

## Appendix – Humanism & Existentialism

*“The humanistic way of thinking, which has proclaimed itself our guide, did not admit the existence of intrinsic evil in man, nor did it see any task higher than the attainment of happiness here on earth. It started modern Western civilization on the dangerous trend of worshipping man and his material needs. Everything beyond the physical well-being and the accumulation of material goods, all other human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature, were left outside the attention of state and social systems as if human life did not have any higher meaning.” Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn*

*“Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. ... ‘Did he lose his way like a child?’ ... ‘Whither is God?’ [the madman] cried. ‘I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. ...’” Frederick Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra*

### Key terms

Nature, evolution, reason, science, progress, human person, rejection of optimism, nothing, finite human reason, alienation, self existence, freedom & responsibility, courage & scorn

### Lecture objectives

- \*Identify the major themes and characteristics of humanism and existentialism.
- \*Recognize and describe built in difficulties with humanism and existentialism.
- \*Explore ways in which humanism and existentialism manifest themselves in our culture.
- \*Identify potential bridges with the humanistic and existentialist worldview.
- \*Recognize and explore the impact of humanism and existentialism on the church.

### Humanism: Glory to Man in the Highest

Introduction: What does the word ‘humanism’ mean?

1. Humanitarian
2. Classical scholarship or study of the humanities
3. Secular humanism
  - Beware hysteria!

#### A. A Humanist Manifesto or Statement of Beliefs

Introduction:

- The contrast between humanism and Christianity
  - Is humanism a religion?
  - A humanist metaphysic or expression of what exists
1. I believe in nature:
    - a. In nature neither intelligence nor purpose operates.
    - b. Chance is the source of creation.
  2. I believe in evolution:
    - a. Time, variation, and natural selection produce all forms of life.
    - b. We, too, are the product of blind forces at work.
    - c. There is no human nature intrinsic to us.
  3. I believe in reason:
    - a. We have to think for ourselves; this is our authoritative source of knowledge.
    - b. The commitment to free inquiry
    - c. The rejection of revelation and the dependence on reason alone for ethics
    - d. Optimism through the triumph of reason
  4. I believe in science:

- a. Scientific research must be free from limits.
  - b. The scientific method is, by definition, naturalistic.
  - c. Science has two tasks:
    - 1) To understand and shape the world of nature
    - 2) To understand and shape humanity
  - d. The urgent task we face is the scientific study of values.
  - e. Then we can create our own human future.
  - f. The god of eugenics
5. I believe in progress:
- a. We have the resources to build a better society.
  - b. The marriage of humanism with evolutionary progress is the grounds for hope.
  - c. We are on the threshold of a great leap forward because we can now shape our own nature and destiny.
6. I believe in the human person:
- a. We can rely only on ourselves for we are the measure of all things.
  - b. The self-conscious rejection of God, and of Christianity in particular
  - c. The rejection of moral absolutes
  - d. The pursuit of happiness
7. The need for religious language in humanism:
- a. Mysticism about nature; our unity with the earth
  - b. The glory of human personality
  - c. The Paradise of happiness

*Interactive questions:*

*What are some praiseworthy aspects of the Humanist Manifesto? What are some potential problems with this Manifesto? In what ways might these beliefs help an unbeliever hear the Gospel? In what ways might these beliefs hinder an unbeliever from hearing the Gospel?*

**B. Some Questions for the Humanist:**

- 1. Whose humanism are we to choose, and why?
- 2. Can we believe in Chance when we think about the origins of life, or when we look at the world around us, or at ourselves?
- 3. Can we believe in reason, given two great challenges?
  - a. The finiteness of all our human knowledge.
  - b. The fallibility of our reasoning processes.
    - 1) Reason must be the humble handmaid of revelation.
- 4. Can we believe in progress?
  - a. What are the mechanisms of evolution?
  - b. Does the twentieth century give us grounds for hope?
- 5. Can reason and science give moral values?
  - a. Without God what are our options?
    - 1) The individual
    - 2) The majority
    - 3) The powerful
    - 4) An ideology
  - b. God is the only true foundation for moral order.
- 6. Can we believe in humanity?
  - a. On what basis can we give dignity to human persons?
    - 1) If we are the product of evolution what more can we be than matter?
    - 2) We are so tiny in a vast and uninterested universe.
  - b. What about the fallenness of our human nature?

*The beauty of the Biblical teaching on the image of God, and the glory and shame of our humanity*

- c. The heart of humanism is the passionate longing to save human persons from God.
  1. We are creatures made by God.
  2. We have finite minds and need his truth to understand life.
  3. We need his directions for living so that we do not err.
  4. We deserve his judgment and rejection.
  5. We must throw ourselves on his mercy.
  6. We have to trust in His Son not our own achievements.
  7. We are so hard-hearted we need His Spirit's enabling to come to Him.
- d. The humanist shouts bravely: 'God is dead. We are free.'

*Seeking to raise our humanity from the dust of the earth, we are lost.*

### **Existentialism: The Loss of Hope**

Introduction: Some examples of existentialist writers

1. Existentialism is difficult to understand without some experience of its anguish, or a readiness to empathize.
  2. A definition: "Existentialism is a doctrine that renders human life possible."
    - a. A practical philosophy
    - b. Life seems impossible
  3. Why this pessimism after the confidence of humanism? A consistent atheism
- A. Existentialism's rejections of the optimism and confidence of the humanist
1. I reject your optimism about the death of God.
    - a. Everything changed by God's death.
    - b. Not atheism, simply, but a world from which God is absent.
  2. I reject your optimism about moral values.
    - a. Humanism suppressing God without moral cost.
    - b. No more possibility of finding certain moral values.
    - c. The centrality of the decline of religion in understanding Western culture.
  3. I reject your optimism about reason.
    - a. Criticism of the sterility of much philosophy
    - b. Giving expression to the tensions in the soul
  4. I reject the approach of humanistic science to the human person.
    - a. The physical sciences cannot measure the soul.
    - b. Treating human persons as objects denies responsibility.

*Interactive question:*

*From your perspective as a believer, in what ways is the existentialist rejection of humanistic optimism healthy? In what ways is it problematic? How might this skepticism be helpful in hearing the Gospel? How might it cause difficulties?*

5. I reject your optimism about human progress.
    - a. Human nature always the same, only the situation changes.
    - b. Our society is in a state of dissolution.
    - c. Even what appears to be progress, the advance of technology, is actually alienating.
  6. I reject your optimism about human nature.
    - a. The frank recognition of evil in the human soul
    - b. The terrible reality of the two world wars challenged Europeans to face up to evil. Vietnam did the same for many Americans.
- B. The Creed of the Existentialist
1. I believe in Nothing.
    - a. The individual and the race are confronted with nothingness.
    - b. The reality of accomplishing nothing with one's life
  2. I believe in the finiteness of human reason.

- a. A finite individual cannot know anything with certainty.
- b. Even the 'exact' physical sciences are confronted with apparent contradictions and insoluble problems.
- c. Our technology controls us; we don't control it.
- 3. I believe in the alienation of human persons.
  - a. We are homeless in this world, for we have the experience of person-hood, but there is no place for us.
  - b. We find alienation in the totality of our human experience.
- 4. I believe in the existence of myself.
  - a. I cannot put hope in science, or reason, or economic or political solutions.
  - b. Without God there is no fixed, or desirable human nature.
- 5. I believe in human freedom and responsibility.
  - a. Freedom without a definition
  - b. Freedom is a kind of condemnation, for there is nowhere we can turn for help.
  - c. We have to invent ourselves.
  - d. This necessity of authenticating ourselves through choice creates anguish and despair.
- 6. I believe in courage and scorn.
  - a. The lucidity of understanding our wretched condition is a kind of victory.
  - b. We must choose to struggle on in the face of absurdity.

#### C. Challenges to the Christian

- 1. The need to emphasize that Christianity is truth
  - a. Truth about the way things are
  - b. Truth historically
  - c. Truth can only be known in humility before God's revelation in creation and in His Word.
- 2. The need to have more than conformity to orthodoxy and to traditional forms
  - a. The call to demonstrate the reality of a relationship with the living God
  - b. The call to live a life of justice, mercy and faithfulness
  - c. The need to communicate with empathy, gentleness and respect
- 3. Existentialism takes seriously the brokenness of the human situation.
  - a. The need not to heal people's wounds lightly
  - b. The Biblical account requires us to regard the world, as it is now, as abnormal.
  - c. Christ came to a hurting world, and took those hurts upon Himself. This is the Christian's calling.

#### *Interactive question:*

*Given the existentialist skepticism regarding humanistic optimism, how might the existentialist hear your claim that Christianity is "truth"? How might you shape your discussion to help the existentialist hear these claims afresh?*

- 4. Existentialism takes human responsibility seriously.
  - a. This is a rebuke to Christians who idly wait for heaven.
  - b. We have such significance before God that our choices cause ripples for eternity.

#### D. Response to Existentialism

- 1. Are courage and scorn enough to fill a person's heart?
- 2. The impossibility of being consistent to the denial of moral certainty.
  - a. God has placed His law in our hearts.
- 3. Instead of 'superman' what?
  - a. 'A gnawing and crumbling skepticism and relativism.'
  - b. 'Amusing ourselves to death.'
- 4. Existentialism is an insufficiently radical critique of humanism.
  - a. It has the same starting point: the denial of a word from God.
  - b. The fundamental problem is pride.