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KIERKEGAARD AND BARTH:
SIMILARITIES, COMPLEXITIES, AND DIFFERENCES

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As contributors to existentialism and neo-orthodoxy, Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth stand as two of the most significant figures in theology. They share similar beliefs, and in several ways, Kierkegaard had an influence upon Barth. In fact, Barth owned several of Kierkegaard books in his personal library, and Barth had referred Kierkegaard's writings on more than one occasion.¹ Yet, this relationship is not as simple as it first appears because Barth criticized some of Kierkegaard's views later in his life.² This paper, then, will sort through the difficult question of how Kierkegaard and Barth were similar and dissimilar. Rather than merely stating that Barth is a disciple of Kierkegaard, it will be shown that there are significant similarities, several complexities, and several differences between these two influential thinkers.

Preliminary Remarks: Three Versions of Kierkegaard

Prior to comparing Kierkegaard and Barth, it must be noted that Kierkegaard has often been variously defined, and as a result, grossly misunderstood. For this reason, as Alasdair McKinnon suggested, it is necessary and useful to “distinguish between three different Kierkegaards: the Kierkegaard of the authorship, the real Kierkegaard and what, for want of a better term, he calls ‘the phantom Kierkegaard’.”³ In other words, before we make any comparisons involving Kierkegaard, we must determine which version of Kierkegaard is in view: the author, the man, or the phantom. Only when we make these distinctions can we avoid miscommunication and error.

¹ “Barth’s own library contained two volumes of Kierkegaard’s works from the Jena edition of the German language *Gesammelte Werke – Practice in Christianity and The Instant*—as well as a volume of selections from Kierkegaard’s journals and diaries, also in German translation.” See Philip G. Ziegler, “Barth’s Criticisms of Kierkegaard – A Striking out at Phantoms?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*. Volume 9. Number 4. October 2007, 435-36.

² In 1963, the retired Barth criticized Kierkegaard in an address entitled *Dank und Reverenz* and in his essays “A Thank You and a Bow – Kierkegaard’s Reveille” and “Kierkegaard and the Theologians.”

³ Ziegler, 437.

Kierkegaard was a complex individual. To begin with, he used pseudonymous names in order to express his philosophical ideas. Because of the fictional aspect to some of his writings, the reader must distinguish between the pseudonymous author and the historical author. In fact, biographical studies have shown that there were striking differences between Kierkegaard's personalities as a contemplative writer and a jovial friend.⁴ As surprising as it may be, Kierkegaard purposely presented himself in confusing ways, saying "A whole book could be written if I were to relate how inventive I have been in hoaxing people about my mode of existence."⁵ Kierkegaard apparently enjoyed being playful in his approach to life, but this can prove to be challenging for his readers and interpreters. So when comparing Kierkegaard to another theological thinker, this complexity should keep us from being overly confident about our conclusions and comparisons.

While Kierkegaard and Barth shared many similar views, they were also different from one another. As this paper will evidence, *how* similar and *how* different depends on having a proper understanding of Soren Kierkegaard. This is further complicated by the fact that in addition to our own understanding of Kierkegaard, we must consider how *Barth* understood Kierkegaard and decide whether Barth was responding to Kierkegaard the author, Kierkegaard the man, or Kierkegaard the phantom.

Similarities between Kierkegaard and Barth

Both Kierkegaard and Barth affirmed the transcendence of God. In contrast to Hegelianism, which taught that God could be understood, Kierkegaard considered intellectual knowledge to be incomplete in itself. Likewise, Barth rejected liberalism that stressed the

⁴ See Lowrie's *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, 3-54.

⁵ Lowrie, 148.

immanence of God. For both Kierkegaard and Barth, God could not be believed or fully comprehended through logic or intellect. In their views, a truly transcendent being cannot be grasped through mere human effort. Revelation and faith required something more than intellectual assent.

Regarding Christology, Kierkegaard and Barth emphasized the importance of the spiritual, more so than a historical. In other words, Christ in the *present* is more important than Christ in the distant past. They shared the belief that historical knowledge in itself does not bring a person closer to God. While not rejecting history or questioning the legitimacy of Jesus' life, Kierkegaard and Barth were more concerned about a person's spiritual encounter with Christ in the present. The historical contemporaries of Jesus had no advantage when it came to their salvation; what mattered was whether they accepted Jesus in a spiritual sense.

Both theologians rejected a definition of faith that reduced faith to an adherence to doctrinal propositions or right belief. Kierkegaard not only rejected Hegelianism and its affirmation that the system was all-encompassing, but he made fun of the idea. For example, he entitled one of his manuscripts *Philosophical Fragments* to criticize Hegel's idea that a philosophical or theological system could take into account everything. Rather than a complete system, Kierkegaard could only offer mere fragments. Likewise, Barth "rejected the validity of general revelation in nature, stating that general revelation in nature is unable to reveal God to man. To Barth the event of revelation is Jesus Christ..."⁶ As such, mere intellectual investigation cannot reveal God to man. Saving faith requires Jesus Christ being revealed to an individual.

Both theologians agreed with Luther who distinguished between the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and *deus revelatus* (the revealed God).⁷ This is not surprising because

⁶ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 562.

⁷ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him : The Doctrine of God*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 60.

Kierkegaard was raised by a Lutheran father, and Barth was born and raised in Protestant Germany.⁸ Of course, Kierkegaard and Barth did not use the same terminology as Luther, and they took this distinction further than Luther. The existentialists believed that God as an immaterial being was for the most part beyond human comprehension. Human beings could only understand what God revealed to them through Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard speaks of Jesus Christ as revealing God to us in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, while Barth states similar views in *Church Dogmatics I/1*. While many Protestants would agree with Luther's distinction, Kierkegaard and Barth set themselves apart in their efforts to emphasize the severity of the chasm between what is hidden and what is revealed. This is one important way that Kierkegaard and Barth were alike.

In regards to truth claims, therefore, they shared a similar perspective on how people experience the truth. Although both used propositional statements in their writings, they rejected the idea that genuine knowledge could be communicated or accepted through mere propositions. Kierkegaard was not a rationalist, but an existentialist. Barth likewise deemphasized the role of propositional truths and "declared that the Bible is not the Word of God until it *becomes* that for the individual; in other words, Barth emphasized subjectivity in his approach to the Bible."⁹ Truth must be experienced firsthand, and this experience is more than mere intellectual assent. They agree that God's revelation cannot be reduced to propositions.¹⁰ Thus, Carl F. Henry would comment, "since Barth rejects objective intellectual revelation, he remains as opposed to

⁸ Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, vol. 3, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999-2003), 117.

⁹ Enns, 564.

¹⁰ Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, vol. 3, *God, Revelation, and Authority*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 430.

Christian possession of valid truths about God as was Kierkegaard.”¹¹ Thus, it is fair to say that neither Kierkegaard nor Barth emphasized the verbal, but the personal, nonverbal experience of God.¹² In Barth’s words, both agreed that “the subjective is the objective,” meaning that subjectivity is an essential aspect of true belief.¹³

On a practical level, both Kierkegaard and Barth also recognized that living the Christian life was not necessarily easy. Kierkegaard discusses this in *Attack upon Christianity* and Barth in *Church Dogmatics III/4*. Kierkegaard realized firsthand how difficult it could be to speak out against the status quo – even to the point of endangering himself. Barth, too, made a daring decision to not make an oath to Hitler, and as a result, was expelled from Germany. Thus both recognized that “even in predominately Christian cultures (Christendom, so-called), confession is hardly a routine matter and sometimes requires courage.”¹⁴ Regardless of whether a person agrees or disagrees with them, they are both fairly courageous in terms of rejecting the establishment.

Complexities between Kierkegaard and Barth

Beyond the similarities and differences mentioned above, it should also be noted that later in his life, Barth critiqued Kierkegaard.¹⁵ Barth criticized Kierkegaard for being legalistic, overly individualistic, and fixated upon the subjective. However, in these aspects, Barth may not have been as different as suggested. Philip Ziegler has persuasively argued that Barth may have been arguing against a “phantom” of Kierkegaard – one that was common in Barth’s day and in

¹¹ Henry, 231.

¹² Feinberg, 118.

¹³ Ziegler, 440.

¹⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology, Vol. III*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 107.

¹⁵ See Barth’s essay, “A Thank You and A Bow.”

our own – that Kierkegaard was far more extreme in his views than he actually was. Barth, for instance, accused Kierkegaard of being essentially Catholic, and in so doing, “he implicitly acknowledged that he had misinterpreted him.”¹⁶ In other words, despite the criticisms, Kierkegaard and Barth may be even more alike than Barth thought.

First, Barth stated that Kierkegaard was fixated upon the subjective, suggesting that Kierkegaard had no place for the objective. Kierkegaard has widely been criticized for this, but there are instances in Kierkegaard’s writings that suggest that the objective *did* have a place. Kierkegaard was not opposed to the objective, but recognized that there must also be personal involvement (subjectivity) that involves action (or imitation) on the part of the individual. For Barth to say that Kierkegaard’s rejected objectivity was, and still is, a common and “serious misrepresentation of Kierkegaard’s Christian thought.”¹⁷ In *The Book on Adler*, for instance, Kierkegaard affirms both the subjective and objective when he says that the test of a true Christian “maintains its objective continuance outside all believers, while it also is in the inwardness of the believer.”¹⁸ And to make sure the reader does not miss it, Kierkegaard adds that “there is no identity between the subjective and the objective.”¹⁹ So while some may criticize Kierkegaard’s basis for such claims, it is inaccurate to say that Kierkegaard altogether disregarded objectivity.

Secondly, Barth criticized Kierkegaard for his legalistic tendencies. Of course, we would not be surprised if Kierkegaard struggled with legalism due to his strict upbringing as child, but we must investigate if legalism was indeed a problem for Kierkegaard.²⁰ Certainly, there are

¹⁶ Lowrie, 173.

¹⁷ Ziegler, 438.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 117-18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Lowrie, 3-54.

points where Kierkegaard speaks of Christianity as being a difficult, narrow way which “becomes narrower and narrower to the end, to death.”²¹ But rather than legalism, an alternative explanation is possible. This intensity is partly due to Kierkegaard’s emphasis upon a point of decision – that crisis moment when a person must decide whether or not to take a leap of faith.

As he expressed in his journals, the melancholy Kierkegaard had a difficult time believing in God’s forgiveness, but this is quite different from saying that Kierkegaard *rejected* the necessity of forgiveness altogether.²² In fact, Kierkegaard adamantly believed in the Lutheran doctrine of salvation by grace alone, and did not question the need for grace, but questioned his own spirituality. In his writings, Kierkegaard paid more attention to human response (or what he called the “minor premise”) because in his view, that was what was most uncertain.²³ Kierkegaard struggled with overcoming his own melancholy, but recognized that it was a “must” to accept God’s forgiveness.²⁴ For that reason, Kierkegaard’s “phantom” may be considered a legalist, but it appears that Barth was wrong in citing this as a difference because Kierkegaard did in fact affirm the need for forgiveness.

Thirdly, Barth questioned the absence of the Church in the writings of Kierkegaard. While this is a legitimate criticism, one must consider the socio-cultural context within which Kierkegaard lived. In Denmark, Kierkegaard was surrounded by so-called Christians who claimed to be the Church, but he did not see much validity in the faith community around him. For that reason, Kierkegaard believed that “talk of the church... can and has become but a highly refined form of unbelief.”²⁵ The problem, though, was not the true Church, but the mass or

²¹ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, 20.

²² Lowrie, 201-209.

²³ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, 15, 24-5.

²⁴ Lowrie, 208.

²⁵ Ziegler, 448.

“Crowd-Church” that distracted from a genuine personal encounter with Christ.²⁶ This being the case, Kierkegaard was not arguing against the Church per se, but for a better Church, and was understandably focused on personal faith. Especially near the end of his life Kierkegaard wrote extensively about the leaders of the Established Church – through articles dripping with scathing criticism – which illustrates the fact that he saw the disingenuous church around him to be misleading the public from true, New Testament Christianity. Even still, Kierkegaard focused on the individual more so than the community because he believed that individuals who took the leap of faith would improve the Church at large. In this sense, Kierkegaard and Barth were probably closer than Barth realized.

Differences between Kierkegaard and Barth

Despite these complexities, there are definite differences between Kierkegaard and Barth. One of these differences involves the priority of Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard is well-known for emphasizing Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* as the model of authentic faith. Abraham played a central role in Kierkegaard’s thought and life, even to the point of giving up his fiancé Regine in the manner of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Barth, on the other hand, placed a much greater emphasis upon Jesus Christ than did Kierkegaard. In Barth’s view, all theology must focus around Jesus, so His works are more Christocentric than Kierkegaard. In contrasting the two thinkers, it has been noted that there is not “any *fundamental* opposition between Barth and Kierkegaard, though we acknowledge the necessity of the Christological corrective Barth has given to Kierkegaard.”²⁷ While Kierkegaard acknowledged the importance of Christ, Barth emphasized Christ even more in His theology.

²⁶ Verner Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, 334.

²⁷ Arther C. Cochran. *The Existentialists and God*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 47.

Secondly, it would be fair to say that Kierkegaard and Barth were both influenced by the Enlightenment due to their emphasis upon the individual, but in different senses. It has been rightly noted that Kierkegaard was preoccupied with “the role of the individual.” Kierkegaard considered himself a poet, but in a way, he was also a psychologist who considered the inner workings of faith in an individual. In a sense, this could be said of Barth, but Barth was also reacting against the liberalism of his day, which overemphasized the role of the individual. For that reason, Barth tried to move away from the emphasis on the individual and onto the person of Jesus Christ.²⁸ In other words, Barth rejected the anthropocentrism of Schleiermacher and argued for a Christocentric approach to theology. Barth’s departure from the anthropological emphasis is a significant difference between the two theologians.

As mentioned above, Kierkegaard *does* in fact mention the Church, but in different way than does Barth. To begin with, Kierkegaard only offers a bare-bones, limited outline of ecclesiology. It is wrong to say that Kierkegaard neglected ecclesiology, but neither did he spend much time on it. The primary reason for this is that Kierkegaard envisioned the Church in eschatological terms, saying that “the congregation does not really come until eternity.”²⁹ With Kierkegaard’s preoccupation upon the individual, he saw the Church as “the gathering of all the single individuals who endured in the struggle and passed the test.”³⁰ Barth, of course, was not satisfied with this and offered a much more robust ecclesiology in his writings. While Barth was overly pessimistic towards Kierkegaard in this regard, their views of the Church were quite different from one another.

²⁸ Fahlbusch and Bromiley, 117.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 223.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Also, in terms of their method, Kierkegaard and Barth also differ. Within the context of German Idealism, which found value in the resolution of contradiction, Kierkegaard emphasized separation, difference, and “fragments” in contrast to Hegel’s dynamic or “additive” form of the dialectic method. Barth differed in that he turned this method into an analogy. As Cornelius Van Til commented, “In turning away from this dialecticism toward analogy, i.e., toward the recognition of the idea that the divine and the human can be united in Christ, Barth broke both with the static (Kierkegaard) and the dynamic (Schelling, Hegel) forms of dialecticism as an exclusive method in theology.”³¹ In other words, their methods differ – particularly in the way that Barth used analogy. Barth was not merely a disciple of Kierkegaard, but someone who approached theology with a different method.

Conclusion

For these reasons, even though separated chronologically, Kierkegaard and Barth had a unique and complex relationship. On one hand, it seems readily apparent that Kierkegaard had a strong influence on Barth – including their emphasis upon personal encounter, existential truth, and so forth. The relationship is complex in that Barth criticized Kierkegaard on various fronts, yet it is debatable how much they *actually* differed because of how difficult it is to pinpoint the “real” Kierkegaard. Yet in the end, the differences that do exist should not be overlooked.

Certainly, Kierkegaard and Barth had some important commonalities. Both were committed to spiritual encounter as the basis for genuine Christianity. Barth was clearly influenced by Kierkegaard. At the same time, however, we should not oversimplify and assume that Barth was a disciple of Kierkegaard. The unique contribution of each thinker should be

³¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism*. (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), 1962.

recognized, yet this is further complicated by the fact that Barth may have misinterpreted Kierkegaard. When comparing these two thinkers, therefore, meticulous attention should be paid to the similarities and differences between these towering theological figures.

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