

PHILOSOPHY & HUMAN SCIENCE

The 21st Century Scandal of Faith and the Kierkegaardian Resonance

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Abstract

For Kierkegaard, scandalization is both the constant presence and the constant reminder of an unsettling objective incertitude where faith, nevertheless, triumphs. But again, this faith always contains an echo of the scandal that one has traversed. From Kierkegaard's point of view, the impending possibility of being scandalised is the crucial junction where one can go in either of two directions. At this junction, we may either shy away from the scandalization or we may turn to faith; but we never reach faith except through the dilemma of scandalization.

Kierkegaard resolves the dilemma in what he calls *renewal*. The task of renewal is to save and redeem temporality. The very meaning of temporality is essentially at stake: temporality needs a renewal. The dialectic here is that what is renewed has already been, for otherwise, it would not be a renewal; but renewal changes the very fact that it has once been into something quite new and other. Now, when the Greeks (Plato) say that all knowledge is recollection, they are saying that the whole of life which now is has also been before. When it is said that life is renewal, the meaning is that the life which once had being, now enters into a new fullness that was not there before.

1. Kierkegaard' Approach: Faith Precludes Hegelianism

Kierkegaard's point of departure in virtually all his writings is the issue of faith. Ironically, a large part of the content of faith concerns matters not derivable directly from the ontological structure of man's finitude. Consequently even the most careful and systematic rational and empirical scrutiny of the structure of the human being's finitude does not entail faith and its content. Epistemologists and idealists may have thought that faith is grounded on the reasonable, but Kierkegaard reversed the order by his emphatic affirmation that faith derives its energy from the infinite passion of objective uncertainty. Behind this striking reversal in a Christian theology that depended on the reasonable is Kierkegaard's critical view of Hegelianism.

Hegel aroused Kierkegaard's interest through an attempted identification of historical becoming with the immanent movement of logical categories. Kierkegaard realised that if history is the quest of infinite Spirit for freedom, the existential assignment of finite spirit suffers corruption, for in the Hegelian mindset it is the juxtaposition of logical contraries that generates process and becoming, not the decisive experiences of the individual. Kierkegaard lashed back at Hegelianism, protesting Hegel's pretentious diatribe: Kierkegaard made the incisive assertion that logically necessary relations, being necessary, cannot become, otherwise they are not necessary. What must be, always has been and does not suffer change – but is this what individuals experience?

Apart from his dialectical method, another distinguishing characteristic of Kierkegaard is that he weaves together both the philosophical and theological dimensions within a distinctively dynamic approach in examining these issues, and his work should be understood from this perspective. Consequently, his treatment of any topic in his individual fashion weaves both dimensions together. Robert Perkins acknowledges that this approach is innovative, when he affirms:

Kierkegaard's interpretation of theology will never be far in the background, for Kierkegaard's appraisal of Christian theology was innovative and was served by his critique of idealism. His theological

views are and were as welcome to the average theology professor as his supposed appraisal of philosophy was welcome to other professors.¹

2. The Problem of the Moment

Kierkegaard's treatment of the "Scandalization" of Faith springs from the problem of the *Moment*. By *Moment* is meant the point at which eternity chooses to interact with temporality. This kind of intersection happens precisely at the *Moment* in which the Absolute Paradox appears in human form. Here, Kierkegaard represents the *Problem of Lessing*. Kierkegaard's intervention indeed has solved age-long religious and epistemological problems. If the Moment were a merely a *historical fact*, contemporaneity would be an advantage.² If it were an *eternal fact* immediately available to all generations, it could not be the Moment. In reality, it is an absolute fact that simultaneously has become historical. This presents a difficulty that cannot be essentially resolved in terms of time. This paradox can only be apprehended in faith; and it is only God who can give the condition and the possibility for faith. Faith was a great challenge for his time: the world seems to face even more serious challenges to faith today; but already, Kierkegaard was proposing a convincing answer.

The issue here is what one may call *contradictions of existence*, the notion of *coming into existence* or *coming into the world*. The reference here is not to *becoming* or the process of alteration but of *something's coming into existence*. The point of emphasis is not *coming into being*, but *coming into the spatial-temporal actualization of any possibility and the individual, historical incarnation of the eternal*. This is the ultimate *contradiction of existence*: the Eternal in time. It is not an issue of the Eternal

¹ R. PERKINGS, "Kierkegaard's Epistemological Preferences", *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 4/4 (1973) 198.

² Here our author seems to mean that if the Moment were a mere historical fact those who were contemporaries of Jesus during his earthly life, like Mary, Joseph and the Apostles, would have a distinct advantage over us who are at a historical distance from Jesus' earthly life. Kierkegaard reforms this notion (editor's note).

coming into being but as entering into a temporal-spatial structure of existence with its particularity and contingency: the Incarnation.

God does not subsist as a temporal-spatial existent. He is eternal. The historical paradox is that God, the Eternal, has come into spatial-temporal existence at a particular time as an individual with a human nature. The issue is not the essence or being of God but the God-in-time, the entry of the Eternal into human existence. The problem here is not the relationship between revelation and history, between truths of reason and truths of experience, between truths of reason and truths of revelation, but the relationship between philosophical idealism and New Testament Christianity. This relationship presents an absolute qualitative contrast.

How can eternity enter into temporality (into the ordered totality of concrete durations) without disrupting the temporal order of time? Is this acceptable to reason? Or can this be called a point of departure, the point that disrupts reason and erupts into unbelief, atheism and agnosticism?

3. Objective Incertitude and the Triumph of Faith

Kierkegaard emphasizes the fact that the passionate affirmation of faith has always to contend with the resistance of reason. The Paradox scandalizes reason. The Paradox is the Eternal in time, something which reason cannot comprehend and which leads reason to founder in its passion because it cannot conceptualize it and cannot categorize it in human thought. But faith triumphs in the paradox and must always contain an echo of the scandal that has been traversed. The message is that the true believer at every moment acts to overcome the possibility of scandal, for he cannot once and for all decide for faith and against scandalization. Why not?

This point needs to be understood. With regard to the Socratic paradox, the subjective thinker abandons the path of objectification, but this may not be simply left behind irrevocably. There will always be, and must be kept in view, an objective incertitude as a constant reminder. In the triumph of faith in the paradox, there equally remains an objective incertitude. Faith must always contain an echo of the scandal of objective incertitude. This distinguishes the experience of scandalization from mere

sacrificium intellectus which is made once and for all and as a result of which the difficulties are decisively overcome.

In examining the problem, Hermann Diem says that in the latter case one is moving in the sphere of objective thought. The objective contradiction is removed on an objective plane in that an antimony is accepted as something objectively insoluble and at the same time accurately descriptive so that the thinker who has made at a certain moment this sacrifice of his understanding, consequently goes on thinking and exercising his reason within the area that he has cleared by this sacrifice – as though nothing has happened. There can be no question that his existence has been utterly reoriented by this crucial decision, however much he may deny this. Hence he marks himself out to be an existential thinker.

Some have pigeonholed Kierkegaard to be among those who have made this *sacrificium intellectus*. This is unjust. The scandal does not consist in the fact that man is to believe a self-contradiction and thus hold something 'senseless' to be true. It consists "in the fact that all the presuppositions of his being as an existence anchored in truth are called into question."³ If he is to make the *sacrificium intellectus* and thus consent to the negation of his understanding, it would not help him in the least. By the aid of this understanding he has ordered his life up to now and has mastered it by thinking.

It is this very fact that *the human person does not already possess truth in the depth of his recollection*,⁴ but, on the contrary, *that truth confronts him in the divine self-revelation at a particular point in the historical process which has now become irretrievable*. To come to terms with this "scandal," the human being must not isolate thought (the Hegelian weakness) and dissociate himself from other aspects of existence because it is the whole of human existence which the absolute paradox confronts, revolts and

³ H. DIEM, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, trans. by H. Knight, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd 1959, 70.

⁴ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety, A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. by R. Thomte and A.B. Anderson, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, 89.

shocks. It is the whole of human existence that may resist the consequent *new orientation of life which this paradox brings*.

4. Time and Eternity Touch Each Other: Temporality

How does this change in existence brought about by divine revelation work itself out in concrete details? For Kierkegaard, this already happened in that moment of the dynamic processes of historical becoming when revelation rendered existence meaningful within time, with the result that time constantly clashes interactively with eternity and eternity penetrates time. It is abundantly clear that through revelation, the eternal becomes historical and enters at a specific point the ordered series of concrete durations that we call “time”. Yet Kierkegaard makes a dramatic and disconcerting comment:

The Moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time. As a result, the above-mentioned division acquires its significance: the present time, the past time, and the future time.⁵

This is definitely insightful; according to Diem, “there is needed a more exact consideration of the eternal such as will take us beyond the Greek conception.”⁶ The Greek understanding of the character of temporality is naïve, for the Greek philosophers had no idea of eternity in any deeper sense, and neither had they any conception of the meaning of future. For them *the eternal lies behind as the past that can only be entered backwards*.⁷ The Greeks conceived of eternity as belonging to the past, as something that appears retrospectively as in Platonic recollection. Time has no direction, it is a mere passing away of all things; and life in time is not a question of the relation of the present to the past and future. Kierkegaard illustrates it thus:

It is as when I imagine a man walking along the road but do not posit a step, and so the road appears behind him as the distance covered. If the moment is posited but merely as a discripen [division],

⁵ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 89.

⁶ H. DIEM, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic*, 70.

⁷ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 89.

then the future is eternal. If the moment is posited, so is the eternal, but also the future, which appears as the past.⁸

Through revelation, eternity is not an endless future; it is particularised at a special point in the ordered series of concrete durations, and relationship to the eternal is hereby localised, becoming a point of decisive significance for existence. This *effect* of the absolute paradox is as paradoxical as the paradox itself, and consequently, from the point of view of Socratic thinking can only be understood as a *scandal*. But it is just so and not otherwise that the paradox itself insists on its being understood. Reason has understood the ground of scandal just as little as it has understood the paradox itself. In other words, the position is the reverse, that "the paradox does not allow reason to entertain any opinion of it, but as truth itself it is *index et judex sui*."⁹ What offended reason asserts is quite right, but what is wrong is its supposition that this is an objection to the paradox it has discovered, whereas in reality it is the paradox which has provoked the very objection. For Kierkegaard, "all that the offended reason says about the paradox it has learnt from the latter, even though it maintains that it discovered it for itself, because it is under an acoustic illusion."¹⁰

If the claims of the absolute paradox are correct, then, the question can only be what sort of relationship exists between the eternal and the temporality to which the eternal gives significance. The eternal thus appearing through revelation is described in Christian terms as "the fullness of time." According to Kierkegaard:

The pivotal concept in Christianity, which made all things new, is the fullness of time, but the fullness of time is the Moment as eternal, and yet this eternal is also the future and the past. If attention is not

⁸ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 90.

⁹ H. DIEM, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic*, 71.

¹⁰ S. KIERKEGAARD, *Philosophical Fragments*, Originally translated and introduced by D.F. Swenson. New introduction and commentary by N. Thulstrup. Translation revised and commentary translated by H.V. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1974, 61-62, also cf. *The Concept of Anxiety*, 48.

paid to this, no single concept can be saved from a heretical and treasonable admixture that annihilates the concept.¹¹

In *common usage*, the eternal is sometimes identified with the future and this is right inasmuch as the future is in a certain sense the whole of which the past is only a part. Furthermore, to identify the eternal with the future connotes the endless free and open possibilities of whatever is to become in contrast to the fixity of the past which has completed its becoming. The future, Kierkegaard holds, is the incognito under the mask of which the eternal – incommensurable with time – nevertheless wills to maintain its connection with time. But the allusion to ‘common usage’ cannot in Kierkegaard’s opinion be adequate in this matter and more precise conceptual formation and articulation are needed.

In Diem’s opinion, the human being encounters the revelation of the eternal in the present; consequently, the past, as a result of that present experience, becomes distinct from the future. In contrast to the fixity and finality of the past, the eternal contains the seeds of all creative development for the future, for it seals off the past thereby preventing it from hindering by its lifelessness the free vital possibilities of the future. At the same time too, the creative present moment establishes continuity between the future and the past because of the belief that the eternal is both the future and the past. This implies that what comes to be in the future is not an utterly different story from that which has been in the past. Once the creative present is realised, *we have with us the eternal* which is at the same time the future, reverberating too in the past. In this way the past lives again, and yet it too is no longer the same since, as it passes through the creative present, it becomes transmuted by eternity.

5. The Question of Sin

Further discussion on this is concerned with the qualitative transmutation and involves the question of sin. It is not possible to attend to Kierkegaard and escape this idea; therefore, in order to do justice to this present discussion and flesh out its meaning, I will give a very brief consideration to the discussion of sin with

¹¹ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 90.

particular reference to the transmutation just mentioned in the last paragraph.

The concept of sin does not belong to any particular science for science cannot treat the problem of sin. Kierkegaard writes:

The concept of sin does not properly belong to any science; only the second ethics can deal with its manifestation but not with its coming into existence. If any science were to treat of it, the concept would be confused.¹²

Kierkegaard regards an individual as a synthesis of body and soul held together by the *spirit* as the third factor. In other words, that man is a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal held together by the *creative present*. It is the spirit that must establish the synthesis of the body and soul; and, according to Kierkegaard, the spirit is the eternal and operates only when it establishes the first synthesis as identical with the second, that of the temporal and the eternal. This happens through the *moment* at which revelation comes, putting an end to the naiveté of the Greek outlook on the body and time, an outlook that disparaged both the body and time and so veered towards the position of qualifying both as coherent with sinfulness.

Kierkegaard does not deduce the idea of sin from the nature of body and time, but argues rather from the standpoint of faith in revelation. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes the state in which the self stands on the heights of faith and overcomes the scandalization. In his very last affirmation in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard defines faith: by relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is rooted transparently in that Power which constituted it. This, says Kierkegaard, is the definition of *faith*.

¹² S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 21. The editor notes that this position of Kierkegaard corresponds to the Thomistic position that sin is inherently irrational. The Neo-Thomist Bernard Lonergan put it this way: "By basic sin I shall mean the failure of free will to choose a morally obligatory course of action or its failure to reject a morally reprehensible course of action. Thus, basic sin is the root of the irrational in man's rational self-consciousness." B. LONERGAN, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, New York: Philosophical Library 1967, 666.

Sin stands in contrast to faith. It is the very essence of Christianity to affirm and reaffirm that *the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith*. Because *whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*, sin therefore, can only be understood “as the stage on the way of faith which hinders the attainment of that goal.”¹³ For Kierkegaard sin is before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself. The lynchpin of this definition is the despair before God.

The sin may have become a state of despair over one’s despair. Sin, for Kierkegaard, is a detachment from the good, but when one despairs over one’s despair, everything which is of the nature of repentance and everything which is of the nature of grace is an enemy. Despair here means a total unwillingness to consider repentance and grace. And then there is the clinching notion that despair is *before God*. It is the despair of the forgiveness of sins.

One has come to know that having a self is something eternal. Now one meets the challenge of a self that is face to face with God – this is the basis of the definition of sin. Kierkegaard notes that ordinarily the self which in despair will not be itself is a position of weakness. Before God, in despair the self that does not will to be the self that he is, i.e., a sinner, is one who is defying God and so he wills to dispense with the forgiveness of sins. The self in despair that will be itself, i.e., a sinner, is ordinarily a defiant self. But face to face with God, the one who in despair wills to be his sinful self is manifesting weakness: he does not believe that there is forgiveness. He intends to remain a sinner as if weakness were to be the condition of his self in eternity.

Sin defies what is decisive, that for God all things are possible. Kierkegaard puts it this way: “The believer possesses the eternally certain antidote to despair, viz., possibility; for with God all things are possible at every instant.”¹⁴

The natural man does not know and cannot know himself to be a sinner by the light of his reason, he needs revelation in order to realise this. The idea by which Christianity most decisively and

¹³ H. DIEM, *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic*, 73.

¹⁴ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death, A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, 82ff.

qualitatively differs from heathendom (Religiousness A), is precisely the doctrine of sin. Christianity assumes that neither the heathen nor the natural man is aware of the nature of sin. In order to identify sin and disclose what it is, the knowledge of the self-revelation of God is necessary. Kierkegaard has reminded his readers of this very important point which cannot be overlooked:

The qualitative distinction between paganism and Christianity is not as a superficial consideration assumes the doctrine of Atonement. No, the begging must start far deeper, with sin, with the doctrine of sin – as Christianity in fact does. What a dangerous objection it would be against Christianity if paganism had a definition of sin that Christianity would have to acknowledge as correct.¹⁵

6. Sin Positions the Person "Before God"

In developing this point sin is given a further definition. Whereas for Socrates sin is merely negative – sin is ignorance – Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, declares sin to be something that brings forth consequences that are *positive*, *sin is not a final negation of the self but a position that places the self before God*.¹⁶ This, according to Kierkegaard, is the tenet for which dogmatic orthodoxy in its refined state and orthodoxy in *grosso modo* have contended; and every definition of sin which has made it out to be something merely negative, such as weakness, sensuality, finitude, ignorance and so on has been challenged. *Orthodoxy has perceived very correctly that the battle must be fought here – that the decisive struggle must be fought out here.*

A contextual constituent of sin is the self as infinitely potentiated by the conception of God, and thus in turn is the greatest possible consciousness of sin as a deed. This is the expression for the fact that sin positions the person: the positioning factor in sin is specifically this, i.e., that sin is "before God." Within the plan and the grace of God – i.e., within the context of the Paschal Mystery – it is a *happy fault*. The human being realizes who he is in the state of humility and achieves this realization in the presence of the God who graces him with a self that is eternal

¹⁵ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 88-89.

¹⁶ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 96.

and transparently free from despair and hence is grounded in his forgiveness.

Sin is not simply the imperfect, is not that which, in existential dialectic, has not yet ripened into being and hence is the non-existent only in the sense of the not yet existent. If, on the contrary, sin positions a person, then the whole movement of the existential dialectic is decisively changed. The sphere of non-being is everywhere present as nothingness from which there arises deceptive appearance, sin, sensuality divorced from spirit, time divorced from eternity. The point is now to clear this away and to call forth the sphere of truth, being and existence. "Orthodoxy has correctly perceived that when sin is defined negatively, all Christianity is flabby and spineless. That is why orthodoxy emphasises that there must be a revelation from God to teach fallen man what sin is, a communication that quite consistently, must be believed because it is a dogma."¹⁷

Kierkegaard has seen the solution in what he calls *renewal*. The task of renewal is to save and redeem finitude for it cannot be left aside. The reason is that it is finitude (temporality) which is essentially at stake and so needs to be renewed. There is dialectic here: What is renewed has already been, for otherwise, it could not have been renewed, but renewal changes the very fact that it has once been, into something that is quite new and other. Now, when the Greeks (Plato) say that all knowledge is recollection, they are saying that the whole of life which now is has also been before. When it is said, on the other hand, that life is renewal, the meaning is that the life which once had being now enters into a new fullness of life.

This renewal takes place in the moment of faith when revelation brings simultaneity, and – for the Christian – the *passage* into historical becoming is realized. This passage contains two acts. The first is from the negative standpoint – the life of the body and temporality, which previously were not redeemed by the spirit and eternity, stand out as sinfulness. Thus, sin positions the person in a certain condition of life, not simply as a question of the continuing consequences of particular sins, but of sin as of

¹⁷ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 96.

a 'position which unfolds into an ever-increasing, positing continuum,' and which therefore increases with every moment in which the individual does not emerge from it. Hence, Kierkegaard says that, "every unrepented sin is a new sin and every moment that it remains unrepented is also a new sin."¹⁸

This continuing condition of sinfulness is the deepest essence of sin, and the particular sins are not the continuation of sin but *the expression of the continuance of sin*;¹⁹ hence, in any particular sin, the active presence of sin's continuing condition merely becomes clearly perceptible.

The second act is that from the positive standpoint, in the *moment of faith*, the irruption of the eternal cancels the positive non-being of sin. This does not happen by bringing into existence a new kind of being that did not previously exist; rather it happens by the fact that the temporality which previously was sinful now appears as the historical in which the presence of the eternal creates being and life. This is achieved by the fact that the same life of the senses appears, but now as a synthesis held together by the operation of the spirit. This event of *renewal*, therefore, is concerned with the very problem which occupied Kierkegaard from the time of his first decision to treat the Hegelian idea of mediation. The dual Socratic movement towards infinity, in which the ego resigned its finitude in order to win the eternal by the act of choosing its true life, could be accepted as a solution only if the ego already possessed the eternal in the depths of recollection. But according to Hermann Diem, this presupposition is destroyed by revelation and all the difficulties of any transformation of being recur to find their solution only in the act of renewal.

7. Renewal and the Experience of Scandalization

Objectively, the dialectical moment in the two-edged movement of renewal lies in the absolute paradox working itself out both negatively and positively. From the point of view of the concrete individual, it lies in the experience of *scandalization*.²⁰

¹⁸ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 105.

¹⁹ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 106.

²⁰ Scandalization refers to the constant presence and constant reminder of objective incertitude. With regard to the triumph of faith in the paradox, such

Human reason recognizes that the fact of divine revelation does not preclude the qualitative distinction between the divine and the human. Rather indeed in the experience of scandalization this distinction becomes transparent for the first time; the human person cannot obviate the distinction. For this purpose, the human being must first be able to realise his or her sin in order to believe that God is intending to forgive the sin.

Every step to this awareness of sin through the deepening of personal existence contains in itself the possibility of revolt against the paradox of the divinely human, which, is the possibility of scandalisation. If an individual wishes to realise the fact of his life as sinful and to believe in the forgiveness of sins, he must always do so in tension with the resistance called forth by the paradox itself, that is, he must overcome, through faith, the possibility of scandal. As a sinner, man is separated from God by a seemingly bottomless abyss. God is separated from the human being by the same abyss when he forgives sins. If we were ever able to attribute to the human being qualities that belong to God – beauty, kindness, goodness, strength, love – in one respect the human person will never in all eternity resemble God, namely, in forgiving sins. Forgiveness is a re-creation.

If the ever-present possibility of scandal is set aside, then as has been remarked, sin is no longer positioning the person before God, and the qualitative distinction between the divine and the human is obfuscated by man himself. Unless it is safeguarded by this possibility of scandal the doctrine of the divinely human merges into heathen pantheism and necessarily leads to blasphemy.

The problem that Kierkegaard is pointing out is what he calls the *fundamental misfortune of Christianity*. He refers precisely to what Christian denominations have made of Christianity, namely, that their perennial manner of preaching the doctrine of the God-man has *evacuated this doctrine of its true meaning*. The

faith must always contain an echo of the scandal that has been traversed. In Kierkegaard's understanding, "the possibility of being scandalised is the parting of ways. From the possibility of this crux we either turn off the scandalization or to faith; but we never reach faith except through the possibility of scandalization." *Kierkegaard's Writings*, XII, 78 and IX, 68. Scandalization is probably what Lessing called the "Ugly Ditch."

consequence is that the qualitative distinction between the divine and the human is removed in favour of a more pantheistic understanding, first by way of distinguished speculation, and then in the streets and lanes of the populace.

This is not just in Kierkegaard's era but in the present age, too. On the theological level, a closer look demonstrates that there is no real difference between recent theological writings and speculative philosophy. Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the disease of the present era is this: Theology in our day seems to have taken as its model the philosophical categories; and one wonders if theologians are aware of this deviation. In the process they reduce God to the parameters of human reason. To know the truth of Christianity, it will not suffice to approach it as an academic scholar (which seems to be the current practice). The issue is that of superficial knowledge, possessed without reality or significance.

Scriptural hermeneutics, presently a subject for study by every scholar, can be deceptive for those who may be tempted to read into the texts meanings and interpretations that are not there. Hence Scripture study should be left to those whose body and mind and soul enjoy the purity necessary to penetrate the scriptures.²¹ The mysteries of Christianity can only be appreciated by one who approaches the true practitioners, the religious mystics and the saints, and then strive to live as they do. This observation, like that of a watchman, neither accepts being part of the problem, nor pretends to offer any solution. It is merely an observation regarding the shift in the theological circle.

²¹ Editor's note: one notices how closely Kierkegaard's position and the position of our author resembles that of St. Athanasius in his concluding words of *De Incarnatione*: "For the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life... Anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds. Thus united to them in the fellowship of life, he will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven." See *De Incarnatione*, n. 57.

8. A New Self through the Passion of Faith

From the discussion one comes to the understanding that, never in human history has any religious doctrine brought God and the human being so closely together as Christianity has done, nor could anyone do this but God himself. Every human discovery of such a truth remains but a dream, an uncertain fancy. But never has any doctrine so cautiously guarded itself against the most horrible of all blasphemies, that of supposing that this step, after God has taken it, should come to mean no more than that the divine and the human in the last resort merge together. Never has any doctrine been so protected against this as is Christianity by its insistence on the moment of scandal. In the end we may say with Kierkegaard:

Woe to babblers, woe to the frivolous thinkers [and theologians] who have explained away the moment of scandalization, and woe, woe to all hangers-on, and woe to the whole tribe who have learnt to think likewise and praised them.²²

The consequence is that the individual who is to believe in the God-man (the incarnation), must become a new person. The old sinful self, with its sin-permeated plausible structure must be destroyed and a new self created. This new self is an achievement made possible by passion. From the Christian point of view, man cannot become a self by himself, but rather he must allow his old self to die and become a new self through the passion of faith which God makes possible.

In this sense, faith is not intellectual but a passion that transforms the individual's whole existence. The Christian is a believer who has discovered his self-identity by allowing God to give him or her that identity in a moment of forgiveness that allows the person to transcend himself or herself and enter the state of renewal that is entirely characterized by authenticity, i.e., the truth. The believer becomes committed to God's entrance into history. The very nature of this fact, however, is such that it cannot be believed only intellectually. *It requires not a change of thought but a radical change of character.*²³

²² S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 117.

²³ S.C. EVANS, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript, The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, New Jersey: Humanities Press 1983, 268.

As the absolute paradox clashes with man's natural way of thinking, the Incarnation can only be believed by the person who has died and been reborn, the individual who has been gripped by the life-transforming passion of faith. The individual who exists in virtue of this passion that God has made possible cannot think of rendering his faith *provisional* because his very existence is made possible by faith. He cannot therefore regard God's appearance merely as a doctrine to be assented to intellectually. God is not just a Socratic teacher who vanishes into insignificance, but rather he is the one to whom the individual owes his life.

The individual's attitude towards God must in such a case be that of a follower and a disciple. I have earlier explained the process of this rebirth, that is, "renewal." A non-believer is not expected to be familiar with these details. In summary, the meaning is that the individual is *saved from slavery and redeemed from captivity*.²⁴ To make this possible, the teacher, as his choice, *takes away the wrath which hung over the deservingly guilty*.²⁵ In other words, *the transition to the new existence is a liberating transition in which the individual gains the possibility for true action*.²⁶ To gain this liberation, God himself must take care of the guilt and the responsibility that is incumbent upon the individual's sin.

The fact that faith cannot be attained merely by intellectual reflection and is never simply the conclusion of historical evidence is strength, because it places all human beings who are faced with the choice on an equal footing. The redemption of the human self is not an affair of the esoteric knowledge of a gnostic. If Christianity were an intellectual doctrine amenable or even reducible to rational understanding, more intelligent people would have an advantage. If it were an ordinary historical fact, those with more evidence, contemporary eye witnesses and so on, would have an advantage.

²⁴ S. KIERKEGAARD, *Philosophical Fragments*, 21. This, I think, is rooted in Colossians 1:12-20, but especially verses 13-14: "He delivered us from the power/domination of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

²⁵ S.C. EVANS, *Kierkegaard's Fragments*, 269.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Deo Gratias, Christianity's paradoxical character erases the difference between the near and the far, the members of the past generation and those of the present generation. The difficulty of making the choice for faith is the same in every age. Every disciple receives faith with its prismatic dimensions from God firsthand. This is an expression of the deep humanism one sees in Johannes Climacus,²⁷ a humanism that demands equality before God and all people. In this view, salvation is equally difficult for every human being in every time and place since no person can achieve faith himself; and, yet it is also equally easy, since God grants the faith in all its prismatic dimensions to everyone who wills to receive it. This is the principle of equality in Kierkegaard, which has served exemplary purposes for all those who would wish human beings to shine in all their graced transparency.

²⁷ Climacus is not the 7th century Christian monk who lived on Mount Sinai; rather it is the nom de plume that Kierkegaard used for himself (editor's note).