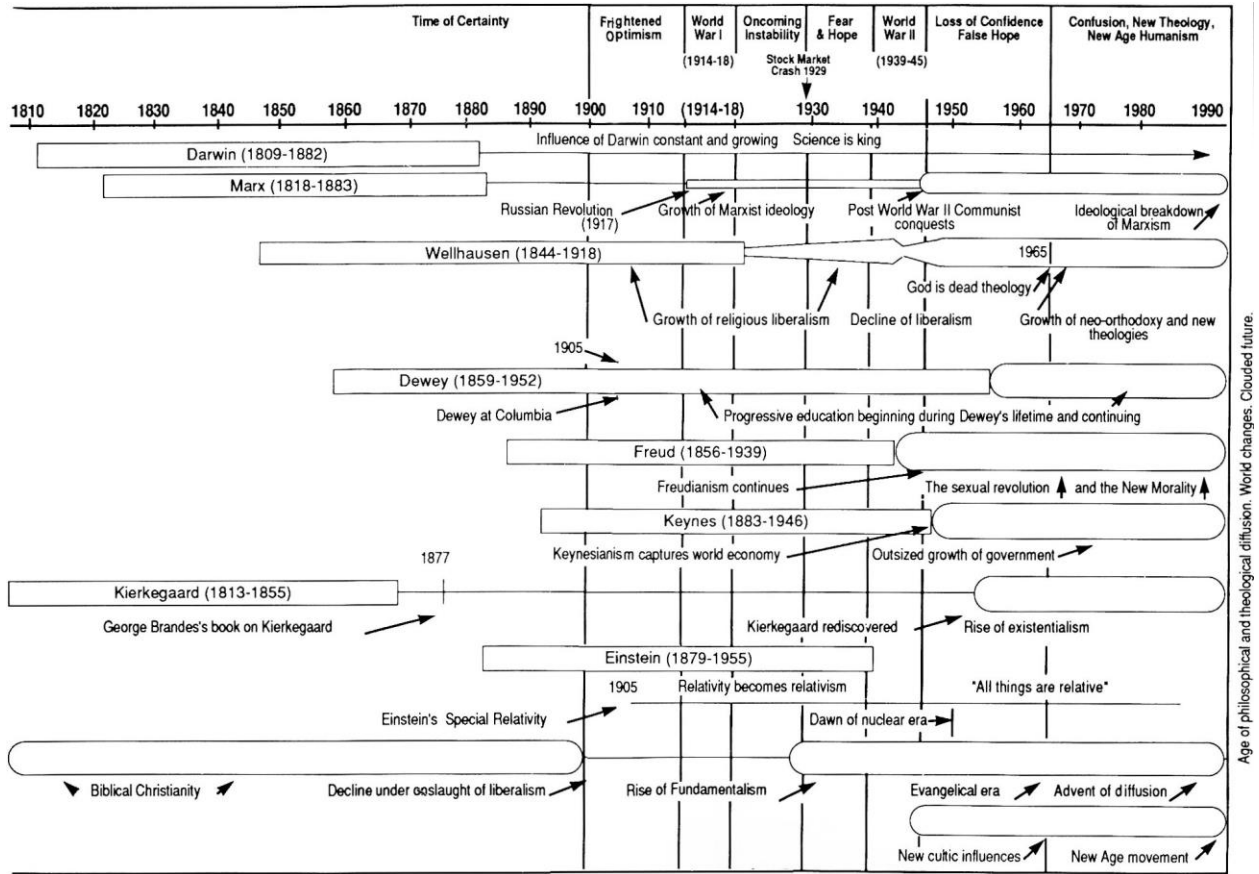


Fig. 8. Ideological history of the twentieth century⁸

⁸ Breese, D. (1990). *Seven men who rule the world from the grave* (pp. 205–224). Moody Publishers.