

A summary, analysis and discussion of søren kierkegaard, training in christianity...

[Religion](#)



I. Introduction

In this essay, I will try to summarize, analyze and discuss several pages of Søren Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*. I will try to focus on his approach to sacred history, a general Christian history and Christianity, which he discusses in this work in relation to faith in God. In other parts of this essay I will attempt also to relate these pages of his work to some key ideas of Kierkegaard's theology and philosophy and support this with some concrete quotations from the text. In the end I will very briefly compare different philosophies of Hegel and Kierkegaard and try to relate Kierkegaard's work to a few topics, which were discussed in modernity.

II. God and man, Christ, Faith and Reason[2]

According to Kierkegaard, there is absolute qualitative difference between God and man. 'There is an endless yawning difference between God and man...'[3] This difference between man and God can not be bridged over by reasoning. It can be bridged over only by faith (or leap of faith), which is matter only of a moment.[4] God is for Kierkegaard absolutely inaccessible transcendence. Man is in comparison to God imperfect and can never comprehend God. Man can comprehend only those things, that are part of his world, but he can never comprehend God and His will or His intentions. We can not box up God in our concepts, in our knowing.

God can not, according to Kierkegaard, be known, He can be only believed. There is nothing in between; there must be decision, choice. If man decides to believe in God, then he can recognize by reason that there is vast difference between God's and his essence. Then man falls down and
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worships God. True Christian must, according to Kierkegaard suffer, he has to abandon everything. This is probably why he decided not to get married. Suffering is inseparable from faith. ' Christianity came into the world as the absolute – not for consolation, humanly understood; on the contrary, it speaks again and again of the sufferings which a Christian must endure, or which a man must endure to become and to be a Christian.'[5] Faith is one of the themes that Kierkegaard preferred. He proclaimed subjectivity of faith against formal and intellectual receiving of dogmas.

Object of faith is paradox. Term paradox is favorite Kierkegaard's term. Paradox is truth, which exceeds boundaries of reason. Jesus Christ is such paradox. Paradox however does not mean nonsense, because in front of God it is not a paradox. ' He is the paradox, the object of faith, existing only for faith.'[6]

Christian religion, its dogmas are not comprehensible by reason. If they were only matter of reason or science, faith would not be necessary. Very important aspect of faith is emotions, emotions need paradox and there is no more paradox faith than Christian faith. On the other hand believing is not strictly irrational. For Kierkegaard is reason also very important. Christian should think rationally, because reason is also needed for faith. In Christian religion, true Christian believes against his own reason, and then he uses his reason. He affirms himself that he believes against his own reason.

III. History

Kierkegaard distinguishes between two types of history: Sacred history and a general Christian history. By term sacred history he means life, teaching and words of Jesus Christ, when he was on Earth, especially Him saying He is God. This history is qualitatively different from a general Christian history. Sacred history stands outside general history, ' Christ's life on Earth, sacred history, stands for itself alone outside history.' [7] It is therefore not a past event that happened several hundred years ago, as was taught during Kierkegaard's life. For believer, this sacred history is always present; it is contemporary to every generation. ' His earthly life accompanies the race, and accompanies every generation in particular, as the eternal history; His earthly life possesses the eternal contemporaneousness.' [8]

On the other hand, general history is not important; it is not history of process of evolution of Hegel's ' Geist'. Christian has according to Kierkegaard nothing to learn from general history, teaching Christian history in schools is therefore pointless. '[...] true Christians [...] have nothing to do with Christians of former generations, but everything to do with contemporary Christ.' [9] So does the history of Christianity of over 1800 years in Kierkegaard's time (over 2000 in ours) have any significance at all? To this question would Kierkegaard probably give answer: ' No', as he gives answers to few similar questions he asks himself.

Firstly, he tries to give answer on question whether Jesus is always the same or he has changed in history and whether we can learn anything about him from history. To this question Kierkegaard responds: ' Yes, He is the same yesterday and today.' [10] Therefore we can not learn anything new about

him from history; we can know him only from sacred history. This means we can know God only as humbled, as 'lowly one,'[11] but never as the one, who is in glory and who will in glory come. 'about His coming again nothing can be known; in the strictest sense, it can only be believed.'[12]

Secondly, Kierkegaard asks himself, if one can prove from history that Christ was God. Here he answers: No. He argues that it is impossible to prove this using reason, because we can only prove that something is against reason and therefore it must be believed by faith. Also the Bible miracles, which Bible uses as proof of Jesus' divinity are not proofs for reason, but only proofs for faith. '[...] they have no intention of proving that all this agrees perfectly with reason; on the contrary they would prove, that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith.'[13] There is such a vast difference between God and man, that man can not by reasoning come from historical Jesus to conclusion that he was God. Especially if God came to Earth in Jesus' body, 'incognito'[14], clothed as human. Kierkegaard writes:

Do God and man resemble one another to such a degree, is there so slight a difference between them, that I [...] can begin with the assumption that Christ was a man? And on the other hand, has not Christ Himself said that He was God? If God and man resemble one another to that degree, if they have that degree of kinship, and thus essentially are included in the same quality, the conclusion, 'ergo it was God', is nevertheless humbug; for if God is nothing else but that, then God does not exist at all. But if God exists, and consequently is distinguished by an infinite difference of quality from all that it means to be a man, then neither can I nor anybody else, by beginning with

the assumption that He was a man, arrive in all eternity at the conclusion, ' therefore it was God'.[15]

Thirdly, Kierkegaard asks if the consequences of Christ's life are more important than His life. For the third time, his answer is: No. Here he compares Christ to an ordinary man, who suffered same sufferings as Christ did during his life. When we consider life of man, there is nothing significant about it, because, there are billions of people who have lived, what is important in man's life, are consequences of his life. But when God lives as man on Earth, his life itself is significant and consequences become not so important. Kierkegaard writes:

No emphasis falls upon the fact that a man lived, but infinite is emphasis which falls upon the fact that God lived. God alone can attach to Himself such great weight that the fact that He lived and has lived is infinitely more important than all the consequences which are registered in history.[16]

From consequences of Christ's life that are evident in history, man can not arrive to conclusion, that Christ was God. Christ's life itself was something extraordinary. But this decision has to be made at the beginning. If man decides there in the beginning to believe that Christ is God, then Christ's life itself becomes for him individually the most significant event and consequences of Christ's life, whole history (of 1800 years for Kierkegaard or 2000 years for us) become irrelevant. On the other hand if man decides not to believe in the beginning that Christ is God, but only a man, one can never from consequences of Christ's life arrive to conclusion, that he is God.

IV. Christianity

Kierkegaard's texts are very often motivated by opposing to the shallowness and soullessness of the age in which he lived, including shallowness and half-heartedness of official Christianity. Kierkegaard's critique of the age led to radical critique of national church and Christianity, which according to him differed great deal from original Christianity in religiosity and ethics.

Christianity as claim and Christianity as reality are far from being the same. '[...] the tension of the paradox was relaxed, one became a Christian without noticing it. All became as simple as thrusting a foot into the stocking. And quite naturally, because in that way Christianity became paganism.' [17] By the end of his life his critique led to open conflict with Danish protestant national church. He argued that church replaced quality with quantity. This conflict with mass and shallow Christianity did not mean condemnation of Christianity itself. On the contrary, Kierkegaard attempted in his whole writings to return to the very beginning of Christianity, to the original intention of Christianity, which he saw in the early church of martyrs.

This is why he proclaimed that to be a true Christian meant to be a follower of Christ, which is associated with suffering. 'To become a Christian (to be transformed into likeness with God) proved to be an even greater torment and misery and pain than the greatest human torment.' [18] To be a true Christian means for Kierkegaard something subjective, it can not be some kind of hypocrisy. Christianity should not appeal on reason. Rational proof of God is not important, important is belief and belief has nothing to do with reason. Kierkegaard encouraged Christians of his age to realize that

Christianity of their time is different from description of Christian in New Testament. He wanted to reintroduce Christianity to people of his time.

‘ Christendom has done away with Christianity, without being quite aware of it. The consequence is that, if anything is to be done, one must try again to introduce Christianity to Christendom.[19] For a man to become again Christian among Christianity of his time, he has to understand this difference and to leave mass Christianity behind and become individual before God. The true Christian is a man who does not believe in God because he received church dogmas or was lectured in Christianity and Christian history, but a man, who is contemporaneous with Jesus Christ, who has personal experience of faith. Faith is for Kierkegaard strictly individual matter. This probably also led him to leave Danish national church.

V. Kierkegaard and Hegel

During Kierkegaard’s life, Hegel’s philosophy was taught and spread across the Denmark and the Europe. Kierkegaard’s writings were formulated against Hegel and his followers, and his critique aimed at several aspects of Hegel’s thoughts. Firstly he attacked Hegel’s speculative logic, absolute idealism, metaphysical system, where individual man has no place. Hegel’s absolute system and positivistic tendencies of science are assuming objective commonness and eventually forgetting individual, concrete, subjective existence of man. And Kierkegaard emphasizes this existence, concrete man, his decision-making, his responsibility, subjectivity.

Secondly Kierkegaard opposes Hegel's rationality of religion. Kierkegaard argued that what is important in religion is on the contrary its irrationality, incomprehensibility of its dogmas and need of an irrational faith, the decision to believe against the reason.

Thirdly Kierkegaard attacks historical aspect of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel understood Christian history as a process of cultivation of 'Geist'- spirit, soul. Kierkegaard however insists on idea that from history, man can not learn anything new about God. The knowing of Jesus or God is not cultivated more with every next generation. Certainty of Christ's godhood does not increase with every century from his death.

VI. Kierkegaard and modernity

Is Kierkegaard's work part of modernity and why? I would like to mention few '-isms' that are related to modernity and are also important part of Kierkegaard's work.

Individualism. For Kierkegaard, individualism and subjectivity are very important. There must be individual decision to believe in Christ, to be a true Christian, means to individually choose Christianity.

Rationalism. Even it might seem that Kierkegaard opposes rationalism, it is not entirely truth. True Christian needs to use reason. Only by use of reason he can understand that his reasoning has limits. Only by reasoning he can realize that there is paradox. However reasoning can take man only to a certain point, when he reaches paradox. This paradox he can not solve with his rationality. He has to accept it by faith.

Historicism. Modernity authors often wrote about history and historicism, Kierkegaard is not an exception. He reject past, history as not real for an individual. ' The past is not reality – for me, only contemporary is reality for me. [...] Every man can be contemporary only with the age in which he lives and [...] with Christ's life on Earth, sacred history, which stands for itself alone outside history.'[20]

Knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is very important also for Kierkegaard. However he opposes this idea by thought that God can not be truly known, according to him, God can only be believed.

VII. Conclusion

Kierkegaard was a remarkable philosopher who stood at the dawn of existentialism. With his emphasis on individuality of man, his decision-making, limitation of reason and need of leap of faith he influenced many philosophers and theologians of the later generations. Although he was believer, he never wrote about himself that he is Christian. To be a true Christian meant for him to be contemporary with Christ. Even in his humiliation. Kierkegaard writes: In how far a man may succeed essentially in becoming a Christian, no one can tell him. But dread and fear are of no avail. Candour before God is the first and last. Candidly to admit to oneself where one is, with candour before God holding the task in view – however slowly it goes, though one only creeps forward – yet one thing a man has, he is in the right position, facing forward.[21]

VIII. Bibliography

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