

Guide to Adventist Theologians, 2

# Jean Zurcher: Philosopher of Man

by James J. Londis

One gets to theology the way one gets to Rome: all roads lead there. Questions in history, literature, psychology, philosophy—any field you wish to name—terminate ultimately in the question of God.

As Ron Walden points out in his article on Edward Vick,<sup>1</sup> until recently biblical studies has been, among Seventh-day Adventists, the most popular theological discipline. In the last three decades, however, the once-small number educated in systematic theology and philosophy has expanded.

One of the first Adventists to earn a doctorate in philosophy was Jean Zurcher, a Swiss theologian virtually unknown to American Adventists until the late sixties and whose contribution, even today, is appreciated by relatively few. This is, in part, because Zurcher's major published work is his erudite dissertation on the nature and destiny of man, intelligible only to those conversant with the language, history and ambiance of philosophy. Because many Seventh-day Adventist colleges do not teach philosophy

courses, Zurcher's creative work does not inform Adventist theology as it might. Even the Adventist publishing houses rejected his dissertation on the grounds that potential readership was too small.

In this article, I hope to examine Zurcher's contribution to Adventist theology by highlighting the two central motifs of his thought: 1) the inadequacy of the dualistic view of man in the philosophical tradition, and 2) the contrasting existential character of biblical thought about man. Before I plunge into this major task, let me tell you a little about Jean Zurcher.

He was born September 30, 1918 in a farm home constructed in 1589 on the shores of Switzerland's Lake Biel and now protected by the historical department of the government. Reared by religious parents, Zurcher believed the Bible to be the word of God. He eventually found his way, fortuitously, to the French Adventist Seminary at Collonges-sous-Salève. Though ignorant about Adventists when he arrived, three weeks into the school term at the close of a week of prayer he responded to an appeal to accept the Seventh-day Adventist message. He was seventeen.

Between 1934 and 1940, he prepared himself for the ministry, and in 1941 began work

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toward a master's degree in history and philosophy at the University of Geneva. This appetizer in philosophy made Zurcher eager for the full meal of the doctoral program, during which he won both the Humbert Prize in Philosophy for an essay entitled "The Philosophy of Louis Lavelle," and the Jean-Louis Claparède Prize for the best paper submitted on "Education for Peace." Noted psychologist Jean Piaget, a member of the jury which awarded Zurcher this second honor, offered to publish the manuscript in a series he was sponsoring. By this time, however, Zurcher was leaving on his first mission assignment for Madagascar and felt compelled to decline Piaget's invitation, not the last occasion when he would subordinate scholarly achievement to the needs of the church for his services.

Later, his doctoral research earned so many accolades from Genevan scholars that it was published in a distinguished theological collection that included works by eminent theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Oscar Cullmann.

Graduating with his doctorate in 1946, Zurcher returned to Madagascar and the islands of the Indian Ocean where he labored until 1958. After a short period of study and teaching in the United States, he accepted a call to be president of the French Adventist Seminary where he served until 1970 when

he became secretary of the Southern European Division (now the Euro-Africa Division), the position he currently occupies.

During his seminary presidency, Zurcher's dissertation on man was translated from French into English by Mabel Bartlett of Atlantic Union College. It was later published by the Philosophical Library in New York, under the title, *Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Zurcher pursued a degree in philosophy because he wanted to learn how to think, and because he realized that much creative theological growth has its roots in the philosophers. His love of the Bible, Zurcher says, motivated him to master Plato and Aristotle. To him, theology and philosophy, while different in some fundamental respects, do not have to be antithetical; in fact, should not be. They are brothers, and as such exhibit both the fondness and rivalry of close siblings.

To appreciate Zurcher's contribution to Adventist theology, let us look first at the similarities between philosophy and theology and then at their differences. Both ask what is real (metaphysics) and seek a consistent and coherent answer. Both are concerned about the problem of *knowing* reality (epistemology) and the implications of a par-

## Zurcher: Selected Writings

Jean Zurcher has written numerous articles, in French, German, English and other languages, for various Seventh-day Adventist magazines. Among his scholarly publications are the following:

### Articles:

"Christian View of Man, I," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 2, 1964, pp. 156-68.

"Christian View of Man, II," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1965, pp. 66-83.

"Christian View of Man, III," *Andrews*

*University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1966, pp. 89-103.

### Books:

*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1967. This was translated from *L'homme, sa nature et sa destinee*, Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1953.

*Christian Perfection as Taught in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy*, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1967. This was translated from *La Perfection chrétienne, dans la Bible et l'Esprit de Prophétie*, Paris: Dammarie-les Lys, 1965.

ticular understanding of reality for human achievement (arts, culture and sciences) and behavior (ethics).

But there are differences. Christian theology bases its work on at least two assumptions: 1) An infinite, personal deity exists, and 2) He has revealed, and continues to reveal, Himself. Traditional philosophy bases its work on assumptions about the rationality of the universe and the importance that human reason, despite the mysteries of existence, pierce through to that rationality.<sup>2</sup> These assumptions, it should be noted, call into question *all* the assumptions undergirding other disciplines, including those of theology, and demand that their “reasonableness” be shown.

Thus, for example, the philosopher asks of the theologian: “How do you know *your* God is the reality we both seek?” Of the scientist he asks: “How do you *know* there is a cause-and-effect relation between natural phenomena?” Of the artist: “What is beauty? Define it for me.” Of the ethicist: “What is the good or the right you talk so much about, presupposing it is real?” Whenever a theologian, scientist or artist attempts to answer such questions about his presuppositions, he is, strictly speaking, doing *philosophy* of religion, *philosophy* of science, and *philosophy* of art. Such queries challenge the rationality of the enterprise as a *whole*.

Now, if a philosopher and a theologian are defined by their concerns, Zurcher is both, yet his training and most noted accomplishments are in philosophy. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that Zurcher’s book on man is the most profound philosophical accomplishment of any Seventh-day Adventist. Not restricted to the critical analysis of what others have done, it is a constructive work exploring new territory.

Addressed to a secular audience, the book puts muscle and sinew on the methodology Zurcher describes in skeletal form in his master’s thesis on existentialism. There he sees man’s immediate experience of himself, rather than his mediated experience of the external world, as the proper starting point for philosophical reflection. Concomitantly, emotions are not less real or significant for knowledge than are measurable observa-

tions. This approach forces the philosopher to pay attention to human feelings and to find ways to capture the “essence” of experiences, even as the scientist tries to penetrate the composition of blood cells. In Zurcher’s opinion, then, to unravel the mystery of human existence requires an “existential” method.

The term “existentialism,” precisely stipulated, provides a corrective to classical philosophy which defines man as a being “gifted with reason.” (To Zurcher, existentialism is neither the fashionable bohemianism of the sixties nor the Sartrean attitude of despair. These offshoots of what Zurcher terms genuine existentialism descend from atheists such as Heidegger, while authentic existentialism, according to Zurcher, springs from Sören Kierkegaard and is Christian, not atheistic, in orientation.) To an existentialist, man is the being who cares, suffers and decides; not merely the being who thinks. To define man as reason is to universalize him, to emphasize what he has in common with all men. Such a perspective minimizes human freedom, which underscores the individual’s personal uniqueness. The difference between existentialism and classical philosophy, then, is the difference between defining a man on the basis of characteristics he shares with all

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men and defining him on the basis of his own unique memories.

Existentialists encapsulate their concern in a motto: Existence precedes essence. “Essence” is *what* I am; “existence” is *that* I am. If my essence (what I am) precedes my existence (that I am), I am defined by something preexistent: a soul, perhaps, a spark of divine intelligence, or some universal concept of

human nature of which I am an individual example. According to this view, all are cut from the same pattern, with their similarities rather than their differences defining them. In existentialism, however, I exist before I have an identity; I come from nothing. After I exist, I must choose what I will become each day I live. This choice is not once-for-all but continual. "Existence" means engaging life passionately and freely; to be is to act and not merely to think.

Curiously, when I think *about* myself, when I freeze a frame in the moving picture of my life in order to study it, I stop existing; that is, the analyzing of myself means I cannot simultaneously make the decisions which create existence. At the moment I begin studying myself, I turn myself—a deciding subject—into an object, much as the photographer taking a self-portrait is transformed into the picture or object. I cannot be both subject and object at the same time. If, therefore, I am a subject (actor, analyzer) rather than an object (that which is acted upon or analyzed), I can encounter my own reality only in living situations, not in abstract self-study. Thinking about myself never yields self-understanding at the philosophical level.

Zurcher says that this existentialist perspective possesses profound spiritual value for Christians. Man is seen as a tangible being, not an abstraction. It is his life as it is *lived*, not merely the life of thought, that is ultimately important. This applies even to the act of knowing. Accurate ideas alone do not constitute knowledge; one must also possess the proper attitude. When dealing with important issues, for example, the apostle Paul contrasts the uselessness of the theoretical with the value of the practical in knowledge. And from the point of view of Christian truth, practical knowledge is communicated better through personal testimony than through reason, for testimony affects the inner man more directly and summons him out of the neutrality of abstract thought into the necessary decisiveness of concrete action. This is why stories and testimonies play a major role in Christian revelation. The Gospel writers are not so

concerned with proof in the abstract sense as with arousing interest and summoning decisions; they attempt to persuade men to believe in Jesus Christ on the basis of their testimony. In a similar vein, when Kant argues for God's existence on the basis of his own inner moral experience rather than on the abstract power of the ontological argument, he is largely relying on testimony rather than on logic.

In his book Zurcher relates his existentialist methodology to the belief in the immortality of the soul in the Western intellectual tradition. Theologians Oscar Cullmann and Reinhold Niebuhr had already done seminal work on this problem, primarily from the biblical point of view; Zurcher goes on to deal with Plato and the Greek tradition which spawned the notion of immortality on the basis of their own presuppositions and methodologies. For Zurcher, an intellectual solution to an intellectual problem is critical; confession of biblical faith in the nonimmortality doctrine cannot by itself expose the intrinsic falsity of the immortality view in philosophy. (Some may wonder why the question of man's nature is so prominent in Zurcher's mind. Beyond those reasons familiar to Seventh-day Adventists, such as the dangers of spiritualism and the faith-destroying doctrine of an eternally burning hell, the proper understanding of man can also shape attitudes toward education, abortion, euthanasia and divine providence.)

Because we are gifted with self-consciousness, Zurcher believes we can enter and know ourselves in ways we cannot know others on the basis of observation. We can enter our own beings at their very source, at the moment of self-creation through decision. This, however, poses a question: If an unmediated experience of our inner lives is the basis of self-knowledge, why is there not more agreement about man's nature? Zurcher gives two reasons: 1) the complexity of conscious life, and 2) the difference between knowing a reality in constant flux (a self in action) and knowing one that never changes (the table in my room). Merely to choose to study ourselves changes us, making self-knowledge difficult if not impossible. At best, we grasp ourselves deciding; we

do not grasp what we have become because we have decided. Further, self-knowledge obliges us to turn ourselves into objects and leave the sphere of direct experience. Our feelings and ideas are criticized and analyzed as if they belonged to someone else, as if they were in the picture rather than in the photographer.

Zurcher contends that it is when that “externalizing-of-ourselves” method for self-knowledge is turned into a model for man’s *being* that we unwittingly repeat the mistake which accounts for the persistence of dualism in Western thought. An artificial act of putting ourselves into the realm of “others” is turned into a doctrine that there must be two realities: the one that is known (the other, the body) and the one that knows (the mind, the self, the soul). This subtle confusion explains why Plato and most subsequent thinkers assumed human nature to be dualistic. To account for the phenomenon of man’s knowing himself as an object, the Greeks posited two discontinuous entities—body and soul—which they thought had a certain interdependence, to be sure, but which were in all essential respects separate.

Zurcher spies the source of the Platonic confusion in the Socratic precept “Know

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thyself,” symbolized by the myth of Narcissus, who lovingly contemplated his image in the water as if it were a reality distinct from himself. His attempt to know himself is futile, the failure producing doubt that there is an essential unity in man. Aristotle sensed this weakness in Plato’s analysis and provided a new conception of man based on different principles and methods. He began

not with the separation of body and soul but with their union, and argued that the differences between the two are abstractions from their concrete unity. Aristotle’s method is existential in this respect: He insists on paying attention to realities as they are presented to us in experience, allowing experience to form ideas, rather than the converse. Man experiences himself as a whole, not as a body and a soul. Zurcher thinks that at this point Aristotle clearly surpassed his teacher Plato on the doctrine of man.

**I**t is nevertheless true that, viewed from certain perspectives, we appear to be interior and exterior, mind and body, two entities in one person. Zurcher tries to show that this experienced duality is not the essence but the structure of our reality. Our reality consists in the synthesizing of two principles which together constitute a human being in time and space. This means that both the body and the spirit make a man a living personality (or “soul” as the Scriptures use the term in Genesis 2:7). If separated from each other, only a disembodied “idea” or a formless “matter” remain. When we see Michelangelo’s David, for example, we see an idea of young manhood (the “spirit” or “soul”) fused with a block of marble (the “matter” or “body”). Only in thought can we separate one from the other; in reality they are experienced as one. To destroy either the idea or the matter in the sculpture is to destroy the sculpture as a whole.

If we are correct in experiencing ourselves, during the decision-making process, as a unity, then we can be sure that no plan has been built into us *ab initio*; no divine script is programming our days. If existence precedes essence, then liberty defines man; it is his uniqueness and destiny. For Adventists, this means that the cliché, “God has a plan for your life”—if incorrectly understood—can actually interfere with God’s plan for your life. If it means that God has already selected your college and university, chosen your career and arranged for your mate, and your task is to play guessing games with Him concerning what He has willed, then Zurcher would say the person cannot grow in God’s

image. As Zurcher sees it, God's plan exists only in a general way in which we conform to love and truth in our choices and are courageous with our freedom. We are to use our freedom to become even more free. Any teaching or practice, therefore, which minimizes or diminishes human freedom is at cross-purposes with the will of God.

Conforming to love and truth in decision-making is another way of saying that law is important to liberty. Our freedom is never infinite. We must choose some model we wish to emulate, some purpose we wish to realize. We thus limit our choices to those which accomplish our objective; and if we conform to love and truth in that process, we are obeying the law. The infinite possibilities before us reveal how impoverished we are of ourselves and that we must place ourselves under law in order to discipline ourselves to reach the ideal. Rebellion against law annihilates liberty; submission to law ensures it.

In Zurcher's opinion, this is the scriptural view of man. The concluding chapters of his book portray the biblical doctrine of man as the one nearest to the Aristotelian philosophy, able to account for man's experience of himself in certain contexts as a unity and in other contexts as a duality. (These chapters on the Bible created some controversy on his doctoral committee, he once confided to me, for some of the professors felt they were out of place in a philosophical essay. Nevertheless, they were allowed to stand.) To the experience of dualism inherent in attempting to know oneself, the Bible adds a moral dualism of struggle between spirit and flesh which also may be mistaken for a dualism of being. However, Christ's redemptive power frees us from this struggle and enables us to change the course of our existence. Starting with the intelligence, the Holy Spirit subdues the *whole* person: even the body is transformed into the Spirit's temple.

Scripturally, then, man's existence precedes his essence; with respect to man, the Bible is existentialist through and through. According to Zurcher, what ambiguity about man that resides in the Bible, especially the New Testament, originates from the writer's dependence on philosophical terms

popular in Hellenism to convey Hebrew insights. Synthesis, not duality, is the natural tendency of the Semitic spirit, reality being conceived as a unity. Failure to appreciate this thrust distorts the biblical picture of man. Man's life is so united to his body that he cannot exist consciously beyond death without it. There must be a resurrection.

I believe the foregoing fairly summarizes the major contribution of Jean Zurcher. Nevertheless, there are some nagging problems to be resolved. If man is truly free, able to make decisions that transcend the cause-and-effect matrix in which the brain exists, then the will and the mind must in some sense transcend the body. On the other hand, if deciding and thinking are so immanent in the physical that the deterministic explanations of some experimental psychologists are true, then we seem to have destroyed the freedom necessary for ethics and religion. Further study needs to be made on the relationship between behavioral determinism and existential freedom and dignity.

Zurcher expatiates on the same themes in his book, *Perfection in the Writings of the Bible and Ellen White*, as he did in his dissertation. Man's choices constitute his essence or character; the possibility exists of infinite development in freedom and love. He shows that in the Bible and Ellen White, righteousness is relational, not intrinsic. For Zurcher, perfection in scripture cannot be "absolute" in the Greek sense of the term because man will grow morally and religiously through eternity. (Had this book been more widely read during the Brinsmead controversy, the dehumanizing effects of absolutism in perfection might have been exposed.)

With respect to other Seventh-day Adventist scholarship on the nature of man, Zurcher has spoken highly of Leroy Froom's *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* as a major encyclopedic contribution rather than as a theological and philosophical work. His only concern about the material centers on Froom's insistence that the spirit which returns to God at death is an entity of some sort, even if not a conscious one. In Zurcher's mind, such a view lapses into essentialism

and is not ultimately true to the tenor of Adventist theology.

Zurcher's existentialist approach to man is one pole of a continuing informal discussion within the Adventist theological community. One group of scholars tends to be "existential" on the relation between faith and evidence, while the other group grants reason and evidence a more prominent role in the religious quest. Few of the disagreements, if any, are tests of fellowship among us. They are issues concerning theologians as theologians, not theologians as believers.

This is as it should be. Zurcher, along with other Seventh-day Adventist scholars, is concerned that matters of opinion, as important as they often are, not become matters of faith, creating schisms at artificial points. The unity we have in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the distinctive beliefs which have carved us uniquely out of the rock of religious history, are greater than such disagreements.

For, in the end, one is a philosopher and a theologian not merely because he has the doctorate to prove it, but because he possesses a spirit of charity toward those who disagree with him and is wise enough to remember that diffidence rather than arrogance should characterize the utterances of a finite man who speaks about the infinite God. For the scholar, no more important virtue can be coveted than giving as much weight to an opponent's argument as one possibly can.

Zurcher's present responsibilities as an administrator have severely curtailed his scholarly work, as did his years as president of the French Adventist Seminary. Yet, he has no regrets. The time he has devoted to students and workers is very satisfying to him. He finds the concrete and experiential just as real and important as the abstract and intellectual. Piety and scholarship, experience and thought: the man Zurcher exemplifies the unity of which he writes.

His *Nature and Destiny of Man* still occasions invitations to speak in Europe's leading universities. In recent years, he has lectured at the University of Strasbourg on Emil Brunner's doctrine of man and at the University of Madrid on his own research (the queen of Spain was in the audience). Little known in America outside the administrative and theological fraternities, Jean Zurcher is nonetheless one of Adventism's ranking theologians. What he has done deserves greater recognition and appreciation from Seventh-day Adventists who are often the last to know their own. In a modest way, this article is one expression of that appreciation.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Edward Vick's Passion for Theology," SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 48-56.
2. Some modern philosophers would deny the rationality of the universe, opting for "absurdity" and "meaninglessness." However, they believe that such a view is the most *reasonable* one available, thus centralizing the role of reason even while they displace it.