



Søren KIERKEGAARD and His Prayers

Sometimes it is said that small countries, unlike large ones, cannot influence history in any major way. In a way this is true, but if we take as an example the kingdom of Denmark, we can see that its role in shaping the world's cultural and spiritual heritage is certainly not insignificant.

Recently there were several anniversaries that remind us of this fact; let us mention some—the bicentennial anniversary of Hans Christian ANDERSEN's birth, and the 120th anniversary of the birth of Karen BLIXEN (1885–1962), who wrote under the name of Isak DINESEN.

The literary talent of the Danes has garnered international recognition; they have been awarded three Nobel prizes, those of Karl Adolph GJELLERUP and Henrik PONTOPPIDAM (in 1917) and Johannes JENSEN (in 1944).

Last year was also the 150th anniversary of Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD's death (1813–1855). He spent most of his life in Denmark, the only exception being his three visits to Germany.

Who was Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD? Was he a philosopher, a religious thinker, a theologian, a prophet or a reformer? There are many answers to this question, but the main truth is that KIERKEGAARD studied protestant theology (1830–1840) in Copenhagen and all of his work and thinking was on the borderline between theology and philosophy.

Hermann DEUSER, a professor of theology, offered this insightful notion on the nature of KIERKEGAARD's work: "KIERKEGAARD did not develop his conception of religiousness with a historical, theological, or dogmatic intention."¹

¹ DEUSER Hermann, *Religious Dialectics and Christology*. In HANNAY Alastair – MARINO Gordon D. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Cambridge, 1998. 377.

Fundamental Prayer

Our study portrays KIERKEGAARD as a Christian who was in a theological battle and never ceased proclaiming aspiration to the Christian ideals. We can see his attitudes both in his published works and his journals and papers, which he often starts with a prayer that reflects the union of his life and his way of thinking.

KIERKEGAARD's prayers and his thoughts about prayer helped him to fulfil his main role: clarifying and fulfilling the idea of what it means to be a Christian. As we look at his prayers, we will understand more about how KIERKEGAARD prayed and how important and significant prayer was for him.

The following thoughts on the topic are characteristic of KIERKEGAARD'S understanding of prayer:

“Father in Heaven! You hold all the good gifts in Your gentle hands. Your abundance is richer than can be grasped by human understanding. You are very willing to give, and Your goodness is beyond the understanding of a human heart, because you fulfil every prayer and give, what we pray for or what is far better than what we pray for.

“Give everyone her or his allotted share as it is well pleasing to You, but also give everyone the assurance that everything comes from You, so that joy will not tear us away from You in the forgetfulness of pleasure, so that sorrow will not separate You from us.”²

Prayer is a manifestation of the human spirit in its relation to God and “cannot exist without God being active.”³ Similarly, he considered prayer to be “a good and perfect gift from the Father of lights”⁴ and “the greatest joy on Earth.”⁵ Prayer is “God's order,”⁶ a God whose “eye surveys humankind with anxious care.”⁷

2 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 79.

3 LIGUS Jan, *Medziludska komunikacia (Interpersonal Communication)*. Banska Bystrica, 2002. 110.

4 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 139.

5 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. VIII 1, A 532.

6 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. IX, A 316.

7 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*. Princeton, 1946. 25.



Prayer and Suffering

KIERKEGAARD's personal prayers found in the *Papers* are from the years 1834–1842⁸ and tell us much about the hardships he had to overcome in his life, as well as about how he handled his health problems:

“Give a person such a productive talent, and along with that such feeble health, and verily he will learn to pray.”⁹ On his relationship with his father: “How I thank you, Father in Heaven, for having kept an earthly father present for a time here on Earth, where I so greatly need him with your help.”

His father, Michael Pedersen KIERKEGAARD, was a very religious and pious man, strongly influenced by pietism and the devout nature of Moravian (Czech) Brethren. He was very strict with his son.

8 SKJOLDAGER Emanuel. *His Personal Prayers*. In THULSTRUP Niels – THULSTRUP Marie Mikulová (eds.), *Kierkegaard as a Person*. Copenhagen, 1983. 156.

9 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *The Point of View*. London, 1939. 68.

In the *Corsair Affair*,¹⁰ which was called the most renowned controversy in Danish literary history, the weekly magazine *Corsair* publicly mocked KIERKEGAARD. In response, he expressed his thankfulness to God: “God be praised that all the assaults of rabble barbarism have come upon me.”¹¹

Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD prayed also when he was deciding about his future work as a pastor: “For several months I have been praying to God to keep on helping me, for it has been clear to me.”¹² He also prayed about his relationship to Regina OLSEN, his fiancée: “Think of her in prayer.”¹³

There is an interesting journal entry for August 1848: “I quit praying for Rasmus NIELSEN, for I was not patient with him, but as soon as I felt I was sinning against him, I talked it out in my relationship with God.”¹⁴

Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD was very firm in one peculiar aspect: “If God does not know me, all is lost.”¹⁵ He also sought help from God to renew his mind: “O Lord, my God, give me again the courage to hope. Merciful God, let hope once again make fertile my sterile and barren mind.”¹⁶

In one of his crucial journal entries, he neatly sums up the line of his prayer life. There he admits that at first he was praying for gifts, happiness and prosperity; then, however, an important change occurred:

“This has now changed. How did it happen? Very simply, but gradually. Little by little I became more and more aware that all those whom God actually has loved, the prototypes and others, have all had to suffer in this world.”¹⁷

10 RUBOW Paul, *Goldschmidt og Nemesis*. Copenhagen, 1968. In KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *The Corsair Affair*. Princeton, 1982. VII.

11 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. VII 1 A 229.

12 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. VII 1, A 4.

13 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Either/Or*. Princeton, 1971. II/319.

14 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Journals*. 815.

15 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. VI B 161.

16 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. III A 91.

17 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. X, 5 A 72. Søren KIERKEGAARD was the youngest of the seven children of his parents. Five of his siblings died before they were 33. Kierkegaard had to live with this knowledge that he will not live up to his 33rd birthday. The magazine “*Corsair*” kept picking on him in its volumes, published caricatures. KIERKEGAARD put his love for God on the first place and for this reason he broke up his engagement with Regina OLSON. Despite this he loved her till the end of his life. His name is in the literature always connected with her name.

Prayer as a Revelation of God

KIERKEGAARD's prayers give us a unique insight on his personal problems and difficulties. His spiritual experience, with the help of which he was able to overcome his problems, strengthened and encouraged him in his faith.

Faith was his goal and prayer was its means. He was sure that "avoiding the personal approach" to God is a good way to "open doors for all kinds of problems."¹⁸ That is why he appeals to the reader:

"Close your door and pray to God and you have the highest a person can have; love your Saviour and you have everything in life and death."¹⁹ Prayers expressed KIERKEGAARD's relationship, hope and love for God.

KIERKEGAARD asked in his prayer: "Whither should we turn, if not to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ?"²⁰ To him, Jesus Christ was the only possible way of salvation. He did not forget to mention, in his allusions to bishops MARTENSEN and MYNSTER and the theologians of the XIXth century, the difference between wisdom and academic knowledge:

"The purity of heart is precisely the wisdom that is gained by praying; a person of prayer does not pore over scholarly books but is the wise person 'whose eyes are opened, when she or he kneels down' (Numbers 24,16)."²¹

In his writings Kierkegaard made an attempt to describe God's qualities, for example God's omnipotence, which "are still the same mighty God"²²; or God's constant nature expressed in love: "O Thou, Who art unchangeable, Whom nothing changes! Thou, Who art unchangeable in love."²³

He stressed the loving relationship between God and humans: "You loved us first. Help us never to forget that You are love."²⁴ Marilyn Gaye PIETY maintains that "KIERKEGAARD is fascinated by the claim in 1Peter 4,8 that "love hides a multitude of sins."²⁵

18 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. XI 2 A 134.

19 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Works of Love*. Princeton, 1995. 69.

20 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Christian Discourses: Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Princeton, 1971. 361.

21 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton, 1993. 26.

22 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 7.

23 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *The Unchangeableness of God*. In BRETALL Robert (ed.), *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Princeton, 1972. 470.

24 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. IV B 171.

25 PIETY Marilyn Gaye, *Good Faith*. In Perkins, Robert, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses. International Kierkegaard Commentary*. Macon, 2003. 157.

KIERKEGAARD called God the God of Love, because “You, Who spared nothing, but in love gave everything”²⁶ and confesses to his Father in Heaven: “Your abundance is richer than can be grasped by human understanding.”²⁷

Through his prayers, Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD wanted to point to God’s love, through which God is willing to listen to sincere prayers: “God to Whom one prays is human, has the heart to feel humanly, the ear to hear a human being’s complaints; and even though God does not fulfil every wish, God still lives close to us and is moved by the struggler’s cry, by his humble request.”²⁸

KIERKEGAARD also stressed the fact that Jesus Christ “prayed for His enemies.”²⁹ It is through prayers that KIERKEGAARD came to better terms with his critics in the Danish society, who wanted to ban further publishing of his works.

Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD also pointed out the differences between God and humans and the need of the human for a relationship with God: “Father in Heaven! What is a human being without You!”³⁰

In another of his prayers, he asked God to make one weak; for the weaker we are, the stronger God becomes in us.³¹ So, another aspect of prayer was the realization of one’s own guilt before God.

A person has a “chance to learn something new about oneself” and find out something new when she or he admits to her or his faults and she or he adds: “Prayer does not change God, but it does change the one who prays.”³²

In another prayer he begs: “Lord Jesus Christ, let Thy Holy Spirit enlighten our minds and convince us thoroughly of our sin, so that, humbled and with downcast eyes, we may recognize that we stand far, far off.”³³

26 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Works of Love*. Princeton, 1995. 5.

27 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 79.

28 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 387.

29 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *The Present Age. Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises*. London, 1940. 134.

30 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton, 1993. 7.

31 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Princeton, 1997. 133.

32 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton, 1993. 22.

33 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Christian Discourses: Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Princeton, 1971. 371.

Unity of Prayer and Life

KIERKEGAARD wrote that “prayer expresses the greatest pathos of infinity, which is comical, for it is practically incomparable to anything we may be able to express externally.”³⁴ He compared prayer to breathing, so if a person does not pray, she or he will die spiritually.³⁵ Truly inspiring is Søren KIERKEGAARD’s attitude to pleas in his own prayers:

“Lord, my God, I really have nothing at all for which to pray to You; even if You promised to grant my every wish, I really cannot think of anything, except that I may remain with You, as near as possible in this time of separation in which You and I are living.”³⁶

In another prayer he says that a Christian “does not demand help, but prays for God’s grace.”³⁷ “KIERKEGAARD fought passionately against the cheap grace of the contemporary Danish Lutheranism.”³⁸ It is the term “cheap grace” (*billige Gnade*) of the German theologian Dietrich BONHÖFFER that is most often joined together with KIERKEGAARD’s attack on the Church of Denmark.³⁹

Furthermore, KIERKEGAARD expresses a wish that we would never forget what it really means to be a human being, and that we would learn from the lilies and birds, learn silence, obedience and joy.⁴⁰

Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD was very sure that living as a true Christian is not at all easy or of a second nature, but rather that God demands a person’s whole effort and expects everybody to follow God. We may rightly use Peter GAZÍK’s beautiful words about Justin the Martyr, applying them to Søren KIERKEGAARD himself: “Being a philosopher meant to him having a mission and fulfilling it.”⁴¹

As he prayed in his life, he asked God to show him how to imitate

34 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Princeton, 1971. 83.

35 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Papers*. IX A 462.

36 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 392.

37 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Princeton, 1997. 64.

38 „KIERKEGAARD hat aber leidenschaftlich gegen die *billige Gnade* des damaligen dänischen Luthertums gekämpft.“ (SCHMIDT Johann Hermann) In *Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde (Evangelical-Lutheran Lexicon for Theology and Community)*. Wuppertal – Zürich, 1998. II/1071.

39 There is an essay published dealing with Dietrich BONHOEFFER in Slovakia too, by one of the prominent scholars studying the works of BONHOEFFER: LIGUS Jan, *Víra a teologie Dietricha Bonhoeffera (The Faith and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer)*. Bratislava, 1996, 112.

40 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air*. Princeton, 1971. 311–356.

41 GAŽÍK Peter, *Justín Martýr a jeho doba (Justin Martyr and his Age)*. Martin, 2003. 58.

his Saviour and to live according to the principle of “no one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). That prompted the following prayer in him:

“Would that we might be willing to comply with them by doing accordingly, that is, by following You!”⁴² Following with all the consequences meant to KIERKEGAARD having to martyr the body and soul, and that is why he asks Jesus Christ for courage to follow.

A great example of this kind of following was Dietrich BONHOEFFER, whose tragic death in a concentration camp “marked his theology with reality when he did not give up his faith in Christ as the one and only Lord, when the Nazis wanted to replace Him with the cult of a God-equal human.”⁴³

“Certainly BONHOEFFER himself provided a living illustration of what it can mean to take the gospel seriously in Kierkegaardian terms.”⁴⁴

Prayer for the Dying

KIERKEGAARD did not forget the importance of prayer for the last days of a human life: “When our days are numbered and the outer being is wasting away, death may not come in its own name, cold and terrible, but gentle and friendly, with greetings and news, with witness from You, our Father in Heaven!”⁴⁵

Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD’s friend, the pastor Emil BOESEN, who visited KIERKEGAARD in the hospital shortly before his death, described their discussion from 18 October 1855, when KIERKEGAARD told him the following:

“So I pray first for the forgiveness of sins, that everything might be forgiven; then I pray that I might be free of despair at the time of my death, and I am often struck by the saying that death must be pleasing to God.”⁴⁶

“Kierkegaard’s arch-enemy was Christendom, the comfortable cultural synthesis of official piety and socio-political convenience.”⁴⁷

42 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *For Self-Examination. Judge For Yourself!* Princeton, 1990. 148.

43 GAZIK Peter, *Ohlas niektorých európskych filozofických a teologických prúdov medzivojnového obdobia v myslení Samuela Štefana Osuského*. In ONDREJOVIČ Dušan. (ed.), *Evanjelická teológia na prahu nového tisícročia*. Zilina, 2001. 173.

44 WATKIN Julia, *Kierkegaard*. London – New York, 1997. 103.

45 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Princeton, 1990. 79.

46 KIRMMSE Bruce, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*. Princeton, 1996. 124.

47 KIRMMSE Bruce, *Kierkegaard and 1848*. In *History of European Ideas*. 1995. XX/167.

KIERKEGAARD died on 11 November 1855, unreconciled with the Church but reconciled with God.

KIERKEGAARD's critical view of the Christian Church is possibly one of the main reasons why his religious influence was relatively small, not only in Denmark, but in the religious world as a whole. Very famous scholar Walter LOWRIE wrote "At all events, Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD's impact upon the Church in Denmark is nil."⁴⁸

What we note from this overview of Søren Aabye KIERKEGAARD's prayers and reflections on prayer is his spiritual (prayer) development, and we can see how important and vital prayer was in his life. To him, prayer was his way to God and was of an immense importance. This statement is confirmed by Perry LEFEVRE, who wrote: "From the beginning of his return to Christianity until death, Søren KIERKEGAARD was a person of prayer."⁴⁹

Suggested Reading

- BRETALL Robert (ed.), *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Princeton, 1972.
 HANNAY Alastair – MARINO Gordon D. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Cambridge, 1998.
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 LEFEVRE Perry, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*. Chicago, 1956.
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The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air. Princeton, 1971.
The Corsair Affair. Princeton, 1982.
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For Self-Examination. Judge For Yourself! Princeton, 1990.
Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits. Princeton, 1993.
Works of Love. Princeton, 1995.
Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress. Princeton, 1997.
Journals.
Papers.

Roman KRÁLIK (1973) studied pedagogy, philosophy and theology in Banská Bystrica and Nitra, Slovakia, and in Praha, Czech Republic. He took part in a research programme at St. Olaf College – Hong Kierkegaard Library and published a number of articles dealing with the thinking of the Danish philosopher Søren KIERKEGAARD. In 2005 he established the Kierkegaard Collection in Slovakia, which is the only specialised library of this kind in Slovakia. He has a doctorate in theology from HTF UK in Praha. He is the author of the recently published monograph *Problém Zvaný Kierkegaard* (The Problem Called Kierkegaard). His email address is kierkegaard@centrum.sk.

48 LOWRIE Walter, *Translators and Interpreters of S. K. Theology Today*, 1955/3. 312.

49 LEFEVRE Perry, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*. Chicago, 1956. 196.