

SEEKING EXISTENTIAL ESSENCE THROUGH THE VOICE OF A PROPHET: A THEISTIC CONSIDERATION

Denis Fonge Tembong
Higher Teacher's Training College
University of Yaounde, CAMEROON

ABSTRACT

Atheists appear to agree with arrogant certainty that the absence of an existent God has direct consequences for human life. They subscribe humanity's liberation from oppressive religious superstitions and place hope for mankind on the natural sciences. Man's frustration of not being able to provide meaning to life or resolve his existential angst through the making of responsible choices is practically evident in the world today. This essay, therefore, closely examines the nature of existential angst and attempts an explanation to Man's limitations in the face of his existential anxieties. It further proposes that a move from the illusions of 'the self-made man' to looking beyond the limits of his abilities can lead to a resolution of man's existential angst. That is, relying on a Greater Force beyond himself through prophetic utterances constitutes a solution to his predicaments. Also, the essay argues that the basis of the slogan, 'existence precedes essence' fails to consider that Man is also spirit and not only matter, therefore, should not depend solely on the perfect working of the physical senses. Furthermore, the understanding that man didn't create himself betrays his frailty and increases the need for his dependency on a Supreme Being as a way-out.

Keywords: Existential Essence, Prophet, Theistic Consideration.

INTRODUCTION

*The ultimate danger and suffering is for a person to lose touch with the 'meaning of his/her life' — to experience meaninglessness. With meaning, we can endure and cope. Without meaning, we have neither energy nor direction to do either. **World council of Churches***

Humanity's enthusiasm associated with scientific exploration of the cosmos is immeasurable as new discoveries in space technology seem to be adding unquenchable appetite for more space adventure. This notwithstanding, the existence and meaning of life constitute the greatest challenge and stand tall like a mountain at the back of our mind. Apparently, science or philosophy has yet not provided convincing answers to the fundamental questions associated with existence, such as: 'Where is Man from and where is he going from here? Volumes have been written on this subjects and research is still going on in attempt to provide dependable responses to these age-old controversial preoccupations. R.C. Sproul points out that "no society can survive; no civilization can function, without some unifying system of thought..." (29). "Philosophy being nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth, it may with reason be expected, that those who have spent most time and pains in it should enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind, a greater clearness and evidence of knowledge, and be less disturbed with

doubts and difficulties than other Men” (George Berkeley 1). However, this is not always the case, for Berkeley argues that “the cause of this is thought to be the Obscurity of things, or the natural Weakness and Imperfection of our Understandings” (1).

Victor Frankl sees man as a “free, self-determined agent who uniquely determines the meaning of his own individual life, having the potential for either great good or great evil” (20). However, Shandon L. Guthrie believes that “We are thoughtful human creatures and we often engage in such self-reflective analysis – not only in terms of who we are with respect to others but who we are with respect to ourselves” (1). Stretching the point further, Guthrie points out that “every day we are bombarded with death and the prospect that our lives are only but short stints against the backdrop of a universe that has existed for almost 14 billion years” (1). Physicists assure us that the universe will ultimately die out in a heat death inaugurated by a period called the “dark era” where all that will be left is a dilute gas of photons and leptons. This is not very reassuring of a future. But the broader question here is, if the universe will ultimately die out, what is the meaning, purpose, and value of my life? Indeed, this question reflects the great existential problem known as the human predicament. As members of the human race we are all thrust into an inquisitive culture seeking to find the meaning, purpose, and value of life against the possible backdrop of an overarching plan from a transcendent Designer. But this means that the existence of God has a direct bearing on how we answer those two fundamental questions about our own existence. Existentialism is the branch of knowledge that specialises in studying human existence, with an intention of providing possible meaning to existence or life. Literary critics appear to be unanimous on the fact that existentialism is one of the most popular literary currents in modern times, as Western civilisation seems to revolve around the philosophy. R C Sproul remarks, “I doubt if there has been any philosophical system that has had as much influence on American culture in the twentieth century as this school of thought” (qtd in Bill Crouse 1). However, existentialism is difficult to clearly define because scholars hold different positions about what the philosophy is all about. In David Edward Cooper’s words, “None of the great existentialist tomes contains the word ‘existentialism’. Reports on its origin differ...” (1). Steven Earnshaw posits that it is “a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual’s existence. (1) For E. A. Livingstone, it is “certain types of philosophical thinking which share a practical concern for the individually existing person and his freedom” (3). Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasises individual existence, freedom, and choice. Its common proposition is that existence precedes essence. By this, existentialism states that man exists and in that existence defines himself and the world in his own subjectivity, and wanders between choice, freedom, and existential angst.

Existentialism seeks to prescribe meaning to life, what is referred to in this discourse as ‘existential essence’. I think it would be rewarding to identify the two types of existentialism before proceeding. Existentialists are deeply divided between atheistic and theistic existentialism. Atheistic existentialism refers to an existential way of excluding any religious beliefs from the philosophical thought. It is derived from a Greek word which means ‘godlessness’. *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* defines it as “the denial of God’s existence, in theory or in practice (21). Advocates of atheistic existentialism believe that man has the responsibility to give meaning to his life on earth. This group of existentialists is further divided between implicit and explicit atheists. Implicit atheists believe in the absence of the existence of God without a conscious rejection of it. Meanwhile, explicit atheists on the other hand, exhibit a

conscious rejection or disbelief in God. These different positions partly account for the difficulties involved in clearly pinning down a definition for the philosophy. For instance, the opinion or rejection of the Supreme Deity by Thomas Hardy is similar to that of Beckett as both constitute rejection, but essentially different because the philosophical reasons for the rejections are different. Generally speaking, two atheists or theists may share the same opinion but differ sharply in the approach. Christian existentialists, Christopher Sunami explains,

are those motivated first and foremost by obedience to God, and secondly by personal and subjective judgments, who accept no authority other than God, and their own consciences, who take absolute and undiminishable personal responsibility both for all their own actions and for the content of the world around them, yet who acknowledge their own limitations and take comfort in the sovereignty, the guidance and the mercy of God. (par. 2)

Similarly, there is hardly any consensus among theistic existentialists, especially in their conception of God. Gier observed the phenomenon at the Northwest Conference on Philosophy, “theists differ substantially among themselves - not only on God but on other fundamental matters, while Jaspers and Marcel have clearly revived a more traditional concept of God, Kierkegaard and Buber’s theism is definitely unconventional” (2). Regarding atheistic existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre posits:

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards. (91)

For Sartre, existence precedes essence so that “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (91). Sartre implies that human beings have no predetermined nature or essence that controls what we are, what we do, or what is valuable for us. To him, there is no God or Deity outside the human being, who has a predetermined course that man has to follow to make his life meaningful. This slogan is opposed to the traditional view that Essence precedes Existence, according to which we are seen as having a given nature that determines what we are and what our ultimate purpose or value is. Like Sartre, Albert Camus in his idea of the human predicament contends that:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. ... I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. ... Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering. (587-588)

If we must conserve the believe that man is different from animals and objects by virtue of his possession of the soul and spirit, then, it implies that man's total dependence on himself to resolve his existential angst, is unattainable. It would be necessary to pause a little and consider what 'angst' is. *Collins Plain English Dictionary* defines it as "a feeling of anxiety, especially one about the general state of things rather than anything specific". Meanwhile, *Oxford Concise English Dictionary* states that it is "a profound feeling of generalised anxiety or dread". The definition which is more illuminating is that provided by *A Dictionary of Philosophy (Pan)* as:

the dread occasioned by man's realization that his existence is open towards an undetermined future, the emptiness of which must be filled by his freely chosen actions. Anxiety characterises the human state, which entails constant confrontation with possibility and the need for decision, with the concomitant burden of responsibility.

Anxiety and fear appear to be related and leave us with the temptation of using them as alternatives. It is important to make it clearer by making a distinction between the two. R. May attempts a distinction by stating that "What makes a difference is not the values involved, but an element of uncertainty (in the case of anxiety) and an actual danger (in the case of fear). While fear has a clear object (an imminent threat), anxiety does not, it is linked to uncertainty, which often provokes insecurity" (32).

Providing a meaning to one's life partly depends on his ability to resolve one's angst or existential anxiety if that is attainable. Sartre's slogan that 'existence precedes essence' presupposes that we have no predetermined nature or essence that controls what we are, what we do, or what is valuable for us; We are radically free to act independently of determination by outside influences; We create our own human nature through these free choices; and we also create our values through these choices. Existential angst are difficult to resolve, since they are the sum total of uncertainties that await us as a result of the choices we make out of life alternatives. This implies that every individual is expected to provide solutions to undetermined future occurrences, emanating from the choices made in the instance. Man is mortal, limited and without the supernatural foresight to predetermine his future. Besides, Man is essentially flesh and blood and cannot control the spirit element of his existence. This means that help must be sought from the source where the spirited element of man emanated. A.E. Taylor, in "Does God Exist?" points out that "Atheism is commonly considered to be a threat to the individual and society. It is "science divorced from wisdom and the fear of God,...which the world has directly to thank for the worst evils of 'modern war'...."(158-159). Genesis, the biblical book of creation reveals that man is essentially dust, which was moulded and breathed into by God, to give it life. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Shandon L. Guthrie points out that "hardly anything, in my estimation, is more impactful than the fundamental question of God's existence" (1). In the same vein, a renowned philosopher of existentialism, Robert Solomon explains: "In most people's philosophies, the belief or nonbelief in God is one of the most important single concepts. It is God who ultimately makes sense of the universe, who gives life meaning. If we believe that life ought to be fair, for example, it is important to believe that there is some powerful being who will make things come out in some fair way – if not in this life, then in another" (66). Solomon adds that "A threat of imminent death - or even a passing thought of

our own mortality – is sufficient to wrench us out of our current involvements, even if but for a moment, and force us to look at our lives” (241). God Himself declares, “I am the one who made the earth and created people to live on it. With my hands I stretched out the heavens. All the millions of stars are at my command” (Isaiah 45:12).

Ralph Waldo Trine, states that “There are moments in the lives of all of us when we catch glimpses of a life our life that is infinitely beyond the life we are now living. We realise that we are living below our possibilities. We long for the realisation of the life that we feel should be (7). Trine adds that “Through the body and its avenues of sense, we are intimately related to the physical universe about us. Through the soul and spirit we are related to the Infinite Power that is the animating, the sustaining force the Life Force of all objective material forms” (7). If salvation indeed comes from God, and is entirely His work, just as our creation was, it follows as a matter of course, that our first and highest duty is to wait on Him to do that work as it pleases Him (5). Without God we appear to have no comforting foundation for our existence and values. The world around us collapses in darkness. And we, figuratively speaking, will have to light our own lanterns in the morning. T. Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, points out that “Once God is removed from being the foundation of moral value, human purpose, and meaning to life, we are then left with a Hobbesian portrait of mankind that makes it “poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (9). K. Nielsen, in “Ethics Without Religion” observes that; “... without God there can be no overarching purpose, no one basic scheme of human existence, in virtue in which we could find a meaning for our grubby lives. It is this overall sense of meaning that man so ardently strives for, but it is not to be found in a purely secular worldview” (74). Even in suffering and death, relationships of caring, concern and love help reveal meaning in life. We find meaning when we experience love — when we give and receive love. We need to learn to listen to our hearts — to hear one another’s hearts. We need to learn compassion and find reasons for hope for ourselves, for our dying loved ones, and for those who are so alone. Man, as we know him, is an animal with a culture; he is part of a community, and the very concept of community implies binding principles and regulations –duties, obligations and rights.

It would be necessary to indicate at this juncture that the Bible is the only authentic source of all claims we may make about God. The apostle Paul once warned us to “Beware lest anyone capture you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8). The warning here is against the possibility for his readers or Christians to be swept away by false philosophies. On the contrary he cautioned them to adopt a philosophy ‘according to Christ.’ Ronald Nash contends that: “Because so many elements of a worldview are philosophical in nature, Christians need to become more conscious of the importance of philosophy” (10). Nash adds, “philosophy and religion ...deal with the same questions, which include questions about what exists (metaphysics), how humans should live (ethics), and how human beings know (epistemology)”. Philosophy matters, Nash observes, because the Christian worldview has an intrinsic connection to philosophy and the world of ideas. It matters because philosophy is related in a critically important way to life, culture, and religion. And it matters because the systems opposing Christianity use philosophical methods and arguments. God told the Israelites, “I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may

bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. (Deuteronomy 30:5-16). That Israel 'may live' and enjoy 'prosperity' are promises afforded by God on the condition that His people obey His commands. God's sovereignty over creation is not the meaning of life itself but, rather, on the backdrop of God's being sovereign over creation, He can and does bestow a sense of prosperity and well-being to those who follow Him.

Hobbes defined morality as merely "a set of 'appetites and aversions' because this is what human beings entertain apart from governmental restraint" (120). Atheism, when you think about it, literally entails that morality is an arbitrary construction of beliefs about what is good or bad. Hobbes argues that the atheist has no objective reason to be morally good except that it suits his own personal desire. Hobbes points out that "it seems rather unlikely that moral values are simply subjective human inventions. But this entails that God exists. Therefore, given the existence of objective moral values, the most promising explanation seems to be God – the only hypothesis that can explain not only the fundamental reality of such an objective ontology but also how such a reality translates into moral duties for human beings to follow" (120). Hobbes advances a set of argument: -If God exists, then it is feasible that there is an afterlife. - If God exists, then he must be a nonphysical being of the order of mind. But human beings are also individual minds that happen to be corporeal. Thus, if God exists and created human beings, there exists at least the capability of an existence apart from the physical body. Now this has important consequences for the great existential questions we've been addressing. What this means is that the present life we all enjoy is not the end-all and be-all of existence. The Bible is replete with philosophical teachings. The book of Ecclesiastes is a prime example. The preacher and author of the book, W. Gary Crampton, "presents us with two distinct and opposing worldviews. He argues that the preacher writes as "an old man looking back on life, and admonishes his readers to pay heed to his instruction" (12:1). On the one hand, "he views the issues of life from the standpoint of the man who is under the sun" (1:3, 9; 2:11). Crampton adds, "This is unregenerate man, who only has an awareness of God and His creation by means of general revelation, a revelation which he suppresses" (11). Third, the Scriptures teach us that God, in His eternal decree has sovereignly foreordained all things which will ever come to pass (Ephesians 1:11). According to Biblical Christianity, as taught by the *Westminster Confession*, "man is a spiritual, rational, moral, immortal being, created with innate, propositional knowledge, including knowledge of God, to have a spiritual relationship with his Creator. Herein he differs from the rest of creation" (4:2).

The Prophetic voice and existential angst

It is of paramount importance before proceeding any further, to briefly examine who a prophet is and the role he plays in resolving existential anxieties. The word 'prophet' comes from the Hebrew word, 'nabi' occurring three hundred (314) times in the Old Testament. It refers to "a spokesman, speaker, or prophet". However, there are other shades of opinions which do not exactly tie with the above view. For instance, S. Herbert Bess, argues, "the primary meaning of the word prophet still needs to be considered. Louw and Nida define it as "one who proclaims inspired utterances on behalf of God" (53.79). It should be underlined that the most essential idea in the word is that of "an authorised spokesman" (Harris, 544). The number of occurrences in the Bible, of the word 'prophet', emphasises the importance God attaches to communicating with

His people. The atheistic notion that God is dead, or that man is abandoned to himself in a vast and solitude universe is unconvincing.

The Bible does not fail to announce the fact that there are true and false prophets and warrants that the features of a true prophet be stated to make the distinction. Shimon Bakon in “True and False Prophets” points out that ‘With the latter prophets, from Amos and Hosea to Malachi, prophecy as we understand it today came to full fruition’. In the same vein, Mark Mayberry identifies the benchmarks of true prophets:

True prophets served as God’s mouthpiece, that is, His spokesman (Exod. 4:10-16; 6:28-7:2; Jer. 1:9-10).

True prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Sam. 23:1-2; 1 Chron. 28:11-19; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

True prophets accurately related the past, spoke to the needs of the present, and offered precise predictions of the future (Isa. 41:21-29; 42:5-9; 43:8-13).

True prophets communicated God’s will by various means and measures (Num. 12:1-8; Joel 2:28-29; Matt. 17:1-8; Heb. 1:1-4).

An established prophet will not only operate in the gift of prophecy, but will carry seasonal prophetic burdens and messages from God the Father to the wider church, and sometimes to nations. His or her emphasis may be much more ‘the word of the Lord,’ as opposed to ‘words from the Lord.’ They may, at times, give a prophetic rebuke or warning to the church, which should always be a message of grace, postured within the Father heart of God.

By definition, “every person has an ‘existence’...each person answers the existential question of ‘how shall I live’ by the way he/she constructs life day to day” (Richard D. Chessick 208-216). This self-and-world construct system can be defined as the conception each of us holds about who and what we are and how our world operates. Marty Slyter points out that “All people must deal with the question of meaning - or the lack of meaning” (4). The role of a prophet in the process of giving meaning to our life and coping with existential angst is twofold, first, in providing divine solution to questions relating to the meaning of life. Second, providing divine solutions to existential angst – problems that are humanly impossible to resolve. It would be rewarding to distinguish coping with existential angst from providing meaning to life. Existential angst here refers to the uncertainty that awaits one in future, as a result of the choices one makes in the instance. Meanwhile “Meaning refers to making sense, coherence, or order out of one’s existence and to having a purpose or goal toward which one can strive (Reker, Peacock, and Wong, 44-49).

Mark W. Baldwin and Richard Wesley, in “Effects of Existential Anxiety and Self-Esteem on the Perception of Others”, expose their failure and frustration in attempting to make meaning out of their lives. The whole idea of one defining himself through careful making of choices is a farce since life in itself is unpredictable and man is limited. It’s worth considering the extent of Baldwin’s and Wesley’s frustration caused by the inability to provide solutions to existential anxieties:

I don’t know what it means to live this life. Things seem so isolated and distant from me when I just sit down and consider what this world all means. And every

time I try to make sense of what's going on here I find things not quite the same as they were before. Each day the world is different and I just get confused and lost in all this change. The world seems to be this huge contradictory mess. Then I realize that I'm only looking at this tiny piece of reality that I deal with myself daily and that there is a whole universe of 'things' which is infinite going on out there which I can't even think of coming to terms with. I'm like a speck of sand but even the whole beach doesn't come close to showing how small I am in the universe. I try to find some sense and meaning in reality to answer why I'm here but I just come up blank. (95)

It follows from the extract above that man, from every indication, must resort to a greater force beyond himself in order to cope with his existential anxieties. Prentice Mulford explains that "all power can be given your spirit... Then all such force will be used to further our undertakings, to bring us material goods, to raise us higher and higher into realms of power, peace and happiness, to accomplish what now would be called miracles" (10). We must be conscious that man usually attempts to resist his problems but resistance must not be taken for solutions to his predicaments, for it can only provide a momentary relief. David Hartman and Diane Zimberoff point out that "Resistance is a universal reality among humans. We are all resistant to some things, at some times. For some people it is actually the predominant theme in their life. Whether it is a major or minor factor for a given individual, understanding and releasing resistance can create ease and efficiency where struggle and impediment exist" (3). However, Mulford argues that "Neither the material mind nor the material body is to be won over and merged into the spiritual by any course of severe self censure or self denial, nor self punishment in expiation for sins committed, nor asceticism. That will only make you the more harsh, severe, bigoted and merciless, both to yourself and others" (10). He adds that it is out of this perversion of the truth that have arisen such terms as 'crucifying the body' and 'subjugating the lower or animal mind.'

Existential angst, therefore, cannot be resolved without the help of divine intervention since Man cannot predetermine his future. Furthermore, providing meaning to one's life also largely depends on divine intervention because every human endeavour has the future element. We can also achieve meaning by setting goals and anticipating future possibilities (Reker, et al. 23) but in all of these, the unforeseen future element would lie beyond our control. Frankl saw three ways of giving meaning to one's life: by doing a deed or by creating a work; by encountering someone or experiencing something; and by the attitude taken toward unavoidable suffering. The feeling of meaninglessness can lead to psychopathology and even suicide. Many people who fail to provide meaning to their own lives may sometimes fall in the temptation of taking away that same life because of the deep feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness. Erich Fromm, points out that, in the face of meaninglessness and alienation from which it may derive adolescents have little to expect from life other than emptiness, futility and boredom. Man is basically sinful by nature and needs to be rescued. Apostle Paul said to himself, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

Man was created to take the form of his creator. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). God relates and communicates with His people through His prophet. The Lord said, "Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known to him in a vision; I will speak with him in a dream (Numbers

12:6). Similarly, He would do nothing without revealing to his people through his prophets. “Certainly the sovereign Lord does nothing without first revealing his plan to his servants the prophets’ (Amos 3:7). This divine communication occurs in supernatural atmosphere. Bess contends that, “Many scholars have spoken of the prophets as having received their messages in ecstasy” (8). He quoted Gunkel as saying that “The fundamental experience of all types of prophecy is ecstasy and similarly Jacob said: ‘Ecstasy is the essence of prophecy’” (8). They seem to mean that every prophetic oracle arose out of an ecstatic experience; that the prophets were transposed into some sort of trance in which they received their revelations.

The prophet as a spokesman of God is central in resolving existential angst. Man’s greatest existential challenge is to resolve his unpredictable problems (existential angst). God who exists out of time, who lives in the past, present and future, and who created man to have fellowship with him, is the ultimate solution to our existential anxieties. In other words, existential Christianity provides the way out of the inferno of thinking that man is abandoned to himself in the universe. In Timothy Neal’s words, “Existential Christianity’s fundamental assertion is that Christianity is not a system of beliefs, but rather a lifestyle expressed existentially” (1-2). In his opinion, ‘existential communication’ “means something that is communicated and expressed to others through our existence, the way we live and act within this world” (1-2). He adds that “becoming a Christian does not involve a change of beliefs, but a change of how we live and exist inside a selfish and egoistical” (1-2). Neal explains that this is revealed in three ways: The existential nature of Jesus Christ, how we express Christianity to others existentially, and how we express Christianity to God existentially. Despite the association of existentialism as a godless and sorrowful philosophy, Existential Christianity is primarily concerned with the teachings of Jesus within a paradoxical and meaningless environment. Jesus and God are used in this context as referring to one person. Jesus himself said “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). Also, existential Christianity functions within the context of ‘God-Man and Man-Man’ relationship as a fulfilment of the purpose of creation – that of man the creature, having fellowship with God the creator. This fellowship is made manifest through prophetic communication by the medium of his prophets, the Bible, and the Church.

In God’s immeasurable love relationship, he resolves our existential anxieties through the predictions of His mouthpieces (prophets). Regarding the prophetic functions *vis a vis* our existential angst, Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya suggest, “prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community...priestly churches are bastions of survival and prophetic churches are networks of liberation” (12). It is necessary to Lincoln’s and Mamiya’s opinion further. Prophetic communication or religion, Lincoln and Mamiya argue, “is appropriated in the world to improve political, economic and social conditions.... Congregations believed to follow a more prophetic stance are often keenly aware of social problems such as poverty and unemployment, and make a concerted effort to address these types of problems in practical, tangible ways” (205). They explain further, “A prophetic function suggests that, just as a religious conversion should alter one’s personal life, such a change may be questioned if not accompanied by the desire and willingness to mobilise collectively to affect societal improvements (12).

Mary R. Sawyer, reflecting on the prophetic orientation and social engagement, points out that, “the resultant redaction is ...the welfare of the collectivity, and integral relation of the spiritual

and the material, and the moral obligation to pursue social-political concretization of the theological principles of equality, justice, and inclusiveness” (67). In the same light, Cornel West “points to the Christian obligation toward social and political activism,...the basic contribution of prophetic Christianity . . . is that every individual . . . should have the opportunity to fulfil his or her potentialities” (16-18). In fact, West considers this as the fundamental core of the prophetic gospel. According to him, “the fuller prophetic Christian tradition must, thus insist upon both this-worldly liberation and otherworldly salvation as the proper loci of Christianity” (18). He adds that “For prophetic Christianity, the two inseparable notions of freedom are existential freedom and social freedom...Existential freedom empowers people to fight for social freedom (16-18).

It should be noted that the church and prophet are divine entities or moral characters that act as transmission mediums for God’s messages to His people. Consequently, the church has a central prophetic responsibility as a medium of communication between God and the society. In God’s creation all human beings are made in the image of God. In the Kingdom of God both the church and the whole of humanity have their goal. “It is, therefore, in this dimension of their common origin and common goal that the inter-relation of church and humanity in their struggle for renewal and unity can best be understood” (K.P.Aleaz 54). Aleaz reiterates that “This point also adds to the wider framework of the history of God’s saving action in which the church participates as mystery and prophetic sign, as a communion in and for the world” (54). Gerhard Kruip and Helmut Reifeld suggest that “Civil society needs civil rights for all and a minimum of social aid... Christian churches can and must help establish the preconditions for these conditions by promoting understanding about human dignity and social justice” (15). They add that civil society organisations need to have access to special knowledge (divine revelation) and have to act professionally. To them, the traditional churches as important organisations can aid civil society by creating organisations that dispense special knowledge, professional training, and counselling not only for their own members but for a greater part of civil society. Kruip and Reifeld argue that churches as divine institutions “could support more differentiated views and help create the necessary amount of confidence needed for civil society actions” (15). By adapting their own perspectives to the complexity of the modern world, churches could contribute more to the necessary process of rationalising political cultures in many developing countries. They argue that “this could be very important in making realistic moral judgments about market economies and would allow a morally legitimated framework for market processes to be established” (16).

CONCLUSION

The existential slogan that ‘Existence Precedes Essence’ is Sartre’s atheistic version of Existentialism. He reverses the theological description that our essence precedes our existence. He argues that each of us as human beings exists before we can define ourselves. As stated before, this definition can be considered our essence – that is, what we think we are in our being. Therefore, our existence precedes our essence. This essence, however, is not fixed and eternal like a theological version of the human soul. We are in a continual process to define ourselves until we can no longer create a definition – that is, at our death. Only then is our essence fixed and stable. After our death, our essence for Sartre is the sum total of our actions and obviously can no longer be changed.

However, while we live, we are driven by the urge to meet the pressing present and future needs. As humans we have a unique awareness of our own being. Because of this awareness, we also know that our being will end. This threat of non-being causes us anxiety since we humans treat our values as comprising our being, threat to them also results in the anxiety of nonbeing. Every experience that in any way causes us fear or anxiety also induces an experience of the anxiety caused by the threat of non-being. This existential anxiety has no object as its source, rather, nothingness itself. The anxiety is therefore irresolvable because the source cannot be overcome, nor can it be abated, rendering the anxiety as perpetual. In this way existential anxiety, being ‘the experience of the awareness of the imminent threat of non-being’ is continually with us and absolutely inescapable.

Since anxiety is humanly irresolvable and at the same time absolutely inescapable, man needs to look beyond his human limits for solutions to his existential angst. These possibilities lie in turning to existential Christianity where God is considered to be at the centre of creation and has the responsibility by His supernatural abilities, to provide solutions to man’s predicament through prophetic utterances. By so doing, Man would be satisfied that his existential essence is met, for, God in creating man already defined his essence as part and parcel of creation. That is, God brought man into existence together with his essence. That is why theology claims that essence precedes existence, contrary to the atheistic view that existence precedes essence. It is worthwhile to conclude this discourse by identifying with William Lane Craig’s existential questions in *The Absurdity of Life Without God*:

If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? Does it really matter whether he ever existed at all? It might be said that his life was important because it influenced others or affected the course of history. But this only shows a relative significance to his life, not an ultimate significance. His life may be important relative to certain other events, but what is the ultimate significance of any of those events? If all the events are meaningless, then what can be the ultimate meaning of influencing any of them? Ultimately, it makes no difference. (42)

Craig adds that both immortality and God’s existence are necessary for life to be meaningful, “It is important to see that it is not just immortality that man needs if life is to be meaningful. Mere duration of existence does not make that existence meaningful. If man and the universe could exist forever, but if there were no God, their existence would still have no ultimate significance” (42-43).

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