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A COMPARISON OF THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PRAXIS OF
SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND POPE FRANCIS.

Br. Alex Juguilon, O.S.C.

Abstract - Although faced with different needs and warrants from different eras, both Søren Kierkegaard and Pope Francis challenged the Christian populous of their times to live authentically. For the two, Christianity is a way of existence that transcends doctrine and speculation. Authenticity is predicated upon an internal transformation that is manifested externally by the way one relates to others. This paper outlines the unique approach each man takes to this challenge.

In the 19th century, Søren Kierkegaard challenged the notion that Christianity's ontology was grounded in the potency of knowledge for approaching the Absolute. He described Christianity as an existence communication rather than as a set of doctrines one must assent to. For Kierkegaard, Christianity was an existential possibility every human being could attain. In his book, *Philosophical Fragments: Johannes Climacus*,¹ Kierkegaard defined what makes Christianity authentic against the cultural, social, political, and intellectual milieu of his time. Almost two hundred years later, Francis faces a similar challenge among Christians in the 21st century. In his exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*,

Francis underscores the idea that authentic Christianity rests in *being* in response to *being* in the world, that is, how one negotiates life and the relationships that unfold within it. This paper explores the objective ways in which Kierkegaard and Francis approach what it means to live as an authentic Christian.

Both Kierkegaard and Francis share a common starting point. They begin by acknowledging that living as an authentic Christian requires more than taking up a mental calculus, the result of a syllogism. Christianity then becomes about *being*. Francis conveys this sentiment in his exhortation when he says that “Ideas are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis.”² In other words, Christians are called to engage realities. *Praxis* comes first, followed by reflection later on, if at all. He relates this notion to the Incarnation in that just as The Word took human flesh, so too do our words have to “take flesh” and be “put into practice.”³

These sentiments which give priority to Christian *praxis* over philosophical or analytical knowledge also form the crux of Kierkegaard’s argument against those who might think that Christianity is predominantly about *ratio*. For Kierkegaard, knowledge about God does not make one a Christian. By making this claim, Kierkegaard opposes two movements that were common in his time. The first was the Hegelian approach to Christianity which translated *being* into a distinction between ideas and knowing; Kierkegaard felt that this separated thought from human experience, and used the story of Judas Iscariot and the good thief as an example. “Judas knew as much about Christ as anyone. He lacked no information, yet he still sold Jesus out.

The good thief, however, knew little about Jesus, but throws himself into the lot with Jesus with the little information he had.”⁴ By using this illustration, Kierkegaard was making the claim that Hegel’s ideas were disembodied. They did not concur with human experience.

The second movement that Kierkegaard opposed was the historical-Jesus movement, for he believed that even one’s knowing all the historical knowledge about Jesus was really inconsequential to making one a believer. Data does not lead one to an authentic faith, even if one had “one hundred recorders to write down every syllable the teacher spoke”⁵ twenty-four hours a day, and filtered through those recordings to find the most authentic translation of what He said. None of this data will lead one to faith. But why not?

Faith, according to both Kierkegaard and Francis requires an internal transformation, and for this internal transformation to occur, one needs transformative knowingness or *paideia*, not just information. And this transformational knowledge is given to us by God says Kierkegaard. To make his case, he examines the relationship between a teacher and student. This relationship is, for Kierkegaard, the highest human to human relationship that can exist, a relationship that he labels as Socratic.

In Kierkegaard’s ‘Socratic model,’⁶ “all learning and seeking are but recollecting,”⁷ for the truth is already contained inside of each person. Nonetheless, a person could remain in *untruth* because of an inability to *remember* the truth. Thus, for people to recognize the truth within themselves, a teacher like Socrates was needed to help the pupil *remember* the truth. This was the teacher’s purpose. The point in time when the student realized the truth was called

the moment,⁸ and it was the point in time when the student came to realize that she or he was in error. When this truth is thus *re-discovered*, it is like a rebirth for the student, and the “person becomes aware that he was born, for his previous state, to which he is not to appeal, was indeed one of ‘not to be.’”⁹ The old self of ignorance died as the new self of recalled knowledge came to be.

This being so, Kierkegaard believed that one would never come to this moment of realization on one’s own; to do so would be a contradiction because “a person cannot possibly seek what he knows, and, just as impossibly, he cannot seek what he does not know, for what he does not know he cannot seek, because, after all, he does not even know what he is supposed to seek.”¹⁰ Indeed, if one could, contrary to Kierkegaard’s sense, discover the truth in this singular manner, there would be several logical consequences. First, since knowing the truth would be just a matter of recollecting, this moment of discovery would just be an accident. It would not be essential to one’s life, but be of passing importance, and there would be no consequences for the choices one previously made. Secondly, the teacher would not be of any importance, and so the student would not owe the teacher anything, for, as his Socratic principle states, “the teacher is only an occasion, whoever he may be, even if he is a god, because I can discover my own untruth by myself...”¹¹ This makes the teacher analogous to a midwife who happens to be present when a baby is born. Just as that baby’s birth was not dependent on the midwife, so too the recognition of the truth would not be dependent on the teacher. Sensing the absurdity of this situation, Kierkegaard thus belittled the possibility that one could actually attain real

transformative knowledge on one's own. Information, perhaps. Transformational knowledge, no.

But Kierkegaard found even this Socratic relationship to be lacking toward the dramatic, experiential transformation that Christians really needed. Consequently, Kierkegaard offers another type of student-teacher relationship that offers a far superior effect. In this relationship, God is the teacher, and when God creates the student, God imbues the student with knowledge of the truth. Therefore, the student already possesses the *paideia*. However, the student lost the ability to know the truth, not because God took it away, because according to Kierkegaard, that would be a contradiction. Likewise, no accident could have taken it away because this would imply that something inferior was able to subjugate God. Thus, it had to be the student's fault for losing it, and this fault Kierkegaard calls sin. This was the reason a student could never reclaim the transformative knowledge on his or her own, for the student remains in perpetual error or sin. Instead, for the student to overcome this state of perpetual error, the teacher has to provide a different condition of "knowing" back to the student, and "all instruction depends upon the presence of the condition"¹² for if this condition is not available, then the teacher would be unable to transform the student. This condition is called "faith,"¹³ and the only teacher who could provide this condition for the student could be God.

This shift in Kierkegaard's premise produces some profound implications for this situation. First, unlike in the Socratic situation, the moment of regaining the condition is significant because the moment that one receives the condition, "he becomes a different person...a new person."¹⁴

Calling this change “conversion,”¹⁵ Kierkegaard sees it as a transition from being in the condition of untruth to truth, and he calls this transition “rebirth.”¹⁶ As a result, this moment of conversion and rebirth led to “an awareness of being born in a previous state of ‘not to be’ to ‘to be;’”¹⁷ a moment that Kierkegaard called “the fullness of time.”¹⁸ Second, the teacher who is responsible for conversion and rebirth must be extra-ordinary, that is, beyond a Socrates. Kierkegaard calls this type of teacher the “Savior.”¹⁹ Furthermore, since the student who rejected the new condition called “faith” is always responsible for an accounting of such a rejection, then that would also make the teacher a “judge”²⁰ because this teacher would also have had to remove the “wrath that lay over the incurred guilt.”²¹ Kierkegaard thus calls this teacher a “deliverer.”²² And herein lies Kierkegaard’s paradox.²³

This paradox consists in the understanding that the teacher who could provide the condition of faith for conversion and rebirth must be God (due to the divine essence of truth), but, at the same time, the teacher who could place the student exactly “in possession of the condition”²⁴ as a Savior must also be a man. And this teacher could be none other than Christ, for only through Christ is one able to receive the faith needed for *paideia* because “faith is not an act of the [human] will...for human willing is efficacious only within the condition...But if I do not possess the condition... then all my willing is of no avail.”²⁵ Therefore, the student is completely indebted to God for his or her own conversion, transformation, and rebirth.

Like Kierkegaard, Francis also feels that an internal transformation is required and says, the “locus of this

reconciliation is within ourselves, in our own lives, ever threatened as they are by fragmentation and breakdown.”²⁶ Likewise, the sign of this internal transformation is peace because “Christ ‘is our peace.’”²⁷ Reminiscent of Kierkegaard, Francis also believes that the source of the *paideia* needed for internal transformation is Christ as “Christ has made all things one in himself: heaven and earth, God and man, time and eternity, flesh and spirit, person and society.”²⁸ Furthermore, “the Lord had overcome the world and its constant conflict ‘by making peace through the blood of his cross.’”²⁹

Where Francis and Kierkegaard differ is in the way that they believe the *paideia* is transferred. For Kierkegaard, it is transferred in ‘the moment’ - the moment that God discharges the condition of faith to the student so that the student can be emancipated, transformed, converted, and reborn in faith. From this *moment*, the student is then able to understand things that were eternal. “God [gives] the follower the condition to see it and opened for him the eyes of faith.”³⁰ Francis’s concept of how the *paideia* is transferred, on the other hand, resonates more with the teachings of Irenaeus and Athanasius³¹ than with the first steps of Socrates.

For Francis, ‘knowledge of God’ is anchored anew in the contemplation and imitation of the human works of Jesus. This is another area where one could argue a difference between Francis and Kierkegaard. For although both believe that being Christian is about existence communication,³² they differ in the way that they believe this existence was communicated. Kierkegaard seems to believe that it is communicated through a vertical aspect as one’s relationship to God affects one’s solidarity to other peo-

ple. Specifically for him, a true follower of Christ realizes that he or she is completely indebted to God alone: “The follower knows then that without the condition he would have seen nothing, inasmuch as the first thing he understood was that he himself was untruth.”³³ Furthermore, once the follower realizes that he or she has been given the condition for the truth, then one can begin to strive to imitate the truth. By this, Kierkegaard emphasizes the fact that God calls each one by name so that when one is called, one has a responsibility to live up to that calling. Therefore, a true believer strives to live up to an ideal set by God and not by society, and in striving to live up to this ideal, one who has faith communicates a way of being to others which makes the true believer an exemplar. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard maintains that “being” an exemplar for someone else does not cause someone who is an unbeliever to have faith. Otherwise, “the one from whom the individual receives the condition is *eo ipso* himself the object of faith and the god.”³⁴

In contrast, Francis seems to believe not only in the vertical aspect of coming to know God, but also in a key horizontal aspect to existence communication. Whereas Kierkegaard sees that one’s vertical relationship with God can affect one’s solidarity with the people, Francis sees that one’s solidarity with the people might directly affect one’s relationship with God. This is a real turn on Kierkegaard’s theory as Francis articulates the reality that “A lack of solidarity towards [others’] needs will directly affect our relationship with God...”³⁵ (God isn’t just in the heavens!) Furthermore, Francis asks, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods, and sees a brother or sister

in need and yet refuses help?”³⁶ And his answer is that refusing to help others, especially the poor and needy, is ungodly, for “Works of love directed to one’s neighbor are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit...”³⁷ For Francis, therefore, the way one acts towards others manifests what one believes about God. There is a horizontal aspect to faith that is vitally necessary. This horizontal aspect also testifies to the true vertical relationship of the Christian.

Grasping this, one quickly realizes that this horizontal aspect also leads to another difference between Kierkegaard and Francis, namely, how one knows that one is living as a true Christian. For Kierkegaard, knowing oneself to be living as a Christian is very personal and interior. It is manifested through a faith-exclusive relationship between the individual and God. Though Kierkegaard believes that being a true Christian requires more than knowing, faith is nonetheless essentially grounded in the realization (thought) that one is completely indebted to God for the condition of faith and salvation. Following this insight, one could communicate this true existence to others by the way one lives, though for Kierkegaard this means that one has to pass through the possibility of being “offended,” the offense coming perhaps from the realization (again, the strong emphasis on thought) that one might have to change one’s way of life in order to be a true Christian or that one might have to suffer, maybe even die, to be a Christian since Christ Himself suffered. In doing these things, one witnesses to others of being a true Christian.

But this witness seems rather personal in the sense that Kierkegaard does not mention an active concern for other people. Francis, on the other hand, includes a more

relational aspect to being Christian. He says that “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor...”³⁸ If one fails to hear the cry of the poor, then one fails to be a Christian. He reiterates this sentiment when he says that “all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples.”³⁹ For Francis, it is imperative that thought, even good and transformational thought, must be turned into real action among the lowliest of people.

Added to this required relational aspect with people articulated by Francis is another difference between him and Kierkegaard, namely the question: *What can be learned from other human beings?* Kierkegaard believes that one could learn much from an exemplar, an exemplar being someone who strives to live as an ideal Christian. Indeed, Kierkegaard puts much emphasis on this ideal, probably in reaction to the fact that he believes society has lost the sense of the ideal due to the fact that only an approximation of the ideal has become the new standard or new ideal. And, with each subsequent approximation, a new, lower ideal is set, a process that he believes continues to the point where the pure ideal is lost. The cure, therefore, Kierkegaard believes, is “to reclaim Christianity, [by which] one needs to reinsert the ideal.”⁴⁰

One can draw a few conclusions from this exposition of Kierkegaard’s concept of the ideal. One is that the ideal is such a high standard to reach that few people reach it. This could be evidenced by the fact Kierkegaard did not consider himself a Christian even though he considered himself as the apostle to Christendom. A second conclusion is that one could not learn about Christ from

someone who is far away from the ideal. Indeed, it seems as though Kierkegaard believes that one had to perfect oneself, or reach near perfection, before one could be an exemplar for others. Finally, a third conclusion is that transformation of the world is dependent upon each person individually being the perfect or near perfect image of Christ.

Francis, on the other hand, affirms that the image (*eikon* in Greek) and likeness (*homoiousios* in Greek) of God can be found in all people. He says that “closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.”⁴¹ Therefore, *one cannot discount anyone*, even those whom one perceives to be sinners living less than the ideal. Through them, one can learn about God. Moreover, by loving them, one can learn something about God, for “Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God; indeed one who does not love others...does not know God.” And the same holds true for non-Christians as Francis said that we need to have an “openness in truth and in love...with the followers of non-Christian religions...”⁴² Clearly, even by engaging with non-Christians, one can learn about Christian virtues such as justice and peace. Thus, for Francis, encounters with all human beings is an opportunity to encounter and learn about God, not just Kierkegaard’s perfected ones.

Also unlike Kierkegaard, Francis does not believe that one has to “get it right” with God or with the Church first—as if the Church is the sole arbiter of any vertical connection. For Francis, *even the life of an atheist, a Marxist, or a gay man can point to God or can effectively communicate something essential of Christ to one who is not an atheist, not a Marxist, or not a gay man.*

There are further differences to note between Kierkegaard and Francis as well. While they both believe that transformation of the world will come collectively, Kierkegaard seems more individualistic while Francis seems more communitarian. For Kierkegaard, only when each individual becomes a “perfect Christ” will the world be transformed. But Francis does not believe that transformation of the world is so reliant on each individual being the perfect or near perfect Christ. Instead, while Francis believes it is important for all to strive for the ideal, he does not believe that one has to actually reach the ideal to make any difference. Indeed, in his thought, even though a person is imperfect, this person is still a part of a community of people who are all imperfect, and together this collaboration of imperfect individuals builds up a community in which the collective strengths of each individual outweighs any individual imperfections. In this way, the community of individuals builds up a “perfect” image of Christ.

The call to live an authentic Christianity is clearly a message most importantly held by both Søren Kierkegaard and Pope Francis. Both agree that Christianity is about *being* and not simply *knowing*. However, their guidelines for the communication of this Christian existence or *being* differ from one another. This paper has pointed to some of the similarities and differences in their approaches. The author hopes that further investigation in this area produces more fruit. There is much to learn from both approaches and each approach is valuable and contributes considerably to learning how to live as the *eikon* and *homoiousios* of Christ.

Notes:

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments: Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1985; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). Originally, the name Johannes Climacus was not in the title, but was the pseudonym by which Kierkegaard masked his identity

² Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World], Vatican Website, November 26, 2013, sec. 231, accessed November 29, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost-exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap20131124-evangelii-gaudiiumen.html.

³ *Ibid.*, sec. 233.

⁴ Bill Cahoy, "Kierkegaard" (Christology class lecture, St. John's School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, MN, November 18, 2013).

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, 60.

⁶ This is Søren Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Socratic model which may seem to differ from the conventional appreciation Socratic thought advanced by Plato and Xenophon.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

²¹ Ibid., 17.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 62.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

²⁶ *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 229.

²⁷ Ibid., cf. Eph 2:14.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., cf. Col 1:20.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, 65.

³¹ Francis seems to support the notion that the paideia was transferred through recapitulation. The idea that according to Irenaeus, Christ as the second Adam, redeemed us by going over again the events in history where the first Adam lost his way. Where the first Adam failed, Christ succeeded and saved humankind. Similar to Irenaeus' thought, Francis has also hinted at Athanasius. The Word spent a whole human lifetime accomplishing works and signs that made the knowledge of God visible. Precisely because Jesus lived, suffered, died, and rose from the dead for us, humanity was thus given a blueprint for how to act. Not only was Christ therefore redeemed, but he also redeemed humankind.

³² Cahoy, "Kierkegaard" (lecture), see note 4.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, 65.

³⁴ Ibid., 101.

³⁵ *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 187.

³⁶ Ibid., sec. 187, cf. 1 Jn 3:17.

³⁷ Ibid., sec. 37.

³⁸ Ibid., sec. 187.

³⁹ Ibid., sec. 216.

⁴⁰ Cahoy, “Kierkegaard” (Lecture), see note 4.

⁴¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est* (25 December 2005), 16; AAS 98 (2006), 230 quoted in Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 272.

⁴² *Evangelii gaudium*, sec 250.