

# Can Existentialist Categories Save Christian Theology?

Rev Dr Paul Tonson (Uniting Church)

This paper contrasts metaphysical and existential categories as alternate means of articulating Christian theology.

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**1. The motivation of this paper** is firstly the dialogue within Christian Theology, emerging from enlightenment times, regarding meaningful God talk; secondly to test the possibility for a meaningful conversation between faith and free thought using the categories of the existential.

**2. Existentialism** as a philosophy is in some ways a separate issue and is NOT my area of expertise. But within that discourse, 19th- and 20th-century philosophers, despite profound doctrinal differences, developed their conversation beginning with the lived experience of the human subject. It is this methodology that I wish to explore. Some turned to this method after finding that traditional systematic or academic philosophies, in both style and content, were too abstract and remote from concrete human experience<sup>1</sup> [i.e. lacked meaning]. The same finding has directed my energies and those like me who identify as progressive Christians.

Christian exponents were early represented in this discourse by [Søren Kierkegaard](#) who within a prophetic Christian framework asserted that each individual—not society or religion—is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely ("authentically").

The insights of Nietzsche in opposition to traditional religion are also a significant and a rich resource for this discussion.

[Jean-Paul Sartre](#) was the first prominent philosopher to adopt the term existentialist as a self-description. Sartre added to the methodology the axiom that for existentialists, "existence precedes essence," to which we can return.

Over against the existentialist approach, the work of Karl Barth (1886 –1968) remains influential with its stress on the paradoxical nature of divine truth and the sovereignty of God. But a generation later, an existentialist account of Christian Theology was embodied in a popular seminary textbook John Macquarrie (1919–2007) Principles of Christian Theology (1977).

Meanwhile in 1968 Honest to God by JAT Robinson initiated a new path with the engagement of informed lay readers in Christian theology. The progressive Christian voice has since gained attention through Bishop John Spong and scholarly works from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism#cite\\_note-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism#cite_note-1) for some of the above

**3. Within Christian theology** the existential categories and method contrast with the metaphysical categories and a discourse which begins outside the individual human subject with the divine subject: 'in the beginning God created...' (Genesis 1.1); 'in the beginning was the Word...' (John 1.1). The notion of divine revelation highlights the difference: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt.11:27).

However, Paul asserts (Rom.1:20) that the divine is evident to all: 'For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.' On first reading this text sounds pejorative. But the drift of my remarks is not to hit non-believers over the head with such an assertion but to note that here Paul affirms an existential method, in which 'God' is the object of human reflection, available to all without special revelation.

Somewhat In harmony with Paul, my intention is to apply the existential method in observing transcendent aspects of human experience which we all may value, and within that shared consciousness to elucidate what progressive and rather agnostic Christians still refer to as God or Godness.

#### **4. An existential path in Christian thought.**

I now want to construct for you the existential basis for my continuing adherence to the notion of GODNESS within a Christian framework. I prefer not to use the words God and Divine since these are already heavily freighted. For this reason, please also note that I see my remarks as something other than argument for the existence of God. The choice to name God, is one of faith, not belief. The focus of my thought is rather on language which speaks meaningfully of human experience.

A particular window on godness in Paul's assertion is human wonder and awe. In this arena, the discoveries of science have only added to our wonder: the mind boggles at the knowledge that the galaxies are moving away from each other at an ever increasing rate. Perhaps scientists who understand cosmology, with those who understand the sub-atomic, are more mind boggled than the less informed lay person. In any case, it seems to me that mind-boggling experiences offer us a common platform for a discourse across the variety of faith and free thought worldviews we bring.

I put it to you that when the mind boggles we are in the centre of the existential attitude Satre illustrated when he wrote of 'a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world'. This language seems overly pessimistic to me, but what I do identify with and value is the implied raising of consciousness to the point where the subject human begins to ask the question of meaningfulness. Perhaps across the diversity of experience and world views, this consciousness is something we share and, along with the existential method, it may enable us to have a fruitful conversation.

Would you agree with me that Wonder and Awe in our minds is not just bemusement, and is certainly not infantile or demeaning [for the Uberman] but it has a significant function, to give us a realistic sense of our creatureliness and our temporality. For me such wonder leads to a higher level of consciousness, of the privilege of having a life, that I receive as sheer gift. This in turn activates an ethical sense— what am I going to do with this short fragile existence of mine, what impact can I make, what is required of me?

## 5. Alternative Christian Paths

For non-faith worldviews it is at this point the Christian worldview crosses a bridge too far, when it names God as the giver of life and source of ethical consciousness. Even orthodox Christian belief stumbles in the face of the problem of suffering in a world made by this God. The classical conception of God as omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent can not be reconciled with the belief in a just God [theodicy].

A progressive approach to Christian theology frees itself from this bind by  
1) relativizing the creedal orthodoxy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century creeds, on the basis that their categories of Platonic metaphysics are no longer meaningful, eg that Jesus was of one substance with the Father. This assertion may have in mind the text in John 10.30: 'I and the Father are one'.

If 2) we turn to existential categories, we can see immediately that John's Text offers a much wider range of meaning than the Creed. Indeed we may say of all true believers that they too seek to be one with God, and that this is precisely what Jesus intended for his followers. We may also affirm that whatever else it means, this oneness with God means harmony with nature and with others and within oneself a sense of integrity. For me, an existential interpretation of oneness with the Father means that the text continues to have meaning.

3) Contemporary existential theology also offers embodies another key feature, that it takes a far more agnostic stance than has characterized the Christian church til now. 'Generally speaking the Christian church has had far too much to say.'

As Disraeli said of Gladstone PM: "A sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity, and gifted with an egotistical imagination that can at all times command an interminable and inconsistent series of arguments to malign an opponent and to glorify himself."

In a church that has been oppressively dogmatic for 2000 years my golden rule is 'Believe as little as possible'. Be agnostic as a path of faith. This agnostic stance is not resignation but affirmation –it carries its own heritage with a deep sense of the valid humanity of people of other faiths and philosophies. It also faces openly the mystery of human experience and commits itself to humanity without an overwhelming need to explain everything in theological terms. As for what knowledge (of God) is essential in Christian theology; 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4.7).

The notion of creation provides an example of my agnostic approach. For a priestly writer of 5 BCE (Genesis 1) we would not expect any other introduction to his creation myth than 'In the beginning God created...' Within my agnostic stance, even knowing that something new happened about 13 billion years ago with the big bang, I find no mileage at all in the assertion that God made everything. On the surface it seems to

represent a claim on the reader that they are beholden to God because God made them, but this people Israel is already beholden to the God they knew through Exodus. Similarly in an existential framework we are already beholden to worldviews and ethics that have come our way, so the assertion that Elohim created everything *ex nihilo* adds nothing that is life related. Moreover, it only removes the mystery of the a priori nature of life one step leaving the question who made God?

However! Genesis 1 as a story remains deeply compelling to me. 1) A truer critical reading of the story as we find it shows it has nothing to do with an *ex nihilo* creation: a) it is about an initial chaos that is shaped and ordered by God, readily encompassing an evolutionary view; b) the basic meaning of the verb *bara'* (to create) is about shaping something already existent, such as shaping the land for farming and habitation (Josh.17:15). The god I am invited to meet in Genesis 1 is the creative spirit that is the essence of all life, god understood in existential terms.

2) The story that begins with a creative God moves on to commission humanity to be creative – 'Be fruitful and multiply and bring order in the world.' I read this to say that creativity, of hand and head and heart, is one of the transcendent qualities of human life. Being creative is a transcendent experience for a human being.

## 6. The Other and the Look

Returning to Wonder and Awe and the ethical consciousness, it was a serendipity for me to find that existential philosophy treats a theme that I have been advancing in the task of articulating Christian theology in existential terms, namely the Other.

The experience of the Other is the experience of another free Subject who inhabits the same world. This experience constitutes intersubjectivity and objectivity. When the Other person experiences the same world, from "over there", the world itself is constituted as objective. At the same time, the Subject experiences the Look (or [gaze](#)).<sup>[28]</sup> of the Other, including the way the Other looks at the Subject. The Subject becomes aware of himself as seen by the Other. That we are seen by the Other gives us a sense of our reality – our existence. This sense may seem to limit our freedom as it generates a response in us, such as the peeping Tom whose awareness is suddenly changed by the sound of a creaking floorboard, when he imagines he is being observed by an Other.

This account of the Subject and the Other seems to me to represent the experience of the believer in relation to the divine. But what follows is even more relevant:

A characteristic feature of the Look is that no Other really needs to have been there: It is quite possible that the creaking floorboard was nothing but the movement of an old house; the Look isn't some kind of mystical telepathic experience of the actual way the Other sees One.

An agnostic stance allows me to live tentatively but fruitfully with the sense of being observed whether or not we can prove 'God is there'

The experience of the Other is common ground for us and our transcendent moments of awareness make a lasting impact. These include experiences that draw forth awe and wonder: the stars, the atom, the opening of a flower, the birth of a child; experiences of the creative genius of humanity – profound life changing ideas and the eureka moments of discovery; experiences of sacrificial living and service, the love of

parent and child, the love of sexual intimacy, and the love I experience as forgiveness and grace even though I have hurt someone. The holy and the transcendent is present to me in the midst of human life and in these experiences I locate God.

The same is true of mundane and sad experiences, the knowledge that 25,000 children under 5 die every day from malnutrition, the sad aberration of the Northern territory Intervention. Such knowledge demands a response from me and in the motivation to put myself out in response I locate godness, what Christians might describe as God's call on my life.

Christian theology can make sense only if Godness is implicit in such experiences. A pithy account of progressive theology is made in the words; 'I don't believe in an interventionist God!' Now if we free ourselves from the notion of God as a distinct player in the realm of human life, are there still meaningful alternative concepts of God? I think so. For example, on the footy field of life, God is not the umpire, looking on, leaving us mostly free to play, but about to blow the whistle when we break the rules. But a Christian concept may see God in the spirit and vitality and challenge and commitment of the game, that transcends what any one individual brings on to the field?

I return to essence as the only meaningful conception of God – eg as the mind of the universe, as the spirit of life, not as any kind of (objectified) being but as an inherent pervasive quality which we experience as given. But as distinct from human life or any particular life form, this godness is enduring, bigger than all of us, with its own direction. It may be represented by what makes the difference between me as a dead body and me as living being, the difference between rocks viewed as cold and lifeless and the continental plates living out their inexorable journey transforming the surface of the world and the lives of all inhabitants, the difference between a purely materialist view of the world and a spiritual conception of it.

## **7. The Other and Otherness**

The difference in language between God and Godness I believe is akin to the difference between the Other and Otherness. Our encounter with the Other always takes a particular form, and is transient. But it gives rise to our awareness of Otherness in relation to our own subjective awareness. Our awareness of Otherness is enduring and transcendent.

The New Testament offers such a diverse range of theology. In some ways, the church has burdened itself with some aspects of Paul's theology that have proved to be inadequate and even oppressive. But in the spirit of dialogue across difference, Paul talks to the Athenian philosophers about their statue to an unknown God. He uses the language of one of the poets to refer to God in whom we live and move and have our being. This still seems to me to be a meaningful reference to God in existential terms.