**Understanding the Times**

Christ Presbyterian Church

**Existentialism: Part One**

Sources for Further Study:

* James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*
* R. C. Sproul, *Lifeviews: Understanding the Ideas that Shape Society Today*
* Anthony C. Thiselton, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion*
* John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*
* James Mannion, *Essentials of Philosophy: The Basic Concepts of the World’s Greatest Thinkers*
* Robert F. Davidson, *Philosophies Men Live By* (out of print)
* Christopher Panza, *Existentialism for Dummies* (online summary)

1. **Some Definitions:**

* **Thiselton**–A philosophical and literary movement with “*an emphasis upon the individual rather than the crowd (or tradition or community); and [upon] the role of active personal engagement and decision for life and for truth, as against passive systems or doctrine*s” (p. 92).
* **Mannion**– A “*philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, and [that] regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses the freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one’s act*” (q. from the *American Heritage Dictionary*, p. 124).
* **Sire**–A “*worldview that has emerged since the turn of [the 20th] century*” that has as its “*major goal the task of transcending nihilism*” (p. 95).

What is ‘nihilism’?

Christian/Theistic and Atheistic versions of existentialism

Flourished in 1950’s

* **R.C. Sproul**–“*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. We encounter the influence of existentialism virtually every day of our lives and in virtually every sphere of our culture*” (p. 49).

1. **Significant Figures in Atheistic and Christian/Theistic Existentialism:**

Each of the figures referenced below differed significantly on many theological and philosophical points, but they “*all believed that each person must define themselves in an absurd, illogical world*” (Dr. Christopher Panza).

* **Soren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855)–Danish Christian philosopher.
* **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900)–Prussian atheistic philosopher, associated with nihilism and the ‘God is dead’ movement.
* **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976)–German, extremely influential atheistic (sort of) philosopher.
* **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980)–French atheistic philosopher and student of Heidegger. Influenced by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

1. **Essential Beliefs of Atheistic Existentialism:**

* **Basic Beliefs**:

Our universe is composed only of matter and ruled by chance.

Individuals must make themselves into ‘authentic’ human beings.

All people are totally free to determine their own identify and personal meaning.

The external world is cold, chaotic, and absurd in nature.

The ‘authentic’ person is the one who revolts against this absurdity and courageously creates their own meaning and value.

‘Good’ is defined as any action that is freely and passionately chosen, and is not measured nor determined by anything outside of the individual.

* **Essential Terms and Concepts** (From Panza)**:**

**Absurdity**

**Anxiety**

**Alienation**

**‘Existence Precedes Essence’**

**The Übermensch (‘Overman’ or ‘Superman’)**

**The Death of God**

**Subjectivity**

1. **A Closer Look at Jean-Paul Sartre and His Influence** (see Davidson)**:**

* Developed the most famous and popular version of atheistic existentialism.
* Basic facts of his life, influences, and work: