

*Breakthrough:  
The Relevance of Christian Existentialism*

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THE CONSERVATIVE PRECINCTS of American life witnessed more than one kind of dissent in the 1950s. While secular liberals fought to keep the spirit of democracy alive, others confronted the second aspect of the problem that Arthur Schlesinger had limned in the late 1940s: the challenge of finding stable values and social forms appropriate to a democratic culture in the “age of anxiety.” To take up this challenge would mean engaging in a kind of cultural dissent, experimenting with new ways of living and thinking. Some young people in 1950s America, fearing anxiety but determined to overcome it, explored in great detail the existentialist outlook that Schlesinger had found attractive but took it in directions that he had not foreseen. By the early 1960s, some of the young existentialists concluded that the way out of anxiety was through disruptive, challenging political activism. This vision of authenticity through dissent led them into the civil rights movement and the new left.

Some of the most politically effective young existentialists offered a relatively acceptable and appealing dissent because they grounded their experientialism in the legitimacy of Protestant evangelicalism. The early cold war was a time of “religious revival,” as some called it, of rising church attendance rates and the ascendancy of evangelical celebrities like the young Billy Graham. Outpourings of the “old-time religion” were noted on college campuses, starting with the upheaval at Wheaton College, outside Chicago,

at the conclusion of World War II. In the 1950s, evangelical groups like the Campus Crusade for Christ won many converts among students. At the University of Texas, conservative Protestantism was the rule, fundamentalism alive and well.<sup>1</sup> Buried deep in the social conservatism of evangelical Protestantism was a latent dissidence, a radical version of this creed's sharp dissatisfaction with contemporary culture. To a minority of young people in the 1950s and 1960s, this latent radicalism came through loud and clear in the highly contemporary form of Christian existentialism.

In the 1950s, students in Austin and elsewhere immersed themselves in the currents of existentialist thought emanating from Europe and circulating throughout the Western world. What emerged from this process by the start of the 1960s was a politicized, seemingly de-Christianized dissident evangelism, a kind of "religionless Christianity," to use the pregnant phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The teachings and example of Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who was executed by the Nazis in 1945 for his involvement in an antigovernment conspiracy, were introduced to young Texans searching for authenticity by Joseph Wesley Mathews, a one-time fundamentalist preacher, at an influential place called the Christian Faith-and-Life Community (CFLC). The CFLC was a residential religious study and training center affiliated with UT. Ronnie Dugger had difficulty making up his mind about Mathews and named him an "inspired merlin . . . genuine, fraud."<sup>2</sup> Others committed to more familiar forms of religiosity and social concern, such as Frank Wright, head of the University Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Austin, always doubted that Mathews and his teachings contributed much to the political ferment of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> But contribute they did.

Many connections linked the Faith-and-Life Community, "one of those robust experiments in community intellectual living that was in such stark contrast to the comfortable campus life of the 1950s," to the political rebellion of the 1960s. Dick Simpson, a liberal activist, agreed that there was "no place else in conservative Texas" quite like "the Community," as its members commonly called it. Simpson was only one of many students who, between 1956 and 1962, resided for some period of time at the Faith-and-Life Community and later became active in civil rights protest and other liberal and radical political activity. Tom Hayden, one of the leading lights of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in its early phase, called the Faith-and-Life Community "the liberated spot on the silent campus" in the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Members of the Community who became active dissidents invariably traveled in the larger orbit of political liberalism around the university. Had it not been for the presence in this environment of secular liberals like

Dugger and Christian liberals like Wright, young people would have been less likely to draw politically dissident inferences from Mathews's existentialism. Existentialism, like the philosophical strains of vitalism and pragmatism that it resembled in some respects, did not in itself imply political engagement of any kind. Yet at this conjuncture of historical circumstances, amid the synthesis of diverse elements in the political culture of the United States, existentialism fed a radical humanism that infused the dissident search for democracy and authenticity.

The crux of the matter was the conviction that one could turn away from anxiety and toward authenticity if one made oneself open to risk; this was the existentialist faith. Although the Community residents spent countless hours discussing the problem of anxiety, in the end they chose a bold stance of freedom, even of mastery, in a changing world. To the combustible chemistry of this historical moment Christian existentialism contributed the hope of breaking through to a new world where young people might find a new, authentic life. Joe Mathews preached a new evangel, drawing on the Protestant tradition of personal regeneration, as fundamentalists did, transforming it into a newly relevant message of rebirth into authenticity. He helped fashion "a message of love, of understanding, of compassion . . . of courage, of gameness."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the spirit of "courage" and "gameness" led to political controversy.

Dugger wondered, "Could it be that Joe knew god but just wasn't introducing him around?"<sup>6</sup> Mathews's theology was unorthodox, but its brash rebellion was calculated to appeal to young people as unmoved by traditional religion as he had become. (This approach found no small success in selling religion: one-tenth of the students who came through the Community reportedly went on to join the clergy.)<sup>7</sup> As existentialist theologians like Rudolf Bultmann had urged, Mathews sought to wrench Christianity out of its ancient trappings and recast it in modern language, symbols, myths, and hopes. Worship, and life itself, became drama. In what the French Catholic thinker Gabriel Marcel called a "broken world," salvation reemerged as therapy.<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ was a symbol of openness to risk and extremity. Believers sought new selves, not as saints transported to the clouds, but in a "New Being" here on earth. One of Mathews's disciples in the early 1960s remarked, "I think the Community is more like the early Church than other groups are today, because the early Church didn't give a goddamn about life after death. Neither do we."<sup>9</sup> Such heterodox adherents sought to fulfill Bonhoeffer's promise of "a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming—as was Jesus' language; it will be a new language of righteousness and truth."<sup>10</sup>

### Building Community

In the beginning, the Faith-and-Life Community seemed like a thoughtful, conservative venture in Protestant campus ministry. The institution's founder was a genial campus Presbyterian minister named W. Jack Lewis. Steeped in local culture as an undergraduate at UT in the 1930s, Lewis had been head cheerleader, or "yeller." He served as a navy chaplain during World War II and returned home to minister to students at Texas Tech College and then at UT. In 1950/1951 he undertook further theological studies in Britain and Europe and encountered the Iona experiment, an intentional Christian community in Scotland. He thought this kind of experiment might speak to contemporary students in a way that conventional campus ministry did not, and he resolved to begin a similar community in Austin.

In 1952 Lewis assembled a prestigious board of directors that provided the CFLC with both official sanction and a springboard into fund-raising. The board included Harry Ransom, as well as Texas businessmen evidently glad to support this kind of Christian endeavor. But the board was mainly composed of prominent theologians at schools across the country, the most illustrious of whom was James I. McCord, who at this time was moving from the Presbyterian Seminary in Austin to the presidency of Princeton Theological Seminary. McCord had been with Lewis in Scotland, and their conversations had urged Lewis on.

Lewis saw the Faith-and-Life Community as part of the movement for "lay renewal" that had spread across western Europe after World War II. This movement, echoing one of the original themes of the Protestant Reformation, emphasized the religious leadership of the laity. It sought to engage laypersons in continuing theological study and to encourage them to relate theology to society. At the CFLC, the "layman" who was to be engaged in religious dialogue was the university student, "that he might be more informed and articulate in his beliefs, with a view toward his becoming a responsible churchman, parent, and citizen in his life and work." The CFLC undertook this lay training, it explained in a communication to other ministers, "for the sake of the renewal of the Church." The CFLC became a model for lay education and campus ministry known around the country and even the world. McCord averred that by the early 1960s, the CFLC had "become known throughout the nation and around the world as a symbol of how Christians might respond to the demands of a new time." Clergy at many other schools, like Duke and Brown Universities and the Universities of Montana and Wisconsin, modeled their own experiments on the CFLC.<sup>11</sup>

According to its charter, the CFLC was open to members of any "Evangelical Christian Communion" or church, thus placing limits on its ecumenism. In its first year it admitted only men, who numbered thirty. They lived together in what was called the "College House," with university approval. In 1953 the Community opened a "Women's Branch," also numbering thirty women, and the "Men's Branch" expanded to forty-five; each branch totaled about fifty in the later years of the experiment. Mildred Hudgins, the CFLC's "den mother," administered the Women's Branch. The women and men lived separately but had joint classes. Judy Schleyer Blanton, a student who lived in the Community around 1960, remembered students there sneaking in and out of bedroom windows, but there is little reason to believe that more sex went on at the CFLC than elsewhere on campus. Women and men ate Friday evening dinner together at the Men's Branch and participated in unified prayer services. All students who chose to join the Community knew they would have to fulfill the normal undergraduate course requirements in addition to their studies at the CFLC. The curriculum here was likely more challenging than what students encountered in most regular classes at the university.<sup>12</sup>

The Community's members persistently described their activities as "corporate." This reflects the cold war concern that people in advanced industrial societies were faced, in this age of anxiety, with the twin dangers of individual isolation and social conformity—conditions that amounted to a recipe for totalitarianism, according to the social thought of the day. Communal experiments like the CFLC, with its written "covenant" enunciating the social commitments of its members, underscored the need to invest social forms with meaning and intentionality in order to prevent them from becoming mindless or oppressive. Claire J. Breihan and O. R. Schmidt, undergraduates who lived at the Women's Branch in the mid-1950s, recall that the corporate discipline of the CFLC was one of its most attractive aspects to them.<sup>13</sup> The Faith-and-Life Community held that it was difficult for individuals to confront a changing world effectively "without the *discipline and sustenance* of corporate structures." Navigating a new world required the development of "new and creative modes of corporate existence," and the Community's members intended to play a part in this work. Where "the struggle" to create such "creative modes" occurs, they said, "there is the breakthrough. There is the future alive in the present." The CFLC searched "toward the development of the new forms that will, God willing, bring meaning into the midst of meaninglessness for countless persons who are trapped between an old world passing away and a new world being born."<sup>14</sup>

The Community officially stated that its experiment in intentional community was both compatible and interdependent with the pursuit of fully developed individuality or autonomous “personality,” to use the term promoted by Paul Tillich, one of the Community’s favored theologians.<sup>15</sup> “Authentic, self-consciously disciplined community does not swallow the individual; it rather creates the very possibility of personhood by pushing the individual against the necessity to decide for himself,” the CFLC’s covenant read. “Genuine participation in the structures of community and authentic individuality are two poles of the same reality.” The higher freedom of the *gemeinschaft* was not supposed to mean conformity. At least some students reported that in practice, life in the Community was animated by a bias “against accommodation for harmony’s sake.” (Others felt differently, as I discuss later.) The capacity to disagree was a mark of the really close relationships that bound a true community. “Let us never forget,” the participants agreed, “that though we are utterly bound by our covenant, we remain free at any time and in any circumstance to break the covenant; never, to be sure, by default in decision but by a self-conscious free resolve made in light of other claims.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet for all the innovation of its formal aspect, between 1952 and 1955, the curriculum at the Community took a “conventional approach,” focusing on Bible and theological studies. Lewis grew disenchanted with this curriculum. “There was no existential ‘bite’ to awaken the student to the relevance of Christian faith to life as he experienced it daily,” he reflected later. The study materials had been “presented from the orthodox and/or dogmatic viewpoint” and therefore “seemed often to demand the acceptance of some constituted authority for their validity.” That Lewis found this problematic indicates the antiauthoritarian direction in which his religious thought already was headed.<sup>17</sup>

Lewis sought new students and new teachers. The criteria for admittance to the Community were radically relaxed: No longer did students need to belong to a church, either Protestant or even Christian. Starting in the fall of 1955, any “inquirer” could apply. Previously, most students, like Claire Breihan, had come from conservative Protestant backgrounds, often fundamentalist. Furthermore, university administrators, professors, and clergy had steered toward the Community many students perceived as campus leaders. Al Lingo, a CFLC undergraduate in the mid-1950s who later returned as a teacher, was a member of the Cowboys, a prestigious UT fraternal organization, as well as a Greek fraternity member in good standing. Fred Buss, another Community member from the late 1950s, was a member of the Deacons, another elite campus men’s group. Now “the

door was open to Catholics, Jews, agnostics, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, and others.”<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, “national, racial, religious, economic, and academic barriers were eliminated” to varying degrees. Most dramatically, the Women’s Branch became the first racially integrated housing on the UT campus in 1954 when it admitted a lone black woman. Residents from the time remember this as a conscious political decision by the group, and it cost the Community some sorely needed financial support. In subsequent years, other black students lived in the Community; one recalls it as “a real enjoyable place to live . . . people were real friendly.” A large number of foreign students lived at the CFLC between 1955 and 1962, one of its most distinguishing features on campus.<sup>19</sup>

Just as important to the Community’s subsequent direction was the appointment in 1956 of Joseph Wesley Mathews as the director of the curriculum. Until he departed for Chicago in 1962, Mathews’s teachings and personality were an omnipresent influence on the character of life and study at the CFLC. McCord recommended Mathews, who was a professor at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and the CFLC’s board unanimously agreed. Although Mathews alienated and hurt at least some of the students he taught, he enraptured others. He acquired disciples and enemies, who found him, respectively, inspirational and authoritarian. He brought the “existential ‘bite’” that Lewis wanted. But Mathews went beyond Lewis—eventually beyond what Lewis could stomach—taking the Community, as one of Mathews’s protégés said, “in a revolutionary direction.”<sup>20</sup>

Joe Mathews started his career as an evangelical preacher with fundamentalist leanings. The son of an Ohio Methodist minister, he went to Hollywood in the 1930s to break into the movies and got saved instead in a Los Angeles revival. He maintained a dramatic flair; his heavy silences, poetic outbursts, and fake stammer in the classroom became legend among his students. With his faith intact, he entered the army as a chaplain during World War II. His experiences in the Pacific theater of war “destroyed him” when he found that his religious verities were useless to dying men. “He could offer somebody a cigarette as they died, but he didn’t have anything to say to them. They had to die themselves,” as Lingo puts it.

In a state of intellectual and spiritual crisis, after the war Mathews began studies with H. Richard Niebuhr at Yale Divinity School, where he became immersed in existentialism. The younger Niebuhr’s austere teachings are usually seen as quite conservative, emphasizing human sinfulness and limitations and steering attention away from broader social questions. But Mathews combined this intellectual material with both the evangelis-

tic zeal of his American Protestant tradition and his own dramatic inclinations. He became a local celebrity at Perkins, known for iconoclastic sermons during which he might rip pages out of a church's Bible to illustrate his disdain of the traditional symbols of belief.<sup>21</sup> The contemporary relevance of Mathews's theatrics was indicated by Joe Slicker, Mathews's assistant at the Community, when he remarked, "The gospels are not talking about a guy named Jesus. They are talking about a drama about a guy named Jesus."<sup>22</sup>

Mathews drew students' attention to the questions that had been sweeping through European Protestant circles for decades and in particular to the German theology of Tillich, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer. Many classified all these thinkers as theological existentialists; Tillich and Bultmann adopted the term themselves. Tillich and Bonhoeffer also were associated with the "neoorthodox" movement in theology, which historians have viewed as a conservative reaction against theological liberalism. Existentialism, however, served as the pathway between theological conservatism and radical humanism. Historically, existentialist philosophy had emerged from Protestantism, particularly in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard (whose writings the students at the CFLC also read). Small wonder, then, that in the cold war United States, existentialism took root most securely in a Protestant religious context. It ended by helping young people reach a place that many of the Faith-and-Life Community's initial establishment supporters could have neither predicted nor wanted.

### *Anxiety and Mastery*

Walter Kaufmann, the editor of an influential English-language anthology on existentialism published in 1956, departed of producing a definition of existentialism, saying that it "is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets." He asserted, in fact, that existentialism "is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy" and concluded that "revolt" and "individualism" were perhaps the most stable characteristics of this odd antirecord. "The heart of existentialism," he wrote, was "the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems" of thought, based on the belief that such systematic thinking was "remote from life." It is possible, however, to identify some consistent themes of those thinkers usually classified as existentialist. Kaufmann's remarks hint at a couple of those themes: first, a belief that thought about life should take the experience of life, rather than abstract principles, as its starting point and, second, an affirmation of the

capacity for self-conscious revolt against authority, intellectual or social, as a basic component of human identity.<sup>23</sup>

Kaufmann failed to consider in any detail the Christian existentialists. These thinkers, studied by students at the CFLC, focused on the paired danger and promise of modern life. The danger was anxiety, and Tillich was its major expositor. Anxiety was a feeling of looking into an abyss, produced by a permanent state of estrangement from God or simply from "the ultimate," or the "ground of Being," as Tillich liked to put it, psychologizing religion for the sake of secular readers.<sup>25</sup> Anxiety was an existential condition, that is, a condition of human life itself, according to Tillich, but it had gotten worse in the age of modernity and industrialization. For all this, Tillich urged his readers to say "yes" to life, "to embrace life despite the spiritual and psychological threat of anxiety, to embrace the risk of nonbeing in the way that Jesus did on the cross. The real prophet of mastery over modernity for students at the Community, however, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a less anxious and more politicized figure. A martyr for his political activity, Bonhoeffer became the exemplar of authentic religion in the modern world.

According to midcentury theologians, people of previous eras could get through their lives either without experiencing too much acute anxiety or they could find relief from it in the unchallenged certainties of both this world and the next. The precapitalist, certainly the pre-Reformation European, past was supposedly a time of psychological and spiritual security, the meaning of life anchored in divinely ordained patterns, social and cosmic. But the narrative went, increasing human control over the physical world disturbed the sense that the world was a perfect and completed structure of divine making. "Only after the victory of humanism and Enlightenment as the religious foundation of western society could anxiety about spiritual nonbeing become dominant," wrote Tillich. More recently, the awareness of other cultures damaged the authority of the Western worldview. Secular humanists celebrated both human power over nature and the human freedom to consciously choose values. Liberal Protestantism was, in a sense, born of these challenges to cultural and theological certainty and of the desire to accept the lessons of the Enlightenment.<sup>26</sup>

Many of the existentialists could not rest easy with this accommodation, and they joined them to the neoorthodox thinkers who rebelled against an easy theological modernism. They did not think the loss of the old certainties could be absorbed so painlessly. They recognized the degree of freedom from necessity that the human species had won in its battle against the natural world, but they feared that spiritually, this physical freedom was sending them toward the abyss. In the 1930s, Tillich wrote that "the man of

