Existence Theology and its Distinction between Faith and World-View

[33] Among the issues that occupy philosophers of existence and quite a few theologians, there is a considerable kinship, so that there is some justification in speaking of an ‘existence theology’. The name is not the best. Any label can cause misunderstandings. It must therefore be said immediately that ‘existence theology’ is not the name of a school. There is no theologian whose thinking is exhaustively characterised as existence theology. One can only speak of a tendency. The theologians that are spoken about in this connection are among others Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten. In addition part of Danish theology is characterized as existence theology, under the influence of Kierkegaard. Not least this is true of K. Olesen Larsen.

In the first part of this study I will attempt to determine the tendencies of existential theology, in order in the second part to consider one of them.

To add yet another introductory remark, the first part of the study consists in two further subdivisions: (1) an account of the understanding of existence (2) followed by an account of its relationship to the Christian message.

Part One

1.

Now firstly, the presupposed understanding of existence.

(a) As the very terms ‘existence philosophy’ and ‘existence theology’ suggest, it is a particular understanding of what it is to exist that lies at its centre. This understanding is inspired by Kierkegaard. Some of the characterisations will be discussed further. Since by existence is understood human life, it states that existence is movement. This is Kierkegaard’s expression. Heidegger says that it is possibility. The characterization is polemically directed against any substantial [34] conception of the ‘I’, the ‘self’, which every human being is or which it is their task to be. But how can a person be the same and be a ‘self’ through the movement of existence? Kierkegaard is not unaware of this question. On the contrary, he brings it to a head in a further characterization of human existence, saying that it is alternation. But is it an illusion when an individual understands himself as an ‘I’, as a ‘self’? No, Kierkegaard does not say that with his characterization. He will rather say without further ado that the individual is not the same simply thanks to the structure of his existence. On the contrary, that is a never finished task. The character of existence as alternating means that the individual throughout life has to win his identity continually.
Hereby, however, only the task is fixed – and fixed in a very pointed way. The question how it can happen is not yet answered. Can it happen with the help of a collection of coherent beliefs that I hold right through the alternating of my existence? Can I with a life- or world-view hold out against my existence’s movement and through this thereby win my identity? No, that becomes an illusory identity. For this means that through my life- or world-view I forget my own existence and its movement. It is an imaginary self I win, at the expense of my structure of existence. Identity becomes that of the life- or world-view, not my own. I pretend that the life- and world-view is what is crucial, not my own existence. It is therefore an illusory solution. The job that I have is to win my identity while being true to my existence’s character as movement and alternation. This has the result that I can only win my identity again and again, from one time to the next. Never once and for all. Therefore there is an additional reason why it would be an illusory solution to want to win one’s identity with the help of a life- or world-view, namely that the latter can be won once and for all. And it is no objection if one refers to the fact that the life- and world-view is not cut and dried, but with time develops and becomes more and more manifold, nuanced and coherent. In principle its identity is given once and for all, even though it is still being developed. In any case, the opposition to the structure of existence is and remains just as stark. For the movement that is existence has nothing to do with development and unfolding. This, too, Kierkegaard has considered with yet another [35] characterisation of existence, namely that it is a pursuit that never gets anywhere, but is only fulfilled in repetition.

But what does it mean on closer analysis that the individual, true to his existence's character as alternation, can win his identity only time and again? This means that he can only win it through decision and action. Our existence’s character of alternation sets up an antithesis between the identity that is gained time and again in decision and action – and the identity that a life- and world-view gains once and for all.

(b) We shall get further in our account of the understanding of existence if we take up a possible objection. Namely, the fact of the matter is that to occur actions have to have goals. Just as a decision must have a directive. One can therefore imagine the following objection: From where shall we find the action’s goal or the decision’s directive if not from a life- or world-view? And, the objection continues, can this not very well happen while the individual remains true to his existence’s character as movement? The meaning of the life- and world-view is, though, that it shall be realised in a life of action. What would therefore prevent the individual from winning his identity through the identity of a life- or world-view, while existing in alternation and striving where he stands, provided he time and again realises his life- and world-view in action?

However, the objection has not grasped everything that lies in Kierkegaard’s understanding of existence. Namely, that the movement of existence is determined more closely as becoming, in other words as coming to be. And that means that the stake each time is nothing less than the individual’s whole existence. The task is really to become in the sense of coming to be, ethically understood. Existence in its totality shall come into play in the given situation, and thus understood, each time become, come to be. Existence’s ‘movement’ therefore does not consist in the rather harmless realisation of a
pre-given life- or world-view. It does not consist in the application of the ideas, norms, values, or principles which a life- or world-view may contain.

But this raises the question, how then the goal of the action has to be, if the action is to be the staking of existence as a whole. Where can the decision’s directive be found, if the decision is to let the whole of one’s existence come into play? This much is certain, that the goal of the action cannot be at our disposal. The directive for the decision cannot be got hold of from within the world, in which we are in charge. If the [36] action’s goal and the decision’s directive stand under my disposal, I will use them to make myself lord over my life's situation and events. The action will not have the character of a genuine decision, but will just consist in the application of a directive. My life’s situations and events are made into cases that are subsumed under ideas, norms, value or principles as the directive’s content. So much can therefore be said, that the action’s goal must be of such a kind that I can only come in relation to it by surrendering myself to it. The decision’s directive must be taken from a place to which I can only come into relation by surrendering my existence. I must not be able to draw the directives into my world and get them under control, but they must demand that I hand myself over and give myself up to them. Thus in the case of both the action and the decision, my existence in a total sense comes into play.

It therefore follows, however, that the action’s goal and the decision’s directive must be found at a ‘place’, which judged by the standard of the life- and world-view and compared with all that belongs to my world, is nothing but insecurity. To specify this in more detail: A particular antithesis operates here. Real action and decision, which is characterized by involving the whole existence, stands in contrast to what is only realization and use, and which does not have to involve the whole person. But what does it mean that existence does not come in play in what is only realisation and use? It means, that in realisation and use, man is secure thanks to having available a life- and world-view, and having available ideas, norms, values, and principles as realised and used. But as I said, real action and decision is now determined in antithesis to realisation and use, where the individual self is secure, and his existence does not come into play. From which it follows that insecurity becomes the mark of real action and decision. To act in a real sense comes to consist in setting a goal that objectively is uncertain, just as a real decision consists in grasping the directive that objectively is seen as uncertain. Insecurity is needed in order for the effort to become one’s whole life. In short, the action’s goal and the decision’s directive must have the character of a highly objective uncertainty, so that the insecurity in that sense can become subjective, so that it can be won only through staking one’s whole existence.

And yet we lack the last and vital piece of information. Where [37] is the ‘place’ where we can get hold of such an objectively uncertain goal and directive? The answer is that that ‘place’ is infinity and eternity. The goal and the directive must derive from beyond the life and the world, that we relate ourselves to in our life- and world-view. For that to be the effort of our whole being, we must in our actions and decisions relate ourselves to a transcendent goal and directive. The relation to the goal and the directive must on that understanding be faith, so that mental security can be won only if existence comes into play in its totality.
To recapitulate:

(a) That existence is alternating and striving here and now means that the individual’s effort can never become a completed affair, but unceasingly, for as long as the individual lives, it is and remains imminent. The identity of the life- and world-view therefore conflicts with the structure of existence.

(b) That existence is becoming means that what is at stake every time is nothing less than the individual’s whole existence. To only realise the life- and world-view and to apply ideas, norms, values or principles has nothing to do with existence’s becoming, because in realising and use the individual is himself in security.

And the result of the exposition has been that only in relation to infinity and eternity can man be true to the structure of his existence. Kierkegaard can therefore also express himself pointedly in that the individual can win his identity only through a conversion in his existence. There is in fact no relation to infinity except in a conversion of existence, because the relation to infinity is as such ethical and religious.

But now we come to the second part of the exposition, which concerns the relation between the understanding of existence and the Christian message. Existence theology means, as already said, a clarity over the way that the structure of existence, as it has been outlined, answers to the Christian message’s content and nature. The correlation shall be demonstrated at the two relevant points in the structure of existence that were highlighted:

(a) Christianity is a proclamation in the sense that a person should not really be able to come to know the content of Christianity outside a proclamation of that content.

[38] Proclamation is a particular form of address, and that means, that what is proclaimed to people comes into force for them.¹ What is proclaimed applies to them – and applies from the instant that it is proclaimed. The individual can therefore not avoid taking a position on it. He is forced to do so. Not to accept the proclamation, yes, willing not to hear it, is also a way of taking a position on it. In other words, the proclamation forces the person into a decision, whether he will or not, because not to be aware of what is proclaimed is to decide against it. The kind of address that proclamation is therefore answers to the fact that a person’s existence is decision.

But that Christianity is proclamation again depends on the fact that its content itself consists of events. The proclamation is God’s intervention, his speech and action in a particular person, in Jesus of Nazareth’s speech and action, life and death. As Bultmann

¹ See my article, ‘Die Kategorie und das Amt der Verkündigung im Hinblick auf Luther und Kierkegaard [The Category and the Office of Proclamation in the View of Luther and Kierkegaard]’, Evangelische Theologie, 1949, p. 249ff.
puts it: the event then and the proclamation today cannot be separated. There is the closest imaginable connection. The meaning of God’s work then was to get established the proclamation that we hear today, and to hear it as God’s own word. Unless that was the meaning of the event at that time it was not God’s [work]. And the proclamation today, which is God’s own word, is grounded in what at that time happened to Jesus of Nazareth, and happened as God’s work. Without the event at that time, the proclamation today is not God’s, but the expression of ideas and of a world-view. (R. Bultmann, Glauben und Verstehen, volume 2, p. 9, pp. 14-16, pp. 74-75, pp. 99-100.)

Not only the Christian character of the proclamation but also the proclamation’s character as events thus corresponds to the fact that the existence of the person to whom the proclamation applies is decision. And inasmuch as the truth concerning man is in those events, a person cannot find his identity thanks to being in relation to an identical life- and world-view, and what it may contain of ideas, values, norms and principles, but only in and with the decision he makes in relation to the proclaimed events.

But, one could ask, what is proclaimed are after all events that have happened once and for all. For that matter, it should therefore be enough to proclaim them once and for all, and once and for all take a position on them.

Against this it should be said that this is ruled out by the proclaimed events’ [39] content. Our willfulness sets itself against the judgement contained within the events. And this continues, as our selfishness is located in a strategic place in our existence, namely in our will, so that nothing in our being is excluded from its power. For this reason alone the proclaimed events’ judgement never enters our mind and becomes a lasting part of us. But also for another reason. The judgement is in fact simply destructive. A person therefore cannot become himself in the judgement. That can only be through the forgiveness that in union with the judgement is the content of the proclaimed events.

But this is all to say that the character of man’s life as alternation and striving here and now answers to the proclaimed events’ judgement and forgiveness. Because the individual’s will is evil and stands against the proclaimed events’ judgement, the individual can never once and for all, but only again and again, in new decisions, win his identity. However ‘win’ is not the right word. For as the judgement is destructive, the individual can only accept it provided that along with the judgement, he receives his life as a new and forgiven life. His identity, his true self, can only be bestowed on the individual as a forgiven self.

(b) We come to the second point of correlation between the understanding of existence and the Christian message if we take our starting point in existence theology’s claim that nihilism is faith’s real alternative, in that the will as it is understood by nihilism accepts all the consequences from our life’s limitations and from the darkness that encompasses our life on all sides. This is Bultmann’s view, as I shall explain in what follows.

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2 See my article ‘Systematic Theology I’ in Theologische Rundschau, 3 (1955), pp. 259-93. [Translators’ note: for an English version of much of this material on nihilism, see ‘The
What brings Christian faith and nihilism together? In what way do they resemble each other, so that it makes sense and is enlightening to put them together and compare them against each other? To this the answer is that their relation to the world is in certain respects the same. For nihilism means to expect nothing from the world, neither fulfilment, meaning nor explanation. It is to look the nothingness of both the world and of all one’s own endeavours in the eyes.

And this corresponds to Christian faith as being dead to the world. The world is alien, anything but a home. This is not changed even by an abundance and excellence of culture. The reason for this is the Christian belief that God [40] is the other-worldly, whose eternity is different from everything this-worldly. Only by becoming free from the world can man relate himself to God.

The theology of existence is thus not interested in keeping faith and nihilism as far apart as possible from one another. Two things prevent it doing so. Existence theology is precisely of the view that the recognition of the other-worldly presupposes despair and its nihilism. The openness that is required to understand and recognize that there is a power that is beyond man and his world, man can today only be placed in if he in a radical sense recognizes the nothingness of everything.

If it should be asked why this is true precisely today, the answer probably is that there have been times when the other-worldly was part of man’s worldview, but that this is not the case today. On the contrary. Therefore there is no way to the understanding and recognition of the other-worldly other than nihilism. Only in being clear about the nothingness of the world and my own life does the question of the transcendent arise. Everything must be taken from the individual in order for the question to come up. So long as we trust in the world and ourselves, the other-worldly is not a question for us, because it does not belong to the worldview of today.

This should not be misunderstood as saying that nihilism’s significance, seen in the light of Christian faith, is merely pedagogical. Nihilism is not over and off the stage, but is adopted into the Christian faith as a standing element in it. And this is the second and decisive reason why existence theologians have no interest in playing faith and nihilism off against each other.

For Christian faith, nihilism is a radical understanding of God’s other-worldliness, his transcendence, and a radical understanding of man’s lostness. For Christian faith, God is always hidden. Worldliness and other-worldliness cannot be linked together in a cosmic unity. To recognise God is to be ready to go into the darkness.

Faith and nihilism thus share the recognition that our life is on all sides surrounded by obscurity. Wheresoever man turns there are limitations, and nowhere can he break

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However we cannot avoid interpreting the obscurity. And we can interpret it either as nothingness or as God. The interpretation is not, however, a matter for knowledge, but for decision. The choice is between allowing the obscurity to be nothingness, and our lives one single meaninglessness from beginning to end – or to call the gloom God so that our lives achieve meaning in an [41] abandonment of all our own demands on life in order to let God be the lord; this depends on the decision. There is nothing here that involves knowledge.

However, two things that are closely related mark out the decision in question. From being incomprehensible, my life in and with the decision becomes comprehensible. My life is incomprehensible, it is truly surrounded on all sides by obscurity, and it becomes comprehensible in and by my refraining from any attempt to penetrate the obscurity by instead saying yes to its limitation and constraint, because my life's truth consist in feeling confined and constrained in the faith that the power that on all sides encompasses my life, is not nothingness, but God. But this presupposes that the decision is putting one's whole existence at stake. Nothing can be held back. All one's own demands on life must be given up.

Viewed objectively nothing is more uncertain than that the power of God is the limitation on my life. If I want to have something objective to hold myself to, then I find only obscurity, mysteriousness, incomprehensibility and death. If we go after realities, then we find that nothingness constrains, limits and surrounds our lives. Faith therefore comes about only as a decision. It is impossible to avoid the decision by making use of knowledge to achieve faith, because for knowledge there is nothing on which to lay hold.

The second correlation between the understanding of existence and the Christian faith is thus clear: when faith means to reverse what is objectively nothing but uncertainty, into a subjective mental security through the staking of one's whole existence, then faith is only because it becomes. It only is in and with its coming. In short, faith corresponds to existence's nature as becoming.

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Before I move on to the second part of this study, there is reason to comment on the discussions that existence theology has given rise to.

(a) Looking back over the previously given account, the first section was a phenomenological and formal explanation of the structure of existence. The second section consisted of a characterisation of existence partly in the light of the Christian message's content and partly in the light of the relation of faith to nihilism. This is likely to arouse suspicion. It has therefore also been asked many times whether the phenomenological and the formal view of existence is not primary. The order of my exposition could also invite that thought [42]. But it should not be inferred from it. The order is only chosen because it made the exposition simplest. For that matter, I could
have adopted the opposite approach. But be that as it may, the suspicion has often been expressed of existence theology that it alters the Christian message in accordance with a pre-given understanding of existence which is in fact independent of the Christian message as such. Is the existence theology not so concerned with the structure of existence that it can only take up as much of the Christian message as can be considered as a stimulus for existence’s alternation, striving here and now, and becoming?

Very often the objection against existence theology is also put forward using the formulaic statement that the existence theologian simply takes over an existing and established philosophy. A large part of his theological work should thus just consist in applying views and results that in their capacity as philosophical should be theoretically irrelevant. This is a very common view. How often does it not happen that Bultmann’s relation to Heidegger is put in this light? The issue is not so simple however. Firstly, the existence-philosophical views and results are, historically speaking, unthinkable without theology. We all know that Heidegger’s analysis of existence is theologically inspired. It has been arrived at though an intense study of Kierkegaard, Luther and Augustine. Heidegger’s talk of existence as possibility (and also his talk of futurity as the temporal moment that has priority) goes back to Kierkegaard. In this context, existence theology uses elements of Heidegger’s analysis of existence, which goes back to an understanding of existence that in any case was entirely religious, maybe even Christian.

(b) I shall add yet another reflection on the dispute that existence theology has given rise to. The debate has gone in two different ways, by either recognizing the problems that existence theology has taken up, or by ignoring them. In the first case one neither can nor wishes to get around existence theology’s efforts. Whatever one may have to criticise, and however inadequate one might find one result or another, it remains the starting point, because it has seen and formulated inevitable problems without allowing itself to be intimidated by their difficulty. The considerations in the second part of this study are to be understood as standing in this relation to existence theology.

In the second case, one takes a position outside existence [43] theology and its problems. One is concerned with other problems. But is it then not a question whether a controversy makes sense? The fact is that any systematic theology that is worth anything, indeed, any distinction that says something, has to battle with difficult and pressing problems. A systematic theological elucidation is of interest only if the author is pressed and challenged by an inevitable problem. Is it therefore defensible to use a controversy to get one’s own problem elucidated when it is at the expense of the problems that gave rise to the opponent’s thoughts? The opponent’s problems may well be as good as one’s own. Doesn’t one owe it to one’s opponent to respect his problems? In any case, it seems that disagreement and a controversy can result in insight only if one begins by being in agreement with one’s opponent – about his problems.3

3 The two attitudes to existence theology may be combined, however. Pointing to an existence theology’s dependence on an existence philosopher’s thoughts and terminology is used to get rid of existence theology’s problems. How often is Bultmann’s relationship with Heidegger’s philosophy used to divert attention from the inevitable problem that Bultmann has seen!
Part Two

As we have said, it is characteristic of the thinkers in whom one finds a tendency to existence theology that they at once intend to distance the Christian faith from any world-view – and at the same time to make it clear that faith without understanding is indistinguishable from obscurantism. It is symptomatic that the sharpest explications of the difference between faith and world-view is found in the two works of Bultmann that have the title *Faith and Understanding*. This gives an account of the difference between the understanding that belong to faith, on the one hand, and the world-view that is incompatible with faith, on the other hand. Faith and understanding against world-view, one could say.iii

However, the question is whether the antithesis that goes under the name of ‘faith and world-view’ does not contain many problems that cannot all be handled at the same time. In that case the task is to separate them from one another. For that to be done, we must first get clear what world-view means.

In one’s view is manifest one’s attitude. It is therefore said that one arrived at this or that view. The individual includes himself [44] in it. According to Hans Lipps, in any world-view an initial decision has sneaked in. Without one’s existence there is no authority for it. Everyone has his world-view. This is not to say that it absolutely must be distinctive, peculiar to the individual. Many can have the same world-view. The individual does not form it on his own, but tradition plays a crucial role. It just is part of the world-view that each vouches for it as his (Hans Lipps, *Untersuchungen zu einer hermeneutischen Logik*, 1938, p. 81 [Investigation into Hermeneutic Logic]). Heidegger therefore also finds it characteristic that one talks of ‘the battle between world-views’. Thereby is understood a battle between different basic positions, each of which is complete, and that the individual has settled on.

It is further said by Heidegger that in the world-view, being in its wholeness is understood and explicated not just by man but from man. Man is the centre to which everything is referred, and from which everything is understood.

‘World-view’ does not denote a world-relation that has always been. But it represents a special relation to the world that is relatively recent. The word appears not earlier than the middle of the eighteenth century. The attitude was unknown and unimaginable in the Greek world, in the middle-ages and particularly in Catholicism. (Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the Worldpicture’ in Holzwege, pp. 86-87).iii

If we now look back at the different ways in which existence theology has confronted faith and world-view and noted the contradiction between them, it is obvious that for some of those involved in the confrontation, ‘world-view’ is taken in the sense given it by Hans Lipps and Martin Heidegger. They talk of world-view in relation to two questions: whether I can win my identity by it, and whether decision and action consist in realising and applying the ideas, norms, values and principles that are its content. And in this context it was said about the world-view that over time it became more diversified,
balanced and coherent. Just as it was said that the world-view is at my disposal so that it
gives me security and helps me bring my existence under control. It is straightforward
that a world-view is thereby understood as something that we have given ourselves. It is
a coherent complex of views concerning life and the world that the individual makes
himself, assisted by tradition.

[45] When on the contrary, the contrast to the world-view gets the theologian to put faith
in connection with nihilism, is there not something else going on? Is it just a contrast to
any world-view that we are talking about? Is faith contrasted to every ontology? Perhaps
we could put it this way, that where Catholic theology has an ontology, existence
theologians think that Protestant theology should have a void. The void – nihilism – must
be there in order not to obscure faith’s character as decision.

We have thus introduced a distinction between world-view and ontology. What does it
consist in? The answer is that the ‘world’ in world-view is that which we have arranged
ourselves, in which we feel at home, and with the things of which we are familiar. The
world is that which is given in its accessibility.

By contrast, in ontology we relate ourselves to being in a way which ignores the world
that we have made. In opposition to the world-view’s world relation, in ontology we seek
for a way to relate ourselves to being, inasmuch as it is alien and inaccessible to us. In
ontology we seek to relate ourselves to the given without trying to get it to stand at our
disposal. If the world ‘nature’ were not regionally defined, we could use it in this context.
Poets sometimes use it in this way.

We asked the question previously, concerning the connection that existence theology
finds between faith and nihilism, whether this places faith in opposition not only to every
world-view but also to every ontology; and obviously the premise for this question is that
nihilism is not only a world-view but also an ontology. It is straightforward that ontology
now means a negative relation to the world-view’s world, that understood this way the
world cannot give meaning to man’s life. Equally straightforward is the similarity to the
Christian faith’s relation to the world. That, too, is negative, inasmuch as Christian faith is
incompatible with trusting the world and seeing one’s life meaning and fulfillment in
what the world can give.

But is nihilism not also an ontology? Does it not also mean a negative relation to being? It
was said before that in ontology we seek to relate ourselves to being in its inaccessibility.
Is nihilism not in that way an ontology that takes inaccessibility to be due to the
meaningless and emptiness of all being? Inaccessibility means that man is seeking and
can never be anything other [46] than seeking in his relation to being. But does not
nihilism give man’s seeking something of an ontological grounding in the nothingness of
everything? Is it not nothingness that according to nihilism makes man’s being into
seeking and makes being inaccessible?

But is not the content of the Christian faith also an ontology, and one which is different
from nihilism? Does not the Christian faith also give an answer, but a different answer
from nihilism, regarding being’s inaccessibility? To elucidate the question, we will go on
to consider two theologians who each in their own way, as far as I can see, assumed that faith contains an ontology – namely Luther and Jakob Knudsen.

1.

The exposition of Luther which I make use of here I owe to Erwin Metzkes’s penetrating little study of Luther ‘Sacrament and Metaphysics’ (1948). But I take the liberty of adapting it to use for the problem that I have raised here.

For Luther it is clear that God is present everywhere in all flesh, in all creatures, in all being. In each individual creature, God is ‘deeper, further, more present than the creature is to himself’. Thus Luther gives expression to an understanding of God’s omnipresence, that put in philosophical terminology is of an ontological character.

Two things are now characteristic of Luther’s view. He distinguishes sharply between faith and ontology, while at the same time he is also clear that faith contains an ontology.

Concerning the first distinction he makes, it is drawn this way: he argues that there is a difference between God’s presence – and his presence for the individual. The latter he is in word and sacrament. God has bound himself to these, and there man shall find him. On the other hand, it exceeds man’s power to seek God everywhere – even though God is everywhere.

It is equally clear that for him, faith’s content is an ontology. For revelation means that God makes his omnipresence visible in a definite place. Beforehand God is present everywhere. In revelation, his prior presence comes into view.

In other words, just as sharply as Luther distinguishes between faith itself and its presupposed world-view, just as little does he want to separate them. Revelation through the word must not stand alone. Nor [47] in a way that makes a distinction between divine powers and God himself, and says that divine forces are active everywhere in creation, while God himself is present in the word. In that case God’s revelation would mean a reduction in his omnipresence. No, God could only reveal himself in Christ, because he is already personally present in all creatures.

Because God’s omnipresence is ontology, we grasp it with our natural reason. Or rather, since Luther distinguishes knowledge of God’s omnipotence from faith itself and also claims that it is with our natural reason that we grasp that, I find it justifiable to characterise knowledge of God’s omnipresence philosophically as an ontological knowledge. Luther does not invoke scripture, but appeals to thought when he tries to comprehend the relationship between God’s omnipresence and space. In order to give an idea of this some of his views will be stated, as cited by Erwin Metzke in his aforementioned work. The question for Luther was, how God on the one side ‘can be wholly and completely present everywhere in all flesh, in all creatures, in all being’, and on the other side again be ‘outside and above all creatures and being, and so can and must be nowhere’. And in response, he refers to the fact that there are other ways of being ‘in’ something than physical location, as when the bread is in the basket and the wine in the
cup. As examples he mentions that colour and light, heaven and earth, are 'in' the eye that sees. What stands in front of the mirror is 'in' the mirror. Or things, including God himself, are 'in' our hearts. The mentioned examples are also examples of how something can simultaneously be present at various locations in space. But he adds others. Physical vision can see five or six miles away. In particular, however, he gives examples that illustrate how something can simultaneously be present in countless places. One face can be reflected in a thousand pieces of a mirror at one time. The sun’s image in the lake can be seen everywhere, so if a thousand eyes look at the lake, each has the image for itself and not for the other. Thousands and thousands can see the same column, without one person’s vision hindering the others’. All that is not a miracle – and yet it is a miracle. And Luther adds to this that God, whose power is without end and measure, has yet other ways to be 'in' something. Just as a seeing person’s possibilities goes beyond the blind person’s, so God’s possibilities exceed the seeing person’s possibilities.

Now it is a fact in the history of philosophy, that ontological [48] knowledge changes. If Luther is therefore correct that faith contains ontology, it makes good sense to ask about the relation between the ontology that belongs to a particular social epoch and the ontology that is implied by faith. They may be similar to each other, and they can be opposed to one another.

For people in the sixteenth century, it was the case that the ontology that was given with the cultural epoch was in many respects similar to the ontology that faith presupposed. This had the effect that with a few exceptions, the form that a person’s disbelief, despair and rebellion against God took was not the form of a denial of the ontology that faith implied. To take Luther as an example, his despair did not take the form of nihilism in the modern, ontological sense. His despair did not destroy the ontology that his faith implied, and which included God’s omnipresence. But in religious doubts the created world uncovers God’s wrath, is a mask for it. The created world is hostile to man, hostile to the creation, and so he fears and flies from it. The least of all creation becomes in the hours of scruple ‘our angry God’. Even facing a rustling leaf he cannot protect himself (Günther Jacob, Der Gewissensbegriff in Luthers Theologie, 1929, pp. 23-35). Despair does not take the form of doubt concerning God’s omnipresence. On the contrary, it remains firm, as despair is encompassed by God’s omnipresence as God’s wrath. In short, however man’s position is in relation to God, the ontology presupposed by faith is not shaken, simply because it is not only the ontology of faith, but also of the time.

By contrast, now in the twentieth century our ontology contradicts the elements of an ontological character that Christian faith presupposes. In order to sketch why, let me stick to what was previously said about Luther’s view. The arguments put forward by Luther, in the name of human reason, which state his convictions about God’s omnipresence, are futile for most people today. That is to say that they do not have the ontology in which these arguments belong.

Two ways for something to be ‘in’ something were important to Luther: (1) colours and light, sky and earth, are ‘in’ the eye that sees it; and (2) things and other people are ‘in’ one’s heart. As analogies for the omnipresence of God these two ways of being ‘in’ are no longer enlightening. Why not? Because people regard the problem concerning
knowledge's transcendence – for this is what it is about when it is [49] said that colour, light, sky and earth are 'in' the eye that sees – as something that has been resolved with a physiological explanation of our senses. And because people regard the problem concerning personal relationships – for this is what it is about when it is said that things and other people are 'in' one's heart – as solved by a biological-psychological explanation. In order to be analogies to the omnipresence of God, knowledge's transcendence – that colour and light, sky and earth are 'in' the eye that sees – must remain as an unsolved riddle after the physiological explanation of our senses. Likewise the personal relationship – that things and other people are 'in' one's heart – must remain as a riddle, that is not able to be mastered by the biological-psychological explanation of the process. However it is characteristic for twentieth century ontology that one is satisfied with a physiological explanation of the senses and finds the question concerning the transcendence of knowledge meaningless. Likewise one is satisfied with a biological-psychological explanation and regards the question concerning what is really the personal element in human relations as a pseudo-problem. Briefly put, the only puzzles are scientific ones. For this reason the two relations can no longer be taken as analogies to God's omnipresence.

For now, not to simplify matters more than necessary, let me add in parenthesis that the West European cultural sphere is divided. This can be seen in philosophy. On the one side is the anti-metaphysical philosophy, either in the form of a logical empiricism which consists in an ontological axiom that reality is sense-data, or in the form of Oxford philosophy, which refers all questions of fact to the sciences and restricts the job of philosophy to a linguistic analysis in order to kill off all metaphysical problems. On the other side we have a philosophy which acknowledges metaphysical problems. And as far as the latter kind of philosophy is concerned, it is the case that it takes a different view on the issues we have raised here. For it requires knowledge transcendence and the personal relationship between people to have an explanation of a different nature than either the sense-physiological and the biology-psychological can offer, because the two aspects in their character as respectively transcendence and personality remain equally puzzling, however carefully mapped they are as sense-physiological and biological-psychological processes. However, at the same time, it realizes that it shall never be able to give an explanation of the puzzles that cognition transcendence and the personal in human relationships pose now. For the only explanations that we can give are the sense-physiological [50] and biological-psychological ones. It just finds the explanations unsatisfactory. And its dissatisfaction manifests itself in this, in constantly circling around the phenomena in ever new attempts at a phenomenological interpretation. The puzzles immediately generate the need for an interpretation. It is notable that an interpretation is not presented as an explanation. But a philosophy that holds that everything important in knowledge and in the relationship between man and man is left untouched by the scientific studies, is open to Luther's arguments. However an anti-metaphysical philosophy obviously is not. But who would deny that it is the anti-metaphysical philosophy that is characteristic of our cultural era, and that its ontology has captured us all? It, however, contradicts the ontological elements that Christian faith implies.
It is now crucial, though, that one does not take the fact that faith implies ontological elements as an occasion to draw the following two conclusions: if the cultural epoch’s ontology corresponds to the ontology that Christian faith presupposes, then it is easier to have faith – or if they contradict each other, then it is more difficult to have faith. Both conclusions are false. This can be concluded from the fact that one with just as much weight could draw the opposite conclusion.

With as much right one can say that it was the sense of being subject to God’s ever-present anger that drove Luther to the view that man is justified by his deeds and held him in it. Certainly there was nothing in the sense of God’s omnipresence that helped Luther from despair to faith.

And as for the case of 20th century people, one could just as well say that the fact that the cultural epoch’s ontology contradicts the ontology that faith presupposes is what helps to make it clear – to cite Gogarten – that ‘human existence’s and history’s most elementary and fundamental phenomenon, namely human being’s relation to one another, is the final and only place where the relation to God is determined’ ([Die Verkündigung Jesu Christi [The Proclamation of Jesus Christ], 1948, p. 115).

This is one issue. But there is another reason why the aforementioned conclusions are false. If we draw the conclusion that it is easier for faith if the cultural epoch’s ontology corresponds to faith, and that is more difficult for faith if they oppose one another, we do not any longer just assert that faith implies an ontology, but we take faith to be an ontology. We make an identification between them.

[51] But the first thing to be said, and that essentially ought continually to be said, is that faith does not allow itself to be reduced to an ontology.

On the other hand, I find it an overstatement of existence theology to take the occasion of the difference between faith and ontology to create enmity between them and deny that faith includes ontology.

And the question is whether the ontological element that faith contains, is not significant for faith’s own content. Metzke gives an account of a certain relation that springs from Luther’s view of God’s omnipresence. Inasmuch as God is present in the same way everywhere, in the sky and in the earth, in the least and in the greatest, no spatial region has an absolute priority. Thanks to his view of the bodily, Luther therefore breaks free of any localising conception. For Luther heaven is never understood locally as a beyond, as a spatially delimited space ‘high above’.

God is thus not first pushed out into the transcendent, in order then to establish his connection with the here and now. Nor in his revelation in Christ does God come from above the world. He comes in by already being omnipresent. He doesn’t break into the world from outside. As said before, God can only reveal himself in Christ, because he is already personally and physically present in all creatures.
But that means that the ontology that faith contains, prevented faith from becoming spiritualistic for Luther. By contrast in Calvin’s understanding it was touched by a strain of spiritualism. Does not the difference between Luther and Calvin lie also in a different perception of the ontology which faith presupposes?

2.

Between Luther and Jakob Knudsen¹ lies both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. And obviously that has an impact. The way in which they express themselves are as different as can be imagined, and also the place where our questions emerge. [52] In Luther this happens in the communion writings. These are what Erwin Metzke has subjected to analysis. In Jakob Knudsen the questions emerge in an explanation of the relation between poetry and ethics. Nevertheless, I think we find a view of the relation between faith and ontology in Jakob Knudsen that corresponds to the view of Luther.

Jakob Knudsen’s view is that it is only thanks to the relation in which we stand to other people, that our own existence is personal. Since it is determined by that, it is only really realised in this relation. Life in the world of personal relations is the touchstone for the real and the unreal.

However in the poetic experience man is outside the life that involves personal relation to others. From which it follows that the poetic experience is unreal. And now it is added: To poetry’s kingdom belongs the whole entire world, in the same instant that one sees it with a sense of beauty. We know the old saying: the sense of beauty is disinterested, which means that it has no will to master what is seen. Jakob Knudsen says that it is without desire. It is characteristic of him that it is precisely in a work on such a prominent ethical issue as ‘zest for life and selfishness’ that he comes to talk about poetry. He thus understands poetry namely as an attempt to put selfishness aside, without destroying the zest for life. Does the attempt succeed? Both yes and no. It succeeds, but only insofar as in poetry we are located in an unreal setting, in a dream world, where we therefore also can just live temporarily in peace from selfishness (Christian Talks, p. 182). ‘...Everything in the world becomes a dream as soon as we find it beautiful’ (p. 185). In other words, in poetry it is only in experience, not in action, that zest for life lives, unreal and provisionally, without desire and without selfishness. Zest for life can live for a long time in poetry, though languishing eventually, 'but where, however, in the dream it can experience that freedom and bright joy that are not burdened by selfishness’s shackles'.

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¹ Jakob Knudsen is a Danish writer and priest, who lived from 1858 to 1917 and was part of the Grundtvigian movement. He wrote numerous novels. Also a novel on Luther's life, which will make many sceptical in advance. But it is successful. No one, including researchers on Luther, will find reading it in vain. At crucial points there is a kinship in mentality between Luther and Jacob Knudsen. Thoughts of life-philosophical nature which are echoed in his novels, he has put into the essay collections Life-Philosophy and Christian Talks. Power of thought, originality and imaginative ability make them rousing reading. In my estimation, Jakob Knudsen is one of the most significant theologians that we have had in Denmark.
Two things are distinctive regarding Jakob Knudsen’s view of poetry, and they are what is important in our present context. Firstly, that the experience of beauty and metaphysical experience come together as one. He talks about the experience of eternity in nature that we get through a sense of beauty. Which does not make it less unreal. ‘When I walk alone in the forest and feel the wholeness of all life, eternity through the nature scenery that I walk in, then I am at once in an unreal world’ (p. 184). But – and this is the second thing that is distinctive in Jakob Knudsen’s view – poetry [53] is not defined by its unreality and provisionality when you just take it for what it is, dream and not reality. Poetry is absolutely a good thing, he says. Why? Because it is true. The realm of poetry is unreal, but not therefore untrue.

For this to make sense, however, a distinction must be made. Experience’s unreality can rest either on what is experienced or on the person who has the experience. Either what is experienced can be unreal in itself or for me. For Jakob Knudsen it cannot concern what is experienced. What I experience cannot be in itself unreal. If that were the case, it could not be true. On the contrary, it is unreal for me because my true self is outside my experience. I am myself outside the experience, because if I ask who I really am, the answer is that I am the self that lives in personal relations and action – and not that which is experiencing.

Actually, Jakob Knudsen himself makes the distinction. ‘God in nature’ cannot be reality for people, which it is not to deny that God in truth is in nature. ‘Yes indeed he is there. And all Christians believe the same’ (p. 187). And he continues by claiming that the Christian person cannot do without the generally religious, and by that he means, surprisingly enough, that the life that Christianity opens up contains both reality and dream. It contains reality, namely life in the world of personal relations, to God or to other persons – and it contains dream, namely the wholeness of all life in the unreality of beauty, as he puts it (p. 188). But to resume: Real is only life in the world of personal relations. Unreal is the poetic experience. But what is poetically experienced is truth and truth in a metaphysical sense. That is why it belongs with Christianity. So Christianity contains both, what is reality and unreality for the individual person.

If we now translate Jakob Knudsen’s view in the terms of the problems we have taken up here, we can begin with posing the most pressing question: why does unreality belong with Christianity? Then the answer is – in the terminology of our problem – that it does so because faith presupposes an ontology. What is here expressed by saying that ontology is part of faith, without being faith, Jakob Knudsen puts forward in the surprising formula that unreality belongs to Christianity.

Jakob Knudsen states that poetry is true. Translated this means that the ontology, which faith contains, is true.

[54] But – and this is the next thing to be said – because faith contains an ontology, it therefore does not itself become an ontology. Jakob Knudsen and Luther express it the same way. Jakob Knudsen says that although it is true that God is in nature, we neither hear nor sense him there, but we do so only in his words (p. 187). And Luther has it, as I mentioned to begin with, that God is certainly everywhere, but it exceeds the ability of
man to seek him everywhere. God has bound himself in word and sacrament, and human beings can only find him there.

To sum up: ontology is not faith, but belongs with it, in the form of philosophy for Luther, in the form of poetry for Jakob Knudsen. For Luther natural reason says that God is omnipresent, and for Jakob Knusden this is said by poetic experience.

Summary

In the first part of the essay some characteristic features of existence theology are explained. Its understanding of existence is explained with reference to its beginning in Kierkegaard. As a result it contradicts the structure of existence, to want to win individual identity with the identity of a life- and world-view, as it is also contradictory to let decision and action consist in the realisation of a life- and world-view. In addition it is shown how existence theology establishes that the content and nature of the Christian message corresponds to the structure of existence conceived in this way.

In the second part one critical point is made against existence theology’s position. A world-view and ontology are distinguished and it is shown that Luther and the Danish writer Jakob Knudsen, each in their own way, have the view that Christian belief contains an ontology; for Luther it was in the form of a philosophy of the fall, for Jakob Knudsen in the form of poetry.\(^{vi}\)

Translated by Hans Fink and Robert Stern

Translators’ notes

1 The Danish here is ‘usikkerhed’, which can also be translated as ‘uncertainty’, where this epistemic connotation should also be born in mind. We translate ‘usikkerhed’ with ‘uncertainty’ when it is objective and with ‘insecurity’ when it is subjective; and correspondingly with ‘sikkerhed’. And we translate ‘visheden’ as ‘mental certainty’, to show that a different word is being used.

ii Løgstrup used the German terms in this sentence, referring back to the title of Bultmann’s book which was also given in German: ‘Glauben und Verstehen gegen Weltanschauung, kunne man sige’.


iv *Sakrament und Metaphysik* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1948).

v This was written in German.

vi We are grateful to Bjørn Rabjerg for his advice on this translation. Please contact Robert Stern with any suggestions for improvement: r.stern@sheffield.ac.uk