

## THE EXISTENTIAL ATTITUDE OF A (NON)BELIEVER

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### ABSTRACT

Western Christian tradition, from the early Church Fathers (St. Augustine) to the great medieval theologians (Thomas Aquinas), constantly speaks of the fundamental difference between two forms of faith: "believing in God" and "believing God." In our day, this relationship reveals the specific attitude of the believer towards God: "to believe in God (Christ) means to acknowledge the fact that God exists; [...] to believe in God (Christ) means to surrender oneself completely to God, to become one with Christ, to become a member of his mystical Body, to accept the Christian faith in its fullest sense. Such faith is not merely an act of the mind. Still, it also requires the involvement of the will, the whole person's devotion to God." By believing in God (*credere Deum*), a person only theoretically acknowledges that God exists. However, by believing in God (*credere in Deum*), he professes Him with his whole life.

"Believing in God" as a theoretical aspect of faith and "believing in God" as a practical aspect of faith can also be distinguished in the case of unbelief. A person who considers himself an unbeliever may, on the one hand, deny God with scientific or philosophical arguments, i.e., decide the question of (un)belief on the level of knowledge, but live as if God existed. On the other hand, a person may theoretically acknowledge God but deny Him in their own life, i.e. resolve the question of (un)belief on the level of life.

Objectively, reality is the same for both believers and non-believers. However, subjectively, believers and non-believers experience their relationship with the world differently. This divides the same reality into different worlds – the world of meaning and the world of absurdity. By saying their *fiat* with believing love, Christians accept the world as a gift. Meanwhile, non-believers do not accept the world as a gift. The world remains foreign to them, just as they remain foreign to the world.

The purpose of this article is to discuss how people living in Western culture seek to give meaning to their existence.

**Keywords:** *Faith in God, Credere in Deum, Theoretical and practical aspects of faith, World of meaning and absurdity, Western Christian tradition*

### 1. THE EXISTENTIAL ASPECTS OF "BELIEVING IN GOD" AND "BELIEVING IN GOD"

People give meaning to their earthly existence in various ways – in one way in Buddhist culture, in another in Islamic culture, and in yet another in Christian culture. One or another religious system, with its characteristic ethical and metaphysical structure, is the common foundation on which a person builds their individual project of existence. So, although this is not always the case, it can be said that people living in Western culture give meaning to their existence, or at least should, in a way that is essentially characteristic of this culture, i.e., from the perspective of the Christian faith. However, what constitutes the ethical metaphysical basis of this Christian perspective? Moreover, what does it mean to give meaning to existence through faith? Western Christian tradition sees a fundamental difference between two forms of faith: "believing God" (*credere Deum*) and "believing in God" (*credere in Deum*). These two forms of faith correspond to two different existential attitudes towards faith:

"Believing in God (Christ) means acknowledging the fact that God exists; believing in God (Christ) means turning to God with one's whole being, becoming a member of the mystical Body of Christ, and fully accepting the Christian faith. Such faith is not merely an act of the mind, but it also requires the involvement of the will, the whole person's devotion to God. By believing in God (*credere Deum*), a person merely acknowledges God's existence in theory. However, by believing in God (*credere in Deum*), he professes Him with his whole life. According to Thomas Merton, "a person may have heard a great deal about God and, agreeing with what they have heard, consider themselves a person of faith. Such believers are likely to be recorded in sociological surveys. However, who and how will count those who have fallen silent to listen in silence to the secret vibrations of the heart, which teach us to trust unconditionally in the invisible God, who revives the fleeting time of earthly existence with generous gifts" (*Life and Holiness*, p. 97). From the earliest centuries, Western Christian tradition has regarded this secret vibration of the heart, which hears the Word of God and devotes its whole life to Him, as the fundamental form of "faith in God" (*credere in Deum*). Following Thomas Merton, the secret vibration of the heart that is essential to this form of faith can be called "primordial intuition," in which, in believing in God, a person relies on a primal, deeper sense of the mystery of Pure and Absolute Being, the foundation of human existence. This is not a matter of knowledge about Absolute Being, but of its immediate experience.

The distinctive aspects of "faith" ("believing in God" and "believing in God") do not cover the entire theological meaning of this word. The theological meaning of this word can be discussed at length. Nevertheless, here we are concerned not with theoretical but with practical matters, i.e. the conditions for the possibility of realising faith in God as a certain project of existence, or more precisely, the presuppositions for this realisation, which lie not in the deductions of logical reason but in the secret stirrings of the heart. Interestingly, these heart vibrations can be found not only in the existential attitude of a believer but also in that of a non-believer. Thus, this problem can also be approached from the opposite side, i.e. through the position of non-belief in God, which is revealed in the literary works of 20th-century French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) (Sartre in his novels *Nausea* (1938) *Words* (1964), Camus in *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), etc.). They described the attitude of disbelief and the greater or lesser desolation of the human heart that this attitude revealed. These thinkers expressed not only the mood of despair that pervaded French thought at the time, but also European thought as a whole, linking their own ontological existentialism with phenomenological philosophy. As is well known, this philosophy rejects theoretical speculation and undertakes a meditative description of the immediate connection between consciousness and existential reality. Sartre and Camus do this persuasively in their literary works, including the question of the possibility of belief and disbelief across the range of topics they address. So, based on the insights of these thinkers, we may ask: what are the premises of unbelief? Or, in the words of Juozas Girnius, "how does a person without God perceive themselves in the world"? This question is concerned not only with the position of unbelief, but also because the unbeliever "in a way testifies to God even when he denies him" (*Žmogus be Dievo*, p. 27).

The previously discussed distinction between "believing in God" as theoretical and "believing in God" as practical can also be applied to the position of unbelief. A person who considers himself an unbeliever may, on the one hand, deny God with scientific or philosophical arguments, i.e., decide the question of (un)belief on the level of knowledge, but live as if God existed. On the other hand, a person may

theoretically acknowledge God but deny Him in their own life, thereby revealing the question of (un)belief in the realm of life. Unlike in modern times, with their emphasis on rationalism, as Girnius observes, today the question of belief and unbelief "manifests itself not in the form of a conflict between belief and knowledge, but between belief and life. Today's unbelief is no longer expressed in the theoretical denial of God through logical arguments, but in the practical denial of God in life itself, in the factual confirmation of life without God" (p. 548). The characters in Sartre's and Camus' novels (almost all of whom are intellectuals) convincingly testify to what it means to deny God in life itself and to exclude Christianity from life effectively.

Be that as it may, in the case of Sartre, who developed a humanistic worldview, we see something interesting. Sartre's *Nausea* can be called the antithesis of the Christian worldview, but one that could only have arisen in Western Christian culture. On the one hand, the author of the novel arbitrarily undermines the ethical and metaphysical principles of the Christian worldview; on the other hand, in doing so, he inevitably reveals what a humanistic worldview becomes when the Christian perspective is removed. Sartre describes this ambiguous and, to him, obvious situation in his autobiographical novel *Words*: "I grew up like a weed in the soil of Catholicism, my roots sucking its juices, which flowed through my veins. Because of this, I suffered for thirty years, seeing nothing. In *Nausea*, I described – and, believe me, very sincerely – the unjustifiable, miserable lives of people like me, as if I myself had nothing to do with it. I was Rokanten, through whom I showed the fabric of my life without any concessions. At the same time, I was myself, the chosen one, the chronicler of hell, a glass and steel photomicroscope examining my own protoplasmic fluid" (*Words*, p. 266). It is unlikely that today's non-believer would describe his life as miserable or unjustifiable, let alone as Sartre described his own: "I grew up like a weed in the soil of Catholicism." At the time when *Nausea* was written (in the fourth decade of the last century), Sartre testified that non-believers were viewed as "rebels" or "arrogant originals."

Meanwhile, the existential project of faith seemed natural and self-evident. Sartre writes about the unnaturalness of unbelief in "Words": "I was taught the Holy Scriptures, the Gospels, the catechism, but I was not allowed to believe: there was disorder, which became my own special order" (p. 263). According to Sartre, the attitude of unbelief is an inner disorder that the person himself accepts and lives as a special order. In other words, a person who does not believe lives in a special inner disorder, which he considers to be a real order. Today, this special inner disorder of unbelief is considered a self-evident and indisputable norm of life. On the contrary, those who seek God are often viewed as originals or misfits who do not fit into the framework of life.

Although there have always been people for whom God meant little or nothing (in the Bible we read about the godless cities of Sodom and Gomorrah being turned to ashes (2 Peter 2:6), about the flood sent upon the godless world, from which only Noah, the herald of truth, was saved (Genesis 6:1-22), it is only in our time that unbelief has become a mass phenomenon. We live in a Christian Western culture, but most people today, consciously or unconsciously, no longer identify themselves with the Christian tradition. In this age of sensualism, scientism, pragmatism, liberalism, etc., Christian values no longer play a decisive role in personal, social, political or cultural life. These areas of life have become clearly secularised. This is a phenomenon Girnius describes as the increasingly widespread "de-Christianisation". According to the philosopher, the roots of this phenomenon should be sought not in external factors,

but in people's hearts, i.e. in their inner distancing from Christianity. It is precisely this inner distance – a certain disorder of the heart – that determines the forms of both personal and public life in various ways. Let us explore what this inner distance from Christianity means.

Merton's term "primary intuition" is the first thing to discuss. Primary intuition, as indicated by the etymology of the word, would mean the act of insight that is essentially characteristic of a person (cf. Latin *intuitio* - to look carefully, to look with the eyes of the soul). A believer strives to look carefully, with the eyes of the soul, at that which is not clearly visible. Meanwhile, a non-believer does not perform this action, and therefore exists differently from a believer. This difference can be explained by Viktor Frankl's image of a "theatre stage". Frankl says: "If you have ever stood on a stage, you should remember how, blinded by the spotlight, you saw a large black hole instead of the audience. Nevertheless, at that moment, you probably did not doubt that there were spectators in that big black hole". A person of faith sees something, or more precisely, someone, in that big black hole in front of them. What they see, in Heideggerian terms, can be described as "Nothingness". In the Heideggerian sense, "Nothingness" means: *Nothingness is no-thing-ness* ("Nothingness" = non-existence as a thing) [1]. This Nothingness is the Pure and Absolute Being mentioned earlier by Merton. In other words, God, who is not a Thing among other things. A person of unbelief would differ from a person of faith, described by this image of a "theatre stage," in that, standing on the stage, he would see only a "big black hole." He does not imagine that in that hole there is what, guided by his primary intuition, a person seeking God imagines there to be – an immaterial (Absolute and Pure) being hidden beyond material reality, or, in other words, a hidden, invisible God (*Deus absconditus*). It is therefore not surprising that a person who does not believe projects his own existence solely onto the plane of material existence. However, this plane is not the only plane of existence.

On the other hand, did not the existentialism of Sartre and even Camus emerge as a philosophical movement that sought ways out of the materiality that leads to the oblivion of being? By calling for us not to limit ourselves to material existence, do these thinkers not lead us to a non-material existence that was previously associated with the divine sphere?

## 2. (NOT) TO BE FROM THE WORLD

When reading the novels of Sartre and Camus, one discovers the authors' efforts to convey a sense of hostility towards the world to readers. This is not surprising: not only atheistic but also theistic 20th-century existentialism emerged as a protest against consumerist culture and Western modernism, which was sinking into alienation. Here, people began to protest against a world which, in Camus' words, had been invaded by "the masses that had become powerful", a world with its "consumer society", "uncontrollable technology" and "dead ideologies"; a world which, in Sartre's words, had entered a new age devoid of traditions and values. It was no coincidence that Camus called his work "rebellious literature" during one of his lectures. In his words, it is literature that, although it seems angry and frenzied, is neither a complete rejection nor a complete acceptance of what is happening in the world – rather, it is a painful struggle against the destructive course of demoralised history (*Krytis*, pp. 9-24).

If we return to the existential project of faith, we could say that a person seeking God lives in a kind of dialectical tension between hostility towards the world and engagement with it. According to Girnius, the Christian relationship with the world,

with world history and culture, is characterised by one truth: *to be in the world but not of the world*, i.e. not to be lost in the cares of everyday life, but to preserve one's spiritual freedom in them (p. 521). The attitude of faith, described as not being of the world, is not negativism. Man does not deny the world because, as the Gospel of John proclaims, the world is what God so loved that he gave his only Son (Jn 3:16). The path of faith is not a path of escape from the world. It is a path through this world. However, it is a narrow path that leads through the narrow gates of being not of this world. In Scripture, we read that Christ's followers should not follow this world but, with a renewed spirit, seek God's will and do it (Rom 12:2). Faith is victory over this world (1 Jn 5:4). So, how does faith overcome this world?

The New Testament proclaims that, on an ethical level, being not of the world means renouncing the worldly outlook, i.e., the inert habits of action, thought, and evaluation that usually guide human society. In explaining what this renunciation means, Merton, like the early Christian thinker Origen, draws our attention to two forms of faith (non-religious and religious). The first (non-religious) faith is "human, limited, external belief in human society with all its inert heritage of superstitions and assumptions, a belief based on the fear of loneliness and the need to "belong" to a group and passively accept its norms, reluctantly agreeing. The other is belief in what we "cannot see," in a transcendent and invisible God, transcending all evidence, requiring an inner revolution, a reorientation of one's existence in the opposite direction to that held by the superstitions of the world. Such faith is a complete recognition of God's existence [...] as the meaning and centre of all being, and especially of our own lives" (p. 97). The first form of faith mentioned here, i.e. external faith in the inert superstitions of society, is what Sartre rejects, offering his own project of human existence without God. However, unlike the person who seeks God, Sartre's person creates his own existence by rejecting the second (religious) form of faith, i.e. by not performing the inner reorientation towards God as the centre of all life. In the words of the Bible, such a person, although not of the world, is not in the world.

The limited external faith mentioned by Merton, i.e., being guided by the world's perspective and inert habits of thinking and evaluation, is what Edmund Husserl attributes to the "natural attitude of consciousness" in his phenomenology. This is the attitude with which a person immersed in banal everyday life — Heidegger's *das Man* — lives, unaware that such a life, in Martin Heidegger's words, is nothing more than "the oblivion of being." It was precisely the establishment of this "natural attitude of consciousness" that Husserl used to explain the process of alienation taking place in contemporary Western culture. He saw a way out of this process in a certain transformation of the meaningful orientation of consciousness. Husserl associated this transformation, in Spiegelberg's words, with an ascetic ideal, i.e., the phenomenological reduction, which means the rejection of all meanings that have lost their obviousness, as well as of all supposedly obvious truths. Only by "purifying" his individual consciousness in this way can man restore the lost meaning of authentic being to the world and to his own human existence. The works of Sartre and Camus depict precisely what happens when an unbeliever attempts to restore the authentic meaning of his existence through this ascetic method of phenomenological reduction (*The Philosophy of Existence: History and Present*, p. 74).

It is no coincidence that Sartre's *Nausea* is full of scenes depicting the rejection of a society of believers and its inert superstitions. One of them is Roquentin's visit to the Bouville Museum. Here hung paintings of the entire elite of the town — flawless men and women who had lived happy lives, earned respect and, ultimately, were immortalised in portraits. In life, they adhered to generally accepted views and were

guided by the wisdom of making as little noise as possible, living modestly and not standing out from the crowd. Standing in the middle of the hall, the centre of serious gazes, Roquentin began to wonder about his own existence – perhaps he himself was just an illusion? This irony, mixed with Roquentin's surprise, hid an inner rebellion against the banal wisdom of universal views. The plot of Camus's novel *The Stranger* also features scenes of rejection by a society with rigid, external beliefs. The protagonist of the novel, a simple company employee named Meursault, is sentenced to death not only for accidental murder, but also for a whole series of seemingly insignificant violations of social norms (for example, drinking a cup of coffee, smoking a cigarette, and dozing off at his mother's coffin). At the moment of his death sentence, Meursault remains indifferent to everything - having defied social standards, he has lived his independent life. However, when reading Sartre's *Nausea* or Camus' *The Stranger*, the question arises: did Meursault and Roquentin really become authentic people by rejecting routine externalities? Was their individual consciousness truly phenomenologically (ascetically) purified so that their existence could regain its lost authentic meaning? The characters in the novels testify to something else: they remain essentially alien to others, to the world and to their own human essence.

On the other hand, as the Bible says, a person seeking God "is a stranger and a sojourner among you" (PR 23:4). But does being a stranger or a sojourner mean the same thing in the existential project of faith and unbelief? If we recall Merton's second form of faith—the reorientation of existence toward God as the centre of all life—then we could say that a person seeking God is a stranger to the world in which the centre of life is usually considered to be the natural consciousness with its false "I." By overcoming the natural attitude of consciousness with its false "I", a person of faith turns to God as the centre of meaning in his life. Thus, he becomes close to the reality of the world in which one lives with God.

The tension between reality without God and with God is evident in Camus' novel *The Plague*. Before our eyes unfolds the symbolic city of Oran, the site of the plague that began there. The people here, although they were engaged in trade, prepared for journeys or enjoyed pleasures, lived in boredom. Moreover, they had only occasional premonitions that something else was there. However, life did not change because of this — it remained as dull as the city, lulling people into a stupor. Catching them unprepared, "the plague forced the inhabitants of Oran to tear away the illusory veil of 'certainty' that was held in place by traditional truths, duties, and norms of behaviour [...]; disrupted people's normal activities, their understanding of the 'significance' of their daily work, and left their entire existence and being to the mercy of their own experiences" (pp. 174-175). The plague turned the individual fates of the inhabitants into a shared collective history, one of the most painful experiences of which was separation from loved ones who remained outside the city walls and separation from the usual interests of everyday life. However, it was precisely this separation that temporarily freed them from the alienation from themselves and the world in which they had lived until then. Unlike Meursault, the hero of *The Stranger*, the heroes of *The Plague* (Dr Rieux, journalist Rambert, etc.) overcame their alienation not by indifferently distancing themselves from the situation, but by engaging with the course of history and seeking effective salvation from evil within it.

From a religious perspective, Camus's "*The Plague*" is an important moment. The inhabitants of Oran, shaken by the plague, sank deeper and deeper into indifference and apathy, and began to long for their lost homeland, i.e. the banal everyday life from which the plague had torn them away and to which they returned after the plague had passed. This lost homeland was not the promised land to which, like the

Israelites travelling through the desert from Egyptian slavery, a person seeking God journeys. The inhabitants of Oran did not experience that inner reorientation of existence towards God as the centre of all life, which Merton speaks of as a condition for the possibility of salvation. If the plague became an effective means sent by God himself to the Christians of Abyssinia to attain eternity, the inhabitants of Oran remained oblivious to the light of eternity. When asked why he was sacrificing himself if he did not believe in God, Dr Rieux replied: "I am in darkness, and I am trying to think clearly." To think clearly is to recognise that the fight against the plague, like the fight against any evil, is a never-ending fight, but that does not mean that one should stop fighting. This is the Sisyphean or stoic greatness of a man without God, different from the greatness of one who seeks God. The latter arises from unconditional devotion to the grace of the invisible God, even in the darkest night of history, and in belief in the future victory of good.

However, perhaps precisely because he is determined to engage with the course of history, it is difficult to place one of the most tragic heroes of Camus' *The Plague*, Dr Rieux, within the stricter framework of a man without God. Even though he sees no trace of God in the plague-stricken environment and feels abandoned by everyone, Rieux strives to do what is necessary at that moment and, perhaps without realising it, carries out God's will. In this case, we can recall the concept of "non-religious Christianity" developed by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. According to this theologian, who experienced the darkness of the concentration camps during World War II, the Christian God is not only the God of believers, but also the God of non-believers. When a non-believer conscientiously fulfils the duties imposed on him by a specific historical situation, he bears witness to Christ without even knowing it. According to Bonhoeffer, being a Christian means living a full life in this world and, despite the awareness of the hopelessness of one's situation, remaining in the whirlwind of goals, duties, successes and failures. It is then that one finds oneself in the embrace of God, who dies and rises again with man in this world that crucifies Him [2]. Be that as it may, his engagement with the historical situation, his respect for human life (here we can recall Camus' opposition to the introduction of the death penalty, which he considered to be the legalisation of murder), and the proclamation of humanistic individualism—all this prevents Camus from being considered an anti-Christian thinker like Sartre, as claimed by the aforementioned French theologian.

Sartre's *"Nausea"* hardly has any connection with the aforementioned concept of "non-religious Christianity". Rocanten's position as a man without God is quite radical here. He is a man who rejects any system of objective values, believing they level a person's life and lead directly to complete nihilism. Both nihilism and the rejection of objective values are based on Sartre's idea of absolute freedom without God. He explains this idea as follows: man stands before nothing higher than himself; even though he is limited, he is absolutely free, like God, to choose himself and to project his existence as he wishes. There is nothing that awaits the non-believer from the realm beyond. By denying God as Absolute Being, the non-believer absolutises his own conditional being and thus transforms his partial freedom into absolute freedom. The project of absolute freedom without God leaves no room for any autonomous categorical imperative that would, in one way or another, motivate human morality.

Sartre's project of absolute freedom without God leaves no room for an autonomous categorical imperative that would, in one way or another, motivate a person's moral choices. Every categorical imperative derives its imperative character only from transcendent reality, i.e., from Absolute Being. Rejecting this ontological reality leaves only immanence, which cannot confer a categorical character on any

imperative. Such a project of absolute human freedom without God is akin to the Indian rope trick Frankl mentions. The fakir performing this trick wants to convince the audience that a boy can climb onto the rope he throws up into the air. However, this is only an illusion created by the fakir, because there is no solid foundation on which the rope is attached. It is not difficult to imagine what would happen if the child actually started climbing the rope. Such is Sartre's project of absolute freedom: a person without God hopes to regain the lost possibility of authentic existence and thinks to do so by climbing the rope of absolute freedom, which is not attached to any stable foundation of values. Such "absurd freedom" provides no basis for human choices and leads to the absurdity of freedom itself.

What is more, absolute freedom creates moral chaos, as evidenced by Roquentin's actions in *La Nausée*. For example, overcome by a fit of nausea in a café, he grabs a cheese knife lying nearby, intending to stab it into the eye of a self-taught man sitting opposite him. Roquentin's decision not to do so is not determined by any categorical imperative or respect for human life and its incomparable value, but rather by random moods or nihilistic metaphysical reasoning: "Then all these people would trample me, kick my teeth out. However, that is not what stops me (it makes no difference whether it's the taste of blood or cheese in my mouth). One would have to take the initiative, provoke an unnecessary incident – after all, the self-taught man's scream, the blood that would spill down his cheek, and the flinch of those present would be unnecessary. The things that already exist are enough." Perhaps what can be said about Sartre's Roquentin can also be said about Camus's protagonist Meursault in "The Stranger", as stated by another character in the same novel, the prosecutor: he tried to look into Meursault's soul, but found nothing; this man is soulless, lacking anything human, and the moral principles that guide the human heart are alien to him; in Meursault's heart, he saw an abyss capable of destroying society. If Camus, who wrote these words at the time, was shocked by this real possibility of human emptiness without God and the moral chaos it creates, today it no longer shocks us. With the attitude of unbelief becoming self-evident, so does this emptiness. It is therefore not surprising that nowadays there is so much talk about life crises, the frustration of man's innate desire for meaning, inner emptiness, boredom or indifference, existential vacuum and other negative states (*La Nausée*, pp. 141–142).

### 3. THE DEFICIT OF MEANING

During World War I, when the meaning of life seemed to be turning into meaninglessness before our very eyes, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "To believe in God means to see that life has meaning." As we can see, meaning is not an objective given but rather depends on a person's ability to see and hear, i.e., on their "primary intuition". If we were to translate Wittgenstein's idea in the opposite direction, i.e., the language of disbelief, we could say: not believing in God means not seeing that life has meaning. Moreover, the fault here lies not in life or its meaning, but in the person's own relationship to what they are experiencing, i.e., a diminished "primary intuition" that fails to see the meaning that could be lived. Gabriel Marcel, a representative of Catholic existentialism, says: "If a person believes, there is no place in his life for absurdity or meaninglessness". Conversely, it is precisely with atheistic existentialism that the concepts of "absurdity" and "meaninglessness" have become established in Western intellectual life, and with them, an awareness of these concepts.

The relationship of a person of faith to what he experiences can be described as "metaphysical concern," i.e., a concern that, at the deepest depths of the soul, resolves

the mystery of life's ultimate meaning. The consciousness of a non-believer is a consciousness free from "metaphysical concern". Therefore, it is frivolous and superficial. This is confirmed by Roquentin, the hero of Sartre's *Nausea*: "I have never felt so strongly that I have no secret depths of the soul, that I am limited to my body, to the superficial thoughts that rise from it like bubbles" (*Nausea*, p. 45). If a person of faith, guided by "primordial intuition," listens in silence to God speaking in the depths of the soul, a person of unbelief limits himself to thoughts bubbling on the surface of consciousness, thoughts that certainly do not arise from the source of divine being. Perhaps this is why the humanity of Sartre's Roquentin and Camus' Mersault is so frighteningly bleak and impoverished. Their poverty and gloom conceal a consciousness of meaninglessness, i.e. the realisation that life is "given just like that", that it is based on the "great absurdity of existence", that it begins in darkness and returns to darkness. The awareness of the meaninglessness of an unbeliever is expressed in these words of Roquentin, the hero of Sartre's *La Nausée*: "In fact, I have always realised that I have no right to live. I came into being by chance. I lived like a stone, like a plant, like a bacterium. My life grew haphazardly in all directions. Sometimes I received some vague signs; sometimes I heard only meaningless noise" (p. 101). And if, through some action or idea, a person without God tries to cover up the "great absurdity of existence," in the end, they must admit that they are only deceiving themselves. That is why Roquentin gives up writing a historical study about a political figure – creative activity, like any other activity, cannot justify his unjustifiable existence. The existence of a person without God is based on darkness, boredom, absurdity, and meaninglessness.

The greatness of a person who has adopted a position of unbelief is to realise the meaninglessness of existence in the world, to have no illusions that life can have meaning. Moreover, despite this, to live. Girnius calls this realisation the "passion of disillusionment," which supports human existence as it sinks into darkness like a flash of lightning. According to Girnius, this "passion of disillusionment" makes a person feel two things: darkness and sobriety. A dark disposition is the rejection of any hopes cherished by a person living with a "natural state of consciousness". A sober disposition is the awakening of natural consciousness to a harsher reality ("the great absurdity of existence") than that in which a person living according to the inert habits of society lives (p. 325). Awakened to a harsher and darker reality, a person of disbelief lives in different ways – with indifferent indifference to the world (as in Camus' novel *The Stranger*), with nihilistic and cynical contempt for the world (like Roquentin, the hero of Sartre's *La Nausée*), or, in the best case, by engaging in historical events (like Rieux in Camus' novel *The Plague*). Be that as it may, life here is based on a fundamental metaphysical conviction - man is "thrown" into the world and forgotten in it; every moment of life allows him to feel the absolute loneliness of his existence anew [3].

In that absolute loneliness of existence, there is something that could transform it into a positive connection with the world. These are the situations in which the heroes of the novels find themselves: the plague that strikes the inhabitants of Oran in Camus' *The Plague*, the death of Meursault's mother, which begins Camus' *The Stranger*, or the small situations that Roquentin finds himself in in Sartre's *Nausea*, visiting taverns, the library or sitting on a bench in the park. The point is that these situations do not develop into events that could give human existence a unified meaning. It is no coincidence that Sartre's Roquentin repeats the same phrase "nothing new" in his diary, as if knowing in advance that the new day, like all the previous ones, will pass in vain: "I have neither Mondays nor Sundays: only days jumbled together in disorder

and sometimes such unexpected moments" (p. 68). Ani, a character in *La Nausée*, also experiences no events, because what she longs for are not events but "perfect moments," i.e., special, stylish situations in which everything should depend on the person, whether they want to extract the perfect moment from the situation. This is a consciousness representing Sartre's concept of absolute freedom, seeking to become the unquestionable author of events. However, from the perspective of faith, the author of an event is never the person himself. Ani longs for perfect moments, the author of which would be the person himself, while Camus' hero, Mersault, in *The Stranger*, ignores any situationality altogether. The death of his mother — what Karl Jaspers calls a "liminal situation," immersing human empirical existence in eternal meaning — touched only the surface of his consciousness with its bubbling thoughts, but did not become a deeper experience of reflection on the ultimate meaning of life. According to existentialists, humans are not free from situations, but, as creators of themselves, they are always free to choose one situation over another. It seems that Mersault does just that, denying with indifference any situation that could develop into a sequence of meaningful events.

Neither by seeking to extract the perfect moment from an exceptional situation, nor by completely denying that situation, is it possible to experience the authentic meaning of being. This meaning is experienced differently – through what Merton called "primary intuition," looking at the requirement or challenge inherent in each situation and responding to it. Accepting a situation as a call or challenge and responding to it becomes an event that gives meaning to the existence of a person seeking God. Numerous stories in the Bible speak of this: Abraham's "Here I am!" uttered when God commanded him to go to Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:10-13), Mary's "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" spoken to the angel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), or Christ's words on the Mount of Olives, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:39-44). In the same way, standing in the presence of the invisible God (as in the theatre scene depicted by Frankl in front of the "big black hole"), the believer, with uncertainty and risk, decides to act and acts as if the situation in which he finds himself and acts as if the situation in which he finds himself has an infinite meaning that transcends his powers of comprehension.

Furthermore, only on the way to some mountain of life will the dark uncertainty of this infinite meaning become bright clarity. In Merton's words, the foundation of a Christian's entire life is not his own, but "the search for God's will with loving faith and the fulfilment of that blessed will with believing love" (p. 56). To recognise God's will, which points the way to the meaning of life, a person needs an alert "primary intuition", i.e., an alert conscience. Today's man, living in an information society where the education system is more oriented towards the transfer of knowledge than the cultivation of conscience, is moving even further away from this foundation of Christian life. That is why Frankl emphasises that, in an era of meaninglessness, human education should not be limited to the transmission of knowledge but should also cultivate human conscience; only then will people become sensitive enough to hear the demands inherent in every situation (pp. 78-79).

#### 4. THE WORLD AS A GIFT

For both believers and non-believers, objective reality is the same. However, subjectively, believers and non-believers experience their connection to the world's reality differently. This divides the same reality into different worlds – the world of meaning and the world of absurdity. By saying their *fiat* with believing love, Christians accept the world as a gift. Meanwhile, a non-believing consciousness does

not accept the world as a gift. The world remains alien to it, just as it is alien to the world. Reading Sartre's *Nausea* or Camus' *The Stranger*, we see that a sense of alienation accompanies the characters' relationships with people, objects, and nature. The authors of the novels even emphasise certain details to convey to the reader the characters' sense of hostility towards the world. The absence of human unity with the world is expressed in Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Plague* through various details of the landscape or city: rusty buildings, rotten fence boards, the sparse light falling on them, thick fog covering the sky, streets of plastered walls, dusty shop windows, dirty yellow trams, etc. In Girnius' words, "even in the gentlest landscape, the world remains impenetrable and hostile [...]. Meaninglessness lies neither in man nor in the world, but in their coexistence – in the clash between the human longing for unity and absoluteness and the world's meaningless silence" (p. 288). However, is what a person who looks at the reality of the world with the eyes of faith, with all its unique concreteness, also the meaningless silence of the world?

From a phenomenological perspective, it can be said that a person living in the world encounters not "things in themselves," but the structures of meaning of those things that depend on human consciousness. Things in the world do not have meaning in themselves, but rather by entering human history, by entering into a relationship with humans. They reveal their meaning only through human subjectivity, i.e. through the most immediate experience of the self-identity of the object. The goal of Husserl's phenomenology, followed by the French existentialists, was to point the way to this immediate experience of being. This is a pre-logical perception of being, the essential feature of which is that, instead of resorting to theoretical speculation, man seeks to return "to the things themselves" (*zu den Sachen selbst*), i.e. to their pure and unarticulated direct experience.

Sartre's *Nausea* is precisely an existential analysis of the perception of immediate existence. According to researchers, it depicts the possibility of an "artificially hypertrophied" experience of immediate existence, which may be interesting because it is the possibility of immediate existence for an unbelieving consciousness, or, in Girnius' words, a meaningless consciousness. Unlike Husserl, Sartre's development of the possibility of experiencing immediate existence is clearly destructive. The immediate connection with reality is expressed here as a morbid, extremely destructive state of nausea that denies any obvious givenness of things. In "Nausea," Sartre describes the following situation: one Saturday at the seaside, where children were playing by throwing pebbles into the sea, Rocquentin also wanted to throw a pebble. Holding it in his hand, he suddenly felt a repulsive sense of disgust for the pebble. This disgust was an immediate, pre-reflective experience of the stone's existence, ontologically before reflective thought about it. In Rocquentin's words, "being does not yield to thinking from a distance: it catches you by surprise, clings to you, weighs on your heart like a fat, clumsy animal." Pre-reflective immediacy reveals the "naked World," which appears as rich, dense, heavy, i.e., absurd, like a disease that destroys man himself.

A similar, but fundamentally different case of experiencing immediate existence is described in the philosophical poem *Daniel* (1913) by Martin Buber, a representative of the philosophy of dialogue. It goes like this: "Once, on a foggy morning, I was walking down the road and saw a piece of glitter lying in the distance. I picked it up from the ground and looked at it for a long time. And suddenly the day was no longer so gloomy – so much light was concentrated in that little stone. [...] In my gaze, the piece of glitter and my 'I' were one; in that gaze, I experienced the taste of the One" (pp. 146-147). Sartre's Rocquentin, holding the stone, experienced the taste of disgust,

while Buber's narrator, holding a piece of glitter in his hand, experienced the taste of the One. Moreover, what determines everything here is not the different material properties of the objects held in the hand (the piece of quartz and the pebble), but the different inner attitudes of the people who picked up the pebble or the piece of quartz. Both Sartre's Roquentin and Buber's narrator have overcome the material opposition between subject and object. However, only Buber's narrator, who, incidentally, is a man of faith, experienced the pebble as something that drew his pre-reflective consciousness into a participatory union with the pebble's being. This was the experience of the One, which arose not from a denial of the situation or an attempt to construct it in one way or another, but from a respectful attentiveness to the events of the world, in which the knowing will of man coincided with the world-creating will of God. This constructive, immediate experience of being can be linked to Merton's aforementioned "primary intuition," which forms the basis of the act of faith. In the context of faith, primary intuition would mean the pre-reflective "I" that transcends the limits of human reflective consciousness, i.e., pure and transparent consciousness that opens itself not to its own contents, but to God's love. This love fills human consciousness through the presence of objects or people.

Sartre's "Nausea" presents a different kind of consciousness, one that has overcome the subject-object distinction of the main character, Roquentin. Having reached the level of empty consciousness, this consciousness does not venture into any transcendent centre of being beyond it, i.e. it does not venture towards any invisible Other. This empty consciousness is perfectly illustrated by Roquentin's words: "When I say 'I', the word sounds empty. [...] Transparent, frozen, empty consciousness, enclosed within walls, continues to exist, but nothing lives in it anymore. [...] Consciousness is like a tree or a blade of grass. It slumbers, it is bored. [...] Forgotten consciousness, left between walls under a cloudy sky. This is the meaning of its existence: to realise that it is unnecessary" (pp. 191-192). This empty, closed-in and slumbering consciousness of Roquentin is enveloped by the primordial immediacy of the existence of things, like sweet marmalade. Instead of experiencing the immediacy of things' existence as Unity, the unbelieving consciousness experiences it as disgusting. More precisely, the pre-reflective connection between "I" and "not-I" reveals "not-I" here only as an opposite that negates me; therefore, this connection is always associated with anxiety about the possibility of losing oneself in the world. This anxiety is considered the beginning of the sense of one's own value, the need for freedom [3]. Therefore, the pre-reflective connection with the existence of things in the world is experienced by the non-believing (Roquentin) consciousness as hatred and disgust toward the reality of things that negate it. On the other hand, it is precisely this hatred and disgust that forces the unbeliever to exist, i.e. to pull himself out of the desired non-existence and push himself into existence.

Thus, Sartre not only de-poeticises life, but also, according to Girnius, destroys the fundamental category of "being" with which Western metaphysics associated the meaning of the world, man and things. This destruction of the category of "being" leads precisely to nihilism – a radical rejection of the value and meaning of things in the world. This rejection gives rise to naturalistic cynicism, characteristic not only of Sartre's Roquentin, who views life with nausea, but also of various aspects of contemporary postmodern society. This distorted manifestation of consciousness, living in a state of extreme inner disorder, shapes the cynicism of our times: political, media, medical, military, and so on. It seems that Sartre was a good prophet of the spiritual trends of the near future.

## 5. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

For a believer who seeks to overcome the false, deceitful “I” of his consciousness and thus cultivate inner order, all created things reflect their Creator. They become traces of God, testifying that God has passed through here. This is the aforementioned “belief in God” (*credere in Deum*) as the sphere of life in the presence of the living God. A person who projects their existence into this sphere encounters God as being “here and now”. As the One whose visible traces (a piece of glitter, the sound of the sea, or the face of a loved one) do not reveal Him, but conceal Him, allowing us to sense eternity. Through this daily reading of God’s traces, a person’s conversion takes place, a reorientation of their consciousness from the false “I” to the true “I”, from inert habits of thinking to God as the centre of the unified meaning of life. According to Merton, in this life, a person of faith is not “converted” once and for all, but is converted many times, and this endless series of large and small “conversions” ultimately transforms him in Christ (p. 138). In the era of meaninglessness, moral chaos, value relativism, nihilism, and cynicism in which we live, to regain the lost ability to believe, a person, Frankl observes, should first seek to “hear the tens of thousands of commands encoded in the tens of thousands of situations that life presents to him. Then not only will his life become meaningful again (meaningful means full of tasks), but he himself will be immunised against conformism and totalitarianism, because only an alert conscience allows a person to resist, not to succumb to conformism and not to bow down to totalitarianism” (p. 79). Only an alert consciousness touches upon eternal questions and answers them with life itself. Only an alert consciousness touches upon eternal questions and answers them with life itself.

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