

## ФІЛОСОФІЯ РЕЛІГІЇ

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### HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PROTESTANT EXISTENTIALISM

**Issue topicality.** The term «Christian existentialism» has long been established in the scholarly literature; however, its internal differentiation has received little systematic analysis. For this reason, this article proposes to examine Christian existentialism at the denominational level – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant – each of which developed within distinct confessional and cultural contexts. The Protestant form of existentialism, in particular, underwent a long and complex process of development, emerging largely as a reaction to the theological and cultural dynamics that have shaped Protestantism since the Enlightenment.

**Goal of the research.** Given the specificity of the research topic, the primary objective of this article is to identify the key moments in the formation and development of Protestant existentialism.

**Methods and research results.** Given that the concept of Protestant existentialism remains largely unarticulated in the scholarly literature, this article adopts historicism as its primary methodological approach. This approach enables an examination of the origins and development of Protestant existentialism. Protestant existentialism passed through two principal stages of development: its formative origins in the nineteenth century and its conceptual consolidation in the 1920s. Fourth, the historical emergence of Protestant existentialism can be understood, on the one hand, as a reaction against modern rationalism and, on the other, as the result of a complex constellation of intellectual influences, among which the most significant were Schelling's German Idealism, Nietzsche's philosophy of life, neo-Kantianism, Dilthey's hermeneutics, Husserl's phenomenology, and Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Although Protestant existentialism was not a homogeneous phenomenon, it brought together thinkers from two main traditions – Lutheran and Reformed – who were actively engaged in the social and political processes of the 1920s and 1930s.

**Key words:** Protestant existentialism, existentialism, dialectical theology, Protestantism, Christian existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard.

**The introduction.** The term «Protestant existentialism» is rarely used in academic monographs – not due to its indefinability, but because religious existentialism is more commonly referred to as Christian existentialism, existential theology, or dialectical theology. For this reason, the term has not gained wide circulation in academic discourse. What, then, can we say about Protestant existentialism in this case? Is it an artificial concept, or does it have a solid historical background? It must first be noted that the definition which restricts religious existentialism exclusively to Christian existentialism is overly narrow. As a matter of fact, there were at least three branches of Christian existentialism: Catholic (Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson), Orthodox (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev), and Protestant (Søren Kierkegaard, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Eduard Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer). This differentiation serves as a foundational premise of the research. Based on this assumption, we aim to emphasize that Protestant

existentialism emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, alongside its atheistic counterpart, primarily within the German-speaking world. Due to the less hierarchical structure of Protestant churches and the diminished influence of Church Tradition, Protestant thinkers made significant and often brilliant contributions to the question of human existence. Unlike their Catholic and Orthodox counterparts, they were generally more open to existentialism, despite its rebellious spirit. It is important to note that, although existentialism is often considered an introspective and even despairing philosophy, many existentialist thinkers have been actively engaged with the social and political issues of their time. For instance, Paul Tillich's involvement in the social implications of the German Revolution of 1918 stemmed from his deep concern with societal problems. Interestingly, Tillich traced the social dimension of his thought back to his grandmother, who had participated in building barricades during the Revolution of 1848. According to Tillich, he was profoundly influenced by the words of the biblical prophets who spoke out against injustice, as well as by Jesus' condemnation of the wealthy. In his «Autobiographical Reflections», he nostalgically recalls, «These were words which I learned by heart in my very early years» [15, p. 12].

Social engagement is also evident in the writings of Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The social dimension of twentieth-century theological thought has been emphasized in numerous scholarly studies. A particularly illustrative example is the influential volume «The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918», edited by David Ford. According to Ford, between the European Middle Ages and the end of the nineteenth century, there were numerous significant events and transformations in both life and thought – many of which originated in Europe but had global repercussions. Among the most notable were the Renaissance and the Reformation, the colonization of the Americas, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, the rise of nationalism, the Industrial Revolution, and the advancement of natural sciences, technology, medicine, and the human sciences. Also impactful were the emergence of bureaucracies, constitutional democracy, new means of warfare and communication, mass education, public health initiatives, and innovative movements in the arts, philosophy, and religion. Throughout this dynamic and often traumatic period, theologians remained active members of society, the church, and academic institutions. Consequently, their theological reflections were inevitably shaped by these developments. In this fundamental sense, their theology can be regarded as modern – inasmuch as it responds to, critiques, or resists these transformations [7, p. 1]. Existentialism, in this case – whether in its atheistic or non-theistic form – is, in all respects, a modern philosophy, provided that we understand modern thought to refer to the intellectual movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Based on the above points, it is important to clarify the historical, philosophical, and theological roots of Protestant existentialism, in accordance with the methodology of historical and philosophical research.

**Goal and tasks.** In this paper, we will focus on the historical background of Protestant existentialism, aiming to trace its key turning points in formation and development.

**Research methods.** Since Protestant existentialism is a highly specific and somewhat obscure term, we aim to explore its historical roots in accordance with the principle of historicism. This approach will help trace its origins and shed light on the concept itself, which may initially appear ambiguous.

**Research results.** Before examining the historical roots of Protestant existentialism, we will review the most authoritative and recent publications on the topic. Then, we will examine the historical roots of Protestant existentialism. Interestingly, the concept of Protestant existentialism does not appear in subsequent monographs on existentialism, such as «A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism» edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall [1], «The Bloomsbury Companion to Existentialism» edited by Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashley Woodward [17], «The Bloomsbury Handbook of Existentialism» edited by Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds, and Ashley Woodward [18], «The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism» edited by Steven Crowell [19], and «The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Existentialism» edited by Kevin Aho [21]. The term «Protestant existentialism» is also not found in the following surveys: «Existentialism: A Reconstruction» by David Cooper [5], «Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed» by Steven E. Earle [6] and «Existentialism» by Robert Solomon [14]. All of these studies can be labeled as historical-philosophical. Meanwhile, the historical-theological monographs also did not contain the term «Protestant existentialism». For example, the studies of the noted scholar

John Macquarrie, such as «An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann» [9], «Studies in Christian Existentialism» [11], and «Twentieth-Century Religious Thought» [12]. The latest monograph written by Hue Woodson [22] also does not use the term. After briefly analyzing the above sources, we can conclude that the concept of Protestant existentialism has not gained widespread acceptance in research circles. More commonly, we encounter the term «Christian existentialism». In this article, we propose a confessional approach, according to which the Christian version of existentialism can be examined from three perspectives: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. Consequently, we intend to survey the rise and development of Protestant existentialism based on this assumption.

The next important step in our research is to distinguish the theological concept of «dialectical theology» from our proposed term, «Protestant existentialism». The concept of dialectical theology is problematic because it is difficult to categorize theologians such as Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer under its umbrella. For example, Roger Olson identifies Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultmann as leaders of dialectical theology [13, p. 301]. Olson also attributes Friedrich Gogarten, Eduard Thurneysen, Thomas Torrance, and Niebuhr to this movement. In our view, however, these theologians are quite distinct from one another in their methods of thought and approaches to solving theological problems. For this reason, we believe the aforementioned term, «Protestant existentialism», is more balanced. Under its banner, unifying such disparate thinkers as Bultmann and Barth does not appear as problematic as it does under dialectical theology. Secondly, dialectical theology, or neo-orthodoxy, was never strictly a theological movement. As Roger Olson mentioned, dialectical theology was influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, drawing inspiration from them for its theological revolution [13, p. 299]. It's important to note that Christian theology has always interacted with philosophy to some extent, whether during the period of the Apostolic Fathers, the Reformation, or the publication of Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans.

Having highlighted several controversial points regarding the use of the term «Dialectical theology» and the near absence of «Protestant existentialism» in research literature, we will now define this movement and analyze its historical development. As mentioned earlier, Protestant existentialism is one form of Christian existentialism, alongside Catholic and Orthodox versions. It unites thinkers who belonged to Lutheranism (Søren Kierkegaard, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Friedrich Gogarten, the Niebuhr brothers, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and the Reformed Church (Eduard Thurneysen, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner).

It is important to note that Protestant existentialism was never a homogeneous movement. Karl Barth was a preacher and theologian, Rudolf Bultmann a biblical scholar, Paul Tillich, a philosopher, Emil Brunner, a theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor and dissident, Friedrich Gogarten, a professor of theology at several German universities, Eduard Thurneysen, a cleric of the Reformed Church, and the Niebuhr brothers, social activists and political thinkers in the United States. Nevertheless, a number of common themes unite these thinkers. First and foremost is a critique of nineteenth-century liberal theology, with its anthropocentric orientation, as well as a broader disillusionment with the rationalism and moralism characteristic of the modern era. It is also important to note that, in its historical development, Protestant existentialism passed through two main stages:

1. A formative period associated with the work of Søren Kierkegaard (the first half of the nineteenth century);
2. A phase of conceptual development and consolidation as a distinct intellectual movement in the 1920 s.

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is widely regarded as the founder of Protestant existentialism. Although he was rooted in the Lutheran tradition, he was also one of its most uncompromising critics. The central ideas in Karl Barth's early work, for example, were formed under the direct influence of Kierkegaard. The same can be said of other representatives of Protestant existentialism.

The question thus arises as to why Kierkegaard became so profoundly influential for Protestant existentialists in the twentieth century. According to Paul Tillich, Kierkegaard combined Lutheran pietism of the revivalist type – including the orthodox doctrinal content of revivalism – with categories derived from Schelling's existential philosophy [17, s. 134]. Tillich also offers a valuable insight into the period during which Kierkegaard's thought was rediscovered in the early twentieth century. He

recalls: «I remember with pride how, as students of theology in Halle, we came into contact with Kierkegaard's thought through translations produced by an isolated individual in Württemberg. In the years 1905 – 1907, we were seized by Kierkegaard» [17, s.134].. Furthermore, Tillich identifies three reasons for Kierkegaard's enduring influence. First, Kierkegaard's religious writings, he argues, «are as valid today as they were when they were written». Second, Kierkegaard served as «an inspiration for dialectical theology, later called neo-orthodoxy». Third, he became «an inspiration for Heidegger, who gave the name existentialism to the entire movement that derives from Kierkegaard» [17, s. 135].

Another prominent Protestant existentialist, Friedrich Gogarten, explains Kierkegaard's impact in the following way. In his book «Der Mensch zwischen Gott und Welt», he writes: «Kierkegaard was, after all, a passionate thinker and possessed a passionate concern for intellectual integrity; such a disposition can also be found among theologians, and it need not harm their theology – even though, it must be admitted, it thereby becomes a dangerous undertaking. I would say that precisely because Kierkegaard took up the task just indicated, namely, of distinguishing the historical and intellectual sediments surrounding the Christian faith from the faith itself, he arrived, in contrast to the inherited philosophical tradition, at entirely new insights into human existence» [8, s. 156]. According to Gogarten, these insights were subsequently taken up by what is known as existential philosophy, which explains Kierkegaard's powerful impact on philosophy. For theologians, however, this remains philosophy – and indeed it is. Yet only a short-sighted mode of thinking would draw from this the conclusion that it is therefore irrelevant for theology [8, s. 156].

Undoubtedly, Kierkegaard's tremendous impact can be seen in Karl Barth's most renowned work, «The Epistle to the Romans». In the preface to the second edition, Barth observes: «If I have a 'system, it consists of the following: whenever possible, I always take into account what Kierkegaard called the «infinite qualitative difference» between time and eternity. «God is in heaven, and you are on earth» » [2, s.xii]. Barth further clarifies this dialectical formula as expressing the relationship of this God to this human being and the relationship of this human being to this God. According to Barth, this theme constitutes both the central subject of the Bible and the sum of philosophy. Indeed, Barth explains that philosophers refer to this crisis of human knowledge as the first cause.

Renowned American theologians Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson assess the impact of the Danish «rebel» Kierkegaard in the following way: «He minted the coins that became current in dialectical and existential theology: «infinite qualitative difference», «the moment», «incognito», «paradox», «encounter», and the like. They were calculated to break the Christological hold of both absolute idealism and positivistic historicism. Faith needs no external props or authorities to gain access to the living Christ of the Bible. External assurances, they argue, can at most provide only «approximate» certainty – too weak a foundation for the hope of eternal life. Faith must overcome the objective uncertainty of the brute historical fact that the God-man appeared as a particular person in the past, that the eternal God has entered historical time. That eternity has entered time without canceling it is a paradox that can be believed only in its offensiveness» [3, p. 10].

Such an appraisal is valid to a considerable extent. There is little doubt that Kierkegaard can be regarded as a founding figure of Protestant existentialism and, more broadly, of existentialism as such. That Kierkegaard was a pioneer of Christian existentialism is a common assessment of all scholars of his views. At the same time, we believe that the formation of Protestant existentialism is not limited to his influence alone. And as Roger Olson rightly notes, Neo-orthodoxy's relationship to existentialism is not absolute or monolithic, but the rediscovery of Kierkegaard's thought helped shape neo-orthodoxy, dialectical theology, at least in its beginnings in the period immediately following World War I That was a time of tremendous pessimism, especially in Europe, about the project of modernity [13, p. 300].

As for other influences on Protestant existentialists, one may point to such thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, Karl Marx, Edmund Husserl, Ernst Troeltsch, Martin Heidegger, and others. This list is, of course, far from exhaustive, since tracing such lines of influence is inherently difficult; for this reason, a degree of generalization and, at times, a deductive approach is unavoidable. In this regard, the assessment of the contemporary researcher in existential theology, Hue Woodson, is particularly instructive: he notes that both Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche exerted an equally

significant influence on existentialism and existential theology [22, p. 1–2]. This influence is also acknowledged by Paul Tillich, who, in his 1944 article «Existential Philosophy», traces the genesis of existential philosophy back to Schelling's winter lectures of 1841–1842 at the University of Berlin – lectures that Kierkegaard himself also attended [16, p. 355]. In the same article, Tillich does not single out a specifically Protestant form of existentialism, instead confining his discussion to the religious strand of existential philosophy, of which Søren Kierkegaard was a prominent representative. Tillich further notes that the Danish thinker did not claim to be a philosopher, even though his writings clearly reveal an implicit engagement with philosophical reflection. As a religious thinker, Kierkegaard encountered opposition from a church that had become «bourgeois» in both theory and practice. He affirmed his radical Christian faith solely in terms of absolute paradox and passionate personal commitment. As a philosophical thinker, he developed a «dialectical» psychology that made a significant contribution to anti-rationalist and anti-mechanistic approaches to the interpretation of human nature [16, p. 373].

Finally, it is worth quoting one of the most perceptive scholars of existentialism, John Macquarrie, who observes in his work «Existentialism» that «one might say that, among many of the existentialists, elements from their religious or cultural heritages coalesced with their existentialism or even supplied the initial impulse toward it. In spite of Kierkegaard's increasingly severe criticisms of Luther, his existentialism is in fact inseparable from his Protestantism. Martin Buber's philosophy is intertwined with the Hasidic tradition of Judaism. The existentialism of Dostoevsky and Berdyaev is deeply rooted in the spirit of Russian Orthodoxy. Unamuno's attachment to Don Quixote and to the quixotic more generally is as Spanish as it is existentialist. The rich diversity among these thinkers reflects the diversity of backgrounds out of which they responded to their philosophical vocations» [10, p.7].

Roger Olson, whom we have already mentioned, offers an assessment very similar to that of John Macquarrie, noting that original existentialism was less a philosophy *per se* than a Christian protest against cultural Protestantism. In a certain sense, existentialism functioned as an anti-philosophy – especially if «philosophy» is defined as the rational investigation of ultimate reality (metaphysics) or as a secular account of knowledge grounded in reason alone (epistemology) [13, p.299].

**Conclusions.** In summarizing our brief examination of the historical origins of Protestant existentialism, several key points may be highlighted. First, the term itself has not been sufficiently articulated in the scholarly literature and is often subsumed under the more familiar category of «Christian existentialism». Second, within theological discourse one frequently encounters the terms «Dialectical Theology» and, at times, «Neo-Orthodoxy», which, in our view, are unable to encompass adequately the highly diverse group of thinkers in question. For this reason, the term we propose – «Protestant existentialism» – appears more balanced and precise in describing the religious and philosophical movement whose leading figures included Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Eduard Thurneysen, the Niebuhr brothers, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Third, Protestant existentialism passed through two principal stages of development: its formative origins in the nineteenth century and its conceptual consolidation in the 1920s. Fourth, the historical emergence of Protestant existentialism can be understood, on the one hand, as a reaction against modern rationalism and, on the other, as the result of a complex constellation of intellectual influences, among which the most significant were Schelling's German Idealism, Nietzsche's philosophy of life, neo-Kantianism, Dilthey's hermeneutics, Husserl's phenomenology, and Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Overall, Protestant existentialism emerged largely as a response to the theological and cultural processes that had been unfolding within Protestantism since the Enlightenment.

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## ІСТОРИЧНІ ВИТОКИ ПРОТЕСТАНТСЬКОГО ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІАЛІЗМУ

**Актуальність проблеми.** Термін «християнський екзистенціалізм» уже тривалий час існує в науковій літературі, однак його внутрішня диференціація досі не стала предметом систематичного аналізу. У зв'язку з цим у статті пропонується розглядати християнський екзистенціалізм на рівні конфесійного поділу – католицького, православного та протестантського, кожен із яких формувався у власному конфесійному й культурному контексті. Особливої уваги потребує дослідження протестантської форми екзистенціалізму, яка пройшла тривалий і складний шлях розвитку, сформувавшись значною мірою як реакція на богословські та культурні процеси, що відбувалися в межах протестантизму, починаючи з доби Просвітництва.

**Мета.** З огляду на специфіку теми дослідження, основною метою статті є виявлення ключових етапів формування та розвитку протестантського екзистенціалізму.

**Методи та езультати дослідження.** Зважаючи на те, що концепт протестантського екзистенціалізму залишається недостатньо артикульованим у науковій літературі, у статті як основний методологічний підхід застосовано принцип історизму. Це дало змогу простежити витоки та еволюцію протестантського екзистенціалізму. У своєму розвитку він пройшов два основні етапи: період формування у XIX столітті та концептуального оформлення у 1920-х роках XX століття. Історичне виникнення протестантського екзистенціалізму, з одного боку, можна розглядати як реакцію на модерний раціоналізм, а з іншого – як результат складної сукупності інтелектуальних впливів, якого він зазнав від німецького ідеалізму Ф. Шеллінга, філософії життя Ф. Ніцше, неокантіанства, герменевтики В. Дільтея, феноменології Е. Гуссерля та фундаментальної онтології М. Гайдеггера. Хоча протестантський екзистенціалізм не був однорідним явищем, він об'єднав мислителів двох основних традицій – лютеранської (Сьорен К'єркегор, Рудольф Бультман, Пауль Тілліх, Фрідріх Гогартен, брати Нібури та Дітріх Бонгегффер) та реформатської (Едуард Турнейсен, Карл Барт та Еміль Бруннер), – які брали активну участь у соціальних і політичних процесах 1920 – 1930-х років.

**Ключові слова:** протестантський екзистенціалізм, екзистенціалізм, діалектична теологія, протестантизм, християнський екзистенціалізм, Сьорен К'єркегор.

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