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The Choice to Act in Faith

Somewhere in a newspaper I read that words such as courage, discipline, duty, honour or selflessness are waning from our vocabulary. Moreover, not only words, but also such people are waning. It is as if there were no such people of whom one could say, "This is a brave and honest person." What has happened?

The situation which the generation of our parents and grandparents had to cope with was very different from what we experience today. Not only has the world around us changed, but we have also changed under the influence of our surroundings.

"To have" instead of "to be – to exist" has become the aim of our actions. "To live" has been substituted by "to use". The word "morality" belongs only to those good old films. And "immorality"—that archaic notion including egoism, heartlessness, rudeness, the absence of moral principles? If you want to be successful, you cannot look backwards.

Our Short Memory

The world is full of hatred and anxiety. Where should we start? Is this not the right time for the Church? Can everybody ask questions? What is my list of values? What priorities and values do I have in my life?

What am I like? Is it really so serious with our society, with the Church, with me? Answers can be found in crowded foster homes, prisons, but also in many disintegrated families, lonely people, and in broken and destroyed human relationships.

The illness of egoism has struck everyone. Nobody has time. People stop listening to each other. Christians have one large advantage, however; they know where to look for the truth and they are conscious of the Decalogue.

Here is the main task for the Church, for laypersons and priests to form a "battalion" and fight bravely—like the Hussites, who fought fearlessly against their numerous enemies, aware that "If God is with us—who is against us?"

They did not look around, they did not make excuses that it was not the right day. We have a free will—we can choose between good



and evil, and, finally, today we can form the “battalion” of courage, honesty and forgiveness.

Central Europe has to deal with many problems at present. The number of attacks against people with different colours of skin—tourists, students, immigrants—has been increasing. And in fact, these attacks are at times not even considered to be racially motivated.

What is behind them? Why do they happen? The main reason may be the negative information about immigrants coming from the media, as well as the general prejudice that all immigrants come solely because of economic advantages.

Hardly anybody believes (including the administration) that they are political refugees, in spite of UNESCO’s massive information campaign on the importance of accepting refugees. Another contextual reason is that there already exists a large ethnic minority group in Central Europe, the Roma, whose full integration in society is in many cases still an unresolved matter.

The Roma were not allowed to continue their nomadic lifestyle during the Communist regime, and the state “compensated” them for this inhibition with various economic advantages and benefits. This did not lead to much improvement, however, and many of the Roma

communities became maladjusted, causing the start of conflicts with the majority population.

Media often play a negative role, as they focus on the “dark side” of the life and behaviour of the Roma. Even though the states, together with various mission organizations, try to contribute to a lasting solution for this problem, the results are far from satisfactory. Views towards the Roma also largely reflect how the majority of society approaches immigrants.

An immigrant is normally perceived as a person who is a wheeler-dealer, refuses to work and looks for social benefit. Because of this, it is nearly impossible to be branded as a political refugee.

Normally, people point to immigrants in countries which readily accepted refugees and are currently facing many difficulties. In countries of asylum, the immigrant is exposed to a broad array of problems, ranging from a language barrier to lengthy and often also clumsy treatment from police.

An immigrant is perceived as dangerous from her or his first day on. Mutual conflicts in refugee camps are not a rare thing either, often involving escapes. An immigrant has to get used to life in an atmosphere full of racism and xenophobia coming from certain parts of the local population.

This feeling provokes emotional tension in the person who has left her or his country of origin and has lost many of her or his roots. We have forgotten all too quickly how we were accepted by other nations before World War I when many Central Europeans emigrated overseas, or prior to 1989 when a lot of our countrymen left the “communist gold cage” and emigrated to the West.

The support of the Western countries was very encouraging for our emigrants, especially in the beginning. It was certainly not always easy, but mutual acceptance, understanding and co-operation helped to overcome prejudices and prevent conflicts.

The Choice of Oneself

What should be the Christian attitude in this respect? Jesus Christ accepted all people without exception and took the risk of not being understood and received with enthusiasm. The acceptance of an immigrant or a foreigner requires love towards our sisters and brothers; it requires forgiveness and the elimination of prejudices and fears of the foreign and new.

It is also necessary to get rid of the idea that an immigrant represents

a danger to our lifestyle and came to take our comfort away. In fact, we can learn a lot from someone who is not the usual neighbour next door. The decadence of the society, decline of morality and the lack of interest in public affairs are typical for our day and age. Books are published, conferences are held, philosophers, social workers and theologians discuss the ethics and morality of the people of the age we live in.

But there is often no result since we do not care about the things which do not bring us personal benefit and we have lost interest in spiritual matters. Where is the problem? How did we fail?

The Danish philosopher Søren KIERKEGAARD (1813–1855) points at the main problems of the society of his day and describes “the crisis of human” in his books. Despite the fact that his philosophical message is one hundred and fifty years old, it is still relevant for our considerations today.

He saw the crisis of the human in the dissolution of the individual who is, in reality, not an abstract but a concrete personality; someone who is choosing between an *Either* and an *Or*. This choice lies at the beginning of ethics.

The choice is made between possibilities. The first precondition of this choice, however, is to become aware of these possibilities. For KIERKEGAARD, the very choice is more important than its result.

The choice of human depends on seriousness, pathos and energy used in the process of choosing. This choice is a basic one for the human, because it enables her or him to become a real personality.

The choice itself is crucial for the content of one’s personality. When one chooses, she or he wants; and that is important. KIERKEGAARD concentrates on the desire for choice, on the desire for decision-making. Being personally engaged in this choice, the individual is able to contradict the system and the crowd, and hold on to what she or he considers good in the human.

The crowd does not want any autonomous thinking or decision-making; it wants blind obedience and imitation. We do not have to go far to find an example. The following of Adolf HITLER and his ideology brought an unexpected tragedy to the whole world. It is a tragedy that many representatives of the Church failed to see, since many of them supported his regime. The crowd was crucial and the crowd determined what was right.

KIERKEGAARD very often addresses his treatise to “that single individual, whom I call my reader”. He calls for autonomous thinking on the part of the individual—thinking that does not depend on

the mainstream, masses, dictatorship of the Church or society. He experienced how the Church authorities were failing and realized that one cannot rely on the words or utterances of people: the actions, and more importantly motives for human acting, are the decisive part.

Presenting this position, KIERKEGAARD conflicted with the Copenhagen-based tabloid *Corsair* and became the object of attacks and ridicule. He dared to reveal and criticize Poul L. MØLLER, the anonymous contributor from the university.

However, KIERKEGAARD did not give up his fight for the autonomous thinking of the individual. Moreover, he pointed at the “non-ardent and non-authentic” society, which lives in its illusions. He was persecuted for his opinion and criticism and in the end died, exhausted at the age of forty-two.

“KIERKEGAARD was searching for the light, because he was conscious of the darkness.”¹ He wanted the human to boost higher, not simply to live her or his life without any personal interest or passion. A human has to live his/her life spiritually, with interest and always as an individual, never as a member of the mass.

KIERKEGAARD is famous for the introduction of three categories of human existence: aesthetical, ethical and religious. He criticizes the aesthetical stage for the avoidance of duties, making the enjoyment of life one’s highest priority.

The life of such an individual depends on good luck and chance; and hence on something that she or he did not cause her- or himself. It is life without stability, where one acts solely on the basis of extrinsic impulses.

Her or his love is oriented at erotics, not at the neighbour as a sister or a brother. She or he wants to get regardless of how she/he gets it. Her or his aim is to have, to own, to make her or his wishes true.

In the aesthetic stage, one does not know anything about the love of a pure heart and honest faith. The result is immediate: one slides into despair and scepticism. This is like chaff, which is trailed by the wind of ephemeral ideas.

Søren KIERKEGAARD is better understood as a philosopher, existentialist, irrationalist, or as someone who criticised religious conditions and the Church in the same way as Friedrich NIETZSCHE did.

Alastair HANNAY, in the preface of his monograph, gives different perceptions of KIERKEGAARD: “Satan, Saint, or SOCRATES.”² Thus,

1 KRÁLIK Roman, *Zápas Sorena Kierkegaarda*. (The Fight of Soren Kierkegaard) Nitra, 2006. 78.

2 HANNAY Alastair, *Kierkegaard*. London – New York, 1993.

he figuratively helps us to explain three different interpretations of KIERKEGAARD.

For the first group of readers, KIERKEGAARD is a critic of the Church and a sick man. For the second group, KIERKEGAARD is someone who searched for the truth of the Church; and for the last, third group, he was a philosopher par excellence, ethicist with the same impact on individualism as SOCRATES.

Many times, and it is paradoxical, the less critical assessment of KIERKEGAARD's interpretation of the Christian religion is heard from philosophers and Roman Catholic theologians, compared to Protestant theologians.

One of the many critical Protestant theologians is Oscar CULLMAN, who "blames KIERKEGAARD for rejection of Jesus Christ's resurrection in the history".³ Karl BARTH poses a question related to KIERKEGAARD: "Where in his teaching are the people of God, the meetings, and the Church, where is its diaconal, missionary, politic, and social content?"⁴ The Slovak Protestant theologian Dušan ONDREJOVIČ also sees KIERKEGAARD's understanding of Jesus Christ as problematic.⁵

The Czech theologian Josef SMOLÍK in his study *Current Attempts at Gospel Interpretation* analysed KIERKEGAARD's attitude towards preaching, claiming that "preaching should not be done in the Church. This seriously harms the Christian religion."⁶ In the United States, the last writings of KIERKEGAARD were translated under the title *Attack upon Christendom*.

These studies lead the conservative circles of the Christian churches to reject KIERKEGAARD as a Christian religious thinker. The other reason for this is KIERKEGAARD's Bible interpretation, in particular: the imitation of Jesus Christ, adult baptism, and the emphasis on the individual being before God.

Transformation through Faith

Simply said, KIERKEGAARD in general happens to be a troublesome and critical "problem" for the Church. For this reason, the American researcher Walter LOWRIE wrote, "At all events Søren KIERKEGAARD'S impact upon the Church in Denmark is nil."⁷

3 THULSTRUPOVÁ Mikulová Marie, *Kierkegaard a dějiny křesťanské zbožnosti* (Kierkegaard and History of Piety of Christianity). Brno, 2005. 173.

4 BARTH Karl, *Mein Verhältnis zu Søren Kierkegaard*. Orbis Litterarum 1963/3. 99.

5 ONDREJOVIČ Dušan, *Teologická encyklopédia* (Theological Encyclopædia). Bratislava, 1992. 55–57.

6 SMOLÍK Josef, *Současné pokusy o interpretaci evangelia* (Current Attempts at the Interpretation of the Gospel). Praha, Oikoymenh 1993. 45–46.

7 LOWRIE Walter, *Translators and Interpreters of Søren Kierkegaard*. Theology Today 1955/3. 312.

According to some, it would be better if he had died three years earlier without turning too radical and provoking an open confrontation with the Church. But in fact, KIERKEGAARD did not explicitly attack any doctrine posited by the Danish Church. He considered the doctrines to be correct and he accepted the existence of the Church with all its sacraments, liturgy, and regulations. In his criticism, he did not attack the Church but its leaders and representatives.

One of the most significant questions when interpreting KIERKEGAARD from the theological point of view is his understanding of faith. As a renowned KIERKEGAARD researcher, Gordon D. MARINO, wrote in a review: “There is no better conversation partner for thinking about faith than the lyrical Danish philosopher Søren KIERKEGAARD (1813–1855).”⁸

As KIERKEGAARD presented in his works and prayers, faith was of crucial position and importance for his way of thinking and life. He considered faith to be indispensable: “Therefore I thank you, God, that you require just faith, and please, give me more of it.”⁹

KIERKEGAARD’s faith was convincing: “My eternal consciousness is my love for God, and for me that is the highest of all.”¹⁰ Faith, in KIERKEGAARD’s interpretation, means deep experience—meditation and practical following of the prototype of faith, Jesus Christ.

Compared to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL’s conception that eliminated faith through cognition and rejected miracles, this inwardness is demonstrated by internal interest and concern in acceptance of claims of the Christian faith, and not by speculation about God.

For KIERKEGAARD, it was also significant that to be a Christian means to believe and love God. Faith is related only to God, and God is the subject of faith. Jesus Christ is a paradox, the subject of faith, and serves only the faith. According to Zdeňek TRTÍK, “KIERKEGAARD bases his whole theology on the absolute paradox.”¹¹

Jesus Christ, however, demands faith from every individual. For KIERKEGAARD, faith was not an aesthetic feeling or immediate impulse of heart, but it was something much deeper and higher: the paradox of life.

KIERKEGAARD asks his reader to take a stand on Jesus Christ, and the reality that Jesus Christ had lived is essential for his whole

8 MARINO D. Gordon, *Alastair Hannay: Kierkegaard: A Biography*. Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter 2002/44. 11.

9 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Bázeň a chvění: Nemoc k smrti* (Fear and Trembling, The Sickness unto Death). Praha, 1993. 254.

10 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Fear and Trembling. Repetition*. Princeton. 48.

11 TRTÍK Zdeněk, *Vztah já – ty a křesťanství* (Relationship I – Thou and Christianity). Praha, 1948. 28.

life. Murray E. RAE aptly defined the Christian faith as one which is characterised by the transformation of the individual under the influence of theophany.¹²

Where there is no change in attitudes and life, there is not even faith. For KIERKEGAARD, to believe meant to be “contemporary” with Jesus Christ, done through a decision for Jesus Christ (to follow him—note by the author) at the “moment”.¹³

The target of KIERKEGAARD’s criticism of the conditions in the Church was the fact that personal Christianity had lost its challenge and became an affectation where everyone does as she or he pleases. KIERKEGAARD, on the other hand, called for an ideal and the Christian demand. The demand must be expressed, stated and heard; and confessed by ourselves.

KIERKEGAARD never stated that he embodied the Christian ideal. What he stated was that he knew what the contents of that ideal were, and that they were presented in the Scripture. Josef L. HROMÁDKA wrote the following lines about KIERKEGAARD’s notion of faith: “KIERKEGAARD knew very well that faith is acceptance of God’s mercy with empty hands. He knew that faith does not stem from human, sacred or moral preconditions, but originates in a place, where God by God’s word cuts the paths of human earthly life and reaches a person in his/her naked existence.”¹⁴

Faith is more lasting than the whole world. Faith, in Kierkegaard’s interpretation, is not something that lacks evidence: it is real, it is not designed for the naive, for those who need a “small crutch,” neither is it for those who are proud of having acquired a doctorate from religious philosophy.¹⁵

If a person wants to live as a Christian, she or he must live with a passion that represents the absolute condition. There are certain requirements that arise from faith and refer to a person, because, as KIERKEGAARD points out, when reaching eternity you will be asked about your faith and faithfulness.

The human race must decide between two different choices:¹⁶ to be or not to be. By this choice, an individual (a person in front of God) achieves a more permanent and deeper relation to God and Christ.

12 RAE A. Murray, *Kierkegaard’s Vision of the Incarnation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford, 1997. XI.

13 SMOLÍK Josef, *Současné pokusy o interpretaci evangelia* (Current Attempts at the Interpretation of the Gospel). Praha: Kalich 1993. 50.

14 HROMÁDKA Josef L., *Evangelium o cestě za člověkem* (The Gospel about the Way to the People). Praha, 1986. 57.

15 PERKINS L. Robert, *Søren Kierkegaard*. London, 1969, 14.

16 PETKANIČ Milan, *Pojem vášně u Sorena Kierkegarda* (The concept of Passion in Soren Kierkegaard). PhD Thesis FF UK Bratislava, 2007. 15.

A person is *either* a Christian who follows God, or a person who does not follow God, and thus cannot be called a Christian. In this statement lies KIERKEGAARD's radicalism (criticism of Church) and the basis of his way of thinking.

Faith represents a *conditio sine qua non* in the life of a person. It helps the person to overcome difficulties and problems. The most important part of a person's life is when the person enters into a relationship with God, Who becomes for the person a hidden Saviour against despair.¹⁷

KIERKEGAARD was convinced about the statements of the New Testament relating to faith, and tried to apply them in daily life: "By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything exactly in the sense in which it said that one who has faith like a mustard seed can move mountains."¹⁸ In another instance, he writes: "This is precisely the nature of belief; for continually present as the nullified in the certitude of belief is the incertitude that in every way corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence. Thus, belief believes what it does not see."¹⁹

KIERKEGAARD found the climax of life to be in the faith that compensates everything. In his works, he tried to defend Christian faith and to make the importance of faith clear to his Christian reader—faith in Jesus Christ. Faith, for KIERKEGAARD, was perceived not only as a decision of an individual, but as a decision always assisted and helped by God.

The evident influence of Pietism is apparent here, emphasising personal and practical faith. Two manifestations of faith are dominant in KIERKEGAARD's works: passion as a manifestation of faith, and deeds as a manifestation of faith. The reason for this kind of emphasis on deeds and passion was that religious faith had become formal and abstract, not requiring a choice that would give faith meaning and content. With the assistance of passion, KIERKEGAARD tried to liberate the person from the "imprisonment of the system."

The passion of faith represents motivation towards action, "towards the correct being",²⁰ and is an important key to authentic morality

17 "The only guarantee against despair (suicide) is faith, Christian faith, faith that is conscious and active" In THULSTRUPOVÁ Mikulová Marie, *Nemoc k smrti a Sebevražda* (Sickness unto Death and Suicide). Křesťanská Revue 1992/2. 38.

18 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Fear and Trembling. Repetition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Trans. Howard V. Hong. 48–49.

19 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Philosophical Fragments*. Johannes Climacus. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Trans. Howard V. Hong. 81.

20 DIEM Hermann, *Kierkegaard*. Frankfurt am Main, 1956. 13.

and Christian faith.²¹ Faith is, for KIERKEGAARD, the highest passion of a person.²² Faith allows us to make the decision to be or not to be.

“Either I exist and am the highest, or I do not exist at all either all or nothing.”²³ He compares his time with the beginnings of Christianity and, at the same time, challenges the individual: “Think now what passion there was in primitive Christianity, without which it never would have come into the world.”²⁴ Passion is, according to KIERKEGAARD, inevitable for Christianity; when there is no passion, there is no Christianity.²⁵

Making the passion weak causes confusion; it diminishes without decision, when a person is an unconcerned spectator (obedient, formal, uncritical member of the Church). Passion is, however, unnecessary when Christianity becomes a matter of the masses, without personal decision, when everybody is Christian.²⁶

Relation between God and human, which KIERKEGAARD metaphorically named as a relation between a teacher and a disciple, is not expressed by blabbering and divulging, but only by passion, which we have named faith and whose subject is paradox.

Faith is, therefore, not a form of cognition, nor an act or a product of will, but an eternal condition, accepted in the moment of encounter with the absolute paradox in time, creating faith together with the absolute paradox of miracle, a paradox which cannot be comprehended or negated by thought.²⁷

KIERKEGAARD places passion against the so-called speculative theology of Jacob Peter MYNSTER and Hans Lassen MARTENSEN. “There is a knowledge that presumptuously wants to introduce into the world of spirit the same law of indifference under which the external world sighs. It believes that it is enough to know what is great – no other work is needed.”²⁸

When reflecting on KIERKEGAARD’s term “passion of faith,” we come to the conclusion that this interpretation is very close to the “first

21 ROBERTS C. Robert, *Passion and Reflection*. In PERKINS L. Robert, *Two Ages: The Present Age of Revolution: A Literary Review*. Macon, 1984. 87.

22 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (tr.: LOWRIE Walter). Princeton, 1971. 118.

23 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Works of Love* (tr.: HONG Howard V.). Princeton, 1995. 45.

24 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Kierkegaard's Attack upon :Christendom* (tr.: LOWRIE Walter). Princeton, 1968. 184.

25 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Kierkegaard's Attack upon :Christendom* (tr.: LOWRIE Walter). Princeton, 1968. 231. Passion is noticed and also related to Job. KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*. Princeton, 1983. 210.

26 According to statistics from 1900, 99.6 % of Danish inhabitants claimed to be Christians. From the total number of 2.449.500 inhabitants, Christianity was rejected by less than 10.000 inhabitants. BARRETT B. David (ed.), *World Christian Encyclopædia*. 236.

27 WALSH Sylvia, *Living Poetically*. Pennsylvania, 1994, 148.

28 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Fear and Trembling. Repetition*. Princeton, 1983. 27

love” that can be found in the New Testament. Blessed is the person who can truthfully say: God in heaven was my first love.²⁹

Human in the Shadow of End

In our conclusion, it is necessary to add that the faith KIERKEGAARD presented in his works is not based primarily on the acceptance of philosophical or dogmatic perspectives. On the contrary, KIERKEGAARD’s aim is a passionate attitude which has been lost in contemporary Christianity and human life. KIERKEGAARD does not want the human to become apolitical or acosmic, turning into his inside and rejecting the outer reality.³⁰ Faith must be lived out in practice, as a real choice and a real stance, following the footsteps of Christ on this Earth.

He warns those who have forgotten to make decisions between to be or not to be (following God) in every moment of their lives to change their attitudes because “from God towards a person do not lead two paths: expensive and cheap, but only the only one: expensive path, confirmed by the life and testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³¹

If this is fundamentally rejected, we cease to be interested in one another, to accept each other, to be human to each other. Conflicts appear, and hatred among people is deepened. Divorce and crime rates rise and we start to worry about our future.

People, individuals, who see the crisis of the present age and the emphasis on “to own” instead of “to exist,” try to respond. This year there was a conference called, very adequately, *Human in the Shadow of End*.

Are we close to spiritual and moral decay when only power-economic interests manage society? An action requires courage and everybody has to be responsible for its consequences.

Every autonomous decision and swerving from the crowd is worth the energy. We lack desire. Desire not in the meaning of physical passion, but is understood as personal, essential and active interest and authenticity.

One lacks interest and desire to choose between either-or, not on

29 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1971. 101.

30 ŠAJDA Peter, *Náčrt kritiky Kierkegaardovho konceptu lásky v diele M. Bubera, T. W. Adorna a K. E. Løgstrupu* (An Outline of the Critique of Kierkegaard’s Concept of Love in the Works of M. Buber, T. W. Adorno and K. E. Løgstrup). *Filozofia* 2003/7. 488–491.

31 LIGUŠ Ján, *Víra a teologie Dietricha Bonhoeffera* (The Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Banská Bystrica, 1994. 35.

the basis of emotions, but on the basis of ethical and Christian laws. One is strongly influenced by society, media, and forgets about one's own existence and conscience.

The people of our age have a wide range of possibilities. Science and technology progress, and, thanks to them, one is able to reach almost everything, but it becomes useless if one cannot reach the peace of one's own soul.

KIERKEGAARD requires real imitation of Christ, not only the pretension of it. He also warns us against superficiality. It is not enough to go passively to church from time to time; it is useless if one lacks a real living relation to his/her sisters and brothers and to God.

He offers a solution: to become an individual, to love one's sisters and brothers, to decide autonomously.

Every human is the object of his/her own activity; he/she is not determined arbitrarily. One is a task for oneself, and this task becomes what it is due to one's choice. There is the challenge and example of Jesus Christ for every single Christian and for the Church as a body.

Jesus Christ accepted us with all our failures, characters and nationalities, and he died for us. We are expected to do less: to love and forgive each other.

Suggested Reading

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