

---

# SALVATION AS THE TELEOLOGICAL VECTOR IN KIERKEGAARD'S PRACTICE IN CHRISTIANITY

**Tibor Máhrik<sup>1</sup>, Dinara Giniyatullova Vasbieva<sup>2</sup>,  
Roman Králík<sup>1, 3, 4\*</sup> and Peter Kondrla<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> *University of Žilina in Žilina, Faculty of Humanities, Univerzitná 1, 010 26, Žilina, Slovak Republic*

<sup>2</sup> *Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Department of Foreign Languages, 49 Leningradsky prospect, 125993, Moscow, Russia*

<sup>3</sup> *Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, A. Hlinku 1, 949 74, Nitra, Slovak Republic*

<sup>4</sup> *Institute of Psychology and Education, Kazan (Volga region) Federal University. 18 Kremlyovskaya Str 420008, Kazan, Russia*

(Received 5 March 2020)

---

## Abstract

The dialectic of the relationship between Philosophy and Theology in S. Kierkegaard's work often hides multi-layered contents that oscillate in one direction or another in their emphasis. In this study, we focus on the theological grasp of the key concept of salvation to which Kierkegaard gives an irreplaceable place in the practice in Christianity. We assert that his theology is based on the existential dimension of the individual being rather than the rational prisms of Systematic theology that dominated in his times. Kierkegaard's absolute paradox in his theology of salvation becomes here not the starting point for argumentation in favour of Christianity, but rather the teleological perspective of the motivational mode for all levels of individual existence in its way to salvation embraced by eternity.

*Keywords:* stages, life, mystery, ultimate, telos

---

## 1. Introduction

It's not possible to understand the content of Kierkegaard's writings correctly unless considering the meaning of pseudonyms and the genre diversity of his literary genius while interpreting his texts. Kierkegaard explained his pseudonyms in Journals and Papers: "The pseudonym is named Johannes Anticlimacus, in contrast to Climacus, who claimed not to be Christian; Anticlimacus stands at the opposite extreme: a Christian to an extraordinary degree - I myself push it only to the point of being a perfectly simple Christian. *Practice in Christianity* can be published in the same way, but there's no rush" [1].

---

\*Corresponding author, e-mail: rkralik@ukf.sk

In addition to the literary level, it's necessary to incorporate the philosophical mode of his thinking, which is dominated by the theological dimension of the author's thinking. It would be a mistake to perceive these three levels in a linear sequence as if the possibilities and limits of the first open the space of the second and then the third. It's similar with Kierkegaard's three stages of existence - the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. It's not a linear cascade of importance, nor a sequence of natural evolution of consciousness and self-reflection in the life of an individual in terms of evolution. These are different perspectives on life and ultimately the story of man and mankind in a wider panorama, such as the phenomenological world of human senses, eroticism, art, good and evil, nature and radical choice of the individual's free will. With every thought in each sphere of the individual's existence, Kierkegaard opens a world of positives and negatives, which ultimately anticipates a deeper understanding of life.

Kierkegaard rejects Hegelian dialectic, in which thesis and antithesis directly establish a synthetic solution. It also rejects rationality as the only legitimate concept of looking at the complexity of life. Therefore, he brings such rich and contradictory examples to his texts and thought projects to show the limitations of human analysis and rationality of man or in terms of aesthetics, ethics or theology. In such a creative way of Spinoza's perception of the reality of life *sub specie aeternitatis*, Kierkegaard is extremely successful in opening-up the space of thought for *the unknown, mysterious and unrecognisable*, which over time can to some extent become known and recognisable in the individual's authentic process of self-updating. The process of becoming self is therefore a painful evolution of the individual's existence, as it's always set in the soil of man's radical choice (*Either/Or*), conscious of the world contravention (*Sickness unto Death*) where Christian love as a contrast to erotic love and friendship is a crucial parameter of man's choice (*Works of Love*) and absolute paradox (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) becomes a stumbling block for any human being's consideration at the level of Psychology, Sociology or Theology at that time.

## 2. Teleological suspension movement

Kierkegaard refused to formulate a system for his philosophy or theology because reasoning in a closed system was unacceptable to him. His approach is rather kaleidoscopic, where he penetrates into understanding the nature of phenomena in different directions and from different positions. We consider Kierkegaard's term 'teleological suspension of the ethical' to be an extremely important attribute of his epistemological methodology. It's not systematically justified anywhere and not explicitly applied, yet the 'teleological suspension' is immanently present across the entire spectrum of his philosophical and theological discourse.

What is the essence of Kierkegaard's thinking in defining the familiar three spheres of an individual's life? The aesthetic sphere analyses the romantic and hedonistic aspects of human life, while the moral aspect of recognising good and evil remains uncovered in the individual's existence project. According to Kierkegaard, the aesthetical doesn't contain the necessary ethical apparatus for a full-fledged individual existence project, which he processed perfectly in *Either/Or* in the dialogues between the famous seducer and the aesthete. Judge William thence offers another sphere of becoming the true self and that is the ethical stage as the teleological suspension of the aesthetical. What we can consider to be *telos* in such a move of Kierkegaard's thinking is the absence ethical in the aesthetical. In the aesthetic stage, man is in a narcissistic intoxication of his own bliss in the mirror image of himself. Missing others, lacking responsibility for others, lacking William's dimension of contract and commitment, lacking social agreement as an ethical standard. It can be argued that this 'deficiency' becomes a teleological argument for Kierkegaard to leave one sphere (aesthetic) and seek another sphere (ethical). His thought movement in seeking answers to questions is always given by 'the unknown', while *telos* itself remains shrouded, and uncovered.

However, this *modus operandi* is repeated in Kierkegaard's reflections on the ethical stage of existence. Here, too, Kierkegaard doesn't find the absolute answers to the moral questions and dilemmas of the individual's life that Abraham represents in the work of Fear and Trembling. Platonic and Kantian understanding of ethical standards as a result of rational reflections on the life *sub specie aeternitatis* is shattered by the story of Abraham who is directed by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Likewise, the Hegelian definition of normative ethics as the resultant of the dialectical relationships in society represented by the Judge William encounters a transcendent reality in the face of a person who cannot ethically justify God's claim placed on Abraham. Therefore, this ethical sphere is teleologically suspended in the religious. There is another, higher authority above the ethical law - the religious dimension of thinking. The religious perspective does not deny ethical, but transcends it. Since Kierkegaard postulated three stages, it would seem that the teleological movement of seeking answers ends with the religious stage. However, such an assumption would again reduce Kierkegaard's discourse into consideration in the new system (religious), which is what Kierkegaard refused. Abraham is called the knight of faith in this story, which implicitly opens the content definition of *telos* even further, including within the religious stage.

### **3. Telos above subjectivity and objectivity**

Kierkegaard's grasp of the complexity of life receives different contours in CUP, where he analyses all three stages of human existence from the perspective of objectivity and subjectivity. It's the religious stage that complicates the content definition of both terms, as is evident in the case of Abraham. If objectivity here corresponds to the phenomenological aspect of

reality, what is *out there*, subjectivity corresponds to the consciousness of a person who reflects the objective side of the world. Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity in terms of the individual's authentic existence inspired many continental writers (A. Strindberg, H. Ibsen, F. Kafka, D. Lodge, H. Hesse, P. Ricoeur, J.P. Sartre, J. Pieper) [2-6], but also overseas thinkers (W.H. Auden, Don DeLillo, W. Percy, J.L. Borges, J. Butler) [7-11].

Kierkegaard sees the *objective knowledge* of man as the convergence of human knowledge in the finite of being to the objective truth possessed by the infinite being of God. Therefore, man's *objective knowledge* of truth is *false* for Kierkegaard's Climacus, although it corresponds to truth. Only God can have objective knowledge of objective truth. Similarly, subjectivity is, on the one hand, the desire to exist in the story of man, inwardness and becoming a self, a process in which the potentiality of human being becomes an authentic actuality, but on the other hand, subjectivity is a problem related to the finality of a human being in dialectical relation to the infinite God. Here, it could be said that *the teleological suspension pattern* relates to the Religiousness A and Religiousness B. In what sense?

While Religiousness A represents the complex task of becoming a self, where the issue of what one believes is less important than of how one is able to turn such knowledge into practical life and implement it in one's own story, Religiousness B underlines the transcendence aspect of religiousness as such and thus is linked with Christianity, where God is not of this world, and is eternal outside of space and time. Thus, this religious type of embracing the reality has to do with paradoxical approach, where the Absolute paradox takes the most important place in that concept. In Jesus (God in time) the eternal or transcendent was made temporal or immanent, which is to be considered as against reason and absurd. Despite this, we agree with Kierkegaard that the differences and boundaries between religiousness A and B remain unclear [12]. In our view, these are two different views from two different perspectives in the same direction on the same subject of interest. Westphal even suggests adding the Religiousness C category, which represents the teleological suspension of Religiousness B, where God in time is not only the Absolute Paradox to believe but also the paradigm or prototype to be imitated [13]. One way or another, Kierkegaard tenaciously explores the essence of religion while making great use of the possibilities provided by the literary instrument of pseudonyms. He constantly oscillates between what we know and what we do not know; between what is subjective and what is objective; between 'what to believe' and 'how to believe' in the sense of tension between the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of individual existence project [14-17].

We believe that the 'religiousness' terminology is somewhat similar to the 'stages of life' terminology. In both cases, it's not a scientific definition of the description of phenomena, but rather an understanding of life in terms of the existence project through dialectic of terminology, whereby the key factor is teleological movement in the intents of Kierkegaard's reflections. In the case of 'religiousness' Kierkegaard isn't concerned with religion as such, but with the

individual's existence *sub specie aeternitatis*, oscillating between the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious/theological aspects of an individual's religiousness. For example, the work (*Sickness unto Death*) repeats reflections on religiousness A and B from different perspectives, but in other works (*Works of Love, 1847*) and especially later works (*Practice in Christianity, 1850*), (*For Self-Examination, 1851*), (*Judge for Yourselves!, 1851*) the author's immersion in the religion issue as a spiritual reality of the individual's existence transcends the concept of religiousness A and B especially by focusing purposefully on new terminology, e.g. sin, revelation, salvation, guilt, conversion, grace in a Biblical sense [18, 19]. Therefore, it's reasonable to seek and identify the *telos* of Kierkegaard's reflections in Kierkegaard's authorship interpretation. In this process, we consider the *theological suspension movement* to be a useful hermeneutic tool for interpreting contents that represent various pseudonyms.

#### **4. Salvation as teleological movement**

The term 'salvation' is used across Kierkegaard's writer corpus in different contexts and therefore with different meanings. At the core of our thesis is the belief that the essence of Kierkegaard's thought movement is *telos* as the unrecognised, out-of-date, going to meet the future, emerging in time, across the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious in the absolute direction to God. Anti-Climacus on many places insists on the need for infinitizing reflection and imagination namely in terms of salvation: When someone wants to despair, then the word is: "Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation" [20] while for Climacus the absolute *telos* means the highest good for an existing individual, because „the highest task assigned to every human being, just as the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective person" [21]. The psychological and ethical limits of man also manifest themselves in the religious sphere where they meet in the concept of man's guilt. Judge William in his statement: "the greater the freedom, the greater the guilt, and this is the secret of salvation" [22] aptly links these limits to salvation as the ultimate perspective of the person's endeavour who uses his freedom to seek the best update of his potentiality.

Climacus does not fall within the definition of 'eternal happiness' and 'the highest reward', but constitutes them as: *the possibility* related to personhood/self rather than any conceptional framework. Kierkegaard understood *salvation* as overarching space, where verticality and horizontality of the single individual existence to be met: „Christianity is rooted in the view of existence which says that all salvation is related to becoming personality/personhood" [1, vol. 3, 490] and thus salvation embraces all the intrinsic promises and potencies that grows up inside all the finite experiences against the face of God to be hoped for. In accord with the above Judge William says that „the personality (*personligheden*) is the absolute, is its own objective (goal/telos), is the unity of the universal and the particular" [22, p. 265]. Again it is the Climacus' statement, that „it is very individual's task to become

a whole human being“ [21, p. 346]. Rather than theological construct *salvation* is for Kierkegaard the very existential dimension term when penetrating a task of integration, of becoming whole, a synthesis of the finite and infinite. As such it belongs to those contingent attributes of telos, that moves his thought forward on in spite of his meta-affirmation in the *Fragments*, that salvation must come from God’s proactive grace alone, and that our sin renders us ignorant of what we need to know and too corrupt to do it.

## 5. Salvation as ultimate telos

Westphal’s concept of religiousness C offers space for the struggle for the individual’s authentic existence in such a perspective where Jesus Christ, God in time, becomes the prototype of following and goal (*telos*) of human effort. However, Kierkegaard’s *telos* surpasses such concept and moves the readers beyond Religiousness C. Anti-Climacus in part „Come here, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest“ (*Practice in Christianity* No. I) represents salvation as the *ultimate telos*, where the two movements might be distinguished: „...don’t be afraid of the laborious pace of conversion [Omvendelse], however toilsomely leads to salvation” [23]. The first is the term ‘conversion’, which is associated with the individual’s consciousness affected by sin. Therefore, man’s efforts to imitate Jesus Christ as a model will fail - “whereas sin leads onward... or leads downward so easily” [23], and the psychological experience of ‘ups and downs’ will be part of man’s conversion. It’s an existential experience in which all three stages of life and all three types of religiousness are dynamically linked. Therefore, the Socratic paradox in this struggle represents a limit over which no man’s effort can be transferred by his own strength and deeds.

This means that *the ultimate telos* is unreachable for man and there is no longer any *possibility* but only *limits* and thus despair consequently? „No, fear nothing and do not despair; he, who says *Come here* is with you on the way; from him there is help and forgiveness on the way of conversion that leads to him, and with him is rest“ [23] - says Anti-Climacus on that question. Accordingly, a single individual is not leaved alone on this road. Yes, *God in time* is somehow the goal to be reached on the end of days, Jesus is the pattern of such life - that corresponds to the religiousness C, but there is God’s active help within the whole ‘conversion that leads to him’. These two movements in conversion - human’s toward *God in time* that leads a single individual from time to eternity and God’s help that has its source in eternity while touches human existence in time - constitute a dialectical movement towards the absolute telos - ‘with him is rest’ - which means an eschatological vector in the direction of an individual’s existence whether it’s life before or after death. The absoluteness of such telos is seen in another important statement: “That is to say, Christianity places infinite emphasis upon entering into life, upon eternal happiness as the absolute good” [23, p. 111]. Biological death in the context of the *ultimate telos* is teleologically suspended in death of another type: “Come

here also you, you, whose residence has been assigned among the graves, you who in the eyes of society are regarded as dead but are not missed, are not lamented - not buried, yet dead - that is, belonging neither to life nor to death; you to whom human society cruelly locked its doors and for whom no grave has yet mercifully opened; you, too, come here, here is rest, and here is life!" [23, p. 18]

Spiritual death is a teleological suspension of the biological and the sociological, which makes Anti-Climacus successfully illuminating, the *ultimate stage* of life that goes beyond the grave: 'rest and life' that's somehow related to God. With such a vector of reasoning, the concepts of 'God in time', 'Absolute Paradox' are no longer enough, but the concept of 'Father' and 'Saviour' into the discourse about 'rest and life'. Each of these terms represents a separate paradigm of perception of the mysteries of life and death, temporality and eternity, human and divine. On the one hand, 'God in time' opens up Climacus understanding of the mystery of incarnation, whereby the eternal logos became flesh and eternity entered into temporality. Strictly philosophically speaking - it's an Absolute Paradox. On the other hand, Anti-Climacus approaches this mystery through the concept of *Father* and *Saviour* to present to his listener with the utmost urgency "how important your salvation is" [23, p. 77], because God calls man: "Therefore come here - here is the way on which one makes headway: here is rest beside the grave, rest from the pain of loss, or there is rest in the pain of loss - with him who eternally reunites the separated ones more firmly than nature unites parents and children" [23, p. 18]. He isn't indifferent to an individual's existence, but vice versa - God is "so human in his divinity!" [23, p. 18], because He's very interested in the story of man and mankind. God knows the man's limits and his inner need for love and the meaning of existence. "With the Father he knows from eternity that only in this way can the human race be saved: he knows that no human being can comprehend him, that the gnat that flies into the candlelight is not more certain of destruction than the person who wants to try to comprehend him or what is united with him: God and man. And yet he is the Saviour, and for no human being is there salvation except through him." [23, p. 77]

Therefore, through the concept of *Father*, Anti-Climacus represents God in his kindness and care, and who wants - metaphorically speaking - all children to come home to him. The term *Saviour* opens-up another dimension of the *ultimate telos*, because the Saviour is the one that is the source and guarantor of salvation. The term 'through him' can be interpreted as dialectic of static and dynamic aspects of the final stage. Static in the sense that God still remains as a model to man, an example, a goal and a direction of existential movement. Dynamic aspects are related to the activity of the Saviour because He invites, saves, and intervenes for the benefit of man because he is love and "he makes no difficulty... he opens his arms" [23] and offers rest and life. As such "out of love he wants to do everything for people; he stakes his life for them, he suffers ignominious death for them - and for them he suffers this life - in divine love and compassion and mercy" [23, p. 138]. The Saviour is the one who, from

eternity, comes to the temporality to meet man in order to save him and draw him to eternity. The key factor on the human side is the attitude to the Saviour - faith. But one must make a radical choice either or [24-26].

Anti-Climacus reveals another important term that illuminates the teleological movement of Kierkegaard's reflections, and that is *Christ*, because: "Christ has given us a direct answer to a direct question... He who was an offense to the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks, the mystery by who everything was revealed, but in the mystery - him they humanly make over into a kind of earnest public figure..." [23, p. 135] Anti-Climacus masterfully associates the term 'Saviour' with the term 'Christ', where the first relates to salvation in an eschatological sense, while the second relates to the concepts of 'God in time', 'Absolute Paradox', 'Stumbling stone' and others belonging to the Climacus sphere of philosophising. Both lines are connected in a special way in "One, who is dead, He who yet lives, the Lord Jesus Christ, who from on high will draw all to himself" [23, p. 152] in sense of salvation as the ultimate stage of life. Because "Christ himself did said very directly that he was the Father's only begotten Son, that is, the sign of contradiction" [23, p. 135], the Lord Jesus Christ carries the paradoxicality of temporality and eternity, and he's the Lord of salvation in a certain sense. Therefore, Salvation becomes a destination on the path to which the Anti-Climacus has ample space and an argumentation mechanism to explain the deeper meaning of the concepts of faith, earnestness, grace, Christianity and Christendom, without concealing what it's primarily about: "Fear and trembling, for faith is carried in a fragile earthen vessel, in the possibility of offence. Blessed is he who is not offended by him but believes" [23, p. 76], Therefore, *salvation* and the *Saviour*, Lord Jesus Christ, as the *ultimate telos* of the existence of each individual are in the epicentre of his interest.

Kierkegaard described his relationship to *Practice in Christianity*: "(it) has great personal significance for me - does it follow that I should acknowledge it straightaway. I might be one of the few who needs such strong remedies - and I, I, instead of benefiting from it and really getting serious about becoming Christian, I start by acknowledging it. Reverie. This work and all the other writings are ready and the time might come when they'll become applicable and I'll have the strength to do it, when it will be truth for me." [27] Salvation as a vector of reasoning across the entire work is noticeable in Kierkegaard's thought world. It represents the final telos, which all the different strands of reflection and layering of descriptive frames of the single individual existence converge to [28].

## 6. Conclusions

For Kierkegaard, philosophy and theology are equivalent epistemological tools to explore the essence of human existence and its meaning. However, one can see the immanent movement of searching and explanation in the direction of telos in both spheres of knowledge, with the content of telos changing. If we



use the term teleological pattern of thoughts, it doesn't necessarily mean that telos has a single and finite meaning. Though the story of Abraham contains a teleological suspension of the ethical, it does not mean that the Religion is more important than ethical or aesthetic, rather that the single individual is somehow higher than the universal. Kierkegaard's understanding of the authentic 'self' directly before god can thus "serve as an antidote to the malign processes that threaten current liberal democracies" [29] not only by eroding their moral substrate but also by dismantling the responsible self before God [30]. Teleological suspension as such thus might represent the vector of Kierkegaard's thought movement towards the sphere from above. His three stages of life, like the different types of religiousness and ethics, form a kind of dynamic complex in which the existence of an individual plays a primary role, overcoming doctrines, teachers, Church, society, history or knowledge in its updating of possible potentials and is directed where there is 'rest' and 'life' - the two words encompassing in salvation.

## **Acknowledgement**

This paper was supported with grant: Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-17-0158 'Perspectives of Religious Development in Slovakia' and Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

## **References**

- [1] S.A. Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers 1848-1855*, vol. 6, part 2, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1978, 125.
- [2] B. Zalec, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **14(3)** (2018) 1-11.
- [3] I. Tavilla, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **14(3)** (2018) 13-26.
- [4] C. Turcan, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(1)** (2017) 5-13.
- [5] N.B. Kirillova and N.M. Ulitina, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(1)** (2017) 95-100.
- [6] J.G. Martín, M. Pavlikova and I. Tavilla, *Xlinguae*, **11(2)** (2018) 320-328.
- [7] M. Pavlikova, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(1)** (2017) 15-23.
- [8] T. Mahrik, M. Pavlikova and J. Root, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **14(2)** (2018) 43-53.
- [9] M. Pavlikova, *Communications*, **20(1A)** (2018) 57-60.
- [10] M. Binetti and M. Pavlikova, *Xlinguae*, **12(3)** (2019) 192-200.
- [11] A. Khan, *Xlinguae*, **11(4)** (2018) 2-10.
- [12] A. Khan, *Stud. Relig. – Sci. Relig.*, **6(2)** (1976) 169-176.
- [13] M. Westphal, *Int. Philos. Quart.*, **44(4)** (2004) 535-548.
- [14] J.G. Martin, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(3)** (2017) 99-108.
- [15] J.G. Martin, A.M. Rojas and R. Králik, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **16(2)** (2020) 39-46.
- [16] M. Valco, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(1)** (2016) 97-105.
- [17] P. Sajda, *Filozofia*, **71(4)** (2016) 282-291.
- [18] K. Valcova, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(2)** (2016) 203-212.
- [19] I. Tavilla, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(3)** (2017) 163-173.
- [20] S.A. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983, 39.

- [21] S.A. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009, 163.
- [22] S.A. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part II, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987, 208.
- [23] S.A. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, 19.
- [24] J.G. Martin, M.O. Cobo and P. Kondrla, *Xlinguae*, **12(4)** (2019) 183-191
- [25] M. Pavlíková and B. Zalec, *Bogoslovni Vestnik*, **79(4)** (2019) 1015-1026.
- [26] B. Zalec and M. Pavlikova, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **15(5)** (2019) 39-48.
- [27] S.A. Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 6: Journals NB11 - NB14, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, 124.
- [28] G. Schreiber, *Kierkegaard Studies*, **1** (2017) 313-341.
- [29] M. Valco, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(5)** (2015) 129-139.
- [30] M. Valco, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(1)** (2017) 47-58.