
SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S INFLUENCE ON THE THINKING OF KAROL NANDRÁSKY

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Abstract

Karol Nandrásy (1927-2016) was a Slovak theologian and professor of the Old Testament. In his numerous studies and monographs, Nandrásy criticized the state of the affairs in the Church and Slovak society. This paper analyses the influence of Søren Kierkegaard on Karl Nandrásy and traces the impacts and inspirations stemming from Nandrásy's careful study of the Old Testament prophets. Having survived the horrors of the Second World War, Nandrásy in his critique resembled Søren Kierkegaard. He was aware of the crisis of the Church of his time and, much like Kierkegaard himself, Nandrásy felt as a lonely "raven croaking on a dry branch" of a tree (the Church). Similar to Kierkegaard, Nandrásy in his last years of life separates himself from the Church, causing substantial commotion in the Church circles.

Keywords: individual, existence, Nandrásy, Old Testament, church

1. Introduction

"It is not theologically surprising that as an Old Testament scholar he (Karol Nandrásy) grounds Theology in God's action in history. But the sharpness of his 'attack on Christendom' goes even beyond Kierkegaard, whom he also cites. Kierkegaard's prophecy of a dark future for a Christendom which no longer was Christian has been more than fulfilled." [1]

This quote comes from the study by American Professor Dr. James E. Will titled: *Protestant Theology in Eastern Europe Prior to 1989*, the purpose of which was to highlight the main contours of one of the most famous Slovak theologians, Karol Nandrásy. Will's article analyses the contribution and significance of various theologians from selected Eastern European countries. Interestingly, the longest section in Will's paper deals with theologians from Czechoslovakia (the country split into two independent entities, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, in 1993). The reason behind this is quite simple: the theologians from former Czechoslovakia were better known behind the 'Iron Curtain'; they managed to get established at foreign universities and exerted substantial influence. Most significant among these were Professor Josef

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Hromadka who lectured at Princeton University and was in the leadership of the Christian Peace Conference, Jan Milič Lochman who became Rector of the University in Basel, and Josef Smolík who studied with Paul Tillich in New York. Among the Slovak theologians mentioned in Will's article are Karol Nandrásky and also Igor Kišš.

The goal of my study is to analyse the influence of the Danish thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, on the work of the Slovak theologian, Karol Nandrásky (who died in Bratislava on July 11, 2016, in the 89th year of his life) – especially in terms of the style and content of his Biblical interpretation and his ability to discern the 'signs of the age'.

2. The life and work of Karol Nandrásky

Karol Nandrásky was born in 1927 in a working class family with meagre means and in overall poor circumstances. He began his university studies in 1948 at the Lutheran Theological Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava and graduated from the same institution in 1952. The successful defence of his doctoral dissertation titled 'The Main Principles of Ethics in Psalms' took place in 1958 at his alma mater in Bratislava. It then took him only a year to habilitate as 'docent' (an approximate equivalent of associate professor) of Lutheran Theology with a special concentration on the Old Testament. He became full professor of the Old Testament in 1969 at a young age of 42. In 1976-1980 and 1984-1987, he served as Dean of the Lutheran Theological Faculty in Bratislava. All of this time, from 1952 (the year of his graduation) to 1997, Nandrásky stayed faithful to his theological faculty, teaching Old Testament subjects and influencing several generations of Slovak theologians and pastors from various Protestant denominations.

Nandrásky was a prolific writer whose philosophical erudition surpassed the theological one. His studies were published in the highly prestigious Slovak Current Contents Journal *Filozofia* (Philosophy) [2- 8], in the theological journal *Křesťanská revue* (Christian Revue; Czech Republic) [9-11] and many others. After departing from the Faculty of Theology, Nandrásky published three monographs [12-14] in which he criticized the internal situation of the Church. He openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the commonly established 'approach' to Christianity. In his search for inspiration, he often turned to the 'Great Dane', Søren Kierkegaard, as well as to Friedrich Nietzsche [15]. Although his relentless criticism of Church Christianity could be heard in many (if not most) of his earlier works, it seems that his departure from academic life gave him a new stimulus to continue in his reproach of what he understood to be a 'dead (or dying) Church'. In the severity of his criticism, we might carefully argue, he even surpassed Kierkegaard himself. With regard to Karol Nandrásky, Igor Kišš pointed out that "it is not by accident that those theologians who could express their objections harshly, critically and without scruples, such as Søren Kierkegaard, belonged to his favourite theologians" [16].

3. The influence of Søren Kierkegaard

Nandrásky expressed his personal relationship to Kierkegaard in his short essay *O dojmoch z Dánska vo forme listu S. Kierkegaardovi*. He emphasized that Kierkegaard was for him “the best friend in Denmark”, whose “spirit reached to the very horizon of our present time” [17]. However, only three of Nandrásky’s major works focused solely on Søren Kierkegaard: *O dojmoch z Dánska vo forme listu S. Kierkegaardovi (About My Impressions from Denmark in the Form of a Letter to S. Kierkegaard)* [17], *Prorockýmysliteľ dánskeho národa (A Prophetic Thinker of the Danish Nation)* [18] and *Osamelý havran. Moje stretnutie s Kierkegaardom (A Lonely Raven. My Encounter with Kierkegaard)* [19].

In the rest of his articles and monographs, Nandrásky cited or alluded to Kierkegaard mainly in connection with his critique of Christianity and society.

In his essay *Osamelý havran. Moje stretnutie s Kierkegaardom*, Nandrásky describes his first encounter with Kierkegaard: “I was eleven years old when I first laid my hands on a small booklet (short monograph) about the life and work of the prophetic thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, by L. Szeberényi in Hungarian. It was my first encounter with the fast flight and warning voice of his fiery heart.” [19] This is probably a reference to the monograph *Kierkegaard élete és munkái (The Life and Works of Kierkegaard)* [20]. This book met with severe criticism in Hungary at the time. András Nagy, arguably the most significant Kierkegaardian scholar in Hungary, called Szeberényi’s work the “efforts of a unique whitewashing ... in which the main thread of the entire analysis is the dogmatism of the Lutheran church and the sole purpose is to integrate Kierkegaard’s attack on the Church into this ideology. Unfortunately, Szeberényi was also blind to the philosophical themes of the corpus. With his simplifications and mistakes he arrived at dilettantism.” [21]

As far as Kierkegaard’s reception and acceptance in Czechoslovakia is concerned, one needs to know that the first book by Kierkegaard translated into Czech language which substantially (and mostly negatively) shaped opinions about Kierkegaard, was the book *The Moment*. Kierkegaard is, on account of this book, presented as a foolish critic of Christianity and the social order in Denmark. Nandrásky’s impressions echo some of the same themes but contain an opposite sentiment: “During my theological studies I laid my hands on his booklet, *The Moment* (1911) in Czech. I found myself in complete harmony with his critique of Christianity.” [19]

Szeberényi’s book and Kierkegaard’s *The Moment*, seemed to have exerted the most significant influence on Nandrásky. His other strong interest were the prophets of the Old Testament who “foresaw the direction of the events and warned their contemporaries against the abyss that was opening in front of the nation” [22]. Nandrásky called Kierkegaard “a prophetic thinker” [18], “God’s Prophet” [12, p. 189], “divine spy” [17] as well as the one who “was the first to knock on the shutter of my cabin” [19, p. 10]. The most frequent parable that Nandrásky uses, however, was that of a “lonely raven” that is “croaking on

a dry branch”, in front of which “pious Christians chose rather to cover their ears” [17, p. 155]. Fearless critics of their society and of the religious establishment of the day (in ancient Israel), Old Testament prophets became another potent source of inspiration for Nandrásky. Kierkegaard could, in Nandrásky’s mind, easily be reckoned among the ranks of the Old Testament prophets. The message had remained consistent: “our civilization is rowing into waters of doom and destruction” [22, p. 10]. Ondrej Prostedník, a student of Nandrásky who later became associate professor of the New Testament at the same Theological Faculty, points out that Nandrásky, “as our professor, uncovered for us the value of the ‘symbolic acts’ of the Old Testament prophets. What seemed as extravagant and absurd deeds at first sight, were meant to compel people to think about God’s actions in history” [O. Prostedník, *Karol Nandrásky (1927–2016)*, <http://ok21.sk/karol-nandrasky-1927-2016/>, accessed 22.07.2016]. When reading Nandrásky’s works it soon becomes obvious that like Kierkegaard, Nandrásky “did not let himself be confused by the optimistic mood of the age” [19, p. 10].

4. The parables - Kierkegaard as a source of inspiration

Nandrásky does not hide his admiration of Kierkegaard’s parables and images (and metaphors) that point to an imminent demise of human society. Nandrásky likens these parables to the present and like Kierkegaard, as it appears, he writes his own ‘moment’. Nandrásky, however, experiences ‘The moment’ during the Second World War. This might be the reason why Kierkegaard has such a profound influence on him. Nandrásky is well aware of the fact that the Church (or, at least, much of its leadership) failed with regard to the challenge of the time when it failed to speak more loudly on behalf of the persecuted Jews. In his works, therefore, he makes it a point to emphasize the reality of the cruel suffering of the Jewish nation: “Freight trains transported thousands of innocent people to concentration camps but the fascist radio shrieked about fighting and about a war for the preservation of European civilizational values. The horrors that Kierkegaard had foreseen came upon us and their end is nowhere to be seen...” [22, p. 10] Like Kierkegaard, Nandrásky set out to find a (true) Christian but could not find one. With regard to his own situation and place in the Church, Nandrásky likened himself to a ‘wild duck’ that lived among the domesticated ones. In similar imagery, Kierkegaard wrote about a wild goose [23]. Nandrásky also compares the prophets with the birds right before a storm “who announce an approaching storm” [22]. Nandrásky goes so far as to liken Kierkegaard to the prophet Amos: Kierkegaard “who shined in the sky of our Christian history much like the late prophet Amos among the people of the Old Testament, his critical, engaged voice and warning legacy remaining ever so relevant up until now” [18]. Or, as he exclaims elsewhere: “Like Amos in the distance of the biblical past, Kierkegaard in our own history flew by at the speed of a comet through the cultural sky of Europe. He did not drag a tail of friends and admirers behind him but his flight was as

direct as of any comet. The fire that burnt within him devoured in an instant the wax of the candle of his life.” [19, p. 14]

5. Human commitment

One of the main traits that Nandrásky emphasizes in Kierkegaard is his consistent rejection of passivity and lack of commitment, so that “human would not be a mere spectator of the historical stage but rather that he would interfere with the events as a responsibly, actively engaged and creative actor” [18, p. 91]. Nandrásky thus, along with Kierkegaard, rejects abstract thinking. Man is bound to be engaged, to fully experience his own existence. Faith must be expressed in concrete deeds. “Christianity is about a concrete human person, not a dogmatic problem.” [18, p. 91] Jesus Christ is the perfect example of this approach, according to Nandrásky. Christ’s “doctrine was his mode of existence” [18, p. 91]. This thought can again be related to Kierkegaard: “Kierkegaard emphasized that the purpose of Christian existence must be appropriated in such a way that it becomes our existence. In place of a doctrine, therefore, he put the communication of existence and instead of admiring Jesus Christ he demanded following Jesus Christ.” [18, p. 92] Nandrásky is critical toward the existentialists who “turned away from Kierkegaard’s understanding of existence and escaped from the goal that Kierkegaard had been after” [18, p. 92].

6. Personal faith versus the established Church

Nandrásky visited Denmark in 1981 and this visit convinced him that the Church was indeed in a deep crisis: “If you, Søren, likened the situation of Christianity one hundred years ago to a ship that sailed towards an extraordinary storm, while having the feelings that you were tied up in your cabin, even if you managed to get out on deck nobody would have believed you, then we must say today that this storm has come quietly the way death approaches and it ‘trimmed’ the ship in a major way.” [17, p. 155]

With respect to the work ‘The Moment’ (Kierkegaard’s attack upon Christendom) we pointed out Kierkegaard’s critique of the Church, people’s rejection of worship services in churches and many other things related to the life of the established Church [24]. Prostředník reflected this in his obituary when he wrote: “Nandrásky touched a very acute problem of his age: yes to faith, no to Church”. Nandrásky even went so far that he rejected a church burial: “he is the first pastor in Slovakia who has refused a church burial” [<http://ok21.sk/karol-nandrasky-1927-2016/>].

Like Kierkegaard before him, Nandrásky pointed out real problems that haunted the Church: lust for power and for money. Jesus Christ is presented as the example to follow, a man who did not desire power or wealth, a man who had nothing. Nandrásky emphasized that money “had become our idol” and that “man believes in the power of money” [12, p. 118]. He was very much for the

separation of Church from state [18], finding his source of inspiration in Kierkegaard [17].

Nandrásky realized that “the crisis of our culture is related to the crisis of the Church, its religiosity and Theology” [22, p. 11]. He stresses that during his life he ‘discovered’ only three theologians who were aware of this situation. They were: Kierkegaard, Ragaz, Bohren [22]. Others lacked humility so they deserved to be called, according to Nandrásky, Pharisees [22]. Nandrásky perceived Kierkegaard one-sidedly as the one who “devoted his whole attention and energy” to Church [17]. For this reason, he “examined (Kierkegaard) meticulously and with passion and analysed all expressions of various groups and forms of Christianity that had been practiced by the Danish Church” [18, p. 91].

Nandrásky did not consider Kierkegaard to be a philosopher or a psychologist. Instead, he aims all of his attention at Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the situation of the Church and its criticism. According to Nandrásky, Kierkegaard “understood Christianity radically” [17] and “was fulfilling the role of the ‘tester of metals’” [18], from Jeremiah 6.27nn: “I have set you as an assayer and a fortress among My people, that you may know and test their way. They are all stubborn rebels, walking as slanderers. They are bronze and iron, they are all corrupters...”. For this reason, the present Church is comprised merely of “barren branches” of what once used to be a large and healthy tree [22, p. 12]. It is the priests who should be called to responsibility, as Kierkegaard argued with passion, because they “were not fulfilling their apostolic mission” [12, p. 189]. “Everything were just empty words and the only goal seems to be for them to become ‘fat’” [18, p. 93]. His relentless critique is aimed also at the professors of Theology who “interpret texts and not the direction and the situation of God’s people in front of God” [17, p. 155]. As a result, the Church pews of modern day Danish churches are empty [17]. The Church is likened to a ship that is unable to set sail out on the open sea [17]. Paradoxically, Nandrásky himself was a professor of Theology at the university, and as such he devoted much of his attention to Kierkegaard’s critique of university professors with which he identified himself. Nandrásky’s major objection (taken from Kierkegaard) is that the professors of Theology lack an existential appropriation. “Appropriation” (or internalization) is one of Kierkegaard’s key terms. Kierkegaard had come to realize that true Christianity rests in ones’ personal appropriation of its purpose”. [18, p. 91]

Nandrásky began his monograph titled *Ježišova Magna Charta a súčasnosť* with the following quote from Kierkegaard [12, p. 5]: “Christendom has abolished Christianity without really knowing it itself. As a result, if something must be done, one must attempt again to introduce Christianity into Christendom.” [25] This citation summarizes Nandrásky’s motive of his own critique. Hence, we must take seriously Prostředník’s appeal: “This is precisely the reason why his (Nandrásky’s) attitude makes me think more deeply about the crisis of the church than about the value of his faith” [<http://ok21.sk/karol-nandrasky-1927-2016/>]. Prostředník was doubtlessly referring to Nandrásky’s

understanding of Kierkegaard's critique which can be summarized by these words: "To properly understand Kierkegaard's critique of the church means to see that it originated in the love toward God and in the zeal to His purpose. In his controversy with the church he saw himself in the role of a hunting dog who meticulously follows his own master in order to discern from his master's gestures what the master commands." [18, p. 93]

Interestingly, just as Nandrásky writes about Kierkegaard who "banged on the gilded foil of the bourgeoisie Christianity" [18, p. 91], so another theologian, Münz, writes about Nandrásky: "Nandrásky was already known on account of his theological experiments, even rebellion and one could anticipate that he would continue on this path" [26]. Nandrásky continued criticizing the Church and society until his very death, dying unreconciled with the Church – like Kierkegaard himself. For many who knew him, Nandrásky has become "A man of strife and a man of contention to the whole Earth" (Jeremiah 15.10), which, again, echoes Nandrásky's words about Kierkegaard [18, p. 91].

7. Conclusions

The theology and attitudes of the Lutheran professor of the Old Testament, Karol Nandrásky, were peculiar and controversial. Much like Kierkegaard before him, his opinions caused turmoil and spawned severe criticism and (in some cases) rejection but, on the other hand, they brought the much needed stimuli and fresh ideas into the theological, philosophical, and ethical discourses of our time [27-29].

Thanks to Nandrásky's incisive critique of Christianity, contemporary theologians were motivated to contemplate the current state of their Churches. Along with Kierkegaard, Karol Nandrásky called into question the seemingly omnipresent superficiality and indifference or disengagement of people with regard to serious questions of faith (as seen individually) and society (as seen collectively) [17]. This critical voice remains relevant for us today as Christians strive to re-appropriate the ancient conviction that "Church doctrine and real-life practice of one's Christian identity converge on the mission field, that is, in our daily life of witness as we fulfil our human callings in the new freedom of evangelical faith" [30].

Nandrásky's bond with Kierkegaard and to with Nietzsche grew stronger in the course of his life. He continued to find new inspiration in them: "as a lonely raven on a dry branch he croaked that the churchly Christendom had lost Christianity without its even noticing. It mints false coins in the form of a Sunday Christendom; may it examine it from all possible sides, it will finally have to concede that the Christianity of Jesus' Gospels does not exist at all." [19, p. 13].

There is no surprise that Nandrásky's relationships with the Church establishment copied those of Søren Kierkegaard. His criticism and rejection of the Church resulted in numerous personal invectives and scandalous name calling on both sides. As Prostednik noted after Nandrásky's death: "It was

surely fitting for the Church representatives that Karol Nandrásky had diverged from the Church; at the time of his death it gives them an excuse to completely ignore his legacy” [<http://ok21.sk/karol-nandrasky-1927-2016/>].

From the evidence examined above it becomes clear that Kierkegaard, whom Nandrásky read in Czech and Slovak translations, had a profound influence on Nandrásky’s theological reflection. Furthermore, it seems to be the case that no Theology impacted by Kierkegaard could resemble “a calm river but rather, more often than not, the raging torrents of wild streams” [16, p. 6]. Henry De Lubac summed it up in the following way: “His ideas (SK) are not so much a food as a tonic and, taken in too large a dose, they might become a toxin” [31]. For there is much in Kierkegaard, especially in his anthropology, which is meant to dethrone the ‘the spirit of modern man’ and to show him the abyss of his predicament. Kierkegaard speaks of alienation that “stifles the human spirit and removes beyond reach any possibility for authentic existence. [32-34] This leads to one’s awareness of his despair, the ultimate despair being an urgent realization that one’s life may amount to nothing but a spiritual void with a stamp of eternity on it.” [35] This is not easy or even possible to process by the emancipated self of the modern human being who tends to overlook that “truth should rather be understood as an objective uncertainty appropriated passionately by the inward reflective experience of love and faith of the self” [36], where the ‘self’ is understood in relational terms and as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

How are we to understand Nandrásky’s interpretation of Kierkegaard and how should we perceive Nandrásky himself? A quote from Nandrásky might be of some help to us: “It was not only Kierkegaard who acted as a prophetic corrective, but the whole modern development with its anti-ecclesiastical orientation should be understood as one big divine corrective, one which we should seriously listen to. The proclaimed ‘theology with its face towards life’ will otherwise remain a mere slogan of those whose faces are marked by empty eye holes.” [18, p. 93]

The most significant Czech theologians such as Hromádka, Lochman, Smolík, Liguš strived to come to terms with Kierkegaard. None of them, however, interpreted Kierkegaard as one-sidedly and uncritically as Karol Nandrásky. For Nandrásky, however, Kierkegaard was a prophet whose voice was ignored and/or rejected by the Church. This may be why his interpretation of Kierkegaard appears to be so unilateral, without the kind of complexity that we appreciate in other authors. While it is true that “The Kierkegaardian type of religious existentialism points us to the essential questions of anthropology with the aim to call human individuals to authentic subjecthood,” we must also remember that “experiencing a self-aware, authentic existence ... is only possible relationally in a three dimensional interplay of personal being: the self’s relation to itself; the self’s relation to others; and the self’s relation to personal Transcendence, which is constitutive to all other relations” [37]. To facilitate such complexity of mutually constitutive relationships (with the goal of an authentic faith), human individuals “must be guided within the community, to

personally acquire the Christian creed (i.e. a theocentric vision of life), purpose (i.e. inner motivation), and hope that correlates to consequential-existential faith” [37, p. 102].

Nandrásky's passion overruled the need for a more balanced view. It was his passion for honest analysis and his anticipation of a growing spiritual crises that would inescapably beset his Church as well as his society, which compelled him to heed and emphasize the voice of the Danish prophet. Since both, the church and the so called ‘Christian society’ had refused to listen and finally rejected this prophetic voice, Nandrásky anticipated that which we struggle with today: a deepening spiritual crisis and a lack of competent solutions on the side of the Church that has lost its salinity.

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