

The Contribution of Søren Kierkegaard for the Present Times

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Not only in the in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our stages ein wirklicher Ausverkauf (a real sale). Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid.

(KIERKEGAARD, S. Søren Kierkegaard's Journals & Papers, vol. 1, p.359.)

In freedom I can emerge only from that into which I have entered in freedom or in doubt I must be presupposed to have entered. If I am going to emerge from doubt in freedom, I must have entered doubt in freedom.

(KIERKEGAARD, S. Søren Kierkegaard's Journals & Papers, vol. 1, p.359.)

Abstract: Søren Kierkegaard was a prolific writer, composing during his short life 35 intellectually captivating writings. In addition to his dissatisfaction with the state of religion and that of the established church in Denmark, his relationship to his father and his unfulfilled love to his fiancé, Regina, gave impulses to his incisive critical reflection. Kierkegaard can be considered a misunderstood prophet of his time who focused his intellectual capacity on topics such as: theology and anthropology – where he emphasized the ‘otherness’ of God and the gravity of human sin, overcome only on the basis of God’s initiative as actualized in daily decisions and acts of following Christ; critique of the power of the press and the indifference of the people to manipulation; and criticism of formal Christianity and the status of the ‘State-Church’ common throughout Europe of his time. Kierkegaard can be considered as one of

the forerunners of modern individualistic existentialism, though one with a more potent religious/Christian dimension.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, God, religious, human being, christianity, existentialism.

Resumen: Søren Kierkegaard fue un escritor prolífico, que compuso durante su corta vida 35 escritos intelectualmente fascinantes. Además de su insatisfacción por la situación de la religión y la de la Iglesia establecida en Dinamarca, su relación con su padre y su amor frustrado por su prometida, Regina, impulsaron su incisiva reflexión crítica. Se puede considerar a Kierkegaard un profeta incomprendido en su tiempo que centró su capacidad intelectual en temas como la teología y la antropología, donde resaltó la “otredad” de Dios y la gravedad del pecado humano, que se vence sólo con base en la iniciativa de Dios materializada en las decisiones cotidianas y en los actos de seguimiento a Cristo; el análisis crítico del poder de la prensa y la indiferencia de la gente a la manipulación; y la crítica de la cristiandad formal y el estatus del “Estado-Iglesia” que era común en toda la Europa de su tiempo. Se puede considerar a Kierkegaard como uno de los precursores del existencialismo individualista moderno, aunque con una dimensión religioso-cristiana más potente.

Palabras clave: Kierkegaard, Dios, religión, ser humano, cristianismo, existencialismo.

Introduction

On May 5th, 2013 we commemorated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who spent his whole life in Denmark except for the three visits of Berlin. Kierkegaard studied theology and philosophy at the University of Copenhagen (1830-1840) and became the most famous philosopher of the North.

For those interested in Kierkegaard and his writings, many have been translated into various languages, primarily English. The book *Purity of Heart* is meant to be an introductory book that serves the reader to get acquainted with Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's writings

During his short life Kierkegaard wrote more than 35 books that can be divided in terms of focus on philosophical-ethical and religious. When looking at Kierkegaard's books, we can see there a clear connection to his personal

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life. He was deeply touched by the death of his mother, five siblings and his father, as well. The notion of death, fear and finiteness (ultimateness) of a human being are the main characteristics of all of his books. Another important moment in Kierkegaard's life was his father's confession about a serious sin from his youth followed by a loss of ideals on the side of the son (i.e. young Kierkegaard): A father-son relationship in which the son secretly discovers everything at the bottom of it all and yet does not dare let on. The father is an important man, devout and strong; only once in a drunken condition did he let fall some words that intimated the worst. The son does not find out any more and does not dare ask the father or any other man. (Pap. V A 108 n.d., 1844)

Later on, Kierkegaard copes with the separation from his fiancé Regina through writing the books *Fear and Trembling* - the biblical story of sacrificing Isaac, and *Repetitiones* – the suffering of Job. Kierkegaard admires Old Testament heroes and emphasizes their relationship to God in order to make them examples for the Christians in the present times:

Job! Job! O Job! Is that really all you said, those beautiful words; The Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord? Did you say more? (Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 197).

After 1848 Kierkegaard concentrates on the religious topic – the person of Jesus Christ. Towards the end of his life (1854-1855) he became well known through his conflicts with bishops Mynster and Martensen and through the critique of religious situation, which was published in the magazine called *The Moment*.

God and human being (a person) according to Kierkegaard's understanding

Kierkegaard never denied the existence of God and God's perfection, excellence. He was fully convinced that God is love who loves any human being in spite of human betrayal and refusal. Humans cannot compare themselves to God, because they are God's creation and compared to God, they always are on the wrong side. Kierkegaard in his writings compares the character and the actions of God and human being (a person): God is in heaven, human being (a person) is on Earth; there is a vast difference between God and human being (a person). In fact, there is an unsurpassable ontological dividing line between the Creator and his creation. Human being (a person) is sinful, seeks excuses, and human mind is bipolar. God is the only salvation for human being (a person) who has to recognize his/her faults: "sin is a crucial expression for the religious existence." (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 267).

Interestingly, Kierkegaard does not seem to give primacy to epistemology in his philosophical-religious understanding. He doesn't begin with the funda-

mental questions of what knowledge is and what we can (or cannot) know. It is not in our capacity, however, to determine the proper method to follow to attain knowledge, that is, there is as much confusion and contention on the level of epistemology as there is in the disciplines that talk about the contents of knowledge (e.g. the question of what is right, or whether there is a God). Our epistemological views themselves presuppose metaphysical claims about the nature and extent of our intellectual powers. Kierkegaard, instead, turns his attention to fundamental questions of ethics as they are contemplated in the 'inward' experience of the human subject. Abstract intellectual arguments won't do against ever growing moral relativism and creeping nihilism. We don't need more evidence for what we argue to be morally right but rather we ourselves need to be more moral to be able to judge what is right. The ability of moral discernment goes hand in hand with the individual's moral state. The decline of morality, or, for that matter, the decline of religion, may be caused by our existential indifference in moral and religious matters, causing a decrease in our imaginative capacity to understand the nature of religious beliefs. This is how one should understand Kierkegaard's famous statement: 'truth is subjectivity'. The search for truth must not be detached from the striving to become the kind of person God created us to be.

A person has to decide constantly which direction to take in order to orient and focus his/her life. His/her relationship to God must be an honest one; it is not enough just to go to church, the relationship is decisive. Kierkegaard gives as example sinful woman (from the gospel of John), who recognized her fault, admitted it and was not ashamed to confess her relationship with Jesus even in front of a crowd. Honesty of a human being is the unavoidable condition for faith. Kierkegaard was very critical to all of those who used the church for their own benefit and carrier. He reproached the pastors and Christians of his times for lives that are lived in a very different mode from Jesus' way of life. They are not able to suffer for the truth, they are not able to follow the examples of the Scripture. This is the true reason why there is no authentic Christianity anymore. A person has to show his/her relationship to God not only in the church, but also in everyday life and doing basic everyday deeds, that are the sign of faith. The deeds must not be done with a wrong motive to be seen or to gain something, but strictly as a consequence of the relationship with God.

The topic of following Christ in man's day-to-day decisions was, indeed, prominent in Søren Kierkegaard. Where there is no radical discipleship of following Jesus, including on the way through the cross, there are no true Christians, neither a true church (Valčo, *Téma nasledovania Krista u Kierkegarda a Bonhoeffera*). Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual and his/her responsibility before God should be seen against the background of his criticism of Hegel's rationalistic, speculative philosophy. In contrast to Hegel and his

abstract, general principles of logical deduction, Kierkegaard wanted to focus primarily on the concrete personal individuality in his immediate existence, thus giving an impulse for the emergence of the philosophy of existentialism (later developed in the philosophies of Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, and others). He maintained that any logical deduction separated from the inner experience of the human subject cannot lead to the essence of human existence. Instead, such abstract intellectualism leads to an ever growing inner (and, subsequently, interpersonal) alienation. Each concrete though becomes meaningful only if it is connected with a passionate act of decision of the individual human existence.

Kierkegaard often focuses on human behavior. A person should not compare themselves to the others, seek excuses but they should genuinely love God and their neighbor. A neighbor is a person whom people meet and he/she must be loved purely. Kierkegaard accentuates non-preferential love. A person has to show the relationship to the other person (a neighbor) without calculations and without the expectations to be paid back. Such a high standard, however, is impossible to attain as long as humans remain in their alienated state. Hopelessness only changes to hopefulness when a person is confronted and liberated by the living Christ in the existential encounter that leads to a 'jump of faith'. Only in this painful but freeing experience, only in this intense, personal, and existential encounter with the reality of the living God, can the human being for the first time truly belong to God. Only then can one sincerely ask the question "How do I live the life of a true Christian?". Christianity is not primarily about doctrine. Rather it is a conviction aligned with a properly defined mode of existence, i.e. in the following of Jesus.

Kierkegaard's criticism

Press

Christianity has been abolished somewhat as follows. Men have entrenched themselves more and more firmly in the fixed idea that Christianity's meaning should be in a trivial sense to make life easier and easier, the temporal easier and easier, something which again is consistent with the fact that the preaching of Christianity has for a long time been, in a trivial sense, an occupation, so these rascally preachers, for the sake of profit, have administered Christianity just as shopkeepers or journalists--nothing better on the market--and therefore the meaning of Christianity becomes in the trivial sense: to make life easier. (Pap. XI.1 A 252)

Kierkegaard was critical not only to the formal Christianity of his time but also to the media and reporters. He was fully aware of the danger coming from the media and its influence on a person's mind (cf. Konvit et al., *O informácii, komunikácii a médiách*, p. 211). He was afraid that a person ceased to be an individual who decides for themselves but thanks to the media is becoming a

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part of a crowd, entering anonymity. Thanks to the media a person lost individual thinking, stopped deciding freely and attempts to conform to the crowd manipulated by media.

Kierkegaard's prophetic voice pointed out something which is increasingly problematic in our 'global societies' today. While media in his time were only beginning to get a grip on the people's consciences, imagination, and value formation, he already foresaw the potentially detrimental effects of media with their power to convey normative images affecting behavioral patterns (Valčo, *Kresťanské cirkvi a výzvy komunikácie v globálnom svete*, p. 53). Communication, whether via the media or within interpersonal relationships, never was a neutral phenomenon. It becomes the foundation for value reflection, since each person needs data to form his/her opinions. They who control the influx of information and determines the art of their mediation wields a great power. This is becoming increasingly clear as the present media increasingly appeal to human senses and emotions, bringing intense experiences loaded with advertisement and hidden value judgments. Kierkegaard's voice thus becomes ever more relevant on this topic.

Criticism of formal Christianity and the status of the Church

State is related directly to number (the numerical); therefore, when a state dwindles, the number can gradually become so small that the state has ended, the concept has dropped out. Christianity is related to number in another way: one single true Christian is enough for it to be true that Christianity exists. (Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, p. 143).

Kierkegaard was highly critical about the connection of state and church. He uses New Testament as an example, where Christians were persecuted and were not under the protection of the state. This situation made early Christian communities vigilant and faithful to Jesus' original message as it was applied in the lives of individuals as well as church communities. On the contrary, in Denmark, pastors became state employees paid by the state. Kierkegaard was fully aware of the danger for the pastors to focus on the financial benefits because of their families, which is in sharp contrast with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. This is the reason why Kierkegaard mentions Jesus' social status, his poverty, suffering, loneliness, birth in the stable so often in his writings. He prays in one of the introductions in his books:

You who yourself once walked the earth and left footprints that we should follow; you who from your heaven still look down on every pilgrim, strengthen the weary, hearten the disheartened, lead back the straying, give solace to the struggling... (Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, p. 217).

Kierkegaard thus wanted to emphasize that Jesus did not desire worldly possessions, and social status and the pastors and all those, who want to be

named Christians, have to follow Jesus' example. Kierkegaard publicized his criticism in the magazine called *The Moment*.

In spite of Kierkegaard's radicalness (expressed, among other areas, in his critique of the church establishment), his intention was not to destroy Christianity, or the established structures of Christian communities. He aimed at the purification of Christianity as a religion of passionate following of the real God in the inevitable existential decisions of each individual. What he advocated might be called a "new, radical Reformation," based on individual awareness of one's situation before God and subsequent day-to-day decisions to follow Christ at any cost. Such a purified church would then be much more attractive to alienated sinners in an increasingly secularized society.

Conclusion


Kierkegaard was neither just a 'church man' nor was he a mere 'philosopher'. He should rather be considered a man 'in-between,' a citizen of both worlds. He felt called to speak as a Christian to the intellectuals of his day and age but he also wanted to speak as a philosopher to the church communities. His prophetic voice was intellectually brilliant so as to attract the attention from the secular academic elites on one hand, and spiritually relevant to attract the hearing of the Christians.

Kierkegaard influence, though not noticeable during his own lifetime, continues to be very powerful through the re-publication, as well as reinterpretation of his original writings. Kierkegaard wanted to change formal Christianity into New Testament Christianity. He refused an abstract system of creeds and impenetrable liturgical chants of the established churches because they alone will not lead the individual a new way of life in the radical following of Christ. He wanted each person to be transformed by God and to love God even more than their own status and well-being. He wanted to change human thinking in order to stop serving the system and become full individuals. A superficial, shallow, cultural, institutional, and 'herd' Christianity is not a faithful representation of God's intentions in Christ, in sending His Son to this fallen world. An erudite dogmatic reasoning must not become a substitute for the simple obedience to Jesus' call: "Follow me!" (Mk 10:21). Thus it is the role of 'subjectivity' (in Kierkegaard's own words: the role of 'inwardness') in the appropriation of religious truths that remains one of Kierkegaard's most important, yet also most contentious contributions.

Related to the topic of subjectivity are the much celebrated (by Kierkegaard) phenomena of doubt and wonder. Instead of privileging doubt (in line with much of modern philosophy), Kierkegaard emphasizes the reality and neces-

sity of wonder. Wonder leaves open the possibility of trust and gives rise to passion. Humans have the privilege to wonder when they begin to view themselves as God's finite creatures, fallen and alienated, and yet loved by the infinite, holy God. Not all things can be explained for many things remain beyond our finite mind's ability of comprehension. When we seek the truth we must, first of all, seek to end our rebellion against the Creator and learn to rest in God in faith. The primacy of wonder over doubt, and subsequent attempts to argumentatively refute the ensuing skepticism, can be considered an important and lasting contribution of Kierkegaard's philosophical approach.

Kierkegaard died alone fully convinced of the truth he lived for and spread around. Václav Fiala wrote:

Only after he was dead we realized that a few coins we found in his pockets after we brought him to the hospital were his whole earthly possession. Shortly before he died, he got the rest of the savings that his father left him. He sacrificed his property, happiness, health and his whole life for the truth. (Fiala, *Trojzvuk*, p. 56). 

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