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SELECTIONS FROM KIERKEGAARD

SOREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-55), Danish writer, philosopher, and theologian, is just a name to most of us—and no easy name, either. The very title of his first great book is mis-spelled in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. But this name punctuates many pages of Karl Barth, and may be found in Denney and Forsyth and Von Hügel. Harald Höffding (1843-1931), another Dane, in his delightful little volume on Rousseau, mentions Kierkegaard with Pascal, Rousseau, and Carlyle, as one of the subjective thinkers who consider the religious problem as personal; and adds in a footnote that Kierkegaard wants this purely subjective Christianity to be lived, namely to be actually experienced in the inner life (de Coussanges' French translation, p. 66). Brunner, in *The Mediator*, answers (p. 222, note) a comparison of himself to Irenaeus by saying: "Between Irenaeus and the present day there have been Augustine, the Reformation, and Kierkegaard." Dr. Lowrie (*Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis*, p. 11), goes so far as to call "that tremendous Dane" the predominant intellectual force in our century. That is going too far, but Kierkegaard's increasing renown and his growing influence on the Continent ought to make him an object of our interest.

Having rooted around in odd places looking for information about this queer melancholy Danish thinker, and for translations of his works into languages which I can read, I'd like to pass some choice fragments on to my brethren. The following pages may not be easy to read: blame me and my fumbling through the various languages that separate the author from me. But perhaps you will find a few nuggets, real nuggets, not merely fool's gold, among this gravel.

My task seems worth while for several reasons. This Danish prose poet, this son of a self-made man who had retired at forty and read Wolffian philosophy, this youth who studied for the ministry but never applied for a church, this Christian who died without the final communion that is so dear to Lutherans because he would receive it only from a layman, is being read, translated, and quoted, and his influence seems to be widening. The translation of his voluminous works and diaries into German has released his profound thought and brilliant style from

their Scandinavian limitations. So many striking thoughts of to-day may be traced back to these books and diaries that one may risk a feeble jingle :

Kierkegaard
Said it before ;

which, believe it or not, rhymes. There you have the correct pronunciation of the stressed third syllable of his name. The first syllable sounds Scotch ; the name means " churchyard ". A Kierkegaard " fan " seems to find his phrases everywhere, perhaps in places which are not due to him (cf. the current difficulty of many " liberals ", i.e. people who are stingy in the credence they give or the authority they allow to Holy Writ, who find it hard not to put a Barthian label on all supernaturalists, in fact on all who believe in the transcendence of God,—as if the divine transcendence were a new discovery !). Certainly we ought to have some acquaintance with the source of so many quotations.

Another reason is that Kierkegaard is very interesting. If these scrappy extracts fail to prove that, try the two hundred pages of translation, in longer selections, in Dr. Lee M. Hollander's *University of Texas Bulletin* No. 2326, reviewed by Dr. Rolston in the *Union Seminary Review* for July 1933, Vol. xlv, p. 423f.

A third reason is that such men as Harald Höfding, Professor Hollander, Dr. Walter Lowrie, and Secretary John A. Mackay acknowledge their debt to him after wrestling with his thought.

A fourth reason lies in Karl Barth's avowed debt to Kierkegaard. American students of Barth sometimes miss what Barth means because they neglect his starting point. Barth's teacher, W. Herrmann, tried to make a sort of Hegelian continuity out of Christian experience and out of theology considered as the contemplative study of that experience. Barth became dissatisfied. So Barth " went Kierkegaard " with a vengeance. And with powerful rhetoric Barth underlines both the positive and negative sides of Kierkegaard's infinite distinction of quality, a qualitative, not quantitative, distinction, between man and God. Along the negative aspect of this distinction, Barth is actually tracking Herrmann and refuting him.

Before going into that distinction, let me withdraw my unkind description of Kierkegaard as a " poseur ", *EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, January, 1934, p. 82, note. Of course any diarist

poses to some extent. Kierkegaard's unhappy love affair is ridiculously artificial. The incorrigible and original romantic introvert seems to have jilted his fiancée in order that, after she had finally married another, he might have a broken heart! (But on the other hand Tisseau of Lund, in the introduction to his French translation of *Repetition*, makes the love affair central to both the life and the literary activity of the great prose poet, so that most of Kierkegaard's books, small or great, become indirect love letters or explanations to the placidly unconscious Regine: cf. Victor Hugo's adolescent *Hans of Iceland*.) Even Professor Höfding admits the exaggerated character of his countryman's later accounts of his early literary activity, an exaggeration due to natural self-deceit rather than to hypocrisy. But I now acknowledge finding plenty of sincerity in Kierkegaard's introspection, in his self-criticism, in his prolonged effort to deliver a message to his fellow-Danes, in his restraint, even in his final polemics. There is a distinct element of self-sacrifice in much of his life. His vast literary work must have cost him far more money than it brought in. He lived on his paternal inheritance and conscientiously refused to receive any interest; he had just drawn his last dollar when fatal illness struck him down.

I

DISCONTINUITY AND THE GREAT DISTINCTION

Höfding, in his splendid book on *Soren Kierkegaard as Philosopher* (2nd German edn., pp. 76-8), says that there are two sorts of thinkers in the field of philosophy: (1) those who concern themselves with a real unity, with coherence, with continuity in spite of apparent opposition, with Hegelian evolution by the integration of opposites, in short with what he calls *quantitative* diversity. We may add that for philosophers who think this way, life is a development of certain non-living complexities; consciousness is an adaptation of the will to live; man is like God, only smaller; therefore God is a quantitative enlargement of man at man's best. (2) Kierkegaard is one of the first in a series of thinkers who take the opposite side. They emphasize distinction, disjunction, difference, contrast, unconformity, what Höfding calls *qualitative* diversity. One thinks

of the triumphant adolescent who has learned to generalize as contrasted with the riper adult whose sound judgment can discriminate.

For this second sort of thinkers, it may be added, life is something different, a plus of a different kind added to elaborate compounds of certain elements, and the distinction between the living and the not-living is more than structural. The soul of man may, as some Peripatetics said, include the central and controlling functions of the vegetative and the animal (Maher, *Psychology*, p. 546), but the human soul, aware of itself and of the world, wishing, hesitating, deciding, is of a different sort. God transcends man: we do not see Him in a mirror, not even a magnifying mirror with a selective lens in front of it. God is above man, far up, out of sight. Some things about God we know as we know the saltiness of the sea, not by swallowing the ocean but by tasting a drop (see Principal John Macleod in the *EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, July 1935, p. 249). But God surpasses human understanding: Isaiah xl. 25, 28; Ecclesiastes v. 2; Matthew v. 45; I Corinthians i. 20; ii. 14.

Hollander, p. 167ff, quotes at length Kierkegaard's argument that it is impossible to prove from history that Christ is God, because the conclusion, God, is in a different category. There is such an absolute difference of quality between the human and the divine that logic unaided by faith cannot cross from one to the other. Here is a very valuable truth, but it ought to be modified by some such line of thought as this: besides the definite category of the natural we have a vague category of the supernatural; the category of the personal lies between the equally exact category of the impersonal and something undefined but more than personal. Or, translating from an early book of Karl Heim's (*Das Gewissheitsproblem in der systematischen Theologie bis zu Schleiermacher*, p. 223f): "A subjectivity-confined ego could already see the limit of this subjectivity, which makes it possible to infer a Beyond and thereby begets the conception of a Something that transcends subjectivity. For seeing a frontier always means seeing a little beyond the frontier. Unless you see beyond the boundary, you don't see the boundary itself, that is, where you are seems unbounded, limitless, containing in itself everything that is or may come to be." The further development of this in an exposition of Matthew xi. 25 to which Kierkegaard himself, I venture to hope, would not seriously

object, is partially outlined in the *Christian Observer*, Vol. 123, No. 35, p. 6, August 28th, 1935.

The pages of Hollander's translation of *Preparation for a Christian Life* just referred to ought to be read by everyone who wants to appreciate Barth. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 331f, on the incognito of the Incarnate Son, quotes the same important book of the great Dane: ". . . the contrast between God and an isolated individual human being is the greatest contrast; it is infinitely qualitative . . . an incognito maintained by omnipotence. Indeed, in a certain sense, by the very fact that He permitted Himself to be born into the human race, He has bound Himself once for all." Hoyle cites this from Brunner, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 171f.

II

THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF THE DISTINCTION

Lowrie, p. 58, Rolston, p. 30, and Zerbe, p. vii, quote from the preface to the second edition of Barth's *Romans*: "If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance" (Hoskyns's translation, p. 10). It took me over a year to locate what Barth meant by the negative and positive aspects or significance of this distinction. The key to this expression is found on p. 84f of Höfding's book, section 4 of the chapter: "Up to here we have been discussing the leap or jerk (*Sprung oder Ruck*) from the negative side; we have conceived the distinction only as an interruption. But can we not also give a positive description or definition of it?"

(*Sprung* is the German word for a *leap* or *jump*, and in the French translation from the German of Höfding's *History of Modern Philosophy* it appears as *bond, saut*. *Ruck* is German for *jerk* or *jolt*, *saccade* in the French; see Höfding's history just cited, Vol. II, p. 299f. Think of a break, of the discontinuity or unconformity that interrupts a smooth line of progress in thought; cf. Lowrie, p. 50, dialectic as "argument in broken lines". *Sprung* also means *chink*, *crack*, or *fissure*, which reminded me of the gap or chasm to which the Barthians so often refer. But in a letter Dr. Hollander kindly corrects me: the Danish

Springet he translates by *Leap*; "This term by the way is Jacobi's, who used it in a discussion with Lessing. It is quite literally a *leap*—not *Ruck*, *jolt*,— . . . a leap into the unknown, a somersault into a different category." See Höffding's history, same volume, p. 23f; also p. 21 on the horrible moat between philosophy and history which Lessing would have liked to leap but could not.)

Höffding goes into the positive aspect of the infinite qualitative distinction by showing that Kierkegaard is set apart among philosophers by his effort to describe the gap which he has leaped. After crossing the unbridged chasm, he goes back and tries to figure out how he ever got across. "It is characteristic of Kierkegaard to break his bridge behind him, break it with the category of the Leap—but he cannot refrain from always hanging around where the break occurred. . . . He is so far as I know the only indeterminist thinker who has sought to describe the leap" (*Soren Kierkegaard as Philosopher*, passage last cited). This effort, which philosophically considered is rather vain, produces from Kierkegaard's pen some of the most penetratingly profound pages of introspective psychology that I have ever read. Whether Barth is as felicitous as his master in this positive part of his work, let those who have studied his doctrine of the Spirit say.

To Barthians, let me remark that if they want that great preacher of the Word to state for them the task to which he finds himself called, let them read two sentences beyond the ordinary quotation from the famous preface, or even three: after quoting Ecclesiastes v. 2, Barth writes: "The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy. . . . The Bible beholds at the same cross-roads—the figure of Jesus Christ."

The following sayings of Kierkegaard relating to this infinite distinction of quality between time and eternity, between man and God, I found in French:

From Ferlov and Gateau's translation of *Sickness Unto Death*: "God and man are two different natures separated by an infinite difference of nature. Every teaching which forgets that is folly toward men and blasphemy toward God. In paganism man brings God to man (anthropomorphic Gods); in Christianity God becomes man (God-Man)—nevertheless

for this infinite charity of His grace God makes one condition, just one, which He could not help making. The sorrow of Christ is precisely having to make this condition. He can humble Himself to the likeness of a servant, endure punishment and death, invite us all to come unto Him, sacrifice His life—but the scandal of taking offence at Him, no! He cannot abolish the possibility of that ” (p. 242). “The scandal that cannot be avoided is this infinite difference of quality between God and man ” (p. 246). “As for him who is not offended (scandalized), his faith is an *adoration*. But adore, which means believe, also means that the difference of nature (quality) between man and God remains an infinite abyss ” (p. 247f). Somewhere else: “The distance from natural man to Christian is like that from child to adult.”

Again: “Man is a synthesis of infinite and finite, of temporal and eternal, of freedom and necessity ” (p. 62). “God offers us reconciliation by remitting our sins. Yet the sinner despairs. . . . ‘No, sins are not forgiven, it is impossible ’ ” (p. 224). “The doctrine of sin, individual sin, mine, yours, the doctrine that forever disperses ‘the crowd’, establishes the difference of quality between God and man more firmly than ever ” (p. 235). “Man is never so much at home with God as when he is far from Him, a familiarity which can arise only from the distance itself; near to God you cannot feel at home, and if you do, that is evidence that you are far away. Man is so powerless before God!” (p. 225).

From Tisseau’s translation of *Repetition*, p. 123f: “The problem at which he stops is neither more nor less than that of repetition. He is correct in not seeking the solution in Greek philosophy, nor in modern philosophy either. For the Greeks go the other way, choosing memory with undisturbed conscience. As for modern philosophy, it is inert; generally, as in the (Hegelian) synthesis, it does nothing but chatter as it dissolves and establishes (*bavarder en ôtant et gardant*; the translators tell us that this is a clever pun, one Danish word meaning both Hegel’s ambiguous *aufheben*, ‘abolish’ or ‘uphold’—cf. possible ambiguity in our ‘hold up’, and see translator’s preface to Barth’s *Romans*, p. xiv—and also ‘chatter’, i.e. talk and say nothing). If perchance it risks a movement, it is always in the sphere of immanence. Repetition, on the contrary, is and becomes something transcendent. I am lucky that he demands

no explanation of me, for I have given up my theory and am drifting."

On this distinction between time and eternity, as on Kierkegaard in general, let me refer the reader to my paper on "The Philosophy Underlying Barth's Theology", in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. xci, No. 362, April 1934, especially p. 162f. There I try to explain the Kierkegaard-Barth notion of eternity by the figures of a line in space and of a high wall with gaps. The distinction of quantity and quality is not quite that of Canon Streeter's Bi-Representationism (*Reality*, Chaps. ii-iv), but students of Streeter ought to find Kierkegaard a little easier to understand.

III

MISCELLANEOUS BITS FROM HERE AND THERE

From *A Seducer's Diary*, part of Kierkegaard's first great work, *Either-Or*, a contrast between the selfishness of aesthetic hedonism and a higher ethics: "What does love love? The infinite. And what does it fear? Being tied down" (p. 233f). "But what does it matter where I am! Finitudes of time and space, you are forgotten; nothing remains but the eternal, love's power, its desire, its satisfaction" (p. 236). The next day, having succeeded, Seducing John says: "All is over, however, and I don't want to see her again" (p. 237). The worst that can be said of Gateau's beautiful French translation of this book is that one paragraph of Gateau's introduction suggests that Kierkegaard, if his secretary tells the truth (p. xxiv), had a clean heart but a dirty mind. The conversations the secretary describes may be merely rebellious chastity. The book contains keen analysis of the immoral and poetical mind of the Scandinavian Don Juan whom Kierkegaard describes, but is free from slime.

From Kierkegaard's own *Diary*, 1849: "The ages from which you may learn about the Ideal are the child, the youth, the young maiden, the old man—from the busy man, the bustling housewife, you can learn nothing of it. And why not? Because they are actually busy with purposes which pass away." Höfding remarks that here the diarist forgets that in *Repetition* hope and memory were extolled as the individual forms of the Ideal.

The following I choose from Lowrie's selections (work cited, p. 47f): "In recognition of the contemporaneousness of Christ you discover that you never succeed in being like Him. Not even in what you call your highest moment. . . . The Example is that which makes endless demands upon you, and you feel terribly the unlikeness—then you flee *to* the Example, and He will have mercy upon you. Thus the Example is He Who most sternly and endlessly condemns you—and at the same time it is He Who has mercy upon you." "In order to gain courage to strive one must rest in the blessed assurance that all is already decided, that he has already conquered—in faith and through faith." That last characteristic sentence, almost Calvinistic in meaning, illustrates Kierkegaard's stylistic trick of paradox; which is not the same thing as his dialectic paradox, argument by broken lines.

Fragments quoted by Höfdding, taken from the German edition cited above:

"A son is like a mirror in which a father sees himself; and for the son also the father is a mirror in which he sees himself as he some day will be."

"To force a child into the distinctive Christian categories is an act of violence, no matter how well intended."

"If I really have to preach Christianity in truth, then also must I disturb all this happy existence which is possible where one never comes in contact with the Spirit."

"Luther, Luther, Luther: thou has a great responsibility!" Later, at the time of his attack on the contemporary church: "Luther had Ninety-Five Theses; I have only *one*: Christianity is not there."

"I do not venture to call myself a Christian; but I want sincerity, and for that will I dare."

"Pain, suffering, begets an unavoidable illusion. . . . One is no true Christian unless he is found in the suffering and torment which are proper for true Christians in this world; and if one is in torment and suffering, then this illusion is unavoidable."

"You cannot put the Ideal into an historical bottle."

"What you do contemporaneously is decisive."

Höfdding, p. 85, quotes this from *The Meaning of Anguish* to illustrate the positive aspect of the time-eternity distinction: "The history of an individual life goes forward in a movement

from one state to another. Each state is bounded by a gap. . . . Before every gap of that sort comes a state as nearest psychological approximation. This state is the object of psychology." "So the gap", Höfding continues, "lies between two states, *zwischen zwei Zuständen*. Or, as he expresses it more exactly elsewhere, it lies between two instants, *zwischen zwei Augenblicken*." Quoting further in the same passage from *The Meaning of Anguish*: "Anguish may be compared with dizziness. He whose eyes are caused to look down into a yawning depth becomes dizzy. . . . In this dizziness, his freedom sinks to the very bottom. Psychology can go no further, nor desires to. In the same instant all is changed, and since freedom rises again, it sees itself to be guilty. Between these two instants lies the gap which no science has explained nor can explain."

IV

SOME OFT-QUOTED SENTENCES FROM KIERKEGAARD

"The Bible is essentially a message from God with our personal address on it."

"Life can only be *understood backwards*, but it must be *lived forward*. . . . Life in this temporal world can never be properly comprehensible, because at no moment am I able to attain complete repose in order to perceive and understand what the backward look shows."

"The Absolute is cruel, for it demands *all*, while the Relative still contrives to demand *some* attention from us."

From his diary when he was twenty-two: "To find a truth, which *for me is truth, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die*." Cf. Hollander, p. 208, and his note on the difference between history, "what has *really* happened, and poetry, what is possible".

Thinking of himself as poet rather than as martyr prophet, Kierkegaard asks, in *Either-Or*, What is a poet? "A wretched man who hides profound torments in his heart, and whose resonant lips are so made that the sighs and cries produce harmonious music as they pass through."

"Paradox is not a concession but a category which qualifies all thinking."

“Paradox is thought’s passion. . . . Every passion’s highest power is that it wants to seek its own destruction. . . . So that is thinking’s highest passion, to discover something that it cannot think.”

Reference may be made to the passage, cited in Denney, *Death of Christ*, p. 216ff, and more briefly by Mackenzie, *Christianity the Paradox of God*, p. 188, where Kierkegaard says that the child naturally learns to trust God as Father; later in life he feels the need for something to bridge the chasm that he now discovers between himself and God, and finds it in Christ. This extract from his diary is autobiographical. It is also true of many of us who receive Christian nurture. It may also have some bearing on the question as to why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, set to work to turn His hearers from the popular Kingdom-ideas toward trust in the Father.

Principal Forsyth, closing the preface to *The Work of Christ*, quoted, as extreme but timely, this saying of “that searching Christian genius Kierkegaard—the great and melancholy Dane in whom Hamlet was mastered by Christ”: Kierkegaard wrote: “For long the tactics have been: use every means to move as many as you can—to move everybody if possible—to enter Christianity. Do not be too curious whether what they enter is Christianity. My tactics have been, with God’s help, to use every means to make it clear what the demand of Christianity really is—if not one entered it.” Cf. Hollander, p. 222. There we have an ever-present danger in evangelism.

V

GRAVEL AFTER GOLD—SOME OF MY OPINIONS

Kierkegaard wrote diaries, records of his thoughts, feelings, hopes, and despairs, which have been published since his death in many volumes. His pseudonymous works were so numerous and varied that he really did carry on his campaign of indirect communication of his message by producing a literature within Danish literature. He wrote a book under the *nom de plume* of John Climacus; another followed by Anti-Climacus, edited by Soren Kierkegaard. Constantine Constantius and even John the Seducer appear as authors, but they are also principal characters in *The Banquet*—which ought to be in *The Harvard Classics* and in *The Modern Library*.

In his last work, a series of pamphlets called *The Present Moment*, Kierkegaard attacks the un-Christianity of the Church as he saw it, and, to adapt Tisseau's words, pitilessly accuses the century in the light of eternity. Tisseau says that these nine pamphlets, assailing the hypocrisy of all times in order to save the world from complacent sickness unto death, are "*The Provincial Letters* of the nineteenth century, written with as much vigour and imaginative warmth" as Pascal's, "but with a pathos that is poignant in another way", for the issues are wider and deeper than "casuistry, scholasticism, and monks' quarrels".

The man died lonely and unhappy. He had created more than one tempest in Denmark, and the students made a demonstration at his funeral; but the systematic theology of his opponent Martensen became a standard text in Germany. It was long afterward that translation began to make Kierkegaard's works known beyond his native land and its Scandinavian neighbours; we Americans may have long to wait. This modern Zachariah the son of Jehoiada may have been thinking of himself when he said to King Christian VIII of Denmark: "Your majesty is singularly unhappy, for your wisdom and prudence are too great and your country too small; it is hard luck to be a genius in Gopher Prairie" (or shall I say "in a hick town"? or, preferring tameness to a slangy anachronism which Kierkegaard would call contemporariness, translate with dignity, "It is a misfortune to be a genius in a provincial place"?).

The gloomy Dane made so much of our duty to think of ourselves and Jesus as contemporaries that one may play with the calendar and shift a century. If Kierkegaard were here to-day, I think that he would mock H. G. Wells and his follower Brightman with their finite God; he would also pour out his scorn on both Wieman and Ames, and call them idolaters. What fun he would make of the late Ivy L. Lee's press-agentry for his chief employer's preacher! He would have disliked Kirby Page's meagre theology and acclaimed much of his ethics, especially that manly editorial when *The World To-morrow* died. Reinhold Niebuhr's paradoxical combination of international pacifism and a willingness to engage in class-war would be a target.

Except for some books, the only objects in my comfortable study of which he would approve are the large waste-basket and perhaps the high-chair, relic of my early childhood, on which

I sit to see and strike these keys. And yes, he would approve of the typewriting machine : about the time that Samuel Morse was getting his invention ready to replace the semaphore telegraph which Napoleon had strung across Europe, Kierkegaard in his diary calls the poet " a living telegraph between God and man ". Therefore he would in general approve the positive and masculine preaching of Karl Barth, finger-post pointing us to God. For I venture to assert that a ball, rolling smoothly downhill from Schleiermacher through Ritschl and Herrmann, if struck smartly with Kierkegaard as a bat, would fly straight outfield to the second edition of Barth's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*.

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