

Søren Kierkegaard: A Reactionist Philosophy

by Brother John Raymond

In our present age, we are faced with the common acceptance that science can solve all our problems. Many even boast that it is modern technology that can make you happy. We see this influence of Scientism even among many theologians. They explain many of the miracles of the Bible as exaggerations of natural occurrences. Is this the first time we have seen this type of attitude? No, we find Søren Kierkegaard facing this issue in the Lutheran Danish Church. Unlike the technological influence of our times, the Danish Church had the infection of a disease called Hegelianism. It is similar to the former in that it proposes the dominance of reason over faith. Kierkegaard takes a stand against this false philosophy in his church. As one can imagine, he was not looked upon kindly by his contemporaries. Many have misinterpreted him. We shall examine Kierkegaard's reaction to this underlying philosophy in the Danish Church. We shall look at his alternate philosophy with its various stages and how reason fits into it.

We find Kierkegaard directly opposed to the Hegelianism found in the Danish Lutheran Church. This philosophy states that all reality is in motion and in the process of becoming. The process consists in the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. God is reduced to a process. History reveals the Absolute's creational restlessness. The person becomes a moment in the unfolding of the Absolute. Thus, Kierkegaard accuses Hegelianism of destroying the "radical otherness" of God.¹ There can be no similarity between the Creator and the creature. Also, this way of thinking breeds contempt for the individual. He says any philosophy which neglects the individual is dangerous.² Hegelianism tries to separate the thinker from the object. Kierkegaard says that this type of philosophy is like building a great castle and living in a barn.³ It is totally impractical because a philosophy must be able to be lived instead of objectively observed. Christianity requires a total assimilation of the individual to Christ. The whole idea of any moral teaching is to put it into practice at the individual level. Therefore, we see that, for Kierkegaard, Hegelianism destroys morality, individuality, and God as we know Him.

Kierkegaard sees the negative effect this philosophy has on the Danish Lutheran Church. He says,

... for people no longer have any will for anything except what is world-historically significant, no concern for anything but the accident, world-historical outcome, instead of concerning themselves solely with the essential, the inner spirit, the ethical, freedom.⁴

We see the effect of Hegelianism which relates the individual to history, at the expense of the inner life which any approach to God requires. Instead of relating oneself directly to God, his contemporaries relate themselves to the race and through the race to God.⁵ He sees the Danish Church basing ethical and religious truth on the authority of the crowd. We see this attitude prevalent in the Church today. As an example of the faulty belief of a crowd, he cites Our Lord's crowning with thorns. He says that an individual would not spit on Christ, but a crowd would spit on Him.⁶ The crowd excludes God because of its impersonal relationship. Also, the second Great Commandment requires us to honor each person as an individual. A crowd tramples down any personal relationships.⁷ Kierkegaard says the truth is more likely to be found in the minority who really have an opinion. He goes even farther in stating a person does not really exist in a crowd. The clergy of the Danish Church had joined the crowd. They had become comfortable in a secular lifestyle and were following the majority.⁸ Christianity for them had become a social movement. In opposition to these developments, Kierkegaard says the truth of Christianity is that everyone has to make a personal accounting to God. Joining the crowd weakens repentance of the individual.⁹ Thus, we see the Hegelian influence in the Danish Church

undermining any personal relationship to God. It is replaced with the impersonal global relationship of the crowd.

In reaction to the false Christian philosophy that surrounded him, Kierkegaard develops his own dialectical process. The process involves the actualization of the spirit in the form of individuality. To proceed from one stage to another one must make a choice or act of the will.¹⁰ He says "To be human is to be anxious, to live in uncertainty, to risk failure, to exercise will."¹¹ The human being is a synthesis of the opposing elements of the "temporal and eternal situated in existence."¹² Our natural tendency in freedom is to break apart, but we resist this with our wills. Because we are free, it is within our power to change our fundamental beliefs. This self-transformation. causes us anxiety because of the uncertainty and risk involved in it.

We are at the same time attracted and repulsed by it. The state of dread always precedes our choices. When we try to escape dread, we are left with despair. We can escape dread by letting ourselves become totally absorbed in the small details of the everyday.¹³ To willfully choose to remain in a state of sin also leads to despair. Thus, we can despair by letting repulsion get the upper hand. We choose not to be what we should be. The Christian has the task of trying to bring the temporal and eternal together. Kierkegaard says the Christian is more characterized by dread, despair, and courage than by happiness. Our existence is ordered in such a way that we must suffer for the truth. We are torn between being an individual and being part of a society. We must transcend the everyday existence; and yet we are committed to Our everyday existence. We can imagine many future possibilities; and yet are limited to the real possibilities. We are committed to our own eternity, and yet committed to relative secular values.¹⁵ Thus, human existence is a synthesis of body and spirit. We are on a upward spiral towards the highest point of the spiritual.

The lowest stage one can be at in this dialectical process is the aesthetical stage. This stage is characterized by living a life of the bodily senses at the expense of the spirit. The aesthete tries to enjoy an aimless life. He lives for fleeting isolated moments. He is very cynical, taking a non-involvement attitude towards any form of morality.¹⁶ He can occupy his time by living in the dream world of the past. He can actively try to bring back the past. Finally, he must find ways of repeating experiences without having them grow dull. Aesthetes must continually find ways of killing time so that they do not grow bored.¹⁷ Eventually, this way of life leads to loneliness, frustration, and despair. Who is a better example of this stage than Kierkegaard himself. He lived in this stage until it almost drove him to suicide. Other examples would be the erotic lifestyle of Don Juan, the boredom of Faust, or the despair of Ahasuerus¹⁸ The only exit from this stage is to realize that one is leading an empty life. Those that can not break away from it are left in a state of despair. Despair is the antithesis which makes the person realize there must be more to life than sensual gratification. He will try to put some meaning in his life by embracing some type of morality. The synthesis of the aesthetical with despair takes him into the ethical stage.

The aesthetic passes from this lower stage to a higher one by an existential leap to the ethical. In the dialectical process, he must intervene with his will to embrace a life with more continuity and universality. In contrast, Hegel's dialectic would assert this synthesis should be achieved objectively as a logical necessity. The state of marriage could be an example of Kierkegaard's type of transition. Marriage forces the aesthetic to suppress his sexual impulsiveness to fulfill his obligations in this ethical institution. Thus, the beginner in this stage is convinced of his moral self-sufficiency. He takes a humanistic and immanent approach to morality. This stage is characterized by a continual movement of the person into himself. This inward movement may bring him to the realization that he can not adequately fulfill the moral law. He begins to feel guilt because he falls short of acquiring perfect virtue. Thus, he becomes conscious of his own sinfulness. Sin becomes the antithesis of the ethical stage.¹⁹ This moment of dread for the individual brings him to

either acknowledge or reject faith. Thus, the ethical man is best characterized by the individual who accepts one's place in the natural order and seeks by his immanent powers alone to effect a harmony between fulfilling his duties and his natural inclinations.²⁰

By acknowledging God, confessing one's sinfulness, and hoping for Divine forgiveness, a person enters the religious stage. Kierkegaard uses Abraham as the prime example of going through this transitional stage. He sites the sacrifice of Isaac as being contrary to Abraham's ethical norms. To perform the task, Abraham "overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher telos outside of it."²¹ He suspended the ethical and proceeded on belief in God only. Thus, Abraham moved into the Divine Paradox of faith. Though Kierkegaard uses this as an example, it does not really fit his definition of the stages. Abraham was clearly beyond the ethical stage when he left his home country solely for God's sake. As far as suspending the ethical, Abraham did not believe God would violate the ethical. He proceeded in trust that God would reconcile this seeming paradoxical command with the demands of morality. Examples like this one earned Kierkegaard the reputation of proclaiming the blind leap of faith as something irrational. We see that for him Christianity was the zenith of his dialectical

process. Living and growing in the Christian faith is the main characteristic of the religious stage. To understand the transition from the ethical to the religious stage, we must look more closely at the part reason plays in faith.

A person outside of Revelation can have a certain type of religiousness. If a person recognizes and strives after goodness to the best of his ability, he falls into the category called Religiousness.

A. This person would have a philosophical attitude towards life. He would be searching for the truth. A perfect example for Kierkegaard of this type of an individual would be Socrates. Socrates does not arrive at a perfect idea of God, philosophically understood, but he does seek to live and even is willing to die in fidelity to the object of his intellectual search. He speaks of himself as "the property of the gods." Thus, for Kierkegaard, a person in the ethical stage can have the characteristics of Religiousness A.

Next, we need to look at what happens when Religiousness A moves into the area of faith. Since the Incarnation, we now have the Revelation of God to man in its fullness. When Religiousness A comes in contact with this Revelation, which Kierkegaard calls Religiousness B, there is a temptation to reject it as foolishness. Yet, "the Absurd, the Paradox, is so constructed that the reason is by no means able of itself to resolve it into nonsense and show that it is nonsense."²² Through sound reason, a person will realize the Paradox can not be resolved. He will then come to the realization that his reason has limits. Thus, the person in Religiousness A understands that he can not understand. He is left with the free assent or rejection of the will which alone is able to realize the Paradox. The only extrinsic evidence which can be granted to this assent to faith is the credibility of the authority behind the Paradox.²³ If the assent is withheld, human reason is then considered higher than Religiousness B. Kierkegaard describes this person as avoiding the martyrdom of faith and returning to paganism. The person falls back into immanence and views the Paradox of faith as absurd.²⁴ Thus, reason can lead us to faith in two steps. First, Religiousness A comes to recognize by reason that the Paradox is incomprehensible to reason. Second, reason can examine the evidence of credibility of the witness of the doctrine of God.

Once we are in Religiousness B, or the religious stage, reason still plays an important part. That which was absurd outside of faith is no longer absurd. By virtue of faith, one's criterion is God for whom all things are possible. Faith makes us understand that which is believed. By living the faith, certain habits of thought develop. This leads to a recognition

of what is not in accord with faith.²⁵ Kierkegaard comes very close to the function of traditional theology. The characteristic attributes of anxiety and despair outside of faith are relieved in faith. Miracles, nature, death, and other problems faced by reason are somewhat more comprehensible in faith. Revelation sheds light on all aspects of reality. Thus, since reason and Revelation come from the same source, we find them complementary to each other.

In conclusion, we see that Kierkegaard's philosophy is motivated by his reaction to Hegelianism. He sees Hegelianism as undermining morality, individuality, and the God we know as Christians. It led to a social movement type of Christianity in the Danish Church. In contrast to Hegel's dialectical objectivity, Kierkegaard bases his dialectic on the individual will. We begin with the aesthetical stage. Despair causes us to move into the ethical stage.

Finally, acknowledging one's sinfulness takes us into the religious stage. In the transition from the ethical to religious stage, we have seen how reason is involved in a two step process. First, One must understand that one can not understand the Paradox. Secondly, reason can examine the evidence of credibility of the witness to the doctrine of God. In the Faith, we see reason enlightened by Revelation. We see in our present times many of the same errors as those within the Danish Church. The social movement or reason over faith type of Christianity is running wild. These errors become very apparent on close examination of many modern Biblical scholars and theologians. We could certainly benefit from his philosophy in our present times.

FOOTNOTES

1. Francis J. Lescoe, Existentialism: With or Without God (New York: Alba House, 1974), p. 53.
2. Ibid., p. 45.
3. Frederick Sontag, A Kierkegaard Handbook (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 50.
5. Ibid., p. 47.
6. William V. Spanos, Existentialism (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1966), p. 238.
7. Ibid., p. 240.
8. Lescoe, op. cit., p. 53.
9. Sontag, op. cit., pp. 53,54.
10. Frederick Copleston, S.J. Fichte to Nietzsche (Vol. VII of A History of Philosophy, 8 Vols.; Maryland: The Newman Press, 1963), p. 341.
11. John Douglas Mullen, Kierkegaard's Philosophy (New York; The New American Library, Inc., 1981) p.75.
12. Lescoe, op. cit., p. 49.
13. Mullen, op. cit., p. 75.
14. Sontag, op. cit., pp. 21,43,51.
15. Mullen, op. cit., p. 158.
16. Lescoe, op. cit., pp. 34,37.
17. Mullen, op. cit., pp. 119,120.
18. Lescoe, op. cit., p. 34.
19. Copleston, op. cit., p. 343.
20. Mullen, op. cit. p. 124.
21. Lescoe, op. cit. pp. 39,40.
22. Cornelio Fabro, C.P.S. "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic", in A Kierkegaard Critique ed. by Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (Chicago; Henry Regnery Company, 1962), p.186.
23. Ibid., p.189.
24. Ibid., p.191.

25. Ibid., p.189.

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