

A Thank You and a Bow: Kierkegaard's Reveille

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CAN YOU IMAGINE the feelings—the surprise, the perplexity—of one who quite unexpectedly some morning receives from a far country the news that he has been named the recipient of a prize that has previously been awarded to such illustrious men as Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Igor Stravinsky, Niels Bohr, and others, and that he has been awarded this prize because he also has shared greatly in the propagation of European culture? "Is Saul also among the prophets?" How shall I make out in the company of these men? That was my first startled reaction.

My second reaction and the question arising out of it were of a somewhat different kind. The news had come from Denmark, from Copenhagen: that is to say from the city on whose streets—beloved by a few, feared or ridiculed by a few, but unknown to many—there once walked Søren Kierkegaard. What if I should meet him here? And what if he, continuing certain pointed discourses which he addressed to the theologians of his time, should accost me with words like these? "So this is how things are with you, my dear friend, at the end of your theological and other existence. This is what you have come to—gallant witness for the truth!—after your stormy eruption in your *Roemerbrief*, after all your more or less agitating journals and polemic treatises, after the many volumes of your nonconformist Church Dogmatics. So! you have come to the point where they now award you a state-prize—and that, too, on the basis of somewhat curious merits from the Christian point of view. My belief was that you might deserve a measure of praise as a little genius, although by my standards something might be said even about that. But as an apostle? If I remember correctly apostles were not awarded prizes, they were rather—you know what I mean." I was afraid that I might meet the shadow of this man in Copenhagen, and that he would speak to me today in this fashion.

My third reaction after receiving the news was of still another kind. This time I can express it in a form other than the interrogative. I had and still have cause to be plainly and simply *grateful* that your university wanted

this time to think of me of all people for the award of a Sonning Prize. Thanks in Greek is *eucharistia*. Thanks are a response to something that is part of this Greek word: Thanks answers to *charis*, that is, a freely given gift of an undeserved good. Thanks are the disposition towards and the action vis-à-vis that which one does not seek, does not expect, does not claim, but simply receives. The news from the far North evoked this kind of thanks in me, and thanks in this sense also I wish to express to you, honourable Mr. Rector, honourable Colleagues of the University of Copenhagen. Such a prize cannot be earned. One can only receive it in amazement. One can reply to it only with pure gratitude.

I should like to be permitted, however, to add that I feel and express this gratitude not least as a representative of the entire theological guild. If I correctly interpret my selection as recipient of the Sonning Prize, this selection implies the recognition that to a right European culture, there belong not only right natural science, art, and politics, but also a right theology—perhaps not least a right theology! What we might call European culture once came to a large extent out of a theological environment. Whether this culture will come through the crisis into which it has passed in our century will once again depend on whether the first and last question—which is exactly the question of theology—is alive and finds a right answer. Right theology is today as in all times the matter of a difficult, hard, and in the eyes of most people a scarcely impressive work. Thus, many of those who do this work will be encouraged as I am and grateful as I am that you wanted this time to consider a choice against which much might have been said, viz. the choice of a theologian.

It has been intimated to me that in addition to this word of thanks, I might within the brevity suggested by the scope of this celebration say to you something pertinent to my particular theological work. What could be more *à propos* in Copenhagen than to sketch briefly my relation to the celebrated Dane whom I have already mentioned and whom I have made speak to us—so that in this hour also the wholesome intruder might not be absent—Søren Kierkegaard?

The first book of Kierkegaard I ever bought was *The Instant*, and that was in 1909. I assume that I also read it at that time. But it could not have made a deep impression on me then, because I was very much occupied with and set energetically on the theology of Harnack, Hermann, and the *Christliche Welt*.¹ Because I was preoccupied with other things during the following years, especially with socialism, Kierkegaard had a respite from me—and I from him! He entered my thinking to a more serious and large extent only about 1919, at the critical juncture between the first and second editions of my *Commentary on Romans*, and from that time onwards he appeared in an important role in my literary utterances. By 1916 a number of us of the younger generation had set out to introduce, with hesitating

1. This journal was published in Germany from 1886 to 1941 and expressed the point of view of theological Liberalism (translator's note).

steps, a better theology than that of the nineteenth century and of the turn of the century—better in the sense that in it *God*, in his unique position over against man, and especially religious man, might clearly be given that honour which we believed we found him to have in the Bible. But the strength and magnitude of the emphasis on God as the ground and object of faith, an emphasis for which Hermann Kutter then provided the stimulation, became plain to us only gradually. The first edition of my *Roemberbrief* itself lacked much in this respect. Among the older authorities, whom in the years 1919–20 we thought partly to support our alarms and partly to urge us onwards, there was, next to Dostoyevsky, next to the older and younger Blumhardts, next to the odd stranger Overbeck and the great Plato—yes, you heard correctly, Plato!—also this Søren Kierkegaard, whereas the reformers of the sixteenth century did not yet evoke much response in us. What attracted us particularly to him, what we rejoiced in, and what we learned, was the criticism, so unrelenting in its incisiveness, with which he attacked so much: all the speculation which blurred the infinite qualitative difference between God and man, all the aesthetic forgetfulness of the absolute claims of the Gospel and the necessity to do it justice by personal decision; in short, all the attempts to make the scriptural message innocuous, all the too pretentious and at the same time too cheap christianism and churchiness of prevalent theology, from which we ourselves were not as yet quite free. In the second phase of the revolution, in which we then were, he became and was for us one of the cocks whose crowing seemed to proclaim from near and far the dawn of a really new day. The second edition of my *Commentary on Romans* is the very telling document of my participation in what has been named “the Kierkegaard Renaissance.” There were to be for all of us, and indeed also for me, new dawns with new questions and answers, and yet I believe that I have remained faithful to Kierkegaard’s *reveille*, as we heard it then, throughout my theological life, and that I am so today still. To go back to Hegel or even Bishop Mynster has been out of the question ever since.

It is true, however—and this several people have pointed out—that in my later books, writings, and sermons, express references to Kierkegaard become fewer and fewer. His peculiar sound has not become silent, but has been muted by other sounds and has become a strong *accompaniment* (*Unterton*) next to *others*. In fact, by reason of a glad agreement with him in his militant aspect, I had at first overlooked certain features of his historical appearance.

Was it permissible to bring into focus the contrasts, contradictions, and precipices which Kierkegaard had sketched so masterfully? Was it permissible to formulate more strictly still the conditions for thinking and living in faith, in love, and in hope? Was it permissible to make and thus again and again effect the truly necessary *negations* about the subject of theology and thereby to cause the poor wretches who become Christians or who might want to think of themselves as such to taste again and again the

bitterness of the training required? Was that permitted, if the aim was to proclaim and to interpret the Gospel of God and thus the Gospel of his free grace? It is odd how easily one is caught in the wheels of a law which can only deaden and make one sour, gloomy, and sad.

Further, what about that *individual*, in whose existence nearly all seems to be centred for Kierkegaard? Where in his teaching are the people of God, the congregation, the church; where her diaconal and missionary charge, her political and social charge? What does it mean, in interpreting the command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," that Kierkegaard could agree with St. Augustine and Scholasticism against Luther and Calvin that there must be a love of self that takes precedence over love of the other? How strange that we who were just coming from an intense pre-occupation with the relation of Christianity to the social question did not immediately become suspicious at the point of Kierkegaard's pronounced holy individualism (*Heils-individualismus*)!

Thirdly, did not a new anthropocentric system announce itself in Kierkegaard's theoretical groundwork—one quite opposed to that at which we aimed? The fact that a *philosophy* of existence, that Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre, could grow out of and base themselves on his work is understandable and legitimate, on the proviso that Kierkegaard wanted to be and was a Christian thinker in his own way. But only where Schleiermacher had not been read with sufficient devotion and where one had not been warned definitely against a continuation of his program, including an existential one, could a *theology* oriented decisively towards and subsisting essentially on Kierkegaard be possible. Where this warning was not heard, the experiment with a subjectivity which as such regarded itself as the truth was taken over anew in just this form. It was an experiment with a faith founded in and moved by itself and thus groundless and without object. Under the signature of Kierkegaard's existential dialectic a genuine theological *movement* (*Reaktion*) has sprung up in the middle of our century. That such a thing could have been made possible by him is a third consideration which did not enter our minds forty years ago. To sum up, Kierkegaard was bound more closely to the nineteenth century than we at that time wanted to believe. We may perhaps raise the historically pointed question whether his teaching was not itself the highest, most consistent, and most thoroughly reflective completion of *Pietism*, which in the eighteenth century along with rationalism laid the foundations of that christianism and churchiness which the pious portrayed, which Kierkegaard opposed so passionately, and which we forty years ago set out to oppose anew by invoking his name among our allies. We could not attack its foundation, man-centred Christianity as such, from a Kierkegaardian basis, because he himself had not attacked, but rather fortified it immensely.

In the light of these later insights, I am and remain thankful as before to Kierkegaard for the immunization he gave me in those days. I am and remain filled with deep respect for the genuinely tragic nature of his life and

for the extraordinary intellectual lustre of his work. I consider him to be a teacher into whose school every theologian must go once. Woe to him who has missed it! So long as he does not remain in or return to it! His teaching is, as he himself once said, "a pinch of spice" for the food, not the food itself, which it is the task of right theology to offer to the church and thus to men. The Gospel is firstly the *glad* news of God's *Yes* to man. It is secondly the news which the *congregation* must pass on to the whole *world*. It is thirdly the news from *on high*. These are three aspects, in relation to which I had to do further study, after my meeting Kierkegaard, in the school of other teachers.