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**The First Step in Missions
Training: How our Neigh-
bors are Wrestling with God's
General Revelation (Part 3)**



Theological Accents
Theologische Akzente

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The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God's General Revelation (Part 3)¹

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Faith Seeks Understanding: A Missionary Philosophy of the Divine-Human Wrestling Match

In this next part of our study of the way in which the human race is wrestling with God's general revelation we are moving from theology to philosophy. For Christians, theology is broadly the study of knowing God, the gospel, and the application of Scripture to life; this is what we have been doing so far. A worthwhile definition of philosophy, which we will use here, is the analysis of human experience.² Philosophical analysis of any topic is usually carried out in light of a person's basic religious or ideological assumptions, which some of our friends call a "ground motive" and others call a "worldview."

Because of this normal relation between religion and philosophy, we do not need to make an apology for openly engaging in philosophy in light of understanding the complex conflict that people have with God's general revelation. But the philosophical analysis in which we will now engage has a particular purpose, to help us understand the people to whom God has sent us, as the Body of Christ, as his missionaries. In the light provided by a Pauline

understanding of God's speech through creation, there are many dimensions of human experience that we can begin to understand in their depths. Without thinking in light of God's general revelation, our understanding of these themes will remain superficial. Thinking about human experience in light of general revelation will not only lead to spiritual maturity; it will also prepare believers for the task of taking the gospel to people whose lives are not only shaped by a vast array of religions and philosophies of life, but who also face the whole range of life problems, questions, and deep needs. If, as I believe, we Christians have thought about life in light of general revelation too seldom, this is worth our serious attention. Thinking deeply about human experience in light of the way people are wrestling with God's general revelation will equip us for applying his special revelation and the gospel. There are several themes we must consider. The first of these themes is the human experience of Angst. Angst and General Revelation: In light of God's general revela-

tion, we can understand Angst and its relation to the gospel. Angst arises from the threatening nature of God's general revelation and finds its solution in the multiple dimensions of the gospel.

I have had similar experiences while teaching philosophy in secular universities (where very few of my students claimed to be Christians) and also while preaching in evangelical churches (where most of the people were Christians). When I directly and sensitively take up the topic of Angst, the level of interest has become extraordinarily high, because the people know I am speaking to their real concerns; boredom is banished. In a philosophy class, the students might have a moderate level of interest when comparing different theories that seek to explain how we know, but those students might be sitting on the edge of their chairs, with rapt attention, when I lecture on the question of whether or not life has any meaning.

In a church situation, the level of interest may be moderate when talking about when a particular book in the Bible was written or about different theories of what will happen when Jesus returns, but when I preach on anxiety or the emptiness of daily life, everyone is really interested. And when teaching in evangelical theological seminaries, students have expressed the most gratitude when I have offered an outline to describe the varieties of Angst and how the biblical message addresses our Ängste. So far I have used the words "Angst" and "Ängste" without defin-

ing them. We need terminology to describe the human condition of being aware that something is terribly wrong in human life, that we are guilty, fallen, lost in the world, dying, and deserve the wrath of God, even if that awareness might be largely repressed so that it remains preconscious for some individuals. Different terms could be used. For that type of awareness we will select the German word *Angst*, which is generally translated into English as "anxiety" or "dread,"³ though I do not want to use these English words because these words may be too familiar to some and may suggest purely emotional matters to others.

The danger in this method of analysis is that some may misunderstand it to be psychology only, instead of an analysis of the entirety of life, including the psychological dimension of life. As used in this context, the word Angst does not refer to a psychological disorder or to the type of problem that might be measured by a psychological anxiety scale or test.

We will usually write Angst (Ängste when plural), not anxiety, because it is more comprehensive than psychological disorders in several ways: This is not a disorder of one person or a set of "sick" people in contrast with other "normal" people; it is a condition and set of problems faced by the entire human race, though different people experience it differently. A person may or may not always feel Angst at a psychological or conscious level, since one's awareness of fallenness may be well suppressed,

or it may be partly addressed by that person's religion or ideology. What we are considering is far more than a psychological condition; it is the condition of fallen humanity, of which people are partly conscious, or are conscious with that awareness partly suppressed. For some people, their Angst may be mostly expressed in artistic or philosophical terms, not in psychological traits or disorders, showing that Angst is more than psychological.

Some psychological or philosophical discussions of anxiety confuse specific fears (even if called anxieties) with the general human condition of Angst, which may have no conscious object more specific than "life," "problems," or the "world." Personally I find that a cup of green tea may relieve my feelings of anxiety, but it does not eliminate Angst; a cup of tea only gives me a calmer state of mind when I consider the deep issues of meaning, guilt, and uncertainty in my life and in the lives of the people I love. This personal experience illustrates the distinction between the psychological experience of anxiety and the human condition of Angst.

I regret that Paul Tillich used the term anxiety to describe what we are calling Angst, though his analysis is very instructive; he defined anxiety as "awareness of possible non-being." In light of our explanation of God's general revelation in the previous chapters, Tillich's definition should be developed and deepened. Let us define Angst as *awareness, often suppressed from consciousness, of our condition as fallen and*

deserving the wrath of God, which all people have as a result of God's general revelation. We will distinguish between our objective status as fallen and separated from God and our subjective awareness of our fallen situation; we will use the term Angst to describe our subjective awareness of our fallen condition, not primarily to describe our objective status of fallen and separated from God.

Without God's general revelation, we would not be aware or conscious that something is wrong, that we are "by nature" (meaning as a result of sin, not as a result of creation) in conflict with God with effects that disturb all of life. If, after Adam and Eve's sin, God had simply let the human race go its way without him, we would not be aware that something is profoundly wrong in the human condition. But people are often aware that something is not right with the world, and that knowledge is a result of God's continuing general revelation. If we do not recognize that this awareness comes from God's general revelation, it is only because of our sinful habit of suppressing our knowledge of God. Tillich's analysis of anxiety merits our attention as a tool to describe Angst, though one must remember that Tillich saw his study of anxiety as a flexible tool to understand human experience in regard to religious needs, not as an overly rigid diagnostic system.⁴

Following Tillich, there are three major types of Angst, each of which can be experienced on either an ulti-

mate level (in relation to God or a God-substitute) or on a secondary, penultimate level (in relation to ourselves and other people). *Moral* Angst has to do with guilt and fear of condemnation, whether the guilt is in relation to other people, God, or a God-substitute; the fear of ultimate condemnation by God comprises the ultimate form of moral Angst. (If I were to rewrite Tillich's analysis, I would describe the experiences of shame in human relations, rejection by people, and loss of belonging in community as additional varieties of penultimate or secondary moral Angst.)⁵ *Existential* Angst has to do with a loss of meaning and purpose.

On a secondary level, it is a sense that life is boring, while, on the ultimate level, it is the perception or feeling that life is empty and meaningless, without a guiding purpose and possibly not worth living. *Ontic* Angst (derived from the Greek word *ontos*, referring to all that has being) has to do with our awareness that our entire being is threatened by what will or may happen to us: matters of fate, the future, and death; the fear of death is the ultimate form of ontic Angst. (I will substitute the word "ontological" for Tillich's word "ontic.").

The three types of Angst overlap and mix in the experience of many people, and within the Christian community we tend to mix moral Angst and ontological Angst because of the way in which we describe sin and death. But it is worthwhile to keep the three varieties distinct in our discussion so that we are more equipped to perceive the

significant diversity in human experience, even in our consciousness (or repressed awareness) of our fallenness. Tillich thought that our western cultural ancestors in ancient Greece and Rome especially wrestled with ontological anxiety, whereas medieval culture especially had to face moral anxiety, while the European and North American cultures in which he lived during the twentieth century were particularly marked by existential anxiety, the threatening loss of meaning. Broadly, with some exceptions, the inhabitants of a particular historical culture experience the whole range of anxieties as perceived through the lens or filter of one variety of anxiety, so that one variety of Angst plays a leading role in the lives of a group of people.

Religion, Tillich claimed, is the way in which humans find courage to face life in the face of anxiety. People are constantly responding to Angst, seeking salvation and solutions, and the way in which people respond to Angst is their religion. (This is why, as John Calvin observed, "Man's nature is a perpetual factory of idols.")⁶ But the forms of Angst and the religious responses to the varieties of Angst display tremendous diversity, depending on the situation of diverse peoples, because cultural diversity influences both our experience of Angst and our religious response. As Tillich noted, perhaps with a bit of exaggeration, "Culture is the form of religion, and religion is the substance of culture."⁷ There is a similar relation between culture and Angst, such that

both the experience of Angst and the articulation of that Angst vary significantly among cultures as cultures are influenced by the many religions.

If Tillich was right, that each culture has a central Angst through which a group of people experiences the other varieties of Angst, we can and should learn to distinguish the varieties of Angst as part of understanding cultures and the application of the biblical message in different cultures. We can also notice the way in which the varieties of Angst gain additional power in human experience because of the ways in which they overlap and penetrate each other. Based merely on my personal observations of students and neighbors, I have the impression that many Europeans experience existential Angst as primary and perceive the other Ängste through the lens of a loss of meaning, whereas many North Americans today experience moral Angst as primary and frequently experience the other Ängste through the lens of guilt or forgiveness.

The analysis of Angst can be used within evangelical missions, preaching, and pastoral care if we understand it within the framework Paul gives us in Romans 1:16–2:5. Angst, in all its varieties, is ultimately the result of the threatening and condemning character of God's general revelation, though there are also secondary causes for Angst which lead to its multicolored rainbow texture. Were God's general revelation to cease, our Ängste would also be laid to rest, but the cost would be the loss of our humanity, reducing

us to be mere brutes. As far as I can observe, my dog does not experience Angst, though I think he is sometimes lonely or depressed. In the beginning God created us by speaking us into existence, and he did so by means of speaking to us in a manner that was different from the way in which he spoke the rest of creation into existence. He created us to respond to him consciously, in his image, whereas the rest of creation responds to God's creating word without the same type of consciousness. God maintains our humanness by continuing to speak the same word to us which he spoke in creation, which we now call his general revelation. This creating word of God made us human and keeps us human today, but in our fallenness, it also continually keeps us partly aware of our fallen condition with a kind of knowledge which I call Angst.

Of course Angst is often unpleasant, but the unpleasantness of Angst should not blind us from seeing how it is associated with both God's common grace and his special, saving grace. God's general revelation, by which he gives his common grace, necessarily and continuously causes a reaction in fallen, sinful humans. And that human reaction of Angst is part of our continuing preparation for the good news of redemption in Christ. As the ultimate background for all human Angst, we must remember Paul's claim that people "know the requirement of God that those who do such things are worthy of death" (Romans 1:32), which he mentions in

order to both explain why people need the gospel and to prepare believers to proclaim the gospel courageously. Far from neglecting Angst and spiritual need, the biblical message both brings the full range of Ängste to articulate expression (A few of the psalms are quoted below as an example.) and then applies the promises of God's grace and the gospel, leading to hope, comfort, joy, and courage. As Christians we grasp the importance and beauty of the biblical message when we openly connect its promises and narratives to our experience of Angst. This normal Christian experience provides a key for talking about the gospel with our neighbors. We should frequently mention the normal human experiences of guilt, shame, lack of purpose, inner emptiness, and fear of the future when we talk about Jesus, so that people perceive more quickly that the biblical message connects with their spiritual needs.

Angst does not necessarily end the moment we come to faith. Though there is diversity of experience among believers, it is very common that we repeatedly or even continually move from the condition of Angst to the assurance arising from faith, and, vice versa, from the assurance arising from faith back to a condition of Angst. Our entire existence in all its dimensions is continually threatened by fate, guilt, and emptiness, so that authentic faith always has to be newly reaffirmed as we repeatedly reaffirm our trust in the promises of God.⁸ Many psalms begin with a heart-rending expression

of Angst expressed in prayer to God, often leading to renewed trust in God and peace with life. A few examples must suffice, though it is important for people both inside and outside the church to be familiar with this theme so that all know that faith is a response to Angst, not a denial of Angst.

Psalm 3: Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him."

Psalm 4: Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

Psalm 5: Listen to my words, Lord, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray.

Psalm 6: Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?

Psalm 10: Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Psalm 13: How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

Everyone comes to the Bible with his or her distinct experiences of Angst which shape all that he or she reads and hears.

Therefore, we have to be careful about how our experiences of the varieties of Angst and our interpretations of Angst influence what we see and find in the Bible. One of the reasons why Christians in different eras have thought they read slightly different messages in the Bible is that they have come to the Bible with different expectations. These different expectations are shaped by different experiences of Angst and different interpretations of our Ängste. I believe that the Bible contains an objective message which reflects God's intentions, but there is an inevitable subjective element in the application of the Bible because of the wide range of expectations and Ängste that we bring to the Bible. The solution, which brings us closer to God's intentions, is to read the Bible very carefully, attempting to allow the Bible to reformat our own spiritual needs. And it is very helpful for us to learn how Christians living in other times and places read and understand the biblical message; when others understand and apply the Bible in light of expectations different from our own, we often see the weaknesses in the expectations we have brought to the Bible.

Just as we inevitably read the Bible in light of our own experience of Angst, we should also attempt to "read" or interpret our neighbors' experience of Angst in light of the biblical message.

This is part of the work which students of missions call "contextualizing" the gospel or which we can call missionary philosophy.

During the process of coming to faith in Christ (as well as during the whole Christian life), the Holy Spirit makes use of the internal correlations between human Ängste and the biblical message both to apply the gospel to our needs and to confirm the truthfulness of the biblical message to our consciousness. Most of the many millions of Christians in the last 2,000 years did not have access to sophisticated books that used the theoretical methods of their eras to "prove" the truth of the gospel according to the cultural standards and definitions of truth used in those many eras.²

Yet many millions have known with confidence that the gospel is true. The truth and importance of the gospel have been recognized by normal believers through the centuries because the Holy Spirit gives the direct intuition that the Voice which speaks of redemption, forgiveness, and peace with God in Jesus (special revelation) is the same Voice which echoes through the entire universe (general revelation) that people are "worthy of death." (Romans 1:32) Therefore, we should consider the profound way in which the biblical message both explains Angst (arising from our confrontation with God's general revelation) and applies redemption to the deepest human needs.¹⁰ Much of the certainty of faith arises from this correlation.

Note for students of theology and humanities: In this and following sections, I am using what theologians call a “method of correlation,” which means correlating (or connecting at the deepest level) the *Ängste*, questions, and needs found in human existence with the answers and solutions found in the biblical revelation, assuming there is variety in how different people and cultures experience and interpret those needs and questions.

This correlation exists and can be discussed because God is the author of both general revelation (including the moral law), which brings awareness of *Ängste* and questions, and special revelation (centered in the gospel), which brings solutions and answers. In the twentieth century the term “method of correlation” was heavily used by Paul Tillich, who is not usually seen as a role model for evangelicals, but the method itself is much older and was clearly used already by Martin Luther (1483–1546), the key founder of the Reformation movement. (See Wayne G. Johnson, *Theological Method in Luther and Tillich: Law, Gospel, and Correlation*, University Press of America, 1983.)

What we call a method of correlation today is only a development in terminology from the relationship between law and gospel, which has been central for evangelical theology and ethics since Luther’s time.

The way I am using the method of correlation is heavily influenced by Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986), who emphasized that it is the job of Chris-

tian theologians and pastors to articulate and clarify the questions and needs within human experience as a step toward preaching the gospel, though Thielicke did not so closely connect *Angst* with God’s general revelation. (See Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (3 vols.), Vol. 1, *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, trans. and ed. by G. W. Bromiley, Eerdmans, 1974.) One of the most popular uses of the method of correlation in Christian literature is found in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), in which the entire Christian faith is explained in answer to a most fundamental human question, “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”, where the authors clearly assume that the need for comfort represents the entirety of the range of human *Ängste* and needs, such as hope and courage. The method this catechism uses for basic Christian teaching must also be used in our entire mission work.

Correlation is one of several relations of the biblical message to human experience and cultures. Other relations include critique, construction, and contribution, each of which flows from one of the multiple uses of God’s moral law, keeping the relation between law and gospel central in our minds.

Such a multifaceted application of the Bible to cultures is a key to a proper contextualization of the Bible that does not risk a loss of Christian identity or truth claims and leads to a proper holism and spiritual balance.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. What is “philosophy?” How is philosophy different from but related to religion and theology?
2. How is Christian philosophy related to biblical statements such as “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7) and “... be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2)?
3. What is the relation between general revelation and Angst?
4. What is the relation between special revelation and Angst?
5. Can you identify a word that is better than the word Angst to describe this type of human experience?
6. What type or types of Angst are predominant in your life or in your culture? How does your individual or culturally predominant variety of Angst influence the experience of other varieties of Angst?
7. How does the Bible correlate with your Angst?
8. Can you identify a better word than the word “correlation” to describe the relation between Angst and the promises of God in the Bible?
9. How do the people who need to hear the gospel from you experience Angst? How does the Bible relate to their needs?

A. Moral Angst

When God first spoke to Adam and Eve after the Fall, our first parents were quick to justify themselves, Adam blaming Eve, while Eve blamed the serpent. Neither quickly cried out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” They attempted to cover their true guilt before God by means of assigning false guilt to each other, while also covering their shame with tree leaves. As true sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, ever since that time, we have been engaged in a similar process: A primordial awareness of ultimate guilt that deserves condemnation leads to a range of secondary symptoms of moral Angst, whether declaring ourselves just and able to do whatever is required of us, implementing a vast range of attempts to cover our shame (sometimes as silly as Adam and Eve) or assigning false guilt to each other (or even to ourselves). In his moral philosophy, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) famously argued, “You can because you ought.”¹¹ With these words he was not only representing the best of secular western thought; he was also representing sinful man, vainly attempting to suppress his awareness of real guilt that deserves condemnation before God. Movies, television shows, novels, art, and poetry are filled with the themes of duty, condemnation, guilt, shame, acceptance/rejection, and false guilt. These are central themes of moral-Angst-filled humanity; these themes fill our lives, our dreams, and our relationships.

There is a range of typical reactions of people to moral Angst:

- They try to reduce what they think God demands to a manageable minimum so they can meet the demands.
- They claim they can do whatever is required of them.
- They develop a system of self-cleansing or sacrifice, whether as a part of an organized religion or as a compulsive personal habit.
- They may deny the existence of God.
- They may deny the existence of a real moral law, which we call moral relativism.
- They deny or radically minimize their sinfulness.
- They develop an array of therapies and techniques to help them feel good about themselves or to accept themselves, a theme in many types of self-help psychology.
- They may deny the existence of a real self that deserves condemnation, seen in types of Buddhism and some western philosophy.
- They may say that all guilt is false guilt, that no true moral guilt exists.
- They may claim that shame is only related to a particular culture and not related to their ultimate moral condition.

The real solution to moral Angst begins with a prayer something like that of David: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." (Psalm 51:1) But

David knew that God's love was unfailing and that his transgressions could be blotted out only because he knew God's historical revelation to Israel. From that source David learned that God had really forgiven real sinners, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From that source David had learned about the whole system of sacrifices of animals. The answer to David's moral Angst was communicated historically, not through God's general revelation, showing us something crucial about the relation between Angst and history. Angst is a universal human condition, shaping all of humanity, while people can generally only look for solutions from those religious options which are available in their historical situation. (Globalization allows people to have contact with a wider range of religious solutions to be found in various cultures.) This is why there is very commonly a question/answer relation between Angst and history. The real solution, which David knew partly but truly, is the gospel of Jesus Christ, of which Paul was so proud. The real solution to moral Angst is that believers "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood." (Romans 3:23, 24)

Without this solution, non-Christian religions, worldviews, and philosophies strongly tend to preach works righteousness and self-salvation, though some promote faith in a Christ substitute. Salvation by God's grace in Christ is the only real solution to moral Angst;

at the same time, it directly contradicts many natural ideas of our sinful hearts which are inappropriate responses to moral Angst. The Bible preaches salvation by grace alone, while our sinful hearts, knowing in a repressed manner that we are worthy of condemnation for our sins, preach some variety of salvation by means of human effort.¹² Even after we have been Christians for many years, in the moment of moral Angst, the sinful nature sometimes whispers in our ears, "You do not really need God's forgiveness and grace. You can do all he demands." This whisper, if we believe it, either drives us to proud self-confidence or into despair.

We can grasp a significant self-contradiction in modern culture if we think of it in light of moral Angst. On the one hand, modern culture has been saying for several generations that there is no Original Sin. Whether you read a children's schoolbook, a newspaper, or a philosophical text, everyone seems to agree that human problems are in our environment or society, that there is no problem within the human heart, at the core of our being. Curiously, citizens of the western democracies are likely to agree with Karl Marx in denying the reality of Original Sin. On the other hand, Original Sin is the Christian doctrine that seems to be most easily proved empirically. It is far easier to prove the reality of Original Sin, or at least to provide significant documentation, than it is to prove the Resurrection of Jesus. To prove the Resurrection takes detailed historical work. To prove Original Sin,

at least in the sense of illustration, we only need to turn on the television, read a newspaper, or glance at an internet news service. The main way the news differs from one day to the next is who is killing whom and then claiming to be doing a good thing by killing him. Almost every page of every news report verifies the fact that moral Angst is not without reason; we are truly guilty, even while modern culture seems united in preaching the goodness of man.¹³

The explanation of this contradiction, between denying our sinfulness even though our sin is so easy to document, is that the sinful heart is constantly trying to justify itself before the accusing law coming from God's general revelation. This self-justification requires a suppression of God's general revelation. We need to understand Romans 1:32, "They know the requirement of God that those who do such things are worthy of death," in order to understand this important religious dynamic inside people and cultures. Understanding moral Angst is important for gospel proclamation, education, and pastoral care.

When we talk with our neighbors about Jesus, they may not know our Christian terminology about sin, and they may not know the biblical account of Adam and Eve, but they very commonly have the experience of moral Angst. People experience guilt, shame, and fear of condemnation, even if they claim to be atheists or adherents of another religion. And many sense that they receive better than they deserve

(awareness of God's common grace). Moral Angst is one of the first themes I notice when I watch a movie or an entertainment program on TV or listen to popular music. Some of this experience of moral Angst will be in relation to other people and to human communities, and some of this experience of moral Angst will mostly be in relation to the universe and to God. As messengers of the gospel, we should display courage and gentleness because we know why people have the experience of moral Angst (conflict with God's general revelation, the ever-continuing, divine-human wrestling match), while we also offer the only real solution, forgiveness by faith in Jesus. One of the first questions we must ask people who are considering the Christian message is why they experience guilt, shame, and the fear of rejection and condemnation; then we must ask what they think the solution is, and if the solution to Angst offered by their historical/cultural tradition is sufficient. Then the stage is set for the gospel.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Why do people experience moral Angst?
2. How are experiences such as shame and social rejection related to moral Angst?
3. What is the relation between Angst and the many historical religious and cultural traditions?
4. What role does guilt play in your life and in the lives of your neighbors?
5. How have you responded to moral Angst?
6. How are many of your neighbors responding to moral Angst?
7. What is the role of guilt in the lives of the people who need to hear the gospel from you?
8. On what basis can we distinguish true guilt from false guilt?
9. Why do people try to cleanse themselves from guilt and shame?
10. How do people try to cleanse themselves from guilt and shame?

B. Existential Angst

Not everyone dares to agree with Albert Camus, but thoughts and feelings similar to his plague the minds of many: "There is but one serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."¹⁴

Against Camus, some people have argued that the question of the meaning or purpose of life is itself a meaningless question, not worthy of serious consideration or discussion; others maintain that there are only meanings of particular objects, events, and practices within particular cultures, so that no general meaning of life or the universe can exist.

But the representatives of both these views protest too loudly! Do the questions Camus raised cause so much anxiety that some feel compelled to close the door on the topic, to suppress the questions?

When lecturing on Camus in universities, I have always told my students that Camus did not recommend suicide; so please do not kill yourself, even if his question raises the deepest levels of Angst. At the very least, Camus recommended that people continue with life as a protest against the absurdity of a life that seems so meaningless. Obviously I think there is a better answer to the lack of meaning, an answer found in the Bible, and there are indications that Camus came to similar conclusions by the end of his life.¹⁵ As a part of training for the mission God has given us, we can begin to talk about the entire Bible as the answer to existential Angst and the loss of meaning, so that in certain contexts our whole mission as Christians can be described as a response to the emptiness of life experienced by people without the gospel. I interpret the experience of meaninglessness, existential Angst, as part of separation from God, while the question about the meaning of life is, I believe, a question that God asks through his general revelation as a means of driving us to see our need for the gospel. This merits explanation.

The great atheist philosopher of the last century, Bertrand Russell, honestly articulated the problem of meaning, if God does not exist. His words merit our meditation.

“That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental col-

locations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of human achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation be safely built.”¹⁶

In response to Russell, my teacher George Forell commented, “Here is an honest man speaking. This is what he honestly believes... . Whenever people have contemplated the human condition in ruthless honesty, they have despaired... . Because of their revolt against God, human beings are separated from the one source of meaning and eventually overwhelmed by meaninglessness.”¹⁷

Russell’s words are the reflections of a son of Adam who has not only been expelled from the Garden of Eden but also cannot find a way back; both the Garden and the Creator have disappeared from his sight, so he supposes that he himself, with all his hopes, fears, and loves, is merely a fascinating cosmic accident, even while other dimensions of his mind and soul remind him of something else. With terrible irony,

as an atheist, he can hardly describe the human race without accidentally referring back to the Garden of Eden. His despair of meaning was, I believe, an experience of separation from God which was also God's call to change his mind and embrace a real answer to meaning in life. If human beings are only "the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms," why would we even ponder the meaning of life?

The Bible provides an analysis of meaning and despair that is surprisingly similar to that of Camus and Russell; the question becomes painfully sharp in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever." (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 3)

Unavoidable facts drive the biblical philosopher to despair: the endless repetition of human life, the endless repetition of events in the natural world, and the expectation that we will both die and then be forgotten by later generations. He engages this type of Angst, painfully probing a deep wound in the human soul, even if the anxiety produced by the questions seems overwhelming. It was by costly experience that the writer of Ecclesiastes discovered that wealth, pleasure, parties, work, and accomplishments did not provide sufficient meaning; outward success could be accompanied by such deep inward emptiness that he was driven to scream-

ing on paper. Pause and think: generations of people, billions of people, have lived and died in an uncaring world that simply keeps spinning through the universe; like those who came before, we will die and be forgotten forever. At best, for those with jobs, we have the endless repetition of going to work and coming home again, day after day after day. I really understand why many people try to forget themselves by means of endless entertainment, drugs, and alcohol, avoiding the thought that it may all be empty.

As Ecclesiastes wrestles with the loss of meaning, he also discovers for us why we wrestle with the question of meaning: God "has set eternity in the hearts of men." (Ecclesiastes 3:11) The anguished cry for ultimate meaning is a part of creation and replies to God's voice echoing through the universe. It is really God who is asking us if our lives have any meaning. Therefore, to find meaning on an ultimate level, he has to find meaning in relation to God. He concludes his study of existential Angst, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty [or meaning] of man." (Ecclesiastes 12:13) But, we must carefully notice, in addition to ultimate meaning, Ecclesiastes also finds multiple secondary or penultimate meanings. These include enjoying the God-given gifts of food, drink, work (2:24–26), and marriage (9:7–9), as well as the general life of wisdom recommended throughout the book. (e.g., 9:13–11:6)

“Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 9:7–9)

In these words the author still considers the meaninglessness of life under the sun, but the bitter anguish he has expressed in earlier paragraphs is now gone. Once God is in the picture, he is no longer searching for ultimate meaning in the everyday realm of food, drink, work, and love. He is free to enjoy life, even when it seems empty for a moment, because he is beginning to find ultimate meaning in relation to God.

The relation between ultimate meaning (in relation to God) and secondary meanings (in relation to creation) provides the clue to understanding important themes in our lives (and our neighbors' lives) that seem to be on the border between the ultimate and the secondary. Think about important values such as love, justice, mercy, honesty, loyalty, and patience. A moment's reflection on our own experience will show that we feel a duty to practice these values in relation to other people; we also know that one of our deepest needs is for others around us to practice these values in relation to us; and further, we experience meaning or fulfill-

ment when we practice these values in our work, our family, our communities, and all our relationships. An atheist could say that these are simply interesting psychological observations, but as a Christian, I see God's general revelation of his moral attributes, which gives us a key to understanding meaning and the quest for meaning.

As part of his general revelation, I believe God is continually making us aware of many of his moral characteristics that should also be characteristics of human beings, created in his image.¹⁸ If a person does not believe in the God of the Bible and rejects God's general revelation, these attributes of God (and humanity) become largely separated in the human mind, so that one person or culture emphasizes love and positive regard of others, while another person or culture emphasizes loyalty to family or clan, while others emphasize justice or honesty.

And intellectually serious atheism frequently runs the risk of denying the reality of all these moral values, a tendency which we call nihilism. But once we accept our knowledge of God, we can begin to understand and experience that these attributes and values are unified in the Being of God and in the relationships among the Persons of the Trinity. These attributes should become unified in practice as we are restored in Christ into integrated humanness. And we experience meaning as we both practice and receive these moral values in all our relationships.¹⁹ A serious atheist may say, “This is all so much rubbish!

Don't you Christians create an imaginary God so that life does not feel so empty and hopeless?" But I notice that some of the most thoughtful and sensitive descriptions of existential Angst and the loss of meaning have come from the pens of convinced and serious atheists such as Camus and Russell. The loss of meaning is part of the human separation from God, and as part of his general revelation, God continues to ask people, both believers and unbelievers, "Does your life have meaning?" "Is your life totally without purpose?" Some will suppress the question; it simply causes too much Angst. But even when suppressed, this question drives people to try to fill their meaning vacuum with a God-substitute. The writer of Ecclesiastes has tried most of the normal God-substitutes and has found them lacking.

There is a valuable tradition within Christian philosophy that offers an explanation of meaning that is complementary to what I have offered without being word-for-word identical with what I have written. This view claims that God has created the world in such a manner that creation has many different aspects or dimensions which cannot be reduced to each other, so that in order to understand God's world, we should consider how each aspect or dimension of creation is both distinct from others and also serves other dimensions of creation. Some distinguish 15 or more distinct dimensions of creation, including such different facets as the mathematical, spatial, biological, logical, historical, linguistic, economic,

and legal aspects of all of life. For example, when I say, "My wife and I have been married for more than 35 years," I can quickly identify mathematical, biological, logical, historical, linguistic, economic, and legal dimensions of our marriage and of my statement about our marriage. Christian philosophers using this method of analysis often say that meaning is the interconnection of the many different dimensions of God's creation; meaning is the way in which each dimension of creation both serves the other dimensions of God's world and is dependent on the other dimensions of God's world. I agree; this is a valuable part of our response as Christians to the loss of meaning in the modern world.

When people repress their knowledge of God, they frequently treat one dimension of God's creation as if it were truly the most important, as a God-substitute. And when this happens, people do not properly experience the meaningful interconnectedness of the many dimensions of God's creation. For us to fully understand and experience the connected secondary meanings in God's world, we have to understand and experience them in gratitude to God, who provides ultimate meaning. An older but good introduction to this tradition is L. Kalsbeek. *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought*. Toronto: Wedge, 1975.

Following in the footsteps of Ecclesiastes, previous generations of Christians have sometimes explained the

whole Christian message as an answer to the question of meaning. More than 1600 years ago (about 398 A.D.), St. Augustine began his long personal testimony (*The Confessions*, in which he taught much theology and apologetics) with a prayer on the topic of meaning: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” Much of what Augustine preached and wrote was an answer to the question of the meaning of life. Centuries later the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) took a similar step to show the way in which the entire Christian faith is an answer to the question of meaning in life. The first question to be considered is, “What is the chief end of man?”, to which the answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” With this beginning, the writers then explained the central themes of our faith and ethics. We can learn to do something similar today. People are wrestling with the question of meaning because they are wrestling with God’s general revelation. The biblical message is the answer to the human quest for meaning.

To rephrase Camus, suicide and the meaning of life are fundamental philosophical questions, but they are primarily questions to be answered by Christian missions (even if the missionary is a philosopher). The biblical message responds to and correlates with existential Angst and the universal quest for meaning. All Christians, who are all missionaries, can learn to address this need, perhaps by simply saying we find our meaning and purpose in relation

to God, perhaps by quoting the Catechism. It is valuable in all our relationships and activities to raise the question of meaning and purpose, or even to ask our neighbors, friends, colleagues, and students not only, “What is the meaning of life?” but also, “Why do we ask about the meaning of life?” Without God, we may be left with words like those of Camus and Russell, asking if suicide is rational and thinking that nothing in the universe relates to our hopes, fears, and loves. The biblical message not only explains why we are searching for meaning. It also provides answers we can practice.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Why did Camus and Russell find life to be meaningless?
2. Why did Ecclesiastes find life to be meaningless?
3. In order for your life or my life to have meaning, does the entire universe need to have a meaning or direction?
4. Why might some people not want to talk about the meaning of life?
5. What is the relation between suicide and meaninglessness?
6. What is the relation between boredom and meaninglessness?
7. What is the relationship between entertainment and the search for meaning?
8. In what ways does the telling of stories and legends relate to the human need for meaning?

9. In what way does meaning contribute to courage and joy?
10. How do personal relationships relate to our need for meaning?
11. How does knowing God influence the meaning of daily work and relationships?
12. How are our neighbors wrestling with meaninglessness? How does the Christian message answer their need?

C. *Ontological Angst*

On the morning I sat down to write about ontological Angst, I read an article in the news about a scientist, Dmitry Itskov, who plans to develop within only a couple decades a computerized robot into which you can transplant your brain, so that you can go on living when your body is worn out. And only another decade later, he predicts, he will be able to transplant your memory into the robot, without your brain, so “you” can go on living without your body or your brain, so that “you” can live forever.²⁰ He is promising eternal life for the super wealthy, and I will not be surprised if some people believe his promises. Obviously I placed the word “you” in quotations because I would like to think there is more to “me” than my memories; I regard my body and my brain as part of “me,” too.

I then turned to wikiHow and learned “How to Overcome Fear of Death,” which offered nine steps contributed by various people.²¹ There is

now an online “how to” manual for learning how to die properly, meaning how to die without fear! (They, too, have observed that the mortality rate for the human race still seems to be very close to 100%, regardless of medical and technical advances.) These authors were not specifically writing for Christian readers, and it seems that they represented different religions and philosophies of life, yet they included an imprecise quotation of Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:34: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” They perceived the way in which fear of death is not far removed from fear of life. Ontological Angst includes both the fear of death and also the fear of life, meaning worry about our fate in the future; ontological Angst is a deep, sometimes overwhelming concern about what will happen to me (or to us) and whether or not I (or we) will be able to respond appropriately, both in time and in eternity.

We know that our entire being is threatened, ultimately by death (both of ourselves and our loved ones), and that we are threatened secondarily by all that will happen to us and to all that we value. Our fate in this life is always uncertain; realism on this topic is contained in traditional marriage vows in which a man and woman commit to each other “for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,” recognizing the uncertainties we all face. It is easy to be afraid of both death and of life, sometimes to

the extent that death seems less threatening than life. Obviously this Angst is interconnected with moral Angst, since guilt and shame often enter into our concerns about fate and death; and obviously ontological Angst is interactively related to existential Angst, since fate and death threaten our many particular meanings while existential Angst can lead to contemplating suicide. But ontological Angst must be distinguished from the moral and existential realms of experience as a distinct type of human experience with wide-ranging consequences. Merely the act of writing about the topic sends a shiver through my soul, so that I feel again how uncertain the future is, not only for myself but also for all those I love. Will the future mean illness, pain, poverty, and loneliness?

In the murky depths of human consciousness, regardless of a person's religion or culture, I hear echoes of God's word to Adam in Eden about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "... when you eat of it, you will surely die." (Genesis 2:17) Death and separation from God are easily and naturally intertwined in the minds of humanity, even for people without the biblical message. After Eden, Adam and Eve died immediately, but they also did not die immediately. Their social/physical life continued, enabled by God's common grace, but their separation from God meant that the God-given goodness of life was always penetrated by the shadow of death, so that alienation, guilt, uncertainty, and meaninglessness

influence all of life. This shadow of death penetrating into all of life is ontological Angst.

Jesus addressed this problem when he prayed about his followers, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3) Real life means having a positive and accepted knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, knowing I am accepted by God. Merely having my memories continue to function within a computer or robot might be more like hell than eternal life. Would I really want to continue for centuries as a memory within a machine, facing eternal guilt, shame, and meaninglessness, while also fearing that someone might turn off the computer? It is not a sufficient response to ontological Angst, though it illustrates how this type of Angst drives so much of human activity.

The ultimate solutions which people seek for ontological Angst always include an element of naked faith, by which I mean faith that is not extensively based on reason or evidence. When I have stood by the grave of a loved one, both grieving the loss and pondering eternity, my mind has raced through the many reasons I have studied about why people believe the Christian message to be true. In seconds I review the arguments for the existence of God, the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus, and the evidences for the historical truthfulness of the Bible. And every time I have been in that situation, I have come to the same conclusion.

The many arguments and evidences are extremely reassuring to know, a real treasure, but Christian arguments and evidences do not reach all the way to the promises which we need when we face ontological Angst. A proof of the existence of God or of the resurrection of Jesus does not also prove the promise of Jesus, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (John 14:2-3) My faith feels naked when I believe these words of Jesus as well as the famous words of the apostle Paul when he writes, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21).

In contrast to such naked faith in God's promises, many of our other Christian convictions are matters of both faith and reason in which faith does not stand naked before God. The proper use of reason leads us to affirm that murder, theft, lying, and adultery are wrong, though these are also matters of faith for all who have read and believed God's Ten Commandments. Thoughtful people often know something about both human dignity and human sinfulness on the basis of reason before they read about these themes in the Bible, though without the biblical narrative they lack a sufficient explanation of what they observe and experience about human nature.²² A similar joining of faith and reason, so that

many of our Christian beliefs are matters of both faith and reason, is true for the many themes addressed by Christian evidences and arguments.

But at the point of our deepest need, ultimate ontological Angst, fear of death, separation, and eternity, we are left with naked faith. We feel the echo of a central theme of God's general revelation echoing through the universe and our entire experience, that "those who do such things are worthy of death." (Romans 1:32) And this drives many of us, much of the human race, to a condition we might call religious panic, panic that might last a moment or might last a lifetime.

Religious panic driven by ultimate ontological Angst not only leads people to believe almost any and every promise, theory, or claim that seems to address this need. (I am thinking here of the way in which people who may claim to be atheists or materialists, then also believe in spirits, reincarnation, or a personal afterlife reconciled with friends and family.) This type of Angst also lies just below the surface of many of the very worst things that people do, both individually and collectively. Religiously or ideologically motivated violence (and will to power) commonly includes the motive of people trying to gain certainty of eternal life or paradise (or certainty about anything in the future) by means of some extreme or violent act in this life, perhaps by means of suicide or martyrdom. This is ideological extremism or religious fanaticism. Though the general revela-

tion of God's moral law should make it possible for humans to live together in a civilized manner, the Angst produced by our encounter with that generally revealed moral law can also drive us to the worst crimes against humanity.

In my personal experience I find the solution to moments of religious panic by noticing the way in which God has demonstrated his covenant faithfulness for many generations and the way in which both the central events of the gospel and the application of the gospel in our lives are designed to emphasize God's faithfulness to his promises. At least since the time of Abraham, God has unfolded a series of promises which progressively build on what God has done in previous generations. For example, Joseph (Genesis chapters 37–45) could know how God had kept his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many generations later, King David knew how God kept his promises to his people for many centuries after Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, are organic parts of the unfolding and fulfillment of God's covenant faithfulness over many centuries after the time of David. Now the celebration of the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion or Eucharist) in our churches is God's direct confirmation of this covenant with me (and, of course, with all believers), to which the Holy Spirit provides internal confirmation by replying inside "Father!" And after worship, in a moment of theological reflection, I notice the wonderful

way in which God's provision correlates with our deepest *Ängste*. And I can sing, with the apostle Paul, "Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55; Paul was referencing Hosea 13:14.)

But we must not forget the importance of secondary ontological Angst, our worry about what will happen to us and to ours in our earthly future. Without this type of Angst, many of our learned people would be without a job. Why is there work for futurologists and horoscope writers, business analysts and tarot card readers, sociologists and psychics, if not for our worry about life in the future? Of course, our Christian faith addresses this need in the doctrine of the providence of God.

There have been one-sided interpretations of what believers should expect in this life, mistakenly applying promises we should receive in eternity to our earthly future. Promises of total ease and happiness in this life, along with complete health and limitless wealth, attempt to address our Angst in an artificial manner, ignoring one of the promises of Jesus many do not like, "In this world you will have trouble." (John 16:33) A balanced understanding of God's providence is found in an old Protestant text, the Heidelberg Catechism. We are told that God's providence is the way in which he upholds and rules heaven and earth in such a way that "leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything

else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”²³ Such an approach to our earthly future, filled with confidence that nothing (not even unfruitful years, sickness, or poverty) can separate us from the Father’s hand, can give us courage to live and to attempt to find practical solutions to daily problems.

Our neighbors, to whom we are bringing the gospel of Christ, are all wrestling with ontological Angst, which is part of our awareness of our fallen situation. This Angst, as well as the other varieties of Angst, is a human reaction to God’s general revelation with its multifaceted content. Many Christians are already comfortable talking about these themes in our prayers, in our Bible studies, and in sermons. We can become comfortable talking about these themes with people who are not yet believers, knowing that the gospel and the entire biblical message is God’s response to these deepest human needs. When we talk about Christ, we sometimes have the fear that we are talking about something that is irrelevant and does not interest normal people. Once we understand that everyone around us is struggling with Angst because everyone is wrestling with God’s general revelation, we see and feel the relevance and importance of God’s special revelation in Christ. Angst is not a psychiatric illness; it is the human condition to which God has responded with the biblical message. This makes the gospel and the rest of the promises of God suddenly seem to be the most important matters in life, equipping us to talk with our neighbors.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Why are some people afraid of death?
2. What role does the fear of death play in life?
3. How is the fear of death related to other varieties of Angst?
4. What role does fear of the future (secondary ontological Angst) play in the life of your society? In the lives of your neighbors? In your life?
5. What is “naked faith?” How is it different from a combination of faith and reason?
6. What is “religious panic?” What roles might it play in the lives of individuals and societies?
7. How do you respond to religious panic?
8. What steps do people normally take to respond to fear of the future? How does an authentic faith influence such normal steps regarding fear of the future?
9. How do the promises of God in the Bible relate to ontological Angst?
10. How can we best talk about God’s promises in relation to the ontological Angst of our neighbors who need those promises?

Annotation

Anmerkungen

¹Copyright 2013 Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D. This text is the third in a series of connected chapters excerpted from a forthcoming book and builds on the themes in the previous text. Permission is hereby given to download, print, send, and copy this text for individual, educational or church use, provided the entire text is used.

²If we use these definitions, some parts of the Bible, such as the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, contain as much philosophy as theology, showing that the definitions of our terms “theology” and “philosophy” are not extremely precise and that the relation between the two types of study must always remain open.

³This term has been widely used in European thought, probably first being used in a manner similar to our use in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). He spelled it *angest* in the Danish language. Though this term is somewhat new, probably less than 200 years old, the experience is as old as humanity.

⁴As a German immigrant to the US, Tillich (1886–1965) seemed to sometimes think in German while writing in English. For sake of clarity, I am translating his English word “anxiety” back into the German word “Angst.” My use of his analysis of anxiety is neither an endorsement of all his opinions nor a recommendation of him as a personal role model. Tillich summarized his analysis of anxiety in *The Courage to Be*. Yale University Press, 1952.

⁵The distinction between guilt and shame has been more sharply clarified by sociologists and anthropologists since the time of Tillich. A good study on the topic is Thomas Schirrmacher. *Culture of Guilt/Culture of Shame*. forthcoming. Bonn: VKW.

⁶John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xi.8. John T. McNeill (Ed.). Trans. by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia, 1960. This version was translated from Calvin’s 1559 Latin edition.

⁷Paul Tillich. *Theology of Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1959. p. 42. There is probably a bit of conscious exaggeration in this slogan,

since some commonalities among all cultures flow from our common humanity, created in the image of God.

⁸Some of the most central continuing themes of the Christian life are encapsulated in the title of the hymn “Trust and Obey,” written by John H. Sammis in 1887. In light of ever-new situations (which easily cause *Angst*), we must trust God’s promises and obey his commands. Both trust and obedience are new every day.

⁹God’s definition of truth, which is the only truly objective definition of truth, is without doubt, different from the definitions of truth found in some of our cultures.

¹⁰What I am recommending should not be confused with what is sometimes called “felt-needs preaching.” The “needs” that people feel may be desires that are sinful (e.g., “I need heroin.”) or the result of false religious assumptions (e.g., “I need wealth to be happy.”), and people do not always feel their real *Angst*, since awareness of *Angst* may be repressed. Talking about the varieties of *Angst* can unrepress a person’s awareness of his real situation, so that he begins to feel needs that were previously repressed from consciousness. The entire Bible is God’s response to human spiritual needs, though people do not always feel those needs.

¹¹This is one of the ethical principles that Kant argued in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (originally published in 1797 in German as *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*). It is sometimes rephrased “Ought implies can,” and is taken as representative of important themes in the European Enlightenment. To be fair to Kant, we must mention that he also talked about “Radical Evil,” a theme which others forget.

¹²Salvation by human effort is sometimes the effort of an individual and sometimes the effort of a collective. I see Communism as an example of an attempt to earn salvation by means of the efforts of a collective, the proletariat.

¹³No parent has ever had to teach children how to do bad things.

¹⁴These are the opening lines of “The Myth of Sisyphus,” one of Albert Camus’s classic essays.

¹⁵Some of Camus’s personal story is told by Howard Mumma. Albert Camus and the Minister. Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2000.

¹⁶Bertrand Russell. Selected Papers of Bertrand Russell. New York: Random House, 1927. pp. 2, 3, as quoted by George W. Forell. The Protestant Faith. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975. pp. 145, 146.

¹⁷Forell. Ibid. p. 146.

¹⁸In the language of academic theology, this topic is sometimes discussed under the heading of “the communicable attributes of God.”

¹⁹In another study of this topic, I have suggested that we Christians experience real meaning before God by means of the transition back and forth between work and worship. See my Sabbath, Work, and the Quest for Meaning. MBS Texte 162 (2011). Available online at URL: <http://www.bucer.org/resources/details/mbs-texte-162-2011-sabbath-work-and-the-quest-for-meaning.html>

²⁰Mike Wehner. “If you live until 2045, you may never have to fear death.” In: Today in Tech. August 1, 2012. A caption under a graphic stated, “If you have enough cash, a Russian man may be able to help you live forever.” Salvation is now something to purchase, not something to either earn with great moral effort or to receive as a gift from God.

²¹August 3, 2012. URL: <http://www.wikihow.com/Overcome-Fear-of-Death>

²²The moral content of what God communicates to us by general revelation can, in principle, be known by moral reason, whereas the gospel is only known by faith.

²³Heidelberg Catechism. Answer 27. This classic text was written by two young pastors, Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, published in German in 1563. This quotation is from the 1962 English translation by Allen Miller and Eugene Osterhaven.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (Magna Cum Laude) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (Cum Laude) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since 1994 he has served the International Institute for Christian Studies and is now IICS Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy. He was a visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 1/2 years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). He is also Academic Council for the International Institute for Religious Freedom. His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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