

## RELIGION AND ATHEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM

The purpose of this paper is to make a critical study of the manner in which Atheistic Existentialism treats religion. Atheistic Existentialism occupies a peculiar position. It is atheistic and it is also against the excessive claims that religion usually makes. That is to say the type of philosophy that it comes to evolve places religion almost out of court. It feels that the philosophical doctrine of Theism and the usual deliberations of religion are both essentialistic. Therefore it apparently develops an attitude of indifference towards both 'God' and 'religion'. The purpose of this study is to analyse this attitude of indifference itself. Perhaps this analysis would yield a conclusion that will be comfortable both to religion and to Atheistic Existentialism.

But in order to derive certain useful conclusions with respect to the concept of religion from a study of Atheistic Existentialism, it would be essential to have a brief survey of some of the important views of some prominent Atheistic Existentialists.

Like every other Atheistic Existentialist Heidegger also makes man not only the starting point of his thought but also the central theme of his thinking. Dasein happens to be the centre of Heidegger's Ontology. If we analyse the nature of Dasein, we shall find that there is a basic difference between the being of man and the existence of things. This difference consists chiefly in the facts that things are simply present to a consciousness but man's nature can be grasped only by an individual subject through '*being in his own existence.*' Therefore, man, according to Heidegger, is not a thing in the world, but is a *being* in the world. And being in the world means that he is not anything to be taken for granted. He is not merely a man of reactions. He is a conscious existence living authentically and all the time trying to realise the possibilities lying within. Heidegger asserts that in authentic existence reduces man to the level

of things. But authentic existence necessarily is characterised by such existential characters as care, anxiety, attitude towards death and an indispensable awareness of nothingness. We are not concerned with a detailed study of Heidegger's Ontology of being but this simple statement of his basic standpoint clearly indicates that every problem has to be viewed from the point of view of Dasein. Any conception of the world does not give due regard to human existence and to man's concern will be a superficial account.

Even a description of God's nature by religion must describe the basic facts. If religion tends to place God at a high pedestal and makes man completely subordinate to it, such a God is of no consequence of Heidegger. He, almost like Nietzsche, feels that in a sense *man had created the concept of God*, therefore, he could any day kill God. Heidegger believes that Nietzsche's famous declaration about God's death is, in a way, a symbol for the destiny of the modern man. He feels that Nietzsche's nihilism, in a way, is an expression of man's existential awareness. As man becomes aware of his being and as he becomes conscious of the essential feeling of nothingness permeating the consciousness of man, he clearly becomes aware of the superficiality of the concept of God. The conception of belief in God, therefore, is, according to him, a consequence of the fundamental *evolution* which has been taking place. This evolution is nothing but an attempt to reassert the primacy of existence and the centrality of man.

He feels more or less like Nietzsche that if a man passes into higher dimensions and comes to realise that it is ultimately he who has to create new values, there is no other way for God but to die. Nietzsche expresses this idea by saying that the new race of supermen would take over the mastery of the world. He feels that man has come to realise that he is no longer dependent on and that he has to fix up future course himself.

Heidegger, even though accepting in principle the basic standpoint of Nietzsche, feels that Nietzsche in his prophetic zeal almost sidetracks and dodges a very important

and central issue that of the ontology of being. He never tries to face the question as to how man, or for that matter superman, would replace God. Therefore, Heidegger says that the centre of man's vision must not be the superman as the new valuer of the world but being as such. If Nietzsche's solution is accepted, God will actually not be displaced. He will assume merely a new name and become the supreme custodian of new values. Therefore, Heidegger says that God must not be thought of as *being*. It is wrong to develop an ontology of God. Such a point of view will not be able to do justice to the perspectives and to the ontological status that man embodies. This kind of a mistake is one of the reasons why religion today seems to be out of place and not in tune with the existential conditions of man.

Heidegger asserts that our new search which is a search into the nature of being must begin with the awareness that all pre-determined security has now vanished. We must realise that we cannot get at the Dasein through the obedience to the traditional God. If at all the search is to be fruitful, it can be fruitful only when man stands free to face against nothingness. That is to say only when comes to realise the nothingness as an essential aspect of being. Heidegger, therefore, says that a traditional religion cannot help man in his ontological adventure. Thus, one feels that Heidegger is against the traditional reliance of religion.

Sartre is more emphatic and straightforward in asserting his atheistic conclusions. It would not be wrong to suggest that Sartre's reaction against the essentialistic ways of reason leads him to denounce not only the rational proofs for God's existence but also to realise *the redundancy and the superficiality of the concept of God itself*. It can be said that his opposition to the ways of reason almost coincides with his complete neglect of the concept of God.

Sartre does not make any persistent effort to develop his atheism. His atheism follows naturally from his existential convictions. There is no effort to try to uproot the concept of God, there is no attempt to demolish the proofs for God's existence, and *yet atheism is the inevitable con-*

*clusion*. In fact, for Sartre the question regarding the existence or the non-existence of God is not even relevant. He feels that intellect, by keeping man engaged in these unnecessary problems, leads him astray and makes him forget the real problem which ought to be the centre of his thought. Therefore an attempt to establish atheism or to reject the grounds for God's existence would, in Sartre's opinion, be a useless waste of time. Even so atheism naturally and necessarily *creeps* into his thought.

If we examine Sartre's position we would find that there are at least three basic ways in which the atheistic trends of thought becomes apparent. Firstly, it is apparent in the very enunciation of Sartre's basic principle of existentialism. That basic principle is that 'existence precedes essence.' "What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialists conceive him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be."<sup>1</sup> This means that man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. This again means that every kind of concept including the concept of *God* appears much later than man's existence. Now, if concept of God is a creation of man, that too after man becomes conscious of his existence, and if man is himself responsible for all his projects and ways of existence then obviously God is not needed.

Secondly, if we analyse the possible origin of the idea of God, we find that it invariably arises in awareness of despair and disappointment. It is only when man feels helpless and is in the dire need of some sort of a support he starts *leaning* on a God little realising that this concept is also a concept of his own creation. Now Sartre says that if we follow up the awareness of despair to its natural conclusion, we would find that this itself is an aspect of general feeling of what Sartre calls the feeling of *forlornness, anguish* and *abandonment*. These feelings are, at times, characterised as general feelings of *Nausea*. Now

Sartre says that an understanding of this feeling would clearly reveal that it is a result of an awareness of the superfluity and meaninglessness of life's ways. Now, if man's being is characterised by such a feeling of superfluity of everything then there is no sense in asserting that the idea of God can be accepted as a redeeming feature. This essential feeling of superfluity of everything pre-supposes that even the notion of God is superfluous. In fact, according to Sartre the starting point of existentialism is the awareness that there is no support for man to lean on and that, therefore, he has to take up the responsibility of everything on his own shoulders. It is on account of this that man is forlorn. Therefore the feelings of forlornness is not a reason for clinging to the idea of God but it is a result of the awareness that God is not.

Thirdly, it can be said that the chief ground of Sartre's atheism is his *belief* in human freedom. Sartre is not prepared to sacrifice the basic existential freedom of man at any cost. If God is conceived as the Ultimate Creator of the Universe then it means that man has been created in accordance with a pre-conceived form or idea in God's mind. But in that case man becomes fully determined. Sartre, on the other hand, is not prepared to accept that man is fully determined. Sartre says that man is *condemned to be free*, condemned because he has not created *himself*. But Sartre feels that it is *useless* to enter into the question regarding the creation of man. But once man is, he is definitely free. In fact, in a sense, man's freedom is basic and it permeates man's existence. Freedom, in Sartre's opinion, means freedom of choice, freedom to take decision in complete awareness of one's responsibilities. Sartre says that "if existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom."<sup>2</sup> That shows that in the face of this basic freedom of man atheism has to be accepted as a natural *corollary*.

In fact, at times, Sartre offers incidental arguments against the notion of God also. For example, in his '*Being*

*and Nothingness*' Sartre raises a question: what is the relation between the so-called notion of God and totality of the universe? Sartre says, "the question has no meaning. It is supposing that it is possible for us to take a point of view on the totality; that is, to consider it from outside. But this is impossible precisely because I exist as myself on the foundation of this totality and to the extent that I am engaged in it. No consciousness, not even God's, can "see the underside" — that is, apprehend the totality. And if by his nature, he is a being beyond consciousness (that is, an in-itself which would be its own foundation) still the totality can appear to him only as an object (in that case he lacks the totality's internal disintegration as the subjective effort to reapprehend the self) or as subject (then since God is not this subject, he can only experience it without knowing it). Thus, no point of view on the totality is conceivable; the totality has no "outside," and the very question of the meaning of the "underside" is stripped of meaning. We cannot go further.<sup>3</sup> It is apparent from this passage that it is not possible to maintain the *legitimacy* of the concept of God in any way. If we reflect on the possible relationship between God and totality we find that there is the possibility of two kinds of relation. God can view the totality either as an object or as the subject. If the first alternative is taken into account then the duality of God and totality has to be accepted. And if God views totality as a subject then it will have to be accepted that God can only be a witness of this totality because one subject can only be aware of the presence of the another subject. Thus in both cases God becomes limited and effected by the totality. As such in both cases God does not remain God.

There is yet another reference to, what might be considered, a possible argument against God. Sartre says that if God does not depend on any thing else for its existence then God cannot be said to be existent, because only such thing exists which for bare existence depends upon the conditions. Clarifying this argument Hazel E. Barnes says in the 'Introduction to Being and Nothingness'. "If God causes himself, then he must stand at a distance from himself. This makes

God's self into something contingent; i.e., dependent. But the contingent cannot be God. Therefore there is no God. Or starting from the other end, if God is not contingent, then he does not exist, because existent is contingent."<sup>4</sup>

Thus we find that Sartre's atheism is in a way a *rejection* of religion. It is a rejection of religion because it strikes in its own way at the very root of religion.

This brief survey of the atheistic thoughts of two of the prominent Atheistic Existentialists throws some light on the concept of religion. At the very outset it may be said that Atheistic Existentialism, by rejecting religion in one sweep, has *admitted religion in a mood of indifference*. Even though religion is religion only in *adversity* — only in being rejected, the fact remains that the grounds of rejection are more or less not so much convincing as they appear to be so. Religion is neglected because it creates falsehood. Religion is also sought to be superceded because religion keeps man confined to the world of essences and ideas and thereby prevents man from realising his *manness* or *uniqueness*. Thus religion by positing the notion of God creates a permanent excuse for every lapse on the part of man and thereby infringes on man's freedom. Again, it says that a true account of man must consider the actual involvement of man in life and existence. For example, if man's freedom is to be discussed, it should not be discussed in a purely essentialistic manner using the emotional tools of religion. An account of freedom must keep into consideration the actual fact of freedom, the actual conditions of obligations and free choice.

But Atheistic Existentialism does not realise that this is precisely the emphasis that the true religious spirit is to make. True religion speaks of involvements and commitments without which life's goal cannot be realised. It is true that many distortions of religion have completely neglected this fact and have taken to the purely rational ways for establishing their points. But the true religious spirit always emphasises the importance of *subjectivity* and *emotional commitments*. In this respect, then Atheistic Existentialism



will appear to be on the side of religion at least for all intents and purposes. Thus we come to an interesting conclusion that in Atheistic Existentialism there is a scope for a true religion.

This can be established by analysing the Existentialist's notion of freedom itself. Atheistic Existentialism asserts that man is basically free. By this is meant that the ultimate choice of every action or decision lies on man himself. Atheistic Existentialists have also emphasised the importance of man's subjectivity. It is said that man, in his subjectivity, weighs the alternatives and finally decides on his projects. If this is so, it means that there is no limitation set on the free choice of human subjectivity. It is quite possible, therefore, for a particular individual, to develop a religious sense and a faith in God. To begin with he may not have any awareness of God but it is a matter of his free choice to let his subjectivity grow in a manner which he wants it to grow. It is quite possible that a particular individual may come to develop a religion of his own. Atheistic Existentialism *cannot* deny this because such a denial would amount to an infringement on the freedom of an individual. Thus even in spite of the Atheism of Atheistic Existentialism religion somehow comes to *stay*.

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#### NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 301-302.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Introduction, p. xxx.