

Origin of the “Leap of Faith”

by Carlton McLemore

In regards to the idea of a “leap of faith”, I have submitted the following excerpt from Francis A. Schaeffer’s *The God Who Is There* (30th anniversary ed., 1998 Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968). Before I can adequately address Schaeffer’s handling of the “leap of faith”, I must first provide a little background information on Schaeffer’s thesis, the line of despair. This requires a little wading through history, as well as large amounts of quoted material. For this I apologize.

Schaeffer argues that in Europe before 1890 and the U.S. before 1935, westerners all accepted the idea of absolutes and antithesis (direct opposition of contrast between two things. As in “joy” which is the antithesis of “sorrow”). Schaeffer writes:

The use of classical apologetics before this shift took place was effective only because non-Christians were functioning, on the surface, on the same presuppositions, even if they had an inadequate base for them. In classical apologetics though, presuppositions were rarely analyzed, discussed or taken into account. So if a man got up to preach the gospel and said, “Believe this, it is true,” those who heard would have said, “Well, if that is so, then its opposite is false.” The presupposition of antithesis pervaded men’s entire mental outlook. We must not forget that historic Christianity stands on a basis of antithesis. Without it, historic Christianity is meaningless. The basic antithesis is that God objectively exists in contrast (in antithesis) to his not existing. Which of these two are the reality, changes everything in the area of knowledge and morals in the whole of life.

Remember, even secular men lived with a romantic notion of absolutes (though with no sufficient logical basis). However, after 1890 in Europe and 1935 in the U.S., all is changed. Schaeffer calls this line between these dates the line of despair.

Europe before 1890 and the U.S. before 1935

Europe after 1890 and the U.S. after 1935

This side of the line, all is changed. Man thinks differently concerning truth. Schaeffer:

The line of despair indicates a titanic shift at this present time within the unity of rationalism (any philosophy or system of thought that begins with man alone, in order to try to find a unified meaning to life). Above the line, people were rationalistic optimists. They believed they could begin with themselves and draw a circle which would encompass all thoughts of life and life itself without having to depart from the logic of antithesis. They thought that own their own, rationalistically, finite people could find a unity within the total diversity – an adequate explanation for the whole of reality. This is where philosophy stood prior to our own era. The only real argument between these rationalistic optimists concerned what circle should be drawn. One person would draw a

circle and say, “You can live within this circle.” The next person would cross it out and would draw a different circle. The next person would come along and, crossing out the previous circle, draw his own – *ad infinitum* . So if you start to study philosophy by pursuing the history of philosophy, by the time you are through with all these circles, each one of which has been destroyed by the next, you may feel like jumping off London Bridge!

But at a certain point this attempt to spin out a unified optimistic humanism came to an end. The philosophers came to the conclusion that they were not going to find a *unified* rationalistic circle that would contain all thought, and in which they could live. It was as though the rationalist suddenly realized that he was trapped in a large room with no doors and no windows, nothing but complete darkness. From the middle of the room he would feel his way to the walls and begin to look for an exit. He would go round the circumference, and then the terrifying truth would dawn on him that there was no exit, no exit at all! *In the end the philosophers came to the realization that they could not find this unified rationalistic circle and so, departing from the classical methodology of antithesis, they shifted the concept of truth, and modern man was born.* (Emphasis in original)

In this way modern man moved under the line of despair. He was driven to it against his desire. He remained a rationalist, but he had changed. Do we Christians understand this shift in the contemporary world? If we do not understand it, then we are largely talking to ourselves.

Schaeffer further elaborates that this line of despair is not thought of as a simple horizontal line but as a staircase:

THE LINE OF DESPAIR

1. PHILOSOPHY

2. ART

3. MUSIC

4. GENERAL CULTURE

5. THEOLOGY

Each of the steps represent a certain stage in time. The higher is earlier, the lower later. It was in this order that the shift in truth affected men’s lives.

The shift spread gradually, and in three different ways. People did not suddenly wake up one morning and find that it had permeated everywhere at once.

First of all it spread geographically. The ideas began in Germany and spread outward. They affected the Continent first, then crossed the Channel to England, and then the Atlantic to America. Second, it spread through society, from the real intellectual to the more educated, down to the workers, reaching the middle class last of all. Third, it spread as represented in the diagram, from one discipline to another, beginning with the

philosophers and ending with the theologians. Theology has been last for a long time. It is curious to me, in studying this whole cultural drift, that so many pick up the latest theological fashion and hail it as something new. *But in fact, what the new theology is now saying has already been said previously in each of the other disciplines.* (Emphasis in original)

After dealing with Kant and Hegel (to whom Schaeffer attributes the opening of the door of the line of despair), he then considers the first man to move below the line. He is the subject of our present discussion.

KIERKEGAARD AND HIS “LEAP OF FAITH”

It is often said that Soren Kierkegaard, the Dane (1813-1855), is the father of all modern thinking.

And so he is. He is the father of modern existential thinking, both secular and theological thinking. Why is it that Kierkegaard can so aptly be thought of as the father of both? What proposition did he add to the flow of thought that made the difference? Kierkegaard led to the conclusion that you could not arrive at synthesis by reason. Instead, you achieve everything of real importance by a leap of faith.

Kierkegaard was a complex man, and his writings, especially his devotional writings, are often very helpful. For example, the Bible believing Christians in Denmark still use these devotional writings. We can also be totally sympathetic to his outcry about the deadness of much of the church in his day. However, in his more philosophical writings he did become the father of modern thought. This turns upon his writing of Abraham and the “sacrifice” of Isaac. Kierkegaard said this was an act of faith with nothing rational to base it on or to which to relate it. Out of this came the modern concept of a “leap of faith” and the total separation of the rational and faith.

In this thinking concerning Abraham, Kierkegaard had not read the Bible carefully enough. Before Abraham was asked to move toward the sacrifice of Isaac (which, of course, God did not allow to be consummated), he had much propositional revelation from God, he had seen God, God had fulfilled promises to him. In short, God’s words at this time were in the context of Abraham’s strong reasons for knowing that God both existed and was totally trustworthy.

This does not minimize Abraham’s faith shown in the long march to Mt. Moriah and all the rest, but it certainly was not a “leap of faith” separated from rationality.

I do not think Kierkegaard would be happy, or would agree, with that which has developed from his thinking in either secular or religious existentialism. But what he wrote gradually led to the absolute separation of the rational and logical from faith.

The reasonable and faith bear no relationship to each other, like this:

FAITH (NONREASON-OPTIMISM)

THE RATIONAL (PESSIMISM)

It is not our purpose here to discuss all that Kierkegaard taught. There was much more than this. *But the important thing about him is that when he put forth the concept of a leap of faith, he became in a real way the father of all modern existential thought, both secular and theological.* (Emphasis in original)

As a result of this, from that time on, if rationalistic man wants to deal with the really important things of human life (such as purpose, significance, the validity of love), he must discard rational thought about them and make a gigantic, nonrational leap of faith. The rationalistic framework had failed to produce an answer on the basis of reason, and so all hope of a uniform field of knowledge had to be abandoned. We get the resulting dichotomy like this:

THE NONRATIONAL AND NON LOGICAL	Existential Experience; the final experience; the first order experience
THE RATIONAL AND LOGICAL	Only particulars, no purpose, no meaning. Man is a machine.

Once we appreciate the development of modern philosophy in this way, we may note that though there appear to be many forms of philosophy today, in reality there are very few. They have a uniform cast about them. For example, if you listened to the defining philosophy as taught in Cambridge, and then turn to the existentialism of, say, Karl Jaspers, you might think there was no unity between them. But this is not so. There is one basic agreement in almost all of the chairs of philosophy today, and that is a radical denial of the possibility of drawing a circle which will encompass all. In this sense the philosophies of today can be called in all seriousness antiphilosophies.

I find it rather fascinating that modern fundamentalist churches are the most vocal about this idea of a leap of a faith, apart from reason, while reviling the very philosophies and worldly systems that have spawned them. It is very similar to the Calvinists and Reformationists defense of “Sola Scriptura” while espousing doctrines rooted in ancient Greek paganism and Gnosticism. We have not obeyed the apostle’s injunction to “keep ourselves unspotted from the world” but instead have conformed ourselves to it.