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**CONCEPT OF RELATIONSHIP GOD-MAN IN  
KIERKEGAARD'S WRITING  
'WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE LILIES IN THE FIELD  
AND FROM THE BIRDS IN THE AIR'**

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**Abstract**

The presented paper analyses Kierkegaard's understanding of the man–God relationship. The lily and bird that God takes care of are an example for man. Man's anxiety, desire and passion disrupt this relationship between God and man, who forgets about his creator. By means of this story 'What we learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds in the Air' Kierkegaard wants to stress God's love for man, man's dependence on God, and human sins. The authors of this paper point out a clear parallel between the story of man's fall (Genesis 3) and Kierkegaard's story of the lily that becomes worried.

*Keywords:* creation, God, man, lilies, birds

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**1. Introduction**

The Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is known not only as a philosopher or a critic of religious orders, but also as a religious thinker who interpreted the Scriptures in his writings. His faith and his search for a deeper meaning of man and his existence are evident in his interpretations of biblical verses. The same can be said about Kierkegaard's writing titled *What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field* and from the *Birds of the Air*. The text is a part of the volume titled *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.

Professor R.L. Perkins in his Introduction claims that "An English translation of the three parts *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* has been published in as many separate volumes" and are incorrect and/or incomplete [1]. In 1937, some parts of this text started to be translated and were not completed before 1993. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* was translated as one of the last of Kierkegaard's writings into English [2], and this volume "has

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certainly not generated much discussion among Kierkegaard's Anglophone interpreters" [3].

As far as Czech translation is concerned, similarly it was gradually translated in three parts: Part One - *Čistota srdce aneb chtít jen jedno* (Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing), Kalich, Praha, 1989; Part Two was translated in 2015 (This volume was translated from Danish original *Hvad vi lære af Lilierne paa Marken og af Himmelens Fugle* into Czech as *Čemu se naučíme od polních lilií a nebeského ptactva*, Acta Kierkegaardiana, Supplement vol. 5 (2015), Kierkegaard Circle, Trinity College, University of Toronto in cooperation with Central European Research Institute of Soren Kierkegaard in Nitra and Ljubljana. Translation: Zdeněk Zaccpal, notes: Jakub Marek, Introduction: Roman Králík); Part Three - *Evangelium utrpení* (The Gospel of Suffering. Christian Discourses), CDK, Brno, 2006.

The aim of this paper is to analyse Kierkegaard's thinking, to stress emphases that appear in the work, and especially, to emphasize the mutual relationship of man to God in connection with man's fall.

For a better understanding of the text, we must clarify the time when Kierkegaard wrote it. In 1847, Kierkegaard dealt with the question of profession: as a rural pastor he personally experienced a calling to serve to God. "For several months I have been praying to God to keep on helping me, for it has been clear to me for some time now that I ought not to be a writer any longer, something I can be only totally or not at all" (Pap. VII 1, A4). This period is characterized also by increased writing by Kierkegaard. As noted by translator Professor Hong, "Kierkegaard was very prolific during the fourteen months before the publication of *Discourse in Various Spirits*. In addition to writing this work, he completed 'reviews' of *Two Ages* and Adler's works, and also developed to a considerable extent a series of lectures on communication. After the publication of *Two Ages*, he considered the possibility of a series of short pieces of varied contents, including one on the lilies and the birds. Early in the autumn of 1846, he pondered a collection of sermons under the title *The Gospel of Sufferings* that was followed by 'three short but delightful discourses: What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air'." [2, p. xi-xii]

## 2. Kierkegaard as a writer without authority

In prologues to his works, Kierkegaard often emphasized a thought that characterized him: He writes without authority, without the power of a teacher. Clearly he wanted to say that he was not only demanding the truth, but also that he does not consider himself the one who tutors or controls. He wanted to be similar to the lilies and birds. Kierkegaard was looking for an individual whom he would address, who realizes the gravity of man in the world, a man before God. Kierkegaard was not concerned about the crowd, but about the single individual whom he calls his reader. The reader was for Kierkegaard a priority. In his books he places demands on faith that must be manifested in acts, as

works of love. For Kierkegaard the relationship of man to God is the most important one. This relationship is possible for a single individual, as only a single individual can be responsible for his action. This is true for all life circumstances, including those that represent one's clashes with social and political authorities and the ensuing voluntary suffering of the single individual. Professor Abraham Khan writes: "Three Biblical personages that inform Kierkegaard's understanding of the spiritual life exemplify the clash and the correlative voluntary suffering: Abraham, Job, and Paul. They went against the grain of the social and political authority or institutions of the day, but did so with eternity as the measure or yardstick for the relativities and vicissitudes of their worldly experience. Their suffering was inward, having to do with the consciousness that no aspect of life in the finite world matters absolutely, despite possibly having to endure dishonour, misfortune, public ridicule, chastisement, and punishment." [4]

### **3. The man of today**

Kierkegaard considered God to be perfect when he takes care of a created man. Moreover, God gives man a perfect present - he sends him a teacher. A teacher guides the man, who typically is worried. This worried man faces a challenge — he must learn and quiet down.

Kierkegaard presents himself as a prophet of 19<sup>th</sup> century – he claims that the fundamental characteristic of the man of our time is that he is worried, filled not only with fear about his future, but also worried about unfulfilled ambitions and his political and economic situation in the world. Man is worried about having neither teacher nor authority that he would respect, and he constantly is facing stressful situations and duties that he must fulfil. Hope that he put in another man failed, and the result of it is a loss of calm. "When feelings of absurdity, despair and boredom with everything come to their culmination, man gets a strong desire for a meaningful life, and if it is not found, he seeks new experience and once again lives through disappointment and despair." [5] Kierkegaard addresses his upbuilding (encouraging) discourses to a man who is aware of his own anxiety and despair.

Kierkegaard saw the problem of the time in the fact that one man compares himself to another, trying to attract attention.

The example of the bird and the lily:

Kierkegaard puts an emphasis on the fact that neither the lily nor the bird:

- compare to each other, but remain silent,
- convince anybody, but accept destiny.

The result is that both the lily and the bird are free, carefree and satisfied, and they are not worried. This is an example of the lily that "does not compare its prosperity with anyone's poverty" [2, p. 161].

By this example, Kierkegaard wanted to show 'his' reader the joy the lily and the bird experience. He wants the reader to make an object out of the bird and the lily to which he should become similar and behave as they do, to become

like an abandoned Lilly: “abandoned, unappreciated, disregarded, without human solicitude” [2, p. 162]. Knowing that God can take care of everyone, the lily is here for a worried man who is confronted with it. Paradoxically, the more he looks at the lily, “the more he wonders at its loveliness and its ingenious formation” [2, p. 164].

By means of a parable, Kierkegaard compares God to a gardener who is perfectly able to take care of everything. Women are like lilies that “do not work, do not spin; they actually do not do anything but adorn themselves or, more correctly, be adorned” [2, p. 163].

Psychologically, Kierkegaard analyses the human mind that is unquiet and worried by individuals’ desires to achieve their goals even at the price of losing themselves. A human heart has to calm down in order to observe the lily and follow its principles, accepting everything that is given. The lily is not worried about its looks, it does not gather food or property - it is happy. Observing, man realizes how imperfect he is, along with the things he does. Man realizes real values that will last forever.

*Conditio sine qua non* means that one becomes aware of imperfection and feels ashamed before God. He becomes conscious of being more precious for the God than the lily and begins to be “filled with wonder at the beauty of the lily he is looking at” [2, p. 164].

Kierkegaard emphasizes the idea that man can learn from the lily that which could not be learned from any other man. One becomes aware of his weakness, imperfection and humility. Man realizes how important and inevitable it is not to compare himself with others, because comparing to others makes man unhappy and disconnected. Kierkegaard rejects that and points it out in the story about the lily: “Someone may think that it would be odd and too much to ask that human language should involve itself with diversity among lilies and their possible worries occasioned by diversity. Someone may think, ‘It is not worth paying attention to diversities and worries of that sort.’” [2, p. 166]

Upon hearing the words of the naughty bird, the lily becomes worried. This naughty bird wanted to be important, and it evoked in the lily a passion to move to another place. The lily was worried by the bird, which pointed out the beauty of others and the places where they grow. The lily desired a change - it became unhappy. The worried lily felt unimportant and longed for better company. It agreed to be moved by the bird to a dream place, so others could envy it. “Alas, on the way the lily withered. If the worried lily had been contented with being a lily, it would not have become worried; if it had not become worried, it would have remained standing where it stood - where it stood in all its loveliness.” [2, p. 169]

Kierkegaard believes the bird represents “the restless mentality of comparison” [2, p. 169]. This idea of mutual comparison can change the attitudes of man who becomes dependent, and his goal is to own (compare with bird [2, p. 175]), instead of to be. Man wants to own things instead of living in a sincere relationship with a neighbour - God. Once again, man faces a choice: “The human being must choose between God and mammon. This is the eternal,

unaltered condition of the choice; there will be no escape, never in all eternity.” [2, p. 207]

Man, no longer happy and satisfied with what he once had, becomes dejected, filled with anxiety and despair. This is the same destiny as of the wood-dove that Kierkegaard describes as follows: “From now on, the wood-dove was worried. Its feathers lost their iridescence; its flight lost its buoyancy. Its day was passed in a fruitless attempt to accumulate abundance; its dreams were fancy’s impotent plans. It was no longer joyful - indeed, it was almost as if the wood-dove had become envious of the wealthy doves. It found its food each day, ate its fill, and yet it was, so to speak, not full, because in its worry about making a living it hungered for a long time. It had trapped itself in a snare in which no fowler could trap it, in which only the free can trap himself: in the idea.” [2, p. 175]

The lily that is satisfied with its status should be an example for man.

Kierkegaard was aware of the fact that “In the worry of comparison, the worried person finally goes so far that because of diversity he forgets that he is a human being, in despair he regards himself as so different from other people that he even regards himself as different from what it is to be human” [2, p. 169].

#### **4. Choice: either - or**

“A choice. My listener, do you know how to express in a single word anything more glorious! If you talked year in and year out, could you mention anything more glorious than a choice, to have choice! It is certainly true that the sole blessing is to choose rightly, but certainly choice itself is still the glorious condition.” [2, p. 206]

For Kierkegaard the either - or choice is typical. The same can be found in the gospel he presents to the reader: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Mathew 6.24). Kierkegaard points out the problem of man in his relation to and desire for property. Man is facing the choice of what or who will be his priority. Kierkegaard knew that the main representatives of the Danish church wanted to link their institution with political influence and power. Through the story about the lily and the bird, he wanted to demonstrate to man that trust in God is the only path that is more valuable than political power and financial security.

Another of Kierkegaard’s stresses is that man is worried about his life, and what he will eat and wear. Under the influence of mass media and society, the top priority for man nowadays is accumulation of property, and consequently he worries that he might lose it. On the other hand, there are gospel words and the certainty that God gives, and Kierkegaard repeats them in his volume: “your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Mathew 16.32-34)

Once again, God wants man to make a decision – to choose. A desire for property results in anxiety associated with resisting faith in God. Man is under socio-economical pressure to achieve results; he is tormented, full of temptation, impatience, and concerns. Some thoughts were further developed by scholars in Existentialism - experience, death, fear, anxiety, etc. [6]. Professor Khan emphasizes: “The individual actualizes or becomes concrete through choice, committing everything finite to the Good” [4, p. 12].

Kierkegaard is convinced the words from the Bible are addressed to worried people who are aware of their weaknesses. God is here for those who need help in their suffering and worries. Kierkegaard presents characteristics of teachers (lilies and birds), “whom one pays neither with money nor with humiliation. No misapprehension is possible, because they are silent, out of solicitude for the worried person” [2, p. 160] and also help man to make a (right) choice.

“And God’s presence in order to be chosen is what gives eternal earnestness to the decision of choice, because neither what has been granted to a human being nor how he chose shall ever be forgotten.” [2, p. 207-208]

## **5. Silence**

The advantage of these teachers - the lily and the bird - is that they are silent. Communication and human language are problems for man. Man hurts others with his words. With words he causes tension - he shows his wealth, superiority, and pride.

Kierkegaard emphasizes that man has to keep silent in order not to make another one uncomfortable. By speaking and giving advice, man exalts himself over others. The lily keeps silent and quiet, and when somebody thinks about it, he becomes worried. He realizes his own weakness.

One of the most important researchers of Kierkegaard, Professor Pia Søltoft, also emphasized the importance of silence in relation to love. “Silence and the stillness that follows from it witness precisely to the fact that the person in love is at one with herself and does not need to explain herself or ask others for advice: but the person who truly made up his mind, that person is in stillness” [2, p. 20], as is said in the long confessional discourse that introduces *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. This stillness also constitutes a point of similarity between the lover and the believer.” [7]

## **6. Parallel between man (Genesis 3) and Lily**

In this story, by indirect communication, Kierkegaard wanted to demonstrate that man becomes worried when he starts to feel desire and envy. The basis of all human failure is mutual human comparison. Similarity between Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the story about the lily and about the human fall - from Genesis (3 Chapter) - is surprisingly interesting here. The serpent, like the bird, caused doubts and anxiety. The lily and man started to distrust God and

started to be worried about their status, and rejected the thought that God wanted the best for them. Man and the lily desired a better future. Both were tempted and worried as well.

The lily is worried by bird.

“This little bird was a naughty bird. Instead of putting itself in the lily’s place, instead of delighting in its loveliness and delighting in its innocent bliss, the bird would show off in its feeling of freedom by making the lily feel its lack of freedom. Not only that, but the little bird was also chatty and talked fast and loose, truthfully and untruthfully, about how in other places there were entirely different gorgeous lilies in great abundance, places where there were a rapture and merriment, a fragrance, a brilliance of colors, a singing of birds that were beyond all description. This is how the bird talked, and it usually ended its story with the comment, humiliating to the lily, that in comparison with that kind of glory the lily looked like nothing - indeed, it was so insignificant that it was a question whether the lily actually had a right to be called a lily.” [2, p. 167]

Kierkegaard characterized the little bird as follows: “the little bird is the poet, the seducer, or the poetic and the seductive in the human being” [2, p. 169].

Comparison of the texts:

Woman is worried by serpent.

“Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3.1-5)

Man wanted to become equal to God or wanted to have better status:

“For God knows that when you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3.4-5)

Similarly, “the worried lily whose worry was to become a gorgeous lily or even a Crown Imperial” [2, p. 169].

Kierkegaard explicitly pointed out further: “Worry about making a living is therefore the snare in which no external power, no actuality can trap a person, but in which only he can trap himself, the rich as well as the poor-if he is unwilling to be contented with being a human being” [2, p. 178].

The result was the same as in the case man: the lily’s death: “Alas, on the way the lily withered. If the worried lily had been contented with being a lily, it would not have become worried; if it had not become worried, it would have remained standing where it stood - where it stood in all its loveliness.” [2, p. 169] “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3.19)

This comparison of stories is interesting for their similarity in the failures of the lily and of the first people in the world. Kierkegaard pointed out man's natural desire to compare, to have better status, and as a result of human weakness to give in to false 'advisers'. The result of the incorrect choice is death, which Kierkegaard describes figuratively, but in all seriousness in the story of the lily. Only death erases all differences between men.

## **7. Conclusions**

“So what does the worried person learn from the lilies? He learns to be contented with being a human being and not to be worried about diversity among human beings; he learns to speak just as tersely, just as solemnly, and just as inspiringly about being a human being as the Gospel speaks tersely about the lilies.” [2, p. 170]

By this story about the deceived lily - whose life ended with an unfulfilled wish and death - Kierkegaard wanted to explain to man that his priorities should be based on his relation to God. Man has to orientate his thinking and attitude towards eternity. Kierkegaard tried to show that man is obliged to seek truth, love his neighbours, and be satisfied with his status in life. Moreover, he should accept the tasks that the God gives him.

Kierkegaard paid attention to a man seizing comparison and desire for property. In the story of the lily and its failure, we can see a parallel with the failure of the first people in the world.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on what or who makes man worried is essential here. Man concentrates on his desires, passions, and wants, and thus he becomes impatient and distracted. “Often there is a conflict between emotional and intellectual, which brings us to the norm of human rationality, which may be difficult to establish - we are not always as rational as we would like to be.” [8] One's priority must be to accept a fate given by the God. In addition to this, one must have a proper relation to this 'fate' or rather 'truth' that comes from God. “For Kierkegaard, truth is more than a noetic, objective category, accessible to intellectual inquiry by a thinking subject. There must be a deeper, existential basis, related to the deepest aspirations and, yes, fears and doubts of the individual - a desire permeated by passion. The truth cannot be meaningful and relevant without this 'subjective desire', whose doubt is the beginning of the highest form of existence.” [9] These subjective realities are “basic building blocks of a new construction directing us back to human dignity” [10]. But they are also important reminders of the relational, 'subjective' nature of Christianity as opposed to what most modern intellectuals have come to understand Christianity to be – a rational set of doctrines. Even in our postmodern age, we continue to observe “a general tendency of much of modern theology to rationalize, psychologize, or historicize some basic teaching of Christianity in order to defend it. The danger is that by so defending Christianity we compromise its very essence.” [11]



Similarly, Peter Kondrla writes, “Two people do not hide anything; they do not keep anything in secret. Their being is open to each other. There is no doubt that man desires to have a similar relationship with God. In fact, the very uniqueness of man rests in his/her ability to enter into a relationship with his/her Creator, which enables one “to love, trust and freely obey God.” ”The aim of man is to surrender to God, to be accepted in God’s inside, to be with God all the time, like spouses who want to spend every moment together.” [12] Man’s relatedness to God is constitutive to human personhood. “Kierkegaard, among others, reminds us precisely of the importance of an intentional cultivation of the individual human self, reflecting and relating to itself and the (human) other, while consciously receiving its being, dignity, and direction/destiny from the (divine) Other.” [13]

This inner satisfaction and balance is the first assumption for man not to get worried: “To be contented with being a human being” [2, p. 182]. Kierkegaard tried to warn man to be thankful and to realize ”how glorious it is to be a human being” [2, p. 187].

We have to agree with the most distinguished Czech researcher and translator Marie Mikulová Thulstrup [14] who, in relation to Kierkegaard’s work *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, wrote: “The author gradually removed aesthetic and philosophical layers of the time and encouraged others to confess Christianity” [15]. The work *What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field* and from the *Birds of the Air* is about encouraging man to follow his religion (by looking up to heavenly birds).

“Seek first God’s kingdom - which is above in the heavens.” The bird is not seeking anything. However far it flies, it is not seeking: it is migrating and is drawn, and its longest flight is a migration. But the person in whose soul the eternal is implanted seeks and aspires [2, p. 208-209].

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