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# THINKING WITH KIERKEGAARD ABOUT CURRENT CHALLENGES IN OUR 'PRACTICE IN CHRISTIANITY'

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## **Abstract**

With his focus on concrete existence of the single individual, Søren A. Kierkegaard greatly influenced Western theological and philosophical thinking from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. When contemplating his theological legacy for the contemporary situation in Slovakia, four major phenomena should be taken into consideration: (1) post-totalitarianism; (2) the transition to a liberal capitalist economy; (3) mass-media culture and virtual reality; and (4) the State-Church situation in an increasingly secular society. In order to revive the traditional, state-funded Churches of our time and to strengthen the ethical fabric of our societies, one should not neglect the basic questions of theological anthropology and soteriology. Kierkegaard's 'Sickness unto death' and 'Practice in Christianity' may serve as good resource, providing that they are not interpreted in solely individualistic and anti-communal ways.

*Keywords:* Kierkegaard, theological anthropology, discipleship, imitatio Christi, Christendom

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## **1. Introduction**

Few would doubt today that Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), though he only lived to be 42 years old, has with his numerous writings on faith, the nature of God, the Church, ethics, the place of the individual, etc. greatly influenced Western religious and philosophical thinking from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward [1-4]. It is, therefore, appropriate that we should engage the rich intellectual legacy of Søren Kierkegaard and attempt to relate it to our current social, religious, and cultural contexts. Our personal reflections are always historically based. The more aware we are of this fact and the more informed we are about our roots, the better we prepare ourselves to stand in a genuine continuity with the best ideas and practices of our tradition, offering relevant solutions to contemporary challenges. An intentional cultivation of being aware of the historical contingencies of such reflection should be promoted not only

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because “it draws on history for its foundations and inspiration, but mainly because the values which motivate and coordinate the present participants in the life of society have been constituted historically. The present continues and revitalizes these values with greater or lesser innovative energy.” [5] Thus, I will attempt to offer an evaluation and possible application of a few selected Kierkegaardian emphases today within the contemporary Slovak society [6].

In order to understand the specificity of our present context, I suggest we should focus on four major phenomena: (1) post-totalitarianism; (2) the transition to a liberal capitalist economy; (3) mass-media culture and virtual reality; and (4) the State-Church situation in an increasingly secular society. The issues connected with a post-totalitarian situation and a state church situation on the one hand and the challenges connected with the existential situation of Christians as ‘authentic’ individuals in an increasingly secularized and consumerist (hedonistic) capitalist society are intricately intertwined and, as such, constitute relevant themes to explore [7-11]. Due the limited space of this study, however, I will only be able to provide short probes into each. Facing a challenge that is too complex and difficult to deal with in one contribution, I have intentionally chosen to approach it with a clear focus and a specific, openly recognized viewpoint – that of a believing and committed theologian who lives with a creative tension between immanence and transcendence. I wish to consider Kierkegaard’s existential ‘subjectivisation’ of intellectual reflection theologically, drawing primarily from Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers* and *Practice in Christianity*.

## **2. Christianity and Christendom in 21<sup>st</sup> century Slovakia**

Our society has been undergoing in the past 25 years (since 1989) dramatic and often traumatic changes, requiring profound transformations not only on the socio-economic and political level, but also on the level of culture and values. The euphoria of November 1989 during which people were so to speak “drunk with freedom” [12] has long subsided, being replaced by confusion and disenchantment over the new state of affairs. “With little or no democratic experience and awareness of political responsibilities, Slovak people often became puzzled about how to use their new freedom, and how to survive in the new system” [13]. Social imbalances and the chaos of corruption spawn new yearnings for strong leaders. The lack of experience of active civic engagement and personal initiative pushes people, especially those born before the 1960s, further down the spiral of frustration. Acute concern for social welfare brings about feelings of nostalgia about past securities, rendering people ever more hesitant about reforming structures they are accustomed to rely on. The mass media seem to provide ‘some’ relief with their omnipresent telenovels, interactive reality-shows, and celebrity culture showcasing, but it is a mere drug which dulls one’s senses and sensibilities. Such flattening of individuals delivers no satisfying solution. Life is ever more as grim in the morning as it was the day before.

I am not advocating turning a blind eye to deplorable social realities of thousands of people in our societies. Social empathy is necessary not only for those on the brim of society but also for those higher up on the social ladder. Social empathy realized in concrete acts of kindness and sacrifice cultivates human nature. However, legitimate social empathy should not be mistaken for nostalgic escapes to illusory memories of a 'perfect past', for this only creates undesirable social and political instability.

The resulting tensions have been difficult to cope with. The basic conflict, however, goes far beyond the dividing lines of conservatism vs. liberalism in economic and social matters. It is a conflict of axiological outlooks [14]. On the one hand, values are considered "temporal, historical and changing in character", while the opposing view acknowledges the existence of a "real hierarchy of values which is more stably accepted in our society and directs its change" [5, p. ix]. This is a far more important issue than is typically recognized by the intellectual and political circles today. If we agree with the notion that values are foundational for individual responsibility, it helps us understand that the values of democracy and cooperative integration and, above all, of human rights and dignity [15], are essential for confronting the challenges of our increasingly secular and globalized world, which stresses international European identity and independent and creative individuality in contrast to a collective identity anchored in a political ideology. The European society has had a devastating experience with human identity grounded in political ideologies [13]. Besides resulting in an obvious social and economic disaster, both the fascist and the communist totalitarian ideologies had a profound effect on the perception of the nature and value of a human being. Such societies witnessed a devastating "instrumentalization of the properly human and humanizing character of the self-identity of persons and peoples" [5, p. 3].

In our present age, however, individuals seem to be ruled by chaotic desires and tormented by unyielding uncertainties. Nevertheless, even in the midst of fake cultural products, unsatisfying chase after material possessions or sensual pleasures, and false political solutions, there is still a belief in, even a desire for authenticity. Creative, responsible 'individuality' appears to be a key to living authentically – not in the freedom *from* others, but rather in the freedom *for* others, even in spite of their (and our own) "sinful imperfection" [16]. Creative, responsible individuality must not become a-cosmic, detached, and self-serving – actually, it couldn't, for then it would not be 'responsible.' It must remain the constitutive force, the essential foundation for any collective identities one wishes to enter into. As such, it serves as a necessary corrective to the flattening force of manipulation – whether it be political, economic, cultural, or religious [17] – and as such, it helps to solve "the most acute problem of every society ... [by] combining the goodness of all its members with the goodness of individuals" [18].

This is where, I believe, Kierkegaard can be our resource. Not only a resource in the manner of an interesting idea, a helpful scheme of thinking, or even an exotic prophetic voice. But a resource in terms of a humble companion

on our existential journey, a source of discontent, a voice that cannot be easily ignored, a relational individual who breaks through our defences – philosophical and religious, urgently inviting us to consider letting ourselves be confronted with the Word, the Logos that became flesh. In a nutshell, this is why I believe Kierkegaard can and should be a resource for us today in our attempts at achieving authentic subjectivity.

We now turn to two themes from Kierkegaard and let him speak for himself to us so that he may indeed become the voice that cannot easily be ignored. The first one is Christian discipleship as imitation of Christ and the second is his mission to introduce Christianity into Christendom.

### 3. The essence of Christian discipleship as *Imitatio Christi*

In order to comprehend Kierkegaard's theme of discipleship, it is essential to first understand the basic tenets of his theological anthropology. This comes to us in the most profound way in *The sickness unto death* (1849) [19], though one finds many other valuable places in Kierkegaard's writings as well. Most people, according to Kierkegaard, find themselves in one of the following two categories: 1) those, who thoughtlessly roam the world seeking pleasures and 2) those, who arrogantly believe to be doing 'the right thing' and pretend to be satisfied with their own, self-imputed righteousness. On account of the first category, Kierkegaard says (among other things): "Most men are really only sample copies [Exemplarer], duplicates of what has been put into the world. Of them it may be said: They derive benefit out of living, but the world has no benefit out of their having lived." [20] On account of the second category, Kierkegaard states that "[t]he proud person always wants to do the right thing, the great thing, and he is actually struggling not with people but with God, because he wants to do it with his own power; he does not want to sneak out of something – no, what he wants is to set the task as high as possible and then to finish it by himself, satisfied with his own consciousness and his own approval" [21].

Both of these modes of being, however, are but variations of living in despair. Kierkegaard equates this state of being in despair with being in sin. According to Kierkegaard, sin and faith are opposites, since a person is an individual 'before God', either he dwells in despair (sin) or he approaches God through faith to receive the forgiveness of sins. "The antithesis sin/faith is the Christian one that Christianly reshapes all ethical concepts and gives them one additional range" [19, p. 83], argues Kierkegaard. The question is – how to become a disciple of Jesus since we all are sick unto death, dying because of our own despair, our own inability to overcome the weakness and defiance, living in blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, actually living in offense, in ignorance and denial of Christ, unable and unwilling to submit to Christ and find our true Selves? Kierkegaard clearly recognizes the seriousness of our anthropological predicament with regard to one's relatedness to God and, subsequently, one's relatedness to oneself and to others. Thus, with a hint of irony he exclaims: "God

creates out of nothing – marvelous, you say. Yes, of course, but he does something more marvelous – he creates saints (the communion of saints) out of sinners.” [19, p. 88].

So, why is ‘creating saints out of sinners’ more marvellous than ‘creating out of nothing’, according to Kierkegaard? Perhaps because when God creates the world out of nothing there is nothing in His way, nothing to obstruct, nothing to thwart His creative intentions. Creating saints, on the other hand, involves dealing with stubborn individuals endowed with a high measure of autonomy and freedom [22]. Interestingly, human beings seem to prefer their desperate state of being to that of ethical and ontological authenticity.

‘Despair’ is the key term Kierkegaard uses in this respect. Despair as a false and twisted state of being. Kierkegaard calls this state of being the sickness that really leads unto death, completely destroying true Self - the Spirit [13, p. 21]. This horrifying sickness is universal – everyone experiences despair unto death, except for the true Christians. Each human can despair over earthly or over heavenly (eternal) matters. It takes on three basic forms – a Self in despair usually is not even being conscious of being in despair and having a Self; secondly, a Self in despair does not will to be true Onself; and thirdly, a Self in despair does will to be true Onself – but in autonomy against the divine Self. Only the despair over eternal matters leads to true consciousness of the Self [19, p. 51-52]. Since only God himself can establish true Self, despair in itself is sin manifesting itself in the never-ending continuing process. According to Kierkegaard, “[t]he sinner ... is so much in the power of sin that he has no idea of its wholly encompassing nature, that he is lost and on the way to destruction. ... Sin has become so natural to him, or sin has become so much his second nature, that he finds the daily everyday to be entirely in order, and he himself pauses only for a moment each time he perceives new impetus, so to speak, from new sin.” [19, p. 105] Whether before God Himself or with the concept of God on one’s mind, despair is always a sin. It is either intensified weakness or defiance; if despair intensifies it results in sin. If a person does not really will to be true Self (Kierkegaard considers this to be the blasphemy against Holy Spirit – in depth it means refusing, denying Christ Himself), there is no forgiveness. It is either sheer ignorance or a lack of vision of better life or, worse yet, a wilful rejection that prevents people from accepting and personally appropriating God’s solution to their predicament; it is an acute self-absorbedness with their own misery, pure self-centeredness that prevents people to discern the source of true life and to live out their “*vocatio* according to God’s original purpose” [23].

Kierkegaard’s emphasis is on the following truth: the call to an authentic state of being and thus to a meaningful life is not coming from human’s inner self – Jesus is the initiator as well as the power of the call. In his *Practice in Christianity* (1850), Kierkegaard states this clearly: “All his willingness to help perhaps would still not help if he did not say these words and thereby take the first step, for in the calling out of these words (‘Come here to me’) he does indeed come to them” [24]. Elsewhere in the book Kierkegaard states: “No, his presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past, thus does not become

more and more distant – that is, if faith is at all to be found upon the earth” [24, p. 9]. Each individual, who is burdened with distressing presence, completely unsatisfied with his path of life, labouring to go through another day in despair – is, according to Kierkegaard, invited by God through the powerful word of Jesus to lay aside the burden. Jesus does not require certain conditions to be met first; he did not come to break the bruised one. On the contrary, he came to raise one up, to grant one a hiding place within Himself, as a true friend and true Saviour of sinners [24, p. 15]. Such is the counterintuitive, indeed paradoxical divine dealing with humans. Such is the foundation for individuals to become disciples who practice their faith by imitating Christ.

#### **4. The nature of Kierkegaard’s attack on Christendom**

Our quest then leads us on to the challenge of bringing this kind of ontologically and ethically potent Christianity – i.e. consisting of truly believing individuals, imitating Jesus – into the Christendom of Kierkegaard’s and our own eras. Here is what Kierkegaard has to say when it comes to the fundamental question of how sin and the forgiveness of sins is conceived of in Christendom: “And what is the situation of Christendom with regard to the forgiveness of sins? Well, the state of Christendom is actually despair of the forgiveness of sins; but this must be understood in the sense that Christendom is so far behind that its state never becomes apparent as being that. Even the consciousness of sin is not reached, and the only kinds of sins recognized are those that paganism also recognized — and life goes on happily in pagan peace of mind.” [19, p. 107] The depth and breadth of human enslavement to sin thus, according to Kierkegaard, reaches so far that individuals as well as the official Church establishments do not recognize their misery. “Even the consciousness of sin is not reached...”! Where there is no consciousness of sin, there is no need for repentance, no need of a savior, no urgent desire to bring wholeness to one’s existence. On account of those still culturally associated with the Christian narrative and rituals, Kierkegaard argues that “[c]ontemporary Christendom really lives as if the situation were like this: Christ is the great hero and benefactor who once and for all has guaranteed us salvation, and now all we have to do is be happy and satisfied with the innocent goods of earthly life and leave the rest to him. But Christ is essentially the prototype; therefore we should be like him and not merely reap benefits from him.” [20, p. 316]

Thus in November 1850 Kierkegaard arrives at the conclusion that the situation of contemporary Christendom needs to hear the message of an upbuilding author, “whose entire thinking is essentially contained in this one thought: the single individual. [In margin] ‘The single individual’ – of course, the single individual religiously understood, ... yes, unconditionally everyone, just as much as everyone has or should have a conscience, can be that single individual and should be that, can stake his honor in willing to be that, but then also can find blessedness in being what is the expression for true fear of God, true love to one’s neighbor, true humanity, and true human equality.” [25] Being

realistic and recognizing how discomfoting, even offensive this idea will be to most, Kierkegaard goes on carefully invoking: “Oh, if only some might achieve it, if it is not, although the task for all, nevertheless too high for all of us, yet not too high in such a way that it should be forgotten, forgotten as if it were not the task or as if this task did not face us in November 1850, so that we may at least learn to forsake not only the mediocre but also the indifferent half measures that reject an established order, yet without driving through to become in an extraordinary sense the single individual, but rather schismatically organize parties and sects, which are neither the one nor the other” [25].

Notice how careful Kierkegaard is when it comes to hasty, “mediocre ... indifferent half measures that reject an established order” – that is, Christendom in the sense of Danish established church hierarchy. His criticism here can be interpreted along purely individualistic lines as if Kierkegaard wished for a complete individualization and internalization of Christianity; or, it may be interpreted more along the reformatory lines – closely resembling the German reformer, Martin Luther, whom Kierkegaard held in high regard (though not without criticizing him) – where the focal point of individual faith rests in a constitutive tension with the emphasis on a liturgical community of Christians (i.e. communal and sacramental aspects of faith). “Making this attachment to the teachings of the Church explicit, his pseudonym Johannes Climacus insisted in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that Christianity presupposes not only a ‘how’ (the life of passionate faith), but also a definite ‘what’ (communally mediated doctrines and concepts) that makes the ‘how’ of inwardness possible” [26]. Even though we don’t find this emphasis developed in Kierkegaard explicitly, we find surprising implicit hints. For example, in a July 1838 letter to his childhood friend Emil Boesen, Kierkegaard writes: “The more I think about our motto: ‘*A church stands in the distance*’, the more I too feel the truth of what you once noted, that it has come considerably closer – but more than an *auditor* I cannot become just yet” [V. Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective, Part III: The Opening Conclusion*, p. 42, <http://www.hccentral.com/eller2/part14.html#f3>, accessed 25.05.2015]. Another hint, indeed, more than a hint, comes to us from Kierkegaard’s Journal in which he records his yearnings and doubts concerning his becoming a Lutheran parish pastor. In one of his last articles written shortly before he died for *The Fatherland*, titled “For the New Edition of *Practice in Christianity*” (May 16, 1855), Kierkegaard expresses his hope the established church can still be saved: “*My earlier thought was: if the established order can be defended, this is the only way to do it: by poetically (therefore by a pseudonym) passing judgment on it; then by drawing on grace in the second power, Christianity would come not only to find forgiveness for the past by grace, but by grace a kind of indulgence from the actual imitation of Christ and the actual strenuousness of being Christian. In this way truth still manages to come into the established order; it defends itself by judging itself.*” [27]

John Milbank offers following thoughts that shed more light on the subject and carry a light, provocative overtone: “In this way a genuine

ecumenical project is inseparable from the project of establishing a global Christendom – the distinction of Christianity from Christendom being rejected as semantically and theologically confused. And the majority of thinking Christians who now suppose that this distinction *can* be made should reflect upon the evidence that, once Christendom declined and eventually collapsed, so too did the social reality of charity, or the life of the supernatural which is Christianity itself.” [28] It is interesting to follow Milbank’s argument according to which “[t]he word in fact historically meant the same thing: the body of Christians. Thus to make the distinction is to reduce Christianity to a ‘belief system’, a notion that only came in during the early modern period. In English, unlike French, the word that denoted this, ‘Christianism’, never caught on. It can also be noted that Kierkegaard attacked not ‘Christendom’, as the translations of his work misleadingly suggest, but Danish Lutheran ‘official Christianity’. He was less critical, if by no means uncritical, of medieval Christendom.” [28]

Whether in a liturgical setting or outside of it, the overarching theme remains clear. In his *Practice in Christianity* Kierkegaard expresses the desire for all the readers and believers who openly proclaim their adherence to Christ – to see and perceive Jesus for what and who He is – the offense and object of faith and yet, the Saviour, the Redeemer of all humankind, who “out of love came to seek the lost, to suffer and die ... He, the only one who is able to help and help with the one thing needful, who is able to rescue from the only, in the truest sense, life/threatening illness, he does not wait for anyone to come to him; he comes on his own initiative, uncalled – for he is indeed the one who calls to them; he offers help – and such help!” [24, p. 12]

## 5. Conclusions

I fear that the threat of the ‘brown’ and ‘red’ type of ideologies is still alive today. The political extremes (red and brown) always take advantage of the social, economic and/or political voids that may exist in a given society. They use such situations to promote their radical agendas. Worst, this is happening all around Europe and, as it was historically, the Jews are always chosen as the culprits. Without a well-developed philanthropic culture at its base, Capitalist market economy with its accompanying hyper-consumerism is equally dangerous – the only difference is that you don't even notice how you become enslaved and manipulated [29, 30]. So, our mission as educator’s and intellectuals is to call people to (1) a critical self-reflection, joining Kierkegaard to some extent in his itching and discomfiting prophetic critique; (2) as well as to a critical appropriation of cultural and religious narratives that constitute the kind of philanthropic, altruistic vision of life that our society can survive and thrive on [31]. The potency of Kierkegaard’s narrative stems from its original Narrator who himself re-enters into the story of the world and our own personal stories through divinely appointed moments of encounter with the human self. I wish to suggest that Kierkegaard did not give up the notion of the need for an authentic, historical, liturgical community of Christians as a proper place where



such encounters are facilitated – though he did give up, rather resolutely, the notion Christendom being the divinely sanctioned form of the Christ's Kingdom on earth – as if mediated directly through the establishment.

I also wish to emphasize that in our epistemological outlook we must go beyond the immediacy of knowledge. For one thing, knowledge in itself does not require a response of the knowing subject. But more importantly, some reality will necessarily remain beyond the immediacy (out of reach) of human knowledge. Though faith does have a noetic quality, it is not limited to knowledge [32]. Faith, according to Kierkegaard, is the bridge over the chasm between offense and inwardness; it is the only right kind of response to the tormenting paradox of the offense. "From the Christian point of view, everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding. The kind of scholarliness and scientificity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian." [19, p. 5] Faith, therefore, is not essentially defined noetically, but existentially and ethically as decision making and action in imitation of Christ. And this imitation of Christ necessarily, i.e. intrinsically involves personal (inward, most of the time) suffering. *Theologia crucis est nostra theologia* – theology of the cross is our own theology, as Luther was known to proclaim. Kierkegaard was, in this sense, a good Lutheran! "There stands Christianity with its requirements for self-denial: Deny yourself — and then suffer because you deny yourself. That was Christianity. But how entirely different it is now." [24, p. 213] Humans are called by God to imitate Christ on his way to and through the cross; to submit their suffering to the suffering of Christ, to hide their failures and anxieties into Christ's death so that they might rise, having gone through the deepest existential revolution possible. Thus, it is only proper to end with Kierkegaard's sobering words: "*What the age needs is not a genius—it surely has had geniuses enough - but a martyr, one who in order to teach men to obey would himself become obedient unto death, one whom men put to death; but, see, just because of that they would lose, for simply by killing him, by being victorious in this way, they would become afraid for themselves. This is the awakening which the age needs.*" [33]

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