

## The individual way of thinking Christianly

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Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009

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Although Kierkegaard did not consider himself to be a pure theologian, Sylvia Walsh opens her latest book *Kierkegaard Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* by saying that the Danish philosopher was first and foremost a Christian thinker. However, this is by no means a contradiction. Walsh refers to the genuine and special way in which Kierkegaard conceives Christianity, a religion which represented for him, right from the beginning, his true way in life the only way towards salvation and redemption, as an individual. Kierkegaard was not a theologian but only “a singular kind of poet and thinker” who wrote *without authority*” (p. 24). Regarding religion, the official authority belongs to the Church, an institution which, in Kierkegaard’s time was way to far from the original Christian spirit. That is the reason why Kierkegaard actually launched an attack against the established Danish church of his time.

As the author herself writes in the *Preface*, the study seeks to sift out Kierkegaard’s contributions, both critical and constructive, to modern Christian theology, pointing out the existential mode of thinking Christianly, as characteristic to Kierkegaard’s theological reflection. This study is not Sylvia Walsh’s first attempt to write about Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy and Christian thought. By the same author we can also have in attention studies such as *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic Of Christian Existence* (Pen State, 2005) and *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (Pen

State, 1994) or as co-author of *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* (Pen State, 1997).

Søren Kierkegaard is the kind of philosopher, whose life and times he lived in had a great influence on his writings. Therefore, the first chapter of Sylvia Walsh's study seeks to highlight the major intellectual influences and events in Kierkegaard's life.

Thus, we find out about the great influence his father Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard had on the child Søren in loving and venerating Christianity, a religion that at the same time scandalized him. The university years are pointed out with highlights on his introduction with the rationalist theology and speculative dogmatics through Danish teachers and personalities such as Henrik Nicolai Clausen or the Hegelian thinker Hans Lassen Martensen. Other important moments of Kierkegaard's life, as transformative events are his engagement with Regine Olsen and his attack against the Danish Church with the boiling point reached at the death of Bishop Mynster, accused by Kierkegaard that he lived and promoted a toned-down version of Christianity. Referring to the importance of Kierkegaard's engagement with Regine the author underlines that "As Kierkegaard understood it his personal relationship to God was 'in a way' a reduplication of his relation to Regine inasmuch as it helped him to understand what faith is" (p. 18). The author's aim is to present these moments in Søren Kierkegaard's life and the social and intellectual context in which Denmark, as well as Europe in general were.

The second chapter dwells on Kierkegaard's idea that Christianity is not a doctrine, but an 'existential communication'. In Sylvia Walsh's words: "By this he meant that what Christianity seeks to communicate to individuals is not *knowledge* about Christianity [...] but an inward capability for existing authentically through a relation to God or the eternal in time in the form of an individual human being, Jesus Christ" (p. 26). The author refers here mainly to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, a text Kierkegaard wrote under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus. In this text, he introduces the fundamental thesis that Christianity is an existence-communication.

Walsh discusses Climacus's views on the objective issue of the truth of Christianity, as historical or rational (metaphysical), as distinctive from the subjective issue of the individual's relation to Christianity. In order to be a Christian, one has to know what Christianity is. However, this should not be an objective issue. Christianity is not a doctrine in the sense of being a philosophical theory. This view would exclude faith as the basis of one's relation to Christianity. Moreover, even if Christianity has doctrines such as the doctrines of incarnation and atonement, they should be actualized in existence rather than to be speculatively comprehended (p. 34).

Being an existence communication Christianity has a rather subjective truth, which should exist in those individuals who are passionately concerned with their eternal happiness. A subjective thinker is the one "whose task is to achieve self-understanding in existence whereas objective thinking is indifferent to the thinker's own existence, requiring the abandonment of oneself in objectivity" (p. 37). For instance, a subjective thinker, when thinking about death and immortality he does not think about them in general but about what means for him to die and to become immortal (p. 38). According to Climacus, the best example for a subjective thinker is Socrates but still he is not a Christian subjective thinker whose existence is caused by a radical alteration supposed by the revelation that one exists in a state of untruth or sin (p. 43).

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 touch upon the main concepts that Søren Kierkegaard analyzed thoroughly in his writings, especially *Philosophical Fragments*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *Sickness into Death*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, as well as the *Journals*. These theological concepts constitute in fact his most important and original contribution to Christian thought.

The third chapter, *Venturing a relation to God*, underlines the most important aspect in the thinking of the Danish philosopher: the way in which we, as human beings, relate ourselves to the divine, namely the direct way, that of the personal, the intimate, and the unmediated. Here Sylvia Walsh explores Kierkegaard's view on God's attributes (God as spirit, subject and pure subjectivity, God's omnipresence, omnipotence, goodness, majesty, God's love, providence, governance and change-

lessness), his refusal of the arguments regarding God's existence and his sense of uselessness when discussing the attempts of demonstrating the existence of the divinity. The author shows Kierkegaard as distancing himself from the modern perspective in this respect and advocating a leap from the rational towards pure faith.

In chapters 4 and 5 the author explores the Kierkegaardian perspective on concepts like: anxiety, sin, despair, as well as the Absolute Paradox. Walsh underlines that the "analysis of anxiety as the psychological precondition of original or hereditary sin in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) is one of Kierkegaard's most original and most notable contribution to Christian thought." (p. 80) as well as the approach on *despair* as a sickness of the human spirit and its continuance in sin, as mark of the relation of the human self to God. Through the concept of sin, Sylvia Walsh touches upon another important aspect in Kierkegaard's thought, namely the absolute paradox of Jesus Christ as the God-human being, which constitutes the heart of his understanding of Christianity (p. 111). In chapter 5, Walsh analyzes this concept of the absolute paradox not with the aim of presenting the doctrines of the Incarnation and Atonement in themselves, but rather in order to clarify their meaning for the individual who meets Christ and who must decide whether he believes in Him or is offended by Him (p. 111).

In chapter 6, Sylvia Walsh continues her analysis by turning her attention to the "positive passions" (p. 145) namely faith, hope and love. The author starts from the work *Fear and Trembling*, which underlines the image of Abraham traditionally regarded as the father of faith. Through Abraham, Kierkegaard amends the tendency of modern philosophy (meaning the Hegelian speculative philosophy) "to go further than faith by presumably comprehending it conceptually in a philosophical system" (p. 147). Kierkegaard sets himself against the classic formula of the Middle Ages *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to understand) as he also parts company with modern speculative thinkers (Hegel, Martensen), for whom the goal of theology is the mediation of faith and knowledge (p. 155). Through Walsh's words the object of faith for Kierkegaard "is not a *teaching* about Christ that is to be comprehended

through philosophy or theology but rather the teacher himself, who is the absolute paradox and thus not object to mediation or a higher understanding in knowledge" (p. 155).

The last chapter of Sylvia Walsh's study deals with Kierkegaard's critical attitude upon society, culture and religion, upon the shift from the individual to the collective, a shift that goes hand in hand with the leveling of society. This phenomenon runs counter the personal relationship with God that Kierkegaard advocates hence an obstacle against spiritual evolution. Walsh stresses upon the fundamental contrast created by the modern age as suggested by Kierkegaard between the individual and the crowd or the numerical. "Due to the advance of civilization, urbanization, centralization, and the rise of the press as the means of communication that 'corresponded to all this and essentially produced it', Kierkegaard was convinced that personal existing had vanished and daily life had been given a wrong direction in the modern age" (p. 182). Turning the analysis to the concept of religion Walsh underlines the distinction made by Kierkegaard between politics, which has to do with the external system of government under which people live and, on the other hand, religion and particularly Christianity, which is more a matter of inwardness of the individual's personal relationship to God.

From this point on Sylvia Walsh amplifies on Kierkegaard's attack of the church, which at its last stage had in attention almost every aspect of the established church and social life in Christendom including baptism and marriage.

In the last pages of her study, Sylvia Walsh makes some important remarks. Therefore, despite Kierkegaard's vigorous attack he has given up on the church as an institution he has not given up on Christianity itself. According to Walsh, this is what distinguishes Kierkegaard most profoundly from other nineteenth-century critics of religion such as Feuerbach, Marx, or Nietzsche (pp. 198-9). Walsh's opinion is that Kierkegaard's legacy would be "to enable us and future generations to think Christianly with a more balanced and existentially oriented understanding of what Christianity is and how to become a Christian in the context of our own existential situations and times" (p. 199).

Sylvia Walsh's new study frames a comprehensive analysis of Søren Kierkegaard's Christian and also philosophical thought. Having in mind some of the key concepts of Kierkegaard the author tries to mark out the particularity of Kierkegaard's thinking Christianly, namely in an existential mode. I consider that she reached this aim in this respect and the main reason of her success is the direct and sometimes exclusive relationship with Kierkegaard's texts in the approach proposed by Sylvia Walsh. From this point of view, the author's suggestion in the last lines confirms both the success of the study and the personal edification concerning the theme: "But if we are to think theologically or Christianly in an existential manner as Kierkegaard enjoins us to do, it is important to read his works first of all on their own terms, that is, as indirect communications to the reader, 'that single individual', for the sake of personal appropriation, rather than as theological fodder that must be translated into some other conceptual framework in order to have contemporary relevance. Only then will Kierkegaard be truly read for the first time, even though we may have read him many times previously" (p. 206).

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