
‘THE MOMENT’

KIERKEGAARD’S ATTACK UPON CHRISTENDOM

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the significant motifs of ‘The Moment’, Søren Kierkegaard’s strident criticism of the Lutheran Church and the religious conditions in Denmark between 1854 and 1855. His bold case caused commotion not only in Denmark, but also in Germany, the United States, and in Bohemia. No other work has elicited as many vastly different interpretations as ‘The Moment’. For many, ‘The Moment’ makes Kierkegaard on a par with Nietzsche as a critic of Christendom.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, church, The Moment, man, critics

1. Introduction

“When Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, his famous reply was ‘It would be a very good idea’. Søren Kierkegaard, on the other hand, did not think that Christian civilization was a good idea. He was fundamentally opposed to the use of Christianity as a social religion, as the ligaments or connective tissue of society.” [1]

“Geniuses are like thunderstorms: they go against the wind, terrify people, and cleanse the air. The established order has invented a number of lightning rods. And it succeeded. Yes, it certainly did succeed; it succeeded in making the next thunderstorm all the more serious.” [2]

‘The Moment’ charges that Church is no longer an authority for the contemporary society. Possible explanations might begin in its failure to respond appropriately to the turning points of modern times. Initially, Church’s authority lay in its values, which were always in line with the New Testament. As this entity weakened, people became more critical of the Church and no longer turned to it as a guide for their lives. It was a response to Church’s becoming an institution more interested in its own welfare and prosperity than its members’ well-being. The Church and its clergy were no longer related to the message of Jesus Christ, who preached poverty and sacrifice. The Church is no longer viewed in a positive way for a contemporary individual seeking a spiritual path.

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One of the reasons might be that the Church did not react to the individual's criticisms or the challenges of those times, but instead was drowning in dogmatic, moral regulations. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was one crying out in the wilderness. This Danish thinker is known as a theologian and philosopher, but for many he was primarily a great critic of the Church.

In his final years, Kierkegaard criticized the Danish National Church (*Den Danske Folkekirke*) and its representatives. His sharp disagreement and criticism of religious hypocrisy are expressed in the journal *Fædrelandet*, in separate volumes entitled *The Moment* (*Øjeblikket*) [2], and also in his *Journals and Papers*.

The published articles provoked an immediate reaction. Professor Hans Lassen Martensen, in his eulogy honouring Bishop Jakob S. Mynster, described his predecessor as representing “the holy chain of truth - witness that stretches through the ages from the days of the days of the apostles“ [2, p. 3].

The last writings, from 1854-1855, became an object of multiple misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Kierkegaard's criticism followed the *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (1848-1849). Here, Kierkegaard expressed his position on the Church and Christianity most clearly: “I also want the basis of it very accurately defined. I do not say of myself that I am a remarkable Christian; I think I would have failed in my task completely, would have misunderstood my individuality and all my qualifications entirely, if I had exposed myself to any attack or any persecution along these lines. But I do maintain that I know with uncommon clarity and definiteness what Christianity is, what can be required of the Christian, what it means to be a Christian. To an unusual degree I have, I think, the qualifications to be able to present this. I also think it is my duty to do it, simply because it seems to be forgotten in Christendom, and obviously there is no likelihood that the present generation is qualified to provide upbringing in Christianity.” [3]

2. ‘The Moment’ and its influence

“Kierkegaard's struggle with the Church became a public scandal.” [4]

In the responses of Kierkegaard's translators, we can see how much he influenced their own attitudes, opinions, and lives. During a personal interview (2008) with Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, a respected researcher and translator, she told us about the impact of *The Moment* for the Czechs. It was the first translation of Kierkegaard's work into their language. The Czech people formed a very negative opinion of Kierkegaard. Furthermore, they were not able to discern any Christian dimension of his work. In response, she translated mainly Kierkegaard's Christian oriented works [5].

Theodor Haecker, a German writer and translator, described *The Moment* as follows: “The pamphlets were exceedingly violent, bitter, and witty. For a moment official action even threatened, but the authorities wisely refrained.” [6] Despite of it Karl Barth wrote: “The first book of Kierkegaard I ever bought was *The Instant*, and that was in 1909. I assume that I also read it at that time. But it

could not have made a deep impression on me then, because I was very much occupied with and set energetically on the theology of Harnack, Hermann, and the *Christliche Welt*." [7] In his own translations of Kierkegaard, Haecker added extensive epilogues in which he analysed contemporary problems of the society, creating a context for Kierkegaard's writing. Kierkegaard's considerable effect on Haecker, and his consequent interpretation, had an influence not only on German society and culture, but also German philosophy [8].

The first translation of *The Moment* into English, by the American translator Walter Lowrie, included a touching *Introduction* that speaks for itself: "Strange that it has been left to me to translate this Attack upon "Christendom," to me who as a "priest" am here attacked with the utmost scorn! Strange (and perhaps significant), as I have remarked in the Introduction, that no one else has shown any zeal to make this trenchant attack known to the English-speaking world! I was not eager to do it. I neither commend nor decry this attack. But perhaps it is well that, since it was written from within the Church, it should now be translated by a priest. In Germany it was translated a long while ago by two ex-pastors, and everywhere it has been hailed in an anticlerical, if not in an anti-Christian interest." [9] (Albert Dorner and Christoph Schrempf were two pastors, formerly members of the Protestant Church in Württemberg. Their translation of *The Moment* was published in 1896 as part of *Sören Kierkegaards agitatorische Schriften und Aufsätze. 1851-1855*, translated by Albert Corner and Christoph Schrempf, Forman, Stuttgart, 1896, 199-366. Gerhard Schreiber added: "Schrempf could not say, of course, whether he would have arrived at the same resolution without Kierkegaard's help, or whether Kierkegaard had merely accelerated this development. Nevertheless, he stated, 'I am and remain grateful to him for his contribution to my decision'. In the May 1909 afterword to his translation of *The Moment*, Schrempf went on to credit Kierkegaard with playing an important role in his decision, earlier that year, to resign his membership in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Württemberg. That formal procedure, Schrempf wrote, brought to fruition his effort to loosen his every tie to official Christianity, a process that in all cost me over twenty years of deliberation. 'Now that I have finally finished disentangling myself from official Christianity both outwardly and inwardly, I am glad of it-and I thank Kierkegaard for having pressed me ever further in that direction. For I do not know whether I would have pursued my dispute with official Christianity all the way to the end without him'. [10] On the other hand: Erik A. Hong, son of Dr. Howard V. Hong, Kierkegaard's most important translator into English wrote to Dr. Roman Kralik about his father. "Dr. Hong helped thousands of people at the end of WWII. The idea for helping people, however, is central to Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology -- what does it mean to be human. The extra ordinary idea was not to necessarily help people from Western Europe but extending a human kindness to whomever was in need -- Europe, Asia or America." [E.A. Hong, *Letter to Roman Kralik*. December 26, 2015])

Further developments with publication in Czech followed. During translation of *The Moment* by Milada Krausová-Lesná (from 1911) an isolated situation occurred that illustrates the controversy about this work. Two parts of tract 9 were deemed not publishable and marked as ‘seized’ [11]. Those parts were titled: “That the Pastors are Cannibals, and in the Most Abominable Way” and “The Pastor Not Only Demonstrates the Truth of Christianity, but He Simultaneously Refutes It”. This occurred again during the reprint of *The Moment* in 2005! [12]

Zdeněk Zecpal, a Czech researcher, who in 2015 translated the ‘seized’ parts of *The Moment* added his own ironic comment: “In 1855 published in Denmark without any problem, while here seized by Austrian censorship” [13].

3. The Moment

“Moment: Among its Danish meanings are something with overtones of, to move (cf. momentum); in a development, which is of decisive importance; and a brief period of time, which is of decisive importance.” [14] (Professor Alastair Hannay explains this concept philosophically: “By acquiring a sense of the instant as ‘now’, and not abstracted from a spatialize continuum but as containing both past and future, we synthesize the temporal and eternal by incorporating the latter into the former. The eternal is then no longer the ‘future’ (as it is for innocence), or the ‘past’ (as it is for the Greeks), but the present. It is the ‘instant’ (Øieblik – literally, glance of the eye), that ‘ambiguity’ in which ‘time and eternity touch one another’. The instant defines the present as a present, and not as a vanishing and abstract time-slice cut out of a time-continuum. Instead of being defined in relation to past and future, the present becomes (in some sense) identical with past and future.” [15])

The publication of *Attack Upon Christendom* had major implications for its author. Kierkegaard was not only completely cast out from society. He was also utterly alone to cope with the isolation of the public and international response. He writes, “Why, then, am I willing to work in the moment? I am willing to do it because I would eternally regret not doing it, and eternally regret it if I let myself be put off because the contemporary generation will perhaps at the very most only be able to find a true presentation of Christianity interesting and odd, in order for it to remain quite calmly where it is, in the delusion of being Christians and that pastors’ play - Christianity is Christianity.” [2, p. 92]

Similarly, Professor Khan sees the main reason for Kierkegaard’s attack in the problem of the interpretation of Christianity: “for failing to preach Christianity according to the New Testament, and offering instead a watered down version of it” [16].

For a better understanding of Kierkegaard’s criticism of religious conditions, we need to clarify two notions that are central to his understanding of Christianity. Kierkegaard drew a dividing line between Christianity and Christendom. He was convinced that “Christendom not only misunderstands the nature of the church, but it also devalues the character of faith and establishes an

unhealthy alliance with the world” [17]. (P. Kondrila adds: “Tendencies of the philosophical interpretation of faith, God and possibilities to know Him finally created an environment in which the real and experienced faith became secondary. Conflicts about God and his being in the philosophical sphere began to constitute a serious threat for the Church.” [18]) This crucial distinction is presented in *Fædrelandet* and *The Moment*.

“Kierkegaard came to distinguish between Christianity and acculturized, accommodated religion, between Christianity and Christendom, and also to have second thoughts about Mynster’s presentation.” [19]

Christendom keeps religion in the background, while politics and sociology come to the fore. Kierkegaard identified the confusion of the two as a weakening of the transformational power of the Christian faith. This led to his feelings of despair, irony, and anger. (“A classic of satirical literature, *The Instant* caused a furor. At last Kierkegaard found himself in the field of action, as a journalist again, just as he had begun back in 1835. To those who knew him he seemed to be bearing the strain well. One suspects he was rather enjoying it all.” [15, p. 410-411]).

Many commentators have written about the difference between Christianity and Christendom. For example, Professor Stephan Evans highlights that “Kierkegaard was far from an academic philosopher, and in many ways not primarily a philosopher at all. He liked to think of himself as a kind of missionary, who had been assigned the task of ‘reintroducing Christianity into Christendom’. The idea of ‘Christendom’, according to Kierkegaard, involved a confusing illusion. People born into a Christian country come to believe that they are Christians regardless of whether or not they have any Christian convictions that shape their lives. Kierkegaard thus saw his task as one of helping people who are already ‘Christians of a sort’ to become Christians in truth.” [20]

4. An overview of the critique present in ‘The Moment’

A critique of human behaviour: “defect of the age, that it is lack character, everything to a certain degree” [2 p. 93].

A critique of the religious situation:

- “the factual situation in the country is actually this, that Christianity, the Christianity of the New Testament, not only does not exist but, if possible, is made impossible” [2, p. 95].
- “now, however, to stay only with Denmark, we are all Christians; the way is as broad as possible, the broadest in Denmark...” [2, p. 115]
- “what in our characterless age must of necessity be practiced is the separation, the distinction between the infinite and the finite, between a striving for the infinite and for the finite, between living for something and living on something that our age - very improperly - has gotten put together in the wardrobe, has gotten blended or made the same, and that, on the contrary, Christianity with the passion of eternity, with the most appalling

Either/Or, holds apart from each other, separated by a chiasmic abyss” [2, p. 162].

- “By means of dogmas, they protected themselves against anything that with any semblance of truth could Christianity be called a prototype, and then under full sail went in the direction of - perfectibility.” [2, p. 182]
- “The difficulty is that the entire age has sunk into the deepest indifferentism, has no religion at all, is not even in the condition of being able to have religion.” [2, p. 208]

No one is willing to make personal sacrifices or to suffer for the truth. Priests become state clerks who are financially secured by the state. Kierkegaard no longer sees their sincerity in a relationship to God and deep personal conviction. He compares their behaviour and motives with the Christians of the New Testament and the conditions of Jesus Christ. Priests have no right to preach the truth because they lack passion, and they are paid for their work. The concept of Christianity for Kierkegaard is related to his conception of Christ and the disciples as those who sacrifice everything, including life itself, for the truth. This is highlighted by Guadalupe Pardi: “In the confusion of Christendom, however, people admire Christ instead of imitating him. Had Christ lived in majesty and enjoyed all worldly and temporal benefits, he would not have been the prototype; he would have become an object of admiration and the duty to imitate him would have been annulled. The ordinary human being, lacking earthly advantages and benefits, finds it ridiculous and impossible to aspire to the majesty of God and is content to admire.” [21]

According to Kierkegaard, human desire for power corrupts human society by creating a false dependency. For example, in order to keep its power, the government creates many who are dependent on it. A man who longs for power becomes dependent. Kierkegaard realized such “dependency” [2, p. 91] and defined it as one of the fundamental flaws of human nature. In his pamphlet *The Moment*, he stressed the universal human desire to: own some property, live a sheltered life in comfort and without any conflicts with the world, and attend church from force of habit - Christendom. “He never accepted the formalistic and rationalistic reduction of Holy Scripture into a textbook of church doctrines.” [22] (M. Valčo accentuates the dimension of existence: “For Kierkegaard, especially according to his mature writings after 1848, it is the God of Christianity who alone is able and willing to open up the human self from the inside and to re-center his whole existence.” [23])

Kierkegaard’s view and relation to the Church was very complicated. Moreover, we can see this also in other significant theologians who wanted to change the situation in the Church.

Kierkegaard criticized what he called the “church parade” [2, p. 188] so very different from the spiritual atmosphere of modesty in Herrnhut pietism and the Moravian Brethren. His personal experience of this sincere piety had deeply influenced him. He was convinced that the Church, in its attempt to become comfortable, had changed into an elite institution.

Kierkegaard knew that a church is not the place where one should seek reconciliation with God. This requires a passion for Christ and obedience to his demands. He was convinced that the doctrines of church and its sermons do not bring any change or conversion. A church service resembles a theatre: it amuses and brings in money. Thus, Kierkegaard draws a connection between them [2, p. 221-222].

We must remember Kierkegaard was very disappointed by the situation in the Church, although he attended church almost every Sunday. Interestingly, Kierkegaard “alternated between several different churches. This was quite common but contrary to Danish law before 1855, which stated that the citizens were tied to one specific church.” [4, p. 113]

Kierkegaard’s criticism of the church was based on his conviction that his motives for going to church were completely different from what he had witnessed. He lacked an existential interest, passion and willingness to suffer for the truth of Gospel. But before that, in his book *Training in Christianity*, dedicated to Bishop Mynster, he tried to present his ideas and explain his attitude. Nevertheless, he never received any reply or change of attitude [24].

In *The Moment*, we find some of the older Kierkegaard’s thoughts:

1. *The Moment* is dedicated to Kierkegaard’s reader: “You whom I have called my reader.” [2, p. 105];
2. Kierkegaard writes “without authority” [2, p. 101];
3. A sign of Christianity is choice - Either/Or [2, p. 94];
4. Absence of the individual – the crowd is untruth.

Kierkegaard’s health deteriorated prior to the publishing of the 10th volume of *The Moment*. On October 2nd, he fainted on street, and on November 11th, 1885, he died in Frederik’s Hospital. He died exhausted from a fight to demonstrate that we live in a world of lies, which he successfully conveyed in his writings.

“What can be recollected eternally? Only one thing: to have suffered for the truth. If you want to take care for your eternal future, see to it that you come to suffer for the truth. There is, of course, at every second the opportunity, the opportunity to suffer for the truth... how could it be otherwise in this world of lies and deception and skullduggery and mediocrity?” [2, p. 298]

A major vindication for Kierkegaard came 90 years after his death in the writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “The Paradox, the God in Time, The Moment, contemporaneous discipleship, these themes, so strongly stated in the Kierkegaardian oeuvre, have had a great attractiveness to theologians trying to make sense of the literal and historical claims of Christianity in a modern skeptical world. One important theologian, whose life was brutally cut short by the Nazis in 1945, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose *Letters and Papers from Prison* introduced to the world the idea of ‘religionless Christianity’.” [25] (Simon Podmore writes similarly: “Kierkegaard's own approach in his critique of Christendom, or what might be called ‘lived Christianity’”. [26])

5. Conclusions

Kierkegaard's criticism can be divided into certain perspectives/parts:

1. The union of the State and the Church,
2. Going to church,
3. The religious establishment,
4. The New Testament lacks authority,
5. Finances and social status have become the measurement of truth.

Even though Kierkegaard criticized the situation in the Church, it does not necessarily mean that he did show disrespect to God. Precisely the perception of God in The Old and New Testaments led him to his criticism of religious conditions. We should note his work was full of melancholy and his early writings full of irony [27].

We have to fully agree with Haecker's statement. "In his last work, *The Moment*, which in method shows a radical break with all his former work, he has, owing to the hard, terribly one-sided, and-here is the change-un-dialectical attack on the Danish State Church, robbed the ecclesiastical theologians of their impartiality and from the outset has dulled their perception with the steam and smoke of passion; at the same time he has made it possible for the anti-clerical theologians and freethinkers to cloak their totally different ways of thinking and utterly different aims behind his attack upon the Church and official Christianity." [6, p. 19]

In his last fight Kierkegaard highlighted the values he cherished the most. He had an aversion to hypocrisy and the representatives of the Church for diminishing God. *The Moment* was a challenge of self-reflection for the Church in 19th and 20th centuries which the Church never accepted. However, the challenge of Kierkegaard's *The Moment* still remains [28, 29].

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