

Kierkegaard and Theology

KIERKEGAARD IS ONE OF those rare men of reflection—he is too many-sided ever to be a founder of a school of thought. He is not quite properly Lutheran, certainly not scholastic enough; nor is he only an existentialist or even pre-Barthian or anti-metaphysical or an irrationalist. He illustrates the motto that prefaces *Philosophical Fragments*, “Better well hung than ill wed.”¹ Though many of his readers have tried to assimilate him to commodious categories, he does not quite fit. For surely no author with such a regard for logicity can be justly described simply as an irrationalist; neither can a devotee of intellectual tradition and a person of catholic tastes and sympathies be seen adequately only as a man of revolt, existentialist or otherwise; and though there is an “either/or” bringing distinctiveness to human discourse and choice, yet it must be remembered that Kierkegaard believed in the powers of personality to synthesize otherwise discrepant factors. Though tragedy and suffering were not alien to him, still he was convinced that Christianity was a happiness view and that faith is the victory that overcomes the world.

To describe Kierkegaard’s significance for theology has been made difficult rather than easy by the scholarship about him, for often he has been claimed to be Lutheran or on the road to Rome, anti-intellectual or too intellectual, anti-church or pro-Augustine, too psychological or too theological or even both. Actually Kierkegaard is much better as a theologian than his theological critics and adherents make him out to be. He is a radical thinker. He is more concerned with the substructures than with the super-structures and, on almost

1. Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 2.

every page, his interest is directed toward that kind of issue which is elemental and from which perhaps several intellectual elaborations can be made. Simply because he talks about matters common to so many positions taken by schoolish thinkers, it becomes almost an adventure to find him a therapeutic but Christian positivist, or a neo-orthodox theologian, or the father of existentialism. Besides being mistaken most of such claims are trivial and an indictment of the scholar who makes them.

A most general point about Kierkegaard perhaps deserves to be remembered. Kierkegaard was, intellectually considered, a diacritical thinker. He was able to make and to sustain distinctions. He excelled in the use of diagnostic abilities and was able throughout his career (brief as it was—he began writing in 1841–1842 and was done about nine years later) to ferret out the skein of possibilities with the utmost of logical rigor. This is the aristocratic and technical side of the man and his authorship. Here he sought to be rigorous, exacting, precise, in fact everything that any scrupulous man of intelligence discovers necessary for intellectual transparency. But the other side, and equally important, was his abiding interest in the synthesis proposed by Christianity for human personality. At once Kierkegaard commanded those dialectic and pathetic (i.e., capacities for pathos) talents that enabled him to indulge and yet to study those pervading emotions and commandeering interests that make existing distinctively human. The point then is that Kierkegaard combined an analytic intelligence with an ethico-religious and synthesizing passion. His authorship endeavors to dignify as well as to express the nobility of the simultaneity of factors within the personality, and especially as this is constituted by faith in Jesus Christ.

All of this should caution the reader against too quickly summarizing Kierkegaard's thought. Reflection moves by distinctions and exclusions and bifurcations but existence is, like the mock turtle soup of which one of his pseudonyms speaks, full of everything. Knowing that the exclusions in thought might not entail exclusions in being, Kierkegaard is very wary indeed in circumscribing what is real. Thus he does not deny metaphysics all meaning simply because he denies that thought and reality are one. Nor does he deny the objectivity of Jesus, of actual existence, of canons of thought, simply because he

notes the importance of subjectivity and the difficulties of the ontological logic of his day. And he is not quite a sectarian and a voluntarist on distinctively Christian matters simply because he notes intellectual and ethical discrepancies on matters like the Church and the sacraments. But neither is he meekly traditional here either.

Surely Kierkegaard was a wise man. He knew that intellectual extremes were daring and even exciting but here common sense was his guide. His intellectual affirmations were tentative and subject to recall. But ethically and religiously he sought decisiveness and maximal risk-taking. The leap of faith was an act whereby the personality constituted itself, whereby character was formed. To keep oneself ethically decisive while admitting intellectual uncertainty was part of Kierkegaard's admonition towards the good life. The fact that an erstwhile Christian culture had blurred this difference and the fact that philosophers had proposed ontological understanding, the understanding of being itself, as the bridging of the gap, led Kierkegaard to his task of reintroducing Christianity into Christendom and making numerous viable intellectual distinctions all over again.

Four issues will be here adumbrated. Though these might indicate Kierkegaard's relevance to contemporary theology, still more it is hoped that they may incite that kind of enthusiastic attention deserving a man of pervading Christian compassion who was simultaneously an aristocrat among the *cognoscenti*.

I. The Meaning of Religious Discourse

First it ought to be noted that Kierkegaard addressed himself to the problem of the meaning of religious discourse. It is a commonplace among students of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theological literature to note the difference between saving theology by converting its statements into metaphysical claims on the one hand and historical claims on the other. The Gnostics had even tried, much earlier, to vindicate theological claims by showing that no historical claims were essential. And today, once again, there are fervent endeavors among the theologically inclined to show that theology can be demythologized and, further, that commitment to Jesus Christ does not entail a commitment to a metaphysical schematism. All of this

is part of the large and vexing inquiry into the meaning of religious discourse.

It is perhaps a dubious distinction to impose upon an author, namely, that he wrote on a topic relevant to men of a century later. Besides, Kierkegaard wrote on this topic only indirectly and in consequence of a concern with the question of the locus of religiousness. Though Kierkegaard knew too that the Christian religion had permeated our customs, our literature, and our language with glory and hope, he was not content to let the contemplation of these objectivities be the primary religious act. He contended against Hegel, not so much because his empirical descriptions were either wrong or absurd, but, rather, because Hegel denied in his grandiose interpretation the religiousness of human subjectivity. It is Kierkegaard's merit to have stressed the fact that theological language, whether this be the language of the Bible or the more formal discourse of the theologian, corresponds also to human subjectivity.

Unlike other thinkers who make a point by excluding too much, Kierkegaard does not deny the possibility of objective reference to theological language. However, his point is a pregnant one, and fraught with all kinds of as yet unexplored implications, namely, that religious discourse is not religious because it conveys results. The point of religious language is not to communicate results as much as it is to stimulate the process of experience and thought that will reconstitute human personality. Ethico-religious truth is, in other words, not a quality of the language itself but is rather the process, the striving of the human subject to be a definitive individual.

Though this kind of point is frequently made, and usually clumsily, it is to Kierkegaard's credit that he makes it with both an aristocratic intellectual intent of clarifying the muddle that the learned create on these matters, and an earnest religious endeavor of showing that the simple man as well as the learned share the condition in their subjectivity for the realization of the highest truth that Jesus Christ is. Kierkegaard had no sympathy with Spinoza's religion in which God is actually the sum total of the logical predicates available to an aristocratic mind. Likewise, the translation of the language of Christianity into that of the logic of historical existence, which Hegel tried to effect, Kierkegaard protests on both intellectual and moral grounds.

But, as yet, Kierkegaard is relatively untried on these matters. However, one hundred years ago he admitted the objective uncertainty of theological pronouncements and hence was not disturbed by biblical criticism of his day nor would he be chagrined by the confessions of intellectual incertitude in ours; but, withal, he noted that the primary question was the quality of one's own life, his own subjectivity, and that no theological sentence was religious in meaning until the appropriation process was stimulated and human passion aroused.

I am bold enough to suggest that recent theology is positively amateurish on these matters. Kierkegaard's epistemological and technical acumen holds a great promise for future formal inquiries upon which so much theology depends. But even more than this, Kierkegaard was a master at etching out the devotional requisites of Christian religiousness and not least of his disinterestedness is expended on the task of reflecting himself out of the aesthetic, the philosophic, and the aristocratic, and back again into the devotional and the simple.

II. The Importance of Passions and Interests

A second consideration marking Kierkegaard's theological relevance is his disclosure of the importance of passions and interests. Few authors have been so marvelously equipped for this kind of task as that Dane. He wrote effortlessly and gives the impression of writing with the immediacy that the bird sings and the flower spreads its fragrance. It is no wonder that he thought of himself as a poet. Once his literary goal became clear, his authorship comes forth almost completely free of those niggardly and finite calculations marring so many artistic and literary productivities. He wrote out of his own inwardness that was rich indeed and in a style not calculated to please his public but one adequate to his own insight. But, for this very reason, he succeeds in writing out of his own pathos and writing his way into the pathos of another individual, his reader. If nothing else, the Kierkegaardian literature is so rich in pathos, so replete with those dimensions of human subjectivity that are truly universal, so expressive of refined passions and concerns, that here alone it will bridge long spans of time and continue to challenge moral turpitude and laxity.

Such honesty, sincerity, and flaming concern, expended as it is in an authorship that defines religious truth not as sentences to be learned but as dynamic becoming of the self, are theologically important by themselves. But Kierkegaard did more. He described the casual and efficacious role of interests and passions in the greatest detail. He brings together what are otherwise so often separated in Christian tradition. For him, the emphasis upon the objectivity of Jesus' existence, of the Atonement, and other divine acts, does not deny the existence or the significance of subjectivity. In fact, it is his intent not to correct Protestant theology here as much as it is to supplement its account by showing that subjectivity too can be orderly, that it can and indeed must predispose the person. Instead of distrusting subjectivity as Lutheran dogmatics and Church practice suggest, Kierkegaard delineates carefully the role of despair, of dread, of guilt, this to make clear that no one is a sinner deductively and only because the dogma says that all men are sinners. A subjective state does correspond and Kierkegaard is apt at pointing it out, all the while skillfully noting the differences as various objectivities, laws, mores, God, Christ, are engaged.

But more than this, Kierkegaard notes too that the content of Christian religiousness is finally passionate and interestful, not conceptual. Not only are modes of subjectivity the cause of religious striving but the appropriation of religious teaching, and of anything else religious that is objective and social, leads to another mode of subjectivity. Even love, the *agape* of the New Testament, must be a passion. Kierkegaard felt a responsibility as author to lead his reader out of subjectivity and into the contemplation of objectivities only for the sake of the new subjectivity that Christian faith, hope, and love are. Surely this is of a distinctive note in theological and philosophical writing and worthy of very careful attention. Few authors have been as successful in saying this in a congruent manner as was Kierkegaard. For he destroys as he moves along his own authority and calculates the effect of his writing in such a way as to augment the passionate response within the reader.

Kierkegaard, as also noted in the previous section, is here proposing a new basis for the discussion of theological issues. In centuries past, when theologians were able to talk with impunity about the

final and efficient causes of nature (this because the physicists already did so), when men of religious learning could espouse easily the fortunes of God in the progress of men, then there seemed little reason to believe that human subjectivity was naught else than a mirror, confused and distorting indeed, of the passing scene. But Kierkegaard is suggesting that the inner life is not a mirror of the outer existence. It is not a chaos, not a random or caused array. Kierkegaard's literature is the disclosure of the life of subjectivity as a cosmos, capable of being mapped and described, in some respects independent and in ethico-religious senses most important of all. By saying that an interest in and a passion for existing is the reality that men can actually practice and own, Kierkegaard proposes a kind of metaphysics, not only compatible with Christianity and the New Testament, but also a new point of departure for theological discussion.

III. The Pragmatic Significance of the Person of Jesus Christ

It may seem amiss to say it but Kierkegaard seems also to have re-discovered the pragmatic significance of the person of Jesus Christ. All kinds of books can be written about Jesus Christ just as they can about Plato, each book taking account of the history of the teachings, of institutions, of the criticisms of either, and all of this being a documentation of the significance of the man. Each book thus written is in turn an item in history to be understood again as a part of the growing significance of the man. But it is Kierkegaard's point that as true as the respective historical accounts of Plato's and Christ's significances might be, still this is not the proper way to describe the bearing upon human interests of the person of Jesus Christ. As important as scholarship might be, Kierkegaard brings a correction to the view that grows up where religious studies are pursued and taught, namely, that by increasing the scope and broadening the grasp, the personal and intense religious response will follow as a matter of course.

Certainly it is true that Christianity has its own tradition and that this is both extensive and refined; likewise there is an institutionalizing of the idea which has resulted in the Church becoming a formidable power in the affairs of men; and not least, rightly or wrongly, there are external authorities, men and books, that are re-

puted to keep the keys to the treasures of life eternal. Kierkegaard neither denies nor affirms with enthusiasm the above views. But what he is concerned to point out is the fact that no one of these is, nor all of them together are, in such connection with the individual that the Christian's response is ever passionless, habitual, or trivial. Instead there is the person of Christ and He is the paradox. This latter word, "paradox," is intended by Kierkegaard to safeguard the uniqueness of the Christian's object of interest. Paradoxicality describes that kind of relation and object that Christianity and Christ are.

On the object side, Christ is the paradox because no premises offered to reflection can make loyalty and faith to Him a necessary and inevitable consequent. He is neither obviously God, nor inductively speaking, even the greatest man who ever lived. Even if He were the latter, still an absolute commitment would be incommensurate with the approximative and necessarily hypothetical conclusion. But on the subject's side, there is paradoxicality because He is the object of interest, offense or faith, scorn or worship, without that kind of justification that decisiveness seems to ask. The interest that He asks in His own existence and person is an interest not congruent with self-interest nor is it congruent with that reason that we all invoke quite concretely as the reflectively organized common sense of mankind. The contrariety of interests on the subject's side is many-sided of course. Disinterested analysis and reflection suggest a suspension of decision while the guilt and concern going with it counsel the need for a resolute decision; it does not quite seem to be in one's own interest to deny oneself and his interests in order to save oneself. Jesus Christ seems to be asking that men live by dying, that they win by losing, that they get by giving.

Kierkegaard's theological fecundity is again rich on two sides. On the abstract and formal side, he has produced and argued with exactitude the doctrine of paradoxicality and several related doctrines that constitute in part, surely, the prolegomenon to future Christological discussion—even if like other prolegomena this one too may help to circumscribe the inventiveness and exuberance of speculative thinkers. But, on the ethical and practical side, Kierkegaard is even richer. There is an almost lavish outpouring of literature from his pen on the consequences in human existing of an active relation to and interest

in the existence of Jesus Christ. This again does not lack exactness and form but rather vindicates the view that Christian subjectivity has its aesthetic features, its suppleness, its variants, and even its sophistication. Where most authors are pedestrian and flat-footed and at best can repeat biblical rubrics with only slight elaboration, Kierkegaard can both illustrate in his own person and sketch for his reader the dramaturgical feature of Christian inwardness.

Not least of the relevance of the figure of Jesus to the person is the fact that a response to Him is not exclusively intellectual, or emotional, or dutiful. It is to Kierkegaard's credit again to have corrected the intellectualism of Protestantism and brought ethicality and empirical behavior back into consideration. Kierkegaard insists that religiosity too is a living synthesis of the personality in thinking, feeling, and willing. The aesthetic factors are not extirpated, the ethical is not abnegated; instead Kierkegaard delineates the richness of the faith relation by showing that even many sets of categories cannot quite exhaust it. All of this is testimony to the personality values that Kierkegaard discovers to be a consequent of the contemporaneity of Jesus Christ.

The thesis that contemporaneity with Jesus is actually possible involves Kierkegaard as it has everyone who thinks about it in numerous problems, epistemological and theological. Kierkegaard repudiates the use, though not necessarily the truth, of the substance doctrines and other gambits of the past. Instead he suggests that Jesus Christ exists as the contemporary only when one's own interest and passion is Christ-like. His suggestion is that the historical Jesus when viewed detachedly and disinterestedly is not the eternal contemporary. But when one forgives trespasses, as the prayer of our Lord suggests, then we are forgiven; when one loves an enemy, one is loved. But one is not loved because of one's own love, one is loved contemporaneously. Kierkegaard too is concerned to say that one's deeds do not merit God's attention. The presence of Christ is not a disinterestedly guaranteed and objectively warranted phenomenon. Again I can only urge that Kierkegaard's reflections here are most suggestive and seem to bear out the New Testament as well as augur well for further consideration.

IV. Re-reading the Human Situation

Last, and briefly, Kierkegaard has read exceedingly well the features of human existence. Many of the listeners in the pew have noted that things in the world are not quite the way the preacher has described them. When one hears the pulpit fulminations about the horrors of sin, and these horrors get no amplification other than that provided by either gross sensuality or misuse of public trust, then it certainly becomes difficult to fit the theological categories to every man. Kierkegaard corrected the interpretations, not by reforming the dogmas but by examining again the way it is we actually behave. Thus he sees us as sinners when we are sensual but also when we are most spiritual and moral. Nowhere does he suggest that sensuous delight in the things of the world is *ipso facto* sinful.

But all of this is part of his long essay in re-reading the human situation. Every issue he touches, the faith and reason controversy, the question of original sin, the significance of music, gets a new and creative treatment. If one analyzes all of this, it is surely the case that Kierkegaard makes his reader see that one's own personality, not history and not nature, is the locus for the presence of God. The larger orders may have their teleologies, God is undoubtedly present in all things occasioning their working together for good, but it is still men who must love God. Again, Kierkegaard does not deny in order to affirm—his domain is personality and he dares to believe that Christ died for every man and that the paramount concern must be to become a Christian. Once the inner teleology is taken care of, then the natural and historical scene may be read for what it is worth.

Hence it is that Christian faith is not alien to personality as Kierkegaard understands it. The otherness of God, the distinction between God and man, are not treated in anything but human terms. This must be remembered about Kierkegaard for he is only mistakenly associated with these traditions that emphasize God's transcendence in non-human categories.

Perhaps few writers have said so much about the glory of our common humanity as Kierkegaard did. Not a little of that glory is evident in the very fact that so much can be known and said about being human and being Christian. For Kierkegaard too, being Christian

was a human perfection, not to be gainsaid because it is human nor slighted because it is finally a matter of grace.

In a day when human nature is in such bad repute, when the very fountainhead of sin-talk seems to be Kierkegaard, it might be well to discover how careful he was, how anxious to do justice to the sensory capacities, the aesthetic refinement, the genial admixture of pluses and minuses that we all are. The diatribes in his literature are reserved for those who have leveled all the valleys, who have straightened all the paths, who have taken the heights and depths of personal expression away from their fellows. All of those who, impressed by the engines of society and anxious to secure conformity to God, country, and duty, and who have slandered man by taking the adventure away—these are Kierkegaard's foes. That they include the clerics too, he was quick to note. His enthusiasms were, instead, for the restoration of passion, of expressiveness, of the individual's caring mightily. His literature is an attempt to restore the individual and his idiosyncrasies to a place of honor. For it is by rubbing that Aladdin's lamp, one's own personality and subjectivity, that one discovers God in Christ reconciling the world and oneself unto Himself.