

Roman KRÁLÍK

# *The Dichotomy of Church and State*

*in the Works of Søren Kierkegaard*

Nowadays, many politicians in Central Europe are devoted to the question of the separation of church and state. Some of the liberal parties intensively demand the separation between church and state before elections, expecting this to improve their chances for success. Church representatives dedicate far too much time to the issue of separation, arguing and reasoning that church and state are and must remain closely connected, as the state consists of citizens who are simultaneously members of the churches.

## **KIERKEGAARD AND THE CHURCH**

Personally I think it is just a matter of time when this separation will come about. When we look at the developments and figures of the past, there is much to learn from them. In this essay, I would like to exemplify my opinion on the separation between state and church with the help of the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855), who strictly opposed the idea that the connection with the State is beneficial for the Church. KIERKEGAARD was convinced that such a connection does not “match” the mission of Christianity. Because of this stance and because he did not explicitly deal with the doctrine of the Church, it is rarely argued that KIERKEGAARD had a positive association with the Church. This does not mean, however, that he did not have interest in the Church, for which he prayed. He considered the teaching of the Church correct in its essence and accepted the church with all its sacraments, liturgies and regulations. It is therefore important to emphasize that the object of KIERKEGAARD’s criticism was not the church as an entity, but primarily the representatives of the Church. This is a crucial point in understanding the importance of the Church for KIERKEGAARD.

Another reason for KIERKEGAARD’s criticism of ecclesial life was

that the contemporary church was markedly influenced by the philosophy and thinking practiced at the University of Copenhagen, where Jesus Christ was at times conceived of primarily as a teacher of ethics and the Bible was not perceived through the prism of the Word of God. In addition, according to KIERKEGAARD, the human is able to find God even without the help of the church. KIERKEGAARD’s criticism of social and ecclesial conditions represents a fight against the relativisation of God and against *natural world in itself, secularisation, and profanity* as the primary determinant.

## **CHRISTIANITY VS. CHRISTENDOM**

KIERKEGAARD pointed out the poverty of theology which had changed the life in the Church into grey theory and hypocrisy with no need for human’s personal passion—the Church *had, since the world’s reformation, forgotten about Christ’s demand of discipleship*. KIERKEGAARD’s attack was connected to his conviction that the Church had surrendered to the dictate of culture and society, instead of being dependent solely on God. As a consequence of the unification of church and state—through which every citizen became a Christian—the sense of Christianity vanished. In this sense, *the idea of the Church is not qualitatively different from the idea of the state, because it is entered by the individual through the uncontrollable physical action of birth*. But when the individual enters this paradox, he will not arrive at the idea of the Church.

When examining KIERKEGAARD’s criticism, it is necessary to point out the difference he made between *Christianity*, the true Christianity lived in accordance with the New Testament, and *Christendom*, i. e. formal Christianity, which was created also through the fusion of the Church and the State.

To understand KIERKEGAARD’s opposition to the condition of the Church, it is inevitable, first of all, to explain his relation to God. The Danish philosopher felt enormous spiritual humbleness and respect towards God. One of his books even carries the title *Fear and Trembling*, and this title accurately captures his relation to God, which stemmed from his sense of personal responsibility and respect. KIERKEGAARD followed the New Testament literally and drew a sharp line between sincere and personal relationship with God and public demonstrations of religiosity. He criticised the tepidity of his contemporaries, believing they made a fool of God. For this reason he even went as far as to warn the believers not to visit church services. He followed the request of the New Testament, believing that the clergyman should not accept a fixed salary or financial reward for his service to God. Since service to God represents the highest possible service, no reward should be accepted—the reward expresses dishonesty and desire for profit. The service to God must be conducted with a pure heart – out of sincerity, an immediate relationship with God and from love.

KIERKEGAARD was afraid that by the means of a church office, the human would desire to govern and exploit his or her position. He saw the example of neutralised Christianity in bishop Mynster and noted that priests lacked passion and determination. Because of the absence of radicality and call to unselfishness, KIERKEGAARD called their sermons babble which turned church visits into habit and tradition that lacked inner life. In church life, KIERKEGAARD saw the absence of the assertive *either-or*—world or God, State or Church—and he underlined the necessity first to search for the kingdom of God, and not, as he saw priests do, for their personal benefit. Therefore he considered the priests to be

renegades who made a business out of Christianity, and he referred to them as state-paid clerks.

### THE INDIVIDUAL VS. MASSES

According to KIERKEGAARD, following God lies not in state protection, but is a narrow path that demands effort and even suffering. A wide path was created by the State, where everybody is a Christian and where the demands put forth by God fade away.

One of the main differences between the State and Christianity is that the State is interested in numbers, in the *masses*, whereas for Christianity, the most important reality is *the individual* and his or her decisions. If the State has the role of protecting the Church, the State prevents the Church not only from free development and progress, but it reorients the Church's attention from the individual to the masses.

KIERKEGAARD's criticism of society and the Church is, however, different from that of NIETZSCHE, who did not long for a remedy to the conditions. By the utilization of harsh criticism, KIERKEGAARD desires to bring to the attention of the individual the right narrow path, which requires autonomous thinking and genuine selflessness. KIERKEGAARD is critical of all hypocrisy, especially of those who make a fool of God by insincere service, while presenting themselves as the most devoted servants. The philosopher accentuates the difference between the profit-oriented Christendom and the example of Jesus Christ, who did not seek fame nor wealth, but the glory of his Father.



In his rigour, KIERKEGAARD goes as far as to compare the church to a theatre. Both perform the same thing. The only difference is that in the theatre everybody knows it is a play—but the church pretends to present the real thing.

KIERKEGAARD pointed out the absurdity of finding the truth in the church without personal interest, desire and passion for God. One of the consequences of this emphasis on individuality and personal relationship is that KIERKEGAARD's work

poorly highlights the concept of the Church as a community. He aimed the spotlight at the individual who is essential for the future of Christianity, making the communal activities of the Church appear to be secondary. To this "incomprehension" of the church, Karl BARTH took a critical stand: "*Where in his teaching are the people of God, the congregation, the Church; where is its diaconal, missionary, political, and social content?*"

### CHRISTENDOM: A COMMUNITY OF NON-CHRISTIANS

From the contemporary cultural-religious situation (tight connection between State and Church in Denmark), KIERKEGAARD concluded that Christianity was declining, which led to the elimination of the mutual relationship between God and human. He constantly referred to this kind of formalised and impersonal Christianity as *Christendom*—and this *Christendom* had nothing to do with the Church of Jesus Christ. He perceived *Christendom* as a community of non-Christians.

The Church often serves—and by far not only in Denmark—the common "Christian" only three times—at baptism, marriage, and death. People who seek God today often appear to have lost confidence in the Church. They identify God with the Church, which is in return tightly linked to the State. This reminds me of a story of an ancient philosopher who walked through the town, holding up a lamp, searching for something. "What are you looking for?" he was asked. "I am looking for the human," he answered.

Even today, though we have many professionals and scientific research constantly makes important progress, we still ask the same question: where is the human? We need to look for him, but we don't find him. Trust and the willingness to help vanish. Materialism, egoism, and desire for power triumph. The role of the Church is to find the human and present him to this world. If the Church does not succeed, it has no future.

It is incorrect to state that KIERKEGAARD was critical towards the church only in the last years of his life, in the so-called *church struggle* (1854-1855). Even in his earlier works, he points out the shortcomings of the Church and its main representatives. Through the description of the condition of the Church, he wanted to stress the real content of Christianity. Kierkegaard *wanted to do in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century Denmark the same thing as Socrates had done before in the pre-Christian Athens*. Today, the revival of Christianity according to the New Testament constitutes a challenge and obligation for all of us who are not indifferent to the fate of the Church. If this revival comes about, the issue of the separation of State and Church will not be relevant any more.

#### Suggested reading

- KIERKEGAARD Søren, *For Self-Examination*. Princeton, 1990.  
 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Judge for Yourself!* Princeton, 1990.  
 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *The Moment and Late Writings*. Princeton, 1998.  
 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Practice in Christianity*. Princeton, 1991.

(The article was translated by Jozef Filo)

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specialised library of this kind in the country. He has a doctorate in theology from HTF UK in Prague. He is the author of the recently published monograph *Problém zvaný Kierkegaard* (The Problem Called Kierkegaard). He is the founder and the chairperson of the Kierkegaard Society in Slovakia. His email address is kierkegaard@centrum.sk.

