

Response to Valérie Nicolet Anderson's "Can Kierkegaard help us understand the role of the law in Rom 7:7-12? Tools for a *kierkegaardian* reading of Paul"

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First of all I would like to thank Valérie Nicolet Anderson for providing us with such an explorative and innovative paper. The three papers of this session relate modern philosophy to the reading of Romans in different ways. The specific contribution of this paper is that it establishes a dialogue between the biblical text and a theologian of the 1800's. Valérie Nicolet Anderson does not aim at revealing something unexpected or hidden in Romans. She uses the work of the Scandinavian Protestant, Søren Kierkegaard, to solve some major puzzles of Romans 7:7-12 by means of clarification. The paper is situated not only in the exegetical field, but also in the systematic. Or rather the two fields are being related to each other. In view of scriptural criticism this is ideal and very helpful for this group working with Romans through history and cultures.

Valérie Nicolet Anderson's paper is easily described in terms of the three dimensions in the model of scriptural criticism. Since the point of that model is that these three dimensions are always present when biblical texts are interpreted, this is not a surprise. By relating to the hermeneutical, contextual and analytical dimensions of this paper I hope both to be able to highlight its advantages and to give my view on what could be discussed in the future work on this topic. I appreciate Valérie Nicolet Anderson's open-ended presentation, which already puts us on the track of discussing the problems raised by it as problems of mutual concern.

Let me start with the *hermeneutical* dimension. Biblical critics have a tendency to provoke systematic theologians with quick references to theological concepts, major figures or traditions followed by a judgment with huge, but unwarranted, consequences. One example of this is Peter Stuhlmacher's interpretation of Romans 3:21-26, where he rejects the important theological distinction between a forensic and an effective view of justification as "an unbiblical abstraction".^{1[1]} What are we supposed to do? Give up the distinction? Reject those who used it? No! I am grateful to Valérie Nicolet Anderson for not choosing that path, but giving us a richer description of the anthropology of Søren Kierkegaard by means of a reading of primarily a section in *The Sickness Unto Death*.^{2[2]}

1[1] Stuhlmacher, Peter. *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*. Transl. Scott J. Hafemann (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox 1994) 63f.

2[2] I have been using another edition and translation than Valérie Nicolet Anderson, namely Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*. Transl. Alastair Hanney (London: Penguin Books 1989).

What is this anthropology? As Valérie Nicolet Anderson points out Kierkegaard – or actually the pseudonym Anti-Climacus³[3] – sees humans as being caught in a predicament, which he describes as either not wanting to be oneself or wanting to be oneself. Both alternatives are wrong seen in relation to God. Humans lack the belief that they are intimately related to God. We have eternal life, but we cannot believe it. The two strategies – or kinds of despair as Kierkegaard names them – fail. They are sinful, since they lead us not to receive the gift of eternal life.⁴[4] To Kierkegaard it is obvious that awareness of God does not help in this respect. It is still difficult for humans to believe that they are grounded in God and have eternal life.⁵[5] However, it is better to be in despair than not even to reflect on the human predicament.⁶[6]

Furthermore, Valérie Nicolet Anderson uses Kierkegaard's theory of indirect speech for clarifying the use of the first person singular in Rom. 7. This theory is not presented in *The Sickness Unto Death*, but taken from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. The human predicament cannot be directly communicated, according to Kierkegaard.

I find this approach helpful both concerning the anthropology and the theory of communication. The text of Romans 7 has an obvious existential ring. An existentialist theologian helps us clarify our intuitive reaction. Still, I am curious. The reason for choosing Kierkegaard presented in the paper is that he read Romans. However, most theologians do. I think Valérie Nicolet Anderson has further reasons for her choice and I would like to hear more about them.

³[3] Since Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms to clarify positions in radical ways, this could add a dimension to the analysis in this paper. However, I do not think it makes a major difference, although it would bring out some nuances and perhaps could lead to that other positions were examined as well in the future.

⁴[4] Kierkegaard. *Sickness* (1989) 114, where faith is defined. "Faith is: that the self in being itself and in wanting to be itself is grounded transparently in God." Cf. 1 of the Introduction.

⁵[5] See, for example, Kierkegaard. *Sickness* (1989) 117f.: "...this human being who hasn't the least illusion of being on an intimate footing with this or that person, this human being is before God, can talk with God any time he wants, certain of being heard; in short this human being has an invitation to live on the most intimate footing with God! Furthermore, for this very person too, God comes to the world, lets himself be born, suffers, dies; and this suffering God, he well-nigh begs and implores this human being to accept the help offered to him!"

⁶[6] Kierkegaard. *Sickness* (1989) 52: "Just as a physician might say there isn't a single human being who enjoys perfect health, so someone with proper knowledge of man might say there is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little (...) It is not discouraging; on the contrary it is uplifting, since it views every man with regard to the highest demand that can be made of him: to be spirit."

Let me push this a little further. If Kierkegaard gives us a helpful view of ourselves and our position in this world (i.e. our context) and if there are some obvious links with the text of Romans (in this case, existential) Kierkegaard need not have read Romans for us to be justified to read him and Romans. The existential connection is sufficient for Anderson's offering a legitimate interpretation of Romans.

However, as a systematic theologian, I also want to raise some critical questions concerning the hermeneutical dimension. Although the choice of Kierkegaard can be justified, it should not be done without criticism. We need not only critical biblical exegesis, but also critical systematic theology.

We know that existentialism is strongly individualistic. The individual is seen as standing alone before God. Is this good or bad? That depends largely on the context. In Alastair Hannay's introduction to the edition of *The Sickness Unto Death* I have used, there is an analysis of the relationship between Kierkegaard's individualism and the breakdown of the traditional social structures of his time. This makes me wonder whether, for example, the social aspects of the law of the people of God may not also be something to be taken into further consideration. Or perhaps the existential dilemma needs to be limited in some other way in the direction of saying that *at times* the individual is standing alone before God?

Perhaps we need also to keep a critical eye on the use of death as symbol.^{7[7]} Death is a serious thing, which Christianity risks diminishing. As Kierkegaard puts it, lethal diseases do not lead to death – but they do! Where does this take us? Paul and Romans depend indeed on this thematic use of death too. Perhaps we need not only be critical of Kierkegaard, but also of Paul?

Now I turn to the *contextual* dimension of this paper. Since the analysis stays close to the selected texts, it may be best described as the contexts of Paul and Kierkegaard. However, neither their oeuvre in a more general sense, nor their historical milieus are taken into account. Rather, they are both seen from an existential perspective, communicating the struggle with some facts of religious life. This means that existentialism is not only characteristic of the hermeneutical dimension in this paper, but also of its contextual dimension.

It is intriguing to find a voice emphasizing the universal human predicament when so many voices are raised for taking our differences into account. I think both perspectives are needed. A solution will not be found, but the dialogue is important. I also think it is

^{7[7]} This has been emphasized by feminist theologians and others. See, for example, Jantzen, Grace M. *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1999) especially chapter 6. "In order to begin: death and natality in the western imaginary" 128-155 and chapter 7. "They shall flourish as a garden" 156-170.

justified not to enter into this dialogue within this paper, but to stick to the task of exploring an existentialist – and in that sense universal – understanding of Romans 7.

This is done in a very open and tentative way in this paper, which I appreciate. The relationship between the texts is primarily described as one echoing the other. The parallels are suggested rather than established. Although Valérie Nicolet Anderson says she wants to read both texts in view of each other, she mainly clarifies Paul's thoughts in a terminology foreign to, but still congruent with, his. I would like to encourage her to keep the tension between Paul and Kierkegaard. After all, their way of putting forth the human predicament is not identical. I will return to this in a moment, when discussing the analytical dimension.

Furthermore, Valérie Nicolet Anderson also says that she wants to help us understand Paul better in order to engage in the Reformed tradition.^{8[8]} This implies that our own context is brought into the process along with that of Paul and Kierkegaard. I would welcome some kind of presentation of how the existential connection is made to us. Why is it helpful for us to read Romans by means of the theology of Kierkegaard?

The *analytical* dimension has already been mentioned several times as a presupposition for the discussion of the other dimensions. This is as it should be, since the dimensions are all dimensions of the same interpretive process. What I find praiseworthy in Valérie Nicole Anderson's paper comes clearly to the fore concerning the identity of the first person singular in Romans 7. Valérie Nicolet Anderson does careful exegetical work in order to clarify that "I" is used as a *prosopopoiia* in the sense that Stowers has presented. If I have understood it right, this means that Paul has indirectly wanted to make the reader think both of the origin of humankind in Genesis and the covenant of Sinai and thus by means of her own relationship to these traditions the reader is drawn into what Paul has to say.

Valérie Nicolet Anderson takes seriously the fact that biblical arguments alone can never solve the problem of the identity of the voice in Romans 7. They point in many different directions. The analytical dimension is necessary, but not sufficient. A hermeneutical dimension is needed as well. In this paper both Kierkegaard's anthropology and his theory of indirect communication are used. The proposed rhetorical figure of *prosopopoiia* is related to a philosophical foundation. Paul is speaking of something which has to be personally communicated, although the speaker and the one spoken to do not know each other. He uses the historical repertoire and draws the listener into his way of reasoning by writing in the first person singular.

However, Valérie Nicolet Anderson is aware of a major problem in paralleling these specific texts at an analytical level. Although she wants to establish the relationship genetically, she knows that in fact Kierkegaard does not mention Romans in *The Sickness*

^{8[8]} This is formulated in terms of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, however this is how I interpret it.

Unto Death. Rather, the title is a quotation from John 11:4 and the story of the awakening of Lazarus. Lazarus is ill, but his sickness will not lead to death. Similarly we may think that we have caught lethal diseases, but we are generally mistaken, according to Kierkegaard. It is only sin, which causes death and from this we have been saved by grace.

It is difficult to establish a genetic relationship between these texts. However, there are other possibilities. The connection need not be made analytically, but can be made contextually. They are both elaborating a universal predicament. It can also be established hermeneutically by means of the existential anthropology. Paul and Kierkegaard are writing about the same thing. As I understand this paper, this is actually what is being done.

This brings me back to the tension between these texts, which could be further reflected upon. When putting forth the common thematic ground, Valérie Nicolet Anderson uses the terminology "before God". Paul and Kierkegaard both write about humans as standing "before God". Paul does this in terms of the law. The puzzling thing is that the law does not help. What about Kierkegaard? He does not write in terms of the law. However, he believes becoming aware of God and getting into despair is actually a good thing, a presupposition for accepting grace. Thus, there is a similarity. Both Paul and Kierkegaard hold that it is good to be "before God", although it does not deliver us from sin or despair.⁹[9]

There is also an important difference. Despair does not arise primarily before the law, but rather before the gospel, to use the common Protestant hermeneutical key. Humans lack faith, i.e. belief that they are transparently grounded in God and have eternal life. What causes offence is not that God wants us to live holy lives, but that God wants to give us everything for free.¹⁰[10] I think it would be worth while to explore this difference and not stop by seeing the parallel or hearing the echo. What can we make of the dissonance?

Valérie Nicolet Anderson has shown that there are legitimate fruitful ways of interpreting Romans with the help of some theological insights of Kierkegaard. Her paper raises some very important issues. How do we justify connections made between biblical texts and systematic theology? How can we remain critical also of the theological dimensions we want to use? It is indeed a temptation to let theologians solve exegetical problems or exegetes solve theological problems. We need criticism on both sides. Furthermore: How do we bring our own context into play doing justice both to what we have in common and what makes us different? A last question I raised was how to deal with dissonance that appears when biblical and theological texts meet?

⁹[9] Cf. note 6 above.

¹⁰[10] The problem concerning the law seems closer to another stage in Kierkegaard's thinking. If I am not mistaken, *The Sickness Unto Death* depicts the religious stage, while ethical problems reflect primarily what he calls the ethical stage. Perhaps that distinction would be helpful.