

# Of Truth and Passion: Mormonism and Existential Thought

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IN THE FIRST CENTURY A.D., PONTIUS PILATE, confounded by Jesus Christ's forceful witness to his mission to "bear witness unto the truth," asked, "What is truth?" (John 18:38) This was neither the first nor the last time that an individual has asked this question, either in genuine torment or in harried evasion. Since the dawn of historical recollection, men and women have pursued truth with an unquenchable thirst.

For Latter-day Saints, the great determining truth of existence is that there is a God.<sup>1</sup> And, since God set the forces in motion that called this world into being, it follows that all truth, from whatever source, relates to him and his existence. Perhaps for this reason basic Mormon doctrine constantly challenges us to seek for knowledge, wisdom, and truth. Accepting the gospel, with its accompanying gift of the Holy Ghost (the spirit of revelation), signifies a first step toward the endless acquisition of new truths, for as has been promised, "by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:5).

And yet, just as God did not create the earth *ex nihilo*, he does not bring a knowledge of truth out of nothingness. Truth is not a gift which is given *gratis*, like the presents showered on a child by wealthy parents. Quite the contrary, truth is gained through great mental effort, aided by enlightenment from the Holy Spirit. Those who desire to attain this prize are commanded to actively seek it. Although the Church frequently admonishes us to search for truth, no definitive method or exclusive source has ever been dogmatically prescribed. As a general guide, we are, of course, directed first to both ancient and modern scripture. Beyond this, we are exhorted, "Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning even by study and also by faith" (D&C

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, it will not be necessary to distinguish between God the Father and God the Son. The more general term "God," therefore, refers to Deity.

88:118). Certainly, within the realm of world literature and thought there lie great riches of wisdom and truth, often the result of lifetimes of concerted effort and struggle on the part of poets, thinkers, and scholars.

A study of the widely varied results of human efforts to understand existence reveals certain strands of thought, observation, or fact that appear again and again in essentially the same form, even among extremely divergent areas of inquiry. These universal strands, insofar as they do not contradict the determining fact of God's being, can be extremely significant in a quest for truth. And particularly, as these recurring insights and observations lead to an enhanced understanding of our place in the world and our relationship to God, they can be very valuable within the context of LDS theology.

One particular group of thinkers and writers, frequently labeled "existential,"<sup>2</sup> has been profoundly concerned with individuals' attempts to create a meaningful pattern from the often seemingly chaotic elements of life. This manner of thought frequently parallels Mormon conceptions in some profound ways, and existential ideas often seem to provide flashes of insight into LDS readers' personal religious beliefs and understanding of life. This article will examine some of the most striking points of congruence and interplay between existential thought and the tenets of Mormonism as they relate to three concepts basic to both: (1) God, (2) humankind, and (3) existence.

### God

It is often mistakenly assumed that an existential orientation to life automatically excludes religious belief. Actually, neither Christianity nor belief in God is incompatible with this philosophical outlook. In fact, several prominent existential thinkers, including Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Buber, are deeply committed to the religious implications of this particular world view. Even atheistic existentialists propound many principles and means of confronting life which correspond closely to LDS belief.

Although terminology differs, most existential thinkers agree that humans exist in a state of delusion and attempted escape from the realities of existence. This mode of being is called "inauthentic," a life lived out in "bad faith." An inauthentic individual tends to confuse personal existence in the world with the objects that demand practical attention. In addition, this type of person desires to escape responsibility for individual opinions, decisions, and actions by becoming part of the faceless crowd. In fact, decisiveness is generally avoided whenever possible, as the inauthentic individual attempts to flee the perils of freedom and the uncertainties of existence.<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, who describes this escapist level of existence as the "aesthetic," shows that an "aesthetic" attitude will lead us to concentrate on filling our lives with what is

<sup>2</sup> The terms "existentialist" and "existentialism" apply to a particular twentieth-century philosophical tendency. Since not all existential thinkers can or would even desire to be grouped in this classification, I will use the expression "existential thought" throughout this discussion.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of authenticity/inauthenticity, see John Wild, *The Challenge of Existentialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), especially pp. 126-50.

beautiful or pleasurable. But however refined, such epicurean pursuits can afford no lasting meaning or self-understanding.

In stark contrast would be the life lived "authentically" or in "good faith." Most existential thinkers would define the authentic individual as one who accepts the freedom that characterizes human status, acknowledges the risks involved with this freedom, and makes the decisions necessary to structure life. In making those decisions, however, one must also accept responsibility for choice and resist the temptation to abandon oneself to the depersonalization of the mass. To live authentically we must accept our own possibilities and our own uniquely differentiated futures. In addition, authentic existence always implies action, a caring or passionate involvement with being; most existential thinkers concur that truth must be *lived* in order to be truth.

Religious existentialists, such as Kierkegaard, Buber, Marcel, and Paul Tillich, go a step further and assert that authenticity also means defining one's identity in relationship to God: each individual must find his or her own path to that being beyond the self. In fact, Kierkegaard, in suggesting that religious conviction is the highest form of being available to humankind, rejects even an authentically ethical mode of existence as ultimately incapable of fully endowing life with meaning. According to Kierkegaard, the entire conception of the ethical is problematic. That is, although it is fairly easy to discuss morals on paper and to work out a score of possible ethical solutions for life's situations, it is in reality extremely difficult to *live* ethically. Even if one does manage to translate theoretical ethics into concrete action, that individual is then forced, by the nature of the ethical itself, to apply every judgment and moral ruling universally. There can be no exceptions and no middle ground. Everything must be clearcut, good or bad, ethical or unethical.

Kierkegaard holds that this type of black/white determination cannot fully grasp and describe the endlessly varied demands of human existence. The purely ethical also limits the possibilities open to us, since there are many situations for which ethical ideals fail to supply answers. This becomes particularly evident as we attempt to align our existence with God, the transcendent Other. Kierkegaard cites as an example the total impossibility of purely ethical decision in the case of Abraham, who is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Even those existential thinkers whose writings are the most completely atheistic, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, show themselves to be deeply concerned with the relationship of the individual to God. Heinrich Heine once remarked that only those who are indifferent, and who therefore do not speak of God at all, truly deny him (Heine 1886, 8). There is clearly no indifference to God evident in the thought of either Sartre or Nietzsche. In fact, the atheism which pervades the writings of these two philosophers seems in large part to be the bitterly resentful outcry of those who, driven by a deep spiritual need, seek desperately for God but are unable to find him. Goetz's speech in Sartre's *The Devil and the Good Lord* represents, not the arrogance of one who chooses his own strength before that of God, but rather

the despair and anguish of a man who is denied the sustenance he so deeply craves from an omnipotent source:

I supplicated, I demanded a sign, I sent messages to Heaven, no reply. Heaven ignored my very name. Each minute I wondered what I could *BE* in the eyes of God. Now I know that answer: nothing. God does not see me, God does not hear me, God does not know me. You see this emptiness over our heads? That is God. You see this gap in the door? It is God. You see that hole in the ground: That is God again. Silence is God. Absence is God. (Sartre 1960, 141)

Implicit in this denial of God is a strong critique of established Christianity. Nietzsche attacks traditional religion even more directly. His impassioned statement concerning the death of God echoes Kierkegaard's concern that Christian institutions have failed to keep belief in God alive.

Have you not heard of the madman who . . . ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. . . .The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances. "Whither is God" he cried. "I shall tell you. *We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives." (Nietzsche 1968, 95–96)

According to the madman, modern cynicism and unbelief have divested God of life. If truth must be lived in order to be truth, then human unbelief murders God. Particularly when viewed from an LDS perspective, this statement rings true in two ways: first, since the Christianity of Nietzsche's time (1844–1900) existed only in an apostate form, humanity had in fact closed the door on the true, living God. To them he would therefore seem to be absent or dead. And second, the only God Nietzsche knew, the only God known to the Christianity of his time, was a being without body, parts, or passions, who is everywhere and nowhere, a God who was the product of a council of men and therefore dead at its very inception. In this sense, God had been "murdered" not only by lack of belief but also by the lack of correct knowledge concerning him.

As Nietzsche rightly perceived, the wall that cut humankind off from contact with God had been erected by human hands. One of the prime differences between the atheistic and the religious existential thinkers is that the former believe there can be no further contact with God, that we are utterly and irrevocably alone, while the latter believe that a relationship with God can be restored through a rigorous, authentic attempt to live the true essence of religion.

In either case, the key element in an existential approach to God is passion. An existentialist does not relate to Deity passively as an abstraction; the intellectual and spiritual intensity of existential thought transforms the God-experience into a living, vital force in human life. Whether the conclusions drawn concerning God are positive or negative, from an existential point of

view, a relationship to him cannot be indifferent. God must be either passionately, actively denied or passionately sought and affirmed.

### *Religion*

Both the religious and the atheistic proponents of an existential world view are united in their criticism of the historical institution of Christianity. The standpoint of two atheistic thinkers has already been mentioned. However, the level of religious conviction demanded by Kierkegaard is also radically different from that generally regarded as "religious." Although the theologians of Kierkegaard's age (1813–55) seemed bent on making it increasingly easy and more pleasant to "believe and be saved," Kierkegaard urged the opposite course. In his assessment, traditional Christianity had become so encumbered by tradition and dogma that it had completely lost the original rigor of belief and action characteristic of Christ and the early apostles: that is, the institution had eclipsed the essence. It was this conviction that propelled Kierkegaard into a full-scale war against a soulless historical Christianity which had forgotten what it means truly to *be* a Christian.

In addition to their criticism of established Christianity, the majority of existential thinkers tend to regard dogmatic religion as a form of bondage that hinders inherent human freedom and discourages individuals from exercising the decisive choice necessary to authentic existence. Institutional religion can be used as a shelter from the burden of individual choice, a means of shifting responsibility away from the individual. Furthermore, religiously oriented existential thinkers denounce the fact that dogmatic religious tradition has been allowed to stifle the individual-God relationship and that rote belief has too often been adopted in the place of committed Christian action.

This criticism is compatible with one of the most basic tenets of LDS doctrine, the Mormon view of free agency. Because even God himself refuses to obstruct the individual exercise of this agency, Mormons believe that church organization optimally should serve as a vehicle to aid us in learning to discipline and fully employ this gift — and burden — of choice. According to Mormon belief, then, an institutional structure can aid rather than obstruct the exercise of agency. However, an LDS member who abdicates his or her free agency and hides within the structure of the Church would be guilty of the inauthentic Christianity denounced by Kierkegaard or Nietzsche.

The existential concept of "care" or "passionate inwardness" also typifies the core of true Mormon belief. For example, William Barrett, noted scholar of existential thought, points out that Kierkegaard consistently centers his religious beliefs upon the assertion that "religion is not a system of intellectual propositions to which the believer assents because he knows it to be true, as a system of geometry is true; existentially, for the individual himself, religion means in the end simply *to be religious*" (1962, 70).

In other words, baptism into a Christian denomination does not make one Christian any more than picking up a violin qualifies a person as a musician. Similarly, baptism into the LDS Church and belief in its doctrines do not automatically transform one into a Latter-day Saint. This transformation from

a potential "saint" to an actual "saint" requires that internal conviction — in LDS terms, testimony — be actualized in existence. True religious faith must exist within the individual as "passionate inwardness," or *the truth that one is*, rather than as an abstract intellectual dogma. Religion is not a set of beliefs, but a state of being. In effect, one's belief so colors every thought and action, that one is propelled to righteous behavior by the force of internal conviction.

Although they often employ differing terminology, the religious existentialists generally agree that faith is the force that endows the God-relationship with existential passion. Faith, as defined by these existential thinkers, is an entirely different substance than intellectual or dogmatic belief. Faith is in fact an action. Marcel intensifies this understanding of faith into the concept of "creative fidelity" or loyalty to God. According to Buber, faith characterizes the I-Thou relation and is the medium by which we enter into the immediacy of personal dialogue with God, who is the transcendent *Thou*. Tillich insists that "infinite passion" must impel the faithful as they seek relationship with Jesus Christ. Similarly, Kierkegaard maintains that living faith arises from love for a living being — for Christ himself. In his view, logic and reason can lead only to a certain point, beyond which one can no longer rely on intellectual proofs. Inevitably, the moment will arrive when each individual must choose to venture all for his or her confidence in Christ and make the "leap of faith." Faith is a risk. As Kierkegaard so vividly describes the dual sense of jeopardy and assurance, having faith means "at the same time to lie upon seventy thousand fathoms of water and yet be joyful" (1945, 430).

Faith is, then, an active force ignited by real love for a living God and an assurance that he will not fail in his promises. In practice, the venture itself, taking the leap of faith, develops faith: the more we must sacrifice for our confidence in God, the stronger that assurance grows. As Joseph Smith has affirmed: "A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary [to lead] unto life and salvation" (1898, 62).

Joseph Smith clearly sensed the same need for passionate intensity in the exercise of faith as did these religious existential thinkers. As his life showed, his faith was a matter of intense inner relationship and involvement with God, a matter of risk and action rather than passive intellectual or dogmatic formulation.

In this sense, conformity to the laws of God should also be a matter of passionate inwardness, not list-making obedience. One great failing of the Jews in Christ's time was that they had enslaved themselves to regulation by believing that the law was an end in itself. As they understood it, the purpose of life was obedience; individuals existed for the law, and therefore, although they felt obligated to do no less than the rules demanded, they also felt no necessity to do anything more. As a result, the whole purpose behind God's commandments was lost, since the Lord's laws and admonitions are vehicles to help mortals cleanse themselves from impurity, develop faith, and rise toward perfection. In this context, the spirit of Christ's injunction to "go the extra mile" is of utmost importance. It is not enough to hold scrupulously to

the letter of the law, merely because an outside source, be it divine or human, requires it. Commandments are not restraints to be imposed externally, like a bridle on a horse. They must become an internal, integral part of our very natures.

This principle may be effectively illustrated with the analogy of a dancer. A beginner in a dancing class is painfully awkward, since the novice must execute every movement exactly as the dancing master instructs, counting each step and consciously willing muscles into a semblance of graceful motion. However, as the dancer becomes more accomplished, movements become easier and less conscious, until at last the grace of bodily motion becomes such an integral part of the dancer's nature that grace carries over unconsciously into every action. The dancer, in effect, at last reaches a level at which he or she *is* grace in motion.

In the same sense, as beginners in the gospel of Christ, we may struggle with this law or that commandment, but if we attempt to live them faithfully, these principles eventually become such a part of our nature that we no longer live *laws* at all — we live *righteousness*. In essence, as we approach perfection, we transcend the laws. Rather than being concerned with not smoking or not bearing false witness, we are occupied with the higher goal of being Christlike in every thought and action. In this state of passionate religious inwardness, we will have “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). At this point, the laws of the gospel become identical with the essence of the individual; we *are* what we believe.

It is this existential concept of authenticity, and the absolute identity of the professor with that which is professed, that provide the avenue through which abstract religious belief can be transformed into a living, active way of life, powered always by the impassioned inwardness of conviction.

### *Perfection*

In his novel *Nausea*, Sartre illustrates poignantly the feeling of meaninglessness which engulfs the person who becomes suddenly aware of being in a world cluttered with objects that seem to have no real reason for being there. In fact, the entire novel represents the protagonist's attempt to find some sort of meaningful coherence within the absurdity of his existence. To varying degrees, this vision of the chaotic and impenetrable nature of the universe is basic to all existential thought.

Although many individuals may never experience as acute a sense of universal absurdity and incoherence as these thinkers recorded, there will be moments when even the deeply religious find themselves, as Sartre's Roquentin, grappling for meaning within the vagaries and challenges of mortal life. Some frustration inevitably results from the natural weakness and imperfection of mortality. In addition, life itself is a confusing duality. Although this earth and all its inhabitants are in a mortal state, the greatest truth and meaning discernible in the world most often relate to the transcendent and perfected being who is its creator. As a result, those things that lend the greatest joy and meaning to human existence tend to be those that belong to the realm of spirit: beauty, truth, knowledge, love, service, and so forth.

As Roquentin illustrates, mortals are propelled by an innate yearning to be complete and whole, lasting and self-existent, a state not entirely possible on earth. From an LDS standpoint, the "stranger here" feeling that troubled Roquentin, and that often seems to reduce mortal existence to meaninglessness, may be seen to spring, at least in part, from barely waking half-memories of a premortal state in the presence of God, a state that was indeed solid, eternal, and perfect. Whatever its source, the sense of estrangement which at times arises between the mortal and spiritual realms can best be bridged by God himself. Since Roquentin has no God-orientation, from a religious perspective he is cut off from the essential heart and core of existence. It is no wonder that for Roquentin even the drive toward perfection seems to be unrooted, meaningless, absurd. What Roquentin feels in *Nausea* is the emptiness of the world severed from God, who is the moving force behind all being, and whose divine plan alone can provide a sense of meaning and purpose in existence. Roquentin therefore illustrates a negative extremity of the search for meaning in existence.

A more positive outcome develops from the basic existential imperative that one must turn inward to search out one's inherent possibilities and create the Self, an idea that finds its most radical expression in Nietzsche's conception of the "Ueberschensch," or "Overman." This concept of striving to actualize one's optimum possibility is actually compatible with LDS doctrine. What the existential atheist performs in defiance of an absurd universe and an absent God, the seeker within the gospel of Jesus Christ performs under the tutelage of the Divine, who can help reveal us to ourselves and thus lead us to heights we might otherwise never attain.

#### HUMANKIND

The modern world tends to push toward conformity and homogeneity. In many cases, society structures itself in ways that reduce individuals to membership in an indistinguishable mass, much like the Greek innkeeper who made all his guests fit his beds by stretching the bodies of those who were too short, and cutting off the legs of those too tall. It is convenient to neatly categorize and pigeonhole people as Jews, blacks, women, hippies, yuppies. In modern society, people are rarely viewed as individuals with unique needs, aptitudes, and possibilities. All major existential thinkers from Kierkegaard on, as well as thinkers and writers in other fields of expertise,<sup>4</sup> have diagnosed and denounced this trend toward uniformity.

In fact, a vast respect for the existing individual and a ceaseless rage at those who attempt to reduce humankind to a mindless crowd devoid of responsibility for personal opinion and action is one unifying thread running through the entire body of existential thought. This view is also basic to LDS doctrine and is a recurring theme throughout the scriptures. The conception

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of this phenomenon, see David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953) and William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956). Oswald Spengler also deals with this topic in *The Decline of the West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).



of the individual may actually be the point at which Mormonism most closely approximates existential thought.

From an existential standpoint, the most basic ground of all human existence is freedom. Although it is always possible to abdicate freedom, this still is the quality which distinguishes human beings from all lower forms of life and from which both the greatest possibilities and the greatest suffering arise. In the existential view, the only way to reach a wholeness of authentic being is through conscious choice and decision. This view is once again entirely compatible with the LDS concept of free agency.

According to existential thought, freedom entails the responsibility to accept and *be* one's Self. When considering society as a whole, we may observe that people are often not comfortable, or to put it more pointedly, not at home with themselves. Often an individual seems to be so frightened of possible confrontation with the Self that he or she prefers crowds, noise, or idle chatter to the silence in which one's only companion is oneself. This inauthentic flight from the Self can have many causes. One of the most predominant is that the actual Self rarely measures up to the Self that we wish we were or feel we ought to be.

LDS doctrine would ascribe this sense of absurdity and inadequacy directly to the mortal state itself, in which the indignity and weakness of fallen earth is superimposed upon the refined matter of the spirit. When faced with guilt at "not measuring up," we have two choices: to abdicate the Self and remain in an inauthentic existence; or to choose the Self, whatever its condition, and struggle through decisive action to transform it into something higher.

This concept of acceptance and transformation of the Self is not unlike the LDS emphasis on overcoming weaknesses and striving for perfection. When we begin to repent and pray with our entire soul, we must first turn inward. Repentance entails a painfully honest evaluation of the Self in the presence of God. Meditation within the framework of prayer provides a great advantage: the Holy Spirit can help us see the blocks to our greatest possibility more clearly and can teach us to overcome them in ways that very often far surpass what we could achieve alone.

However, existential concepts provide no haven for narcissists, despite the emphasis on the Self. The demand to choose and transform the Self does not excuse solipsistic irresponsibility toward the Other. Existentialist thought demands that other individuals be respected as autonomous beings within their own spheres of existence. Most existential thinkers denounce the common worldly practice of treating the Other as an object, a thing, rather than as a Subject. Too often we strip Others of their inherent autonomy and transform them into the object of personal feelings and ambitions: scorn, lust, violence, power, and so forth. In this regard, the existential view again agrees with the scriptural concept of the individual.

In general, God relates to each person Subject to Subject, individual to individual. Christ performed no mass healings; he dealt with individual cases, healing the one in need. Both ancient and modern scriptures indicate that God knows each person individually and will relate to us on a one-to-one basis,

if we are willing. The gospel view of each individual as a valued child of God is clearly congruent with the profound existential respect for each individual as an autonomously existing Subject. As Kierkegaard observed: "I have never ignored any man, the humblest farmhand or housemaid — for he who is 'before God' must simultaneously shudder deep in his soul at the thought: suppose now that God in recompense ignored me" (1975, 6:9).

### EXISTENCE

One striking feature of existential thought is that it returns philosophy from the realm of abstraction back to everyday reality: individuals standing alone, face to face with their own existence. As a general rule, however, people tend to be extremely threatened by the possibility of a head-on encounter with themselves. Instead of choosing the Self and then building consciously on that foundation, many individuals simply close their eyes and run. The world is engrossed in the search for "pain relievers" to deaden the pangs of life, even though this pursuit often leads to a desperate and dangerous overdose.

According to existential thought, those who flee in this way before the possibility of facing the Self are guilty of bad faith, are willfully inauthentic, trapped in a state of dishonesty. In order to reverse this bad faith, we must choose our Self, no matter how imperfect or incomplete that may seem. The authentic Subject can neither live through the eyes and opinions of others nor fashion a conception of Self according to their desires. The Self must be what it is.

However, authentic existence does not, as is sometimes believed, give license to recklessly "do your own thing." Even though individual decisions are influenced by circumstances and other people, in the end, authenticity requires that any decision we may make be embraced as our own, with full personal acceptance of responsibility and any consequences that may follow. To become authentic, we must each take upon ourselves the pain of facing our Self and our lives, in spite of all inherent absurdities, weaknesses, and conflicts, and then proceed onward from that point. An image that captures the magnitude of character required by authentic experience is that of a lone individual standing on a beach in front of a tidal wave, in terrible dread of the future, and yet consciously willing to remain and face what may come.

This full empowerment of the individual as a free agent also invests the very heart of LDS doctrine. The scriptures state quite plainly: "And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon" (2 Ne. 2:26).

Because of this imperfect mortal state, however, it is inevitable that where the freedom to choose and to act is granted, bad decisions will often follow. That is, the way will automatically be opened for us to stumble and fall into sin. The antidote to this human frailty is repentance, a principle which is entirely existential in its ramifications. Through sincere repentance, we are

brought face to face with our own guilt. We must be completely and authentically honest with ourselves, as well as with God, and accept the responsibility for personal misdeeds, along with all attendant mental anguish. God has instituted this freedom of choice in order to insure "that every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgement" (D&C 101:78).

At the moment of judgment, each unrepentant individual will presumably stand alone before the omniscience of God, stripped of all masks and delusions, in the ultimate conflict with the Self. This confrontation can be softened, however, through the ongoing process of repentance, in which as individuals we face ourselves before God over and over again throughout the course of our mortal existence. In this way, through dealing with sins, weaknesses, and shortcomings one at a time, through accepting the consequences of our actions, settling matters and moving on, we can neutralize the terror of that ultimate judgment: if we have nothing hidden, if we have attempted at all times to live authentically and honestly, it may well be that the judgment will be no judgment at all.

The driving force behind this process of choice and consequence must be a burning religious inwardness or passion, which binds us in an unshakable reliance on God. Such inwardness must be developed individually. Those who appear to be religious, and yet whose belief is founded merely on tradition or on the words of others, actually exist in a state of religious inauthenticity. According to LDS doctrine, every individual must have a personal testimony of each principle, ordinance, and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only this conviction, this intensity of religious inwardness, empowers and enables us to face and overcome the ceaseless challenges and difficulties of mortality. If the image of existential courage is a person standing rootless and in dread before the elemental forces of the cosmos, then the image of authentic Mormonism must be that of a tree standing on the same beach before the same tidal wave. However, this tree has roots which extend down as deeply as the tree has worked to send them, into the foundation of faith in and communion with God. These roots serve to dissipate the dread which characterizes an existential confrontation with life's terrible uncertainties.

#### CONCLUSION

The concepts discussed in this article at best only briefly sketch the correspondence between key concepts within existential thought and the basic tenets of Mormonism. In countless ways, the two are congruent: the practiced eye cannot fail to recognize the powerfully existential nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The philosophical tenets of existential thought challenge us to strive for a rigorous authenticity which permits no deception of Self, others, or God. In particular, the religious existential thinkers emphasize inner commitment and battle the petrification of outward form and tradition which far too often strangle the passionate inwardness of true religious fervor. The existential

approach to life requires an inward search to understand the "I," a quest which transforms the tendency to flight before an undesirable Self into a process of self-discovery, self-creation, and refining. The keys to individual development are decision, action, and assumption of responsibility for choices — in short, a full acceptance of and passionate involvement in one's own existence.

Divested of their special philosophical terminology, these concepts closely resemble basic LDS doctrines. However, the philosophical vocabulary and particular emphasis of existential thought on agency and authenticity can enhance understanding of many doctrinal points of Mormonism and bring the sense of what it is to be a Latter-day Saint into brilliantly sharp focus.

Particularly in their demand for inner passion in relation to God, truth, and existence, existential concepts can eloquently verbalize much that is inherent, but not explicitly stated, in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Existential philosophy strives to focus on truth as it is actualized in existence, rather than as it is formulated in an abstract system of ideas. Existentialists are, therefore, deeply interested in the *how* of truth. "The essential sermon is one's own existence. A person preaches with this every hour of the day and with power quite different from that of the most eloquent speaker in his most eloquent moment" (Kierkegaard 1975, 1:460). The key to actualizing truth is inner passion and existential courage. As Kierkegaard exclaims: "What I need is a man who does not gesticulate with his arms up in a pulpit or with his fingers upon a podium, but a person who gesticulates with his entire personal existence . . . , with the willingness in every danger to will to express in action precisely what he teaches" (1975, 1:265).

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