Kierkegaard and Nineteenth Century Continental Theology
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"Kierkegaard's response was simple and to the point"
- *James Nelson*[1]

I. Introduction – Kierkegaard's message

The nineteenth century Danish writer Søren Aabye Kierkegaard holds an important place in the history of Western philosophy and Christian theology. Using an unconventional approach of varied voices including his own and those of a collection of pseudonymous authors, he engaged in a unique dialogue both with himself and other figures of the day concerning such weighty topics as ethical behavior and the nature of truth. Because of this complex layering of perspectives, Kierkegaard's response to virtually any topic he addressed was anything but simple and to the point.

That being said, there does seem to be a relatively consistent theme running throughout many of his writings. This theme boils down to one word: faith. For Kierkegaard, faith and the absence of faith form a dichotomy that shapes the lens through which he analyzes the world around him. One either has faith or does not…there is no middle ground. Faith, therefore, implies a choice – a leap.

Faith is absolutely essential to Christianity, and Christianity is absolutely essential to develop the God-relationship between humans and God that grants the possibility of full and true humanity.[2] Reason and logic cannot be relied on, cannot guide us toward this faith. It is something we must consciously decide to embrace in the complete absence of these all too human temptations. Humans must, in his words, "believe against the understanding."[3]

If the message of Kierkegaard truly is faith, then it is worthwhile to explore the context out of which he developed this core component of his life's work. What was the background and culture of his day, who were the key figures with whom he engaged, and how did these factors influence his understanding?

This paper will review how Kierkegaard both was a product of his time as well as a unique figure within that time, and look closely at the connections between Kierkegaard and two key thinkers of the era – Schleiermacher and Hegel. The goal is to begin to see how these pieces fit together in order to better understand the formation of his unique approach and the central theme of his writing so that it may be possible to reflect upon the value of this theme in a present day context.

II. Kierkegaard as a product of his time

Kierkegaard was born in 1813 into a relatively well-off family in Denmark's capital city of Copenhagen.[4] He was well-educated and, thanks to a sizable inheritance, able to live the life of a gentleman scholar with no attachments or obligations.[5] This background, in conjunction with the culture in which he resided, forms the backdrop for much of his work and the understanding he brought to bear on the world around him.

One aspect of this socio-historical placement is his relationship with the state and the state's church. Kierkegaard was something of an oxymoronic radical conservative with regard to both. At times, he was willing to see the merits of democratic leveling and display great generosity toward the poor.[6] At others, he seemed very at home in the world of the aristocracy, bristling at the uneducated and enjoying luxuries in a day that few in his time could afford in a year.[7] Further, he feared the potential of a mob mentality in democratic structures and showed little sympathy for change in the political

status quo.[8] Simply put, he seemed unable to think outside of the confines of the position into which he was placed to imagine other possibilities or alternatives.

Much the same was true of his relationship to the church in Denmark. While far more vocal in his opposition to the clergy and their complacent congregants, he still held out hope of a position within the edifice until late in his life. As well, he was openly hostile to the more reformist elements within the church.[9] By the time he chose to fully reject the state church, his only solution was to withdraw.[10] It seems impossible to believe that he would have had no knowledge of the variety of Protestant religious faiths throughout Europe, and yet the thought of anything outside of the Danish state church does not seem to ever have been considered.

Another aspect of his time evident in Kierkegaard's work is an element of romanticism. Throughout his life, he engaged in the internal re-interpretation and re-imagination of external events and objects, crafting artistic reproductions of the reality he experienced both in his published works and in his private journals.[11] This romantic streak can also be seen in Kierkegaard's emphasis on individualism. Fearing the impact of world-historical analysis on ethics, he argued passionately for the importance of each individual's ethical decision-making.

While it is true that many of Kierkegaard's positions ran counter to the prevailing wisdom of the era, it is also true that devoting his time and energy to take a stand against these elements places him within that same historical context. Whether lamenting the emergence of natural sciences and progress or attacking systematic philosophy, for instance, his strong reaction is simply that – a reaction to a given stimulus. That he can be credited with much that is original is not in question, but it is important to also

acknowledge that even in swimming against the current he still remains in the same river, so to speak.

The era of which he was a part is noteworthy for a flourishing intellectual culture of writing and criticism. This Golden Age of Copenhagen fostered a number of characteristics of which Kierkegaard shared. There were high expectations for literary output and the accompanying work ethic to maintain a sufficient pace of production, for instance. In this, Kierkegaard excelled.[12]

As well, the culture was such that many authors traded barbs and commented on the state of society by writing and publishing pseudonymously in local newspapers and journals. Such barbs could even become quite harsh, and Kierkegaard was certainly no exception to the rules of the day, engaging on at least one occasion in what can only be described as the literary assassination of one of his rivals.[13]

III. Kierkegaard as apart from his time

By the same token, however, Kierkegaard is very much a figure that stood apart from the culture around him. In an era swept up by hope in the progress of history, the advance of science, and the ever-expanding knowledge of humankind, he challenged these optimistic assumptions and called for greater reflection on the true state of the world and humanity's place within it.

Kierkegaard pursued this task by modeling himself on one of his intellectual mentors – Socrates. He admired Socrates both for his humility regarding what he could possibly know and for the questions he raised regarding others' presumptions about what they knew. Using the pen instead of his voice, he engaged in lengthy public debates in an effort to educate and foster individual ethical development.[14] And, seeing himself in

Socrates, he imagined himself sacrificed as a martyr for offering something other than "what the times demanded."[15]

Toward these ends, Kierkegaard devoted massive amounts of time, energy and resources. Indeed, he depleted almost the entirety of his substantial inheritance during his short life as he focused solely on writing and publication.[16] Even in an era where a strong work ethic was prized, Kierkegaard stood apart from the rest in his single-minded devotion to his cause.

Similarly, while many wrote pseudonymous letters to local papers, Kierkegaard took this concept to new heights, creating individualized characters with multiple books to their name. And, while it is true that he was perhaps not alone in his frustration with the state church, no other figure reached either the level of intensity with which he approached the issue in writing nor followed through with their convictions enough in life to be both fully committed to Christianity and vehemently opposed to Christendom.

Further, at a time when Christianity was in many ways being hollowed out and subsumed into philosophy, Kierkegaard stressed the legitimacy, particularity and vital enduring significance of Jesus, Christian faith and Biblical texts.[17] Too much knowledge, he felt, was puffing humanity up. The result was a loss of the mystery and awesomeness of God and the incarnation of God in human flesh. "[S]uppose that Christianity is not a matter of knowing," he comments, noting that if that is the case, "then much knowledge is of no benefit."[18]

As Christianity became a staid collection of social proprieties, Kierkegaard proclaimed such a trend heretical and demanded radical faith instead. Contrary to the times, Christianity for Kierkegaard was not a bourgeois assumption, but suffering.[19]

IV. Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher

In some ways, Kierkegaard's project of saving Christianity from intellectualism and complacency had already been underway thanks to the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Writing before Kierkegaard at a time when Christianity appeared to be losing the battle against rationality, Schleiermacher is to a large degree responsible for making Christianity viable once again by focusing on the element of feeling ignored by scientific understanding.

Schleiermacher's disdain for the encroachment of foreign elements into Christianity – from the speculations of the Church Fathers to modern-day rationalism[20] – seems to resonate with much of what Kierkegaard railed against when complaining of the downhill slide of Christianity from the time of the Apostles onward.[21] As well, his focus on individual inwardness and faith versus rational observation and calculation lines up nicely with Kierkegaard's views on the true essence of Christianity.

At the same time, however, each of these connections also represents a point of tension between the two. There was likely little virtue in reflecting upon the lives and teachings of ancient philosophers in Schleiermacher's mind, for instance. Their only function would be to obscure and confuse the nature of Christian doctrine. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, these figures were of immense importance. Because of his sense of historical decline, Greek philosophers such as Socrates were in some senses closer to the truth of human existence. "[I]t is already a rarity to encounter a person who has even as much existing inwardness as a pagan philosopher," he lamented.[22] Though they lacked the vital revelation of Christ, they also lacked intervening centuries of distortion that had taken place since his incarnation.

The two also disagreed on where humanity was headed. Kierkegaard sounded the alarm signaling the loss of that which he felt was essential to Christian faith, but appeared to have no expectation that the effort would result in a rebirth of that faith. If anything, he may have hoped that a few scattered individuals would claim and own his teachings and embrace the religious life. Any effort at systemizing Christianity betrayed, in his mind, a lack of faith.[23]

Schleiermacher conveys the sense is very much that once Christianity is properly defined and explicated systematically, it would be to some degree undeniable and irresistible. As well, whereas Kierkegaard focused on the ethical and religious life of the individual before God, Schleiermacher hoped that the renewal of Christianity properly understood would lead to a transformative corporate life that in transmitting the sinless perfection of Jesus would gain the power to redeem the world. "We are conscious," the latter states, "of all approximations to the state of blessedness which occur in the Christian life as being grounded in a new divinely-effected corporate life, which works in opposition to the corporate life of sin and the misery which develops in it."[24]

While embracing inwardness, Kierkegaard also took issue with what he felt was an overemphasis on feeling and emotion as the basis for Christian faith. Arguing strongly against the Grundtvigians – including his own brother – he decried the sentimentalization of a faith he viewed in terms of struggle and suffering. Ironically, though, both figures in the end relied on the head to explain matters of the heart through their various treatises on why humanity cannot rely on rationality alone.

Though one can tease out these differences by reading closely the works of the two figures, and while it is clear that Kierkegaard was aware of the work of

Schleiermacher, his focus lay elsewhere, however. They may have disagreed on the details, but both Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher were still advocating individual inward decisions of faith in an effort to be in relationship with God. It was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his many followers who thought otherwise and therefore received an overwhelming volume of attention from Kierkegaard.

V. Kierkegaard and Hegel

Whereas had they met Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard might have quibbled about the best means to reinvigorate Christianity in Europe, a meeting between Kierkegaard and Hegel may well have been explosive – or, at least, the letter Kierkegaard would write in response to meeting Hegel would have been. Kierkegaard managed to find in Hegelian philosophy virtually everything he deemed faulty in the society around him. Thus, while Schleiermacher receives only the occasional footnote mention, Hegel is the constant companion, implicitly or explicitly, of Kierkegaard's writing.

Hegel, for his part, viewed his project as one of saving philosophy from faulty assumptions about the nature of reason and morality. Because true Reason is something exterior to humanity and human understanding, we can only strive toward it without ever being able to claim full possession. Our limited basis for understanding undermines notions of absolute reason, truth and morality as concepts of which we are able to access. "The designation of an individual as immoral *necessarily* falls away when morality in general is imperfect," he declares, "and has therefore only an arbitrary basis."[25] In some ways, this effort bears some resemblance to Kierkegaard's focus on humility with regard to knowledge.

Where the two depart, though, is in the source of this exterior knowledge and the implications for action. Hegel was less interested in the particularities of Christianity and Christian revelation through Christ than in discovering broad principles that could inform understanding universally throughout human experience. Further, though understanding was limited in Hegel's mind, it was nonetheless possible to review history, discern the forward-moving influence of the Spirit over time, and from that process make educated guesses on where history was being directed that could then provide the impetus for action.

Kierkegaard worried that relying on this sort of world-historical analysis granted too much authority into the hands of a select few to determine a course of action. "[T]o let the ethical become something whose discovery requires a prophet with a world-historical eye on world-history – that is a rare, ingeniously comic invention. If no such prophet arises," he suggests, "we can all call it a day, for then no one knows what the ethical is."[26]

Further, a danger exists within analysis of world history that the individual loses value in the face of sweeping movements. "World-historically, the individual subject certainly is a trifle," he says.[27] "In a world-historical dialectic, individuals fade away into humankind."[28] In contrast, he asks, "Did Socrates talk about what the times demanded, did he understand the ethical as something that a prophet with a world-historical gaze was supposed to discover or had discovered, or as something to be decided by voting? No, he was occupied solely with himself."[29]

If we think about Kierkegaard's response to Hegel in terms of his emphasis on faith, the depth of his concern may become clearer. Hegel's entire system was built upon

the application of reason to comprehend where history was headed and how we should respond.

Not only does this place reason above faith, but as mentioned above it tends to obscure individual decision-making in favor of the acting out of progress on a much larger scale. Given what Kierkegaard thought about the connection between faith and the decision to embrace the God-relationship and the connection between the God-relationship and what he felt it meant to be human, he could thus see Hegel as stripping away the essence of individual humanity in exchange for a world where the sum is far greater than any of its parts.

VI. Conclusion - The enduring influence of Kierkegaard

"Since I am not totally unfamiliar with what has been said and written about Christianity, I could presumably say a thing or two about it."[30] With this tongue-in-cheek comment, Kierkegaard (writing as Johannes Climacus), more or less comments on his entire body of work. He absorbed numerous sources for reflection and in turn closely analyzed their relative merit with regard to his concept of Christianity and Christian faith.

The complexity of his ideas and the unusual format in which he presented them grants him the dubious distinction of historical curiosity, worth reviewing solely for the novelty of doing so, if nothing else. But it is a disservice to those concerned with the issues he dealt with to leave the matter at this level alone. His work represents a contribution to our understanding of the complex nature of human understanding and the gravity of a faith decision.

Thus, while it is important to understand the time, culture and influences that shaped Kierkegaard, it is equally important not to leave him in that context and fail to

seek out the value of his efforts for humankind today. In many ways, the tension between those who would hold tightly to doctrine and feeling on the one hand, and those who advocate science and logic on the other remains embedded in our cultural framework.

Perhaps just as in the nineteenth century, we in the twenty-first need to hear the voice of one who questions the assumption that humanity can either define God or define the reasons why God cannot exist – pointing instead to a radical faith that takes as its starting place the finite nature of human reason and the infinite grace of God.

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[1] James Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 41.
[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Volume I, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 244.
[3] *Ibid*., 233.
[4] Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 28 December 2004), 7.
[5] *Ibid*., 147.
[6] *Ibid*., 490.
[7] *Ibid*., 533.
[8] *Ibid*., 490.
[9] *Ibid*., 319-320.
[10] *Ibid*., 788-789.
[11] *Ibid*., 47.
[12] *Ibid*., 99.
[13] *Ibid*., 394-396.
[14] *Ibid*., 318.
[15] *Ibid*., 497-498.
[16] *Ibid*., 516-517.
[17] *Ibid*., 261.
[18] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 215.
[19] Garff, 713.
[20] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, edited by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2004), 137.
[21] Garff, 764.
[22] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 279.
[23] *Ibid*., 174.
[24] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 358.
[25] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 256, 379.
[26] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 144.
[27] *Ibid*., 148.
[28] *Ibid*., 350.
[29] *Ibid*., 147.
[30] *Ibid*., 231.