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KIERKEGAARD'S RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS AS A BASIS FOR A DIALOGUE AMONG RELIGIONS

AESTHETIC UTOPIA¹

Even if Western philosophy has always reflected on beauty and on art, aesthetics is a modern discipline. Aesthetics was born in the moment that three philosophical threads – which had had until then a more or less independent life – were unified: philosophy of beauty, philosophy of art, philosophy of sensibility or perception. We can even give the date of its birth: 1735, when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, at the age of 21, published his *Reflections on Poetry*. He identifies beauty with the perfection of sensible knowledge and the perfection of sensible knowledge with poetry or art in general. And at the end of his work, Baumgarten asks himself which name this science must have. He returns to the traditional distinction between *aisthetá* and *noetá*, which is Greek for „sensible things” and „thought things.” Since the name of the science of „thought things” is logic, the name of the science of „sensible things” must be *episteme aisthetike*, aesthetical science, or just aesthetics.

If we ask *why* aesthetics was born in the 18th century, we can answer with the German philosopher Odo Marquard:² from its birth until now aesthetics has functioned as fundamental philosophy in Western continental philosophy; aesthetics has taken the place that once was occupied by metaphysics. The turning point here is Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* published in 1790. The point of departure is the modern world, the world of emancipated and conflicting interests, the world described by Hobbes, where every human being is enemy to every human being and every interest is enemy to every interest. Is there a possibility of salvation in this conflicting world? The first

¹ This article is the written version of a lecture given at a Kierkegaard Conference organized by the Cultural Research Bureau and the International Center for Dialogue Among Civilizations on May 4, 2004 in Tehran, Iran.

² Odo Marquard, *Aesthetica und Anaesthetica*, Paderborn: Schöningh, pp. 20-34.

candidate to try to end the continuous war of everyone against everyone was scientific, experimental reason. But Kant showed in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that scientific reason is unable to think reality as a whole and therefore cannot and must not be the answer to the human need for salvation. Scientific reason is an impotent reason, and Kant's critique is still valid today.

The second candidate was moral reason, the kind of moral reason which commands one to treat every human being as an end and not as an instrument for one's own interests. You must behave *as if* you are part of a „kingdom of purposes,“ where everyone acts on the basis of moral reason. But also this reason shows itself to be impotent since moral reason cannot think the conditions of its own realization, cannot even guarantee that moral action can have moral effects in the world.

In light of the failure of both scientific and moral reason to answer the human need of salvation in a world of conflict, Kant, according to Marquard's reading, appeals to aesthetic reason. The faculty of aesthetic judgment – i.e., the faculty of judging the beauty of an object – can offer, if not the realization of the moral law, at least the symbolization of the good (cf. § 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*). Judgment is the only human faculty that can give sensible form to the ethical command in the form of aesthetic exhibition. If culture is, in Kantian terms, the moral and political capacity to realize reason's highest commands, this capacity is awakened and symbolized by beauty and the capacity to judge beauty. Friedrich Schiller thus goes just one step further in the same direction: the moral and political education of a human being must be an aesthetic education.

Marquard thus asks whether aesthetic reason is an *instrument* or a *surrogate* for moral and political reason. Considered as an instrument, aesthetic reason became a surrogate for moral and political reason as early as Schiller and then later for Romanticism. Faced with the impossibility of realizing the good in the world through art, the Romantic withdraws from the world: his attitude towards the world becomes *irony*.

2. KIERKEGAARD'S CRITIQUE OF AESTHETICS

And so we arrive at Søren Kierkegaard. In Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Irony*, published in 1841, we find one of the more radical critiques of modern irony. He analyzes irony as „the condition for every artistic work.“³ Irony, writes Kierkegaard, wants to be free of reality, of the surrounding world, of the others and even of its own works. „*Its reality is only possibility*,“⁴ the pure possibility of producing, of creating a new world. This means that irony can always distance itself from the existing world in order to play with the infinite possibilities that it believes it masters. And its reality is something unreal, since its reality, as just quoted, are precisely the infinite possibilities. „For the ironist, everything is possible.“⁵

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (hereafter *CI*), in *Kierkegaard's Writings* (hereafter *KW*), trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, vol. I-XXVI, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978-98, vol. II, p. 324.

⁴ *CI*, p. 279.

⁵ *CI*, p. 282.

How can irony concretize its infinite power, given that every single artistic product, as single and definite, would negate the power as infinite? How can the infinity which he or she is, be realized? The only way is to transform his or her life in a work of art. Single works of art are not enough, only life as a whole, as infinite, can express the infinitude of that creating power. He or she has to „live poetically”,⁶ to poetically create his or her own life. As a matter of fact, this is still the imperative in our Western world: to be creative, to free the creative power which is in ourselves; if possible all life must be transformed into a creative act. And since life is finite, like every work of art, it cannot express the creative power either; hence, it is life, the artist’s own life, that must be negated and destroyed.

In *Either/Or*, published in 1843, Kierkegaard shows that it is not only the artist or the poet who tries to create his or her life. In fact, it is also the philosopher of art, the so-called „aesthete,” that shares with the poet the aim of creating reality. This implies that the difference between the poet and the philosopher vanishes. „What is it to be poet? It is to have one’s personal life, one’s actuality, in categories completely different from those of one’s poetical production, to be related to the ideal only in imagination [...] In this sense all modern thinkers [...] are poets.”⁷

Thus, Kierkegaard’s critique of the aesthetic life is at the same time a critique of the function of art and a critique of aesthetics as the fundamental philosophy which tries to solve the questions unsolved by scientific and moral reason.

The core of Kierkegaard’s critique of aesthetics is directed against the concept of autonomy. For Kant, the presupposition for the birth of aesthetics was the demonstration that the aesthetic faculty is independent from both cognitive intellect and moral reason. Only as independent and autonomous could aesthetic reason succeed where scientific and moral reason failed. In the second part of *Either/Or*, however, the pseudonym Judge William claims: „When you [the aesthete] define the beautiful as that which has its teleology within itself and give as examples a girl, or nature, or a work of art, I can come to no other judgment than that all the talk about all this having its teleology within itself is an illusion.”⁸ Kierkegaard shows how this apparent autonomy ends always in a heteronomy, in a dependence on something other.

And if the aesthete and the artist want to stick to their aim of living poetically, their lives end in despair. Since despair is untruth, is sin, the very act of living poetically is sin. Living poetically and producing art is – as a new pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, defines it – a „sickness unto death,” an eternal dying without dying.

Poetry is not a way of getting rid of one’s own despair, but only a way of amplifying and reproducing it. This is what we read, for example, in the writing *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air*: „The poem is this echo of [the poet’s] pain, because a scream is not a poem at all, but the interminable echoing of the scream in himself is the poem.”⁹ Poetry is thus unable to reach the other, to produce real and free communica-

⁶ *CI*, p. 280.

⁷ *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers* (hereafter *JP*), ed. and trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, vol. 1-7, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1967-78, no. 6300.

⁸ *Either/Or. Part II*, in *KW*, vol. IV, p. 274.

⁹ *KW*, vol. XVIII, p. 18.

tion, which is always openness. On the contrary, poetry is a way of expressing „closure” towards the other, it is an unfree communication that ends in a form domination of the one human being over the other.

According to Martin Heidegger „art is truth setting itself to work,” art is the becoming and happening of truth. Using the same language, we can say that for Kierkegaard, art is the opposite, it is becoming and happening of untruth, it is *untruth setting itself to work*. Does this mean the end of aesthetics? Does it mean the end of art? Not really; this means rather the end of aesthetics as fundamental philosophy, the end of the aesthetic utopia, the end of the utopia of the redeeming power of art.

3. PERCEPTION OF FAITH

The question that follows from this is: what is the standpoint from which Kierkegaard’s critique of aesthetics is achieved? Traditionally Kierkegaard’s philosophy is depicted as a succession of four stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious and the Christian stage; any particular successive stage is said to be higher than the preceding one and to replace the preceding one. Yet there is a persistence of both an ethic and an aesthetic in the Christian stage. I would like to focus on the aesthetic element in the Christian stage and, in the end, see if this Christian aesthetic can be used outside a Christian context.

In the *Philosophical Fragments*, published in 1844 under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard differentiates between a Socratic and a Christian model of how truth can be learned. In the Socratic prototype, truth is learned through recollection, that is, the teacher is merely an occasion to help the disciple remember truth. Thus the disciple has already truth within him- or herself. We can think for example to Plato’s *Meno*, where a slave remembers a mathematical theorem.

In the Christian model, according to Kierkegaard, the disciple is not just in an untrue state from which he or she can be awakened by remembering the truth, the disciple is untruth itself. Not only is he or she untruth, but the disciple is also unable to *recognize* the truth, since he or she lacks the *condition* for understanding the truth. No teacher can transform him or her, since he or she does not possess the condition for receiving the truth as truth; he or she must be recreated. This is what no human being is capable of doing; only God can do it, argues Kierkegaard. Even the *consciousness* of being untruth cannot arise from the pupil alone; even that consciousness must come from God.

This is what no human understanding can understand, since it is something contradictory. For instance, I cannot say „I am untruth,” without contradicting myself, because if I am really and completely untruth, I cannot even state the true sentence „I am untruth.” If I can say „I am untruth,” I have already demonstrated that I am *not* completely untruth. The consequence is that the human understanding cannot grasp the fact that it is absolutely different from the truth; it cannot grasp the absolute difference between truth and untruth. In fact, the understanding, in order to understand, *must* reduce the absolute difference to a *relative* difference, *must* make the absolutely different term similar in part to the other term it should absolutely differ from. Relating two absolutely

different terms is already to relate them on the basis of something in common. But in this case, the absolute difference is no longer absolute difference.

Facing absolute difference is *impossible* for the understanding. The impossible offends the understanding, it is an *offence* for the understanding, offence in the sense that it is a stumbling-block for the understanding. The category of offence is thus a key notion in Kierkegaard's reconstruction of Christianity. And if God is the absolute difference, facing God, as the absolute difference, is an offence for the understanding. At the same time facing myself as absolute untruth is an offence for the understanding.

Facing God is facing God's love, that love through which God relates to the human being. If, however, God wants to reveal himself *as he is*, he must reveal himself *as absolute difference*; that is, God cannot make himself understandable, otherwise he would reveal himself as non-God, as the non-absolutely different. The consequence is that, according to Kierkegaard, *God's love must be an offence for the understanding*.

The double offence of God's love is this: first, he reveals himself as he is, i.e., as absolutely different, and this implies revealing the human being as a sinner; second, he removes the absolute difference in absolute equality, because love cannot subsist between unequal persons. Love between unequal is domination, not love. Love requires the equality of two partners. And love, writes Kierkegaard/Climacus, is both the cause and the aim of God's revelation.¹⁰

The organ that makes it possible for the human being to face God is not the understanding, it is faith. In other words, faith is the gift, the condition for receiving the truth. Faith is not the truth itself, but the *condition* for receiving God's love, the gift for receiving the gift.

Yet faith is not a knowledge, it is not an act of will. So what is faith? Kierkegaard/Climacus writes: to receive the condition means to „see [God's] glory with the eyes of faith.”¹¹ That is, faith is to *see* God's glory. And in a sermon from the same time of the *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard affirms that faith has eyes and ears which are different from earthly eyes and ears. In fact, the current perception would make God understandable, knowable. But, even if God is not knowable, even if God is not sensible, faith has still a perception, an *aisthesis*, that is different from earthly perception. The object of this perception, Christ, is a perceptive shape, a perceptive Gestalt called „the wondrous” or „the wonder.”¹²

In Kierkegaard, to perceive God's glory means to *recognize* Christ as God, to perceive Christ as God. Still, this perception of faith *offends* earthly eyes, earthly perception. Still, the condition of possibility of faith is offence, an offence that can be removed only in faith and only as long as faith is present. It is always possible to be offended again and to leave faith. That is, faith does not remove the very *possibility* of offence as such. Faith must choose again and again not to be offended.

Furthermore, faith implies making contemporary something which is not contemporary. „Only the contemporary is actuality for me,” writes the pseudonym Anti-

¹⁰ “Out of love [...] the god must be eternally resolved in this way, but just as his love is the basis, so also must love be the goal”, *Philosophical Fragments* (hereafter *PF*), in *KW*, vol. VII, p. 25.

¹¹ *PF*, p. 70.

¹² *JP*, no. 3916, and *PF*, p. 36.

Climacus. „Thus”, he continues, „a human being is able to become contemporary only with the time in which he is living – and then with one more, with Christ’s life upon earth, for Christ’s life upon earth, the sacred history stands alone by itself, outside history.”¹³ To be contemporary with something means to perceive it. And, again, there is the perception of the historical, and the perception of something other which, although it once happened, is not historical in the meaning of something past; it is *outside* history. In order to perceive that which is outside history, imagination can perform a merely preparatory role since imagination is related only to historical events. According to Kierkegaard, imagination can represent the *unhistorical* object only in a mitigated and idealized form. Actually the object that must be perceived in faith cannot be represented or reproduced, like every historical fact (for example the suffering of Christ is not representable according to Kierkegaard). Its perception requires the unity of the perceiver and the perceived and, in this sense, it is a perception without object and without subject. The perceived is not a historical figure, but a kind of absolute figure.

In summary: religious aesthetics thus signifies a discourse on the perception of faith, discourse on faith as perception. Religious aesthetics has an essential relation to offence: the offence constituted by the revelation of God’s love.

I mentioned at the beginning three threads of thought which, unified, gave birth to aesthetics, namely, philosophy of perception, philosophy of beauty, philosophy of art. In religious aesthetics we still have three threads which are combined: instead of earthly perception, we have faith’s perception; instead of beauty, we have the wondrous; and instead of artistic figures, we have the absolute figure.

4. BEYOND TOLERANCE

In Kierkegaard, the notion of the perception of faith is used only in the case of Christ. But can this concept be used outside Christianity? Can this religious aesthetics be the basis of a philosophy of religion? I will offer two suggestions for answering these questions affirmatively.

The first hint is in the direction of a comparative philosophy of religion. I am not competent in Iranian philosophy, but I will venture nonetheless a possible parallel. I have in mind the notion of *mundus imaginalis* developed by Henry Corbin in his translations and commentary on the works of many Iranian philosophers.¹⁴ And I am thinking above all of Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî and his notion of a sensory perception of the sovrasensory.¹⁵ There seem of course to be many differences; in Kierkegaard there is no *intermediate* world between the intelligible and the sensible world as in Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî, and the second perception cannot be the point of departure for a higher knowledge, as in Mollâ Sadrâ. But we can still find a basis for dialogue which can lead to unexpected results.

¹³ *Practice in Christianity*, in *KW*, vol. XX, p. 64.

¹⁴ Cf. for example Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth. From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, trans. by Nancy Pearson, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

¹⁵ Cf. Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî, *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques*, ed. and trans. by Henry Corbin, Paris: Verdier, 1988.

There is, however, a more radical problem which concerns all of us. And it is how to live in a world where there are many religions that claim to be the truth. Historically, from Locke to Voltaire, Western philosophy has elaborated the principle of tolerance. This principle leads to the right for each individual to follow his or her own religion. But I think this is insufficient. It seems to me that we are in need of another principle. The tolerant believer, even if he or she loves believers in other religions, will still believe that his or her own religion is the truth insofar as he or she is a true believer. Consequently other religions are viewed as untruth, or viewed as only partly true – and of course the part that is true is the part similar to her or his own religion. Even for the most tolerant believer, from the point of view of the truth of the religion he or she professes, the difference of religions will be an offence. The alternative seems to be to abandon the principle of a true religion and to develop a kind of relativism. But again, this relativism will be either a form of agnosticism, which is a form of disbelief, or it will be a kind of syncretism, which is a kind of Esperanto of religions. And this religious Esperanto will then be the true religion and the problem will reappear. The religious Esperanto will be the true religion and the others will be only partly true. Even if I renounce the concept of truth and true religion, I can still believe in the superiority of my religion, perhaps because my religion does not need the concept of truth. This is the case in the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo, for example, when he reflects on Christianity as a post-modern and post-metaphysical religion.¹⁶

Even if there are many languages, we all agree that there is no true language, and yet each one of us keeps on speaking his or her own language, the language spoken by the community he or she is a member of. In the case of religion, however, it is not so easy. Belonging to a religion cannot just be a part of a cultural identity.

The problem remains: how to be a believer while not believing in the superiority of my own religion and my own culture?

I noted that a plurality of religions is an *offence* for the believer. In Kierkegaard, as noted, offence is the condition of the possibility of faith. Faith must go through the possibility of offence, but it can never remove offence as *possibility*. Faith implies that one must annihilate the *actual* possibility of offence again and again, without removing the possibility of offence *as such*. The possibility of offence means facing the absolute other; it means facing something that contradicts logical principles.

Our world is different from the 19th century Copenhagen in which Kierkegaard lived. Kierkegaard's problem was above all the relation of Christianity to itself rather than the relation of Christianity to other religions. Our crucial question is, on the contrary, the relation among religions, a crucial question for both believers and non-believers. However, it is my conviction that it is possible to use Kierkegaard's categories of offence and the absolute difference in this new context.

The new offence, which the believers of the 21st century are confronted with, is this: a plurality of religions for a person who believes in the truth of one religion. This is our absolute other: for me, the believer, the absolute other has the face of one who believes in another religion. As for Kierkegaard's notion of offence the alternative is this: I can

¹⁶ Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, transl. by L. D'Isanto and D. Webb, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, and *After Christianity*, transl. by L. D'Isanto, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

be offended by the other believer and try to convert him or her, or I can believe in him/her. What does it mean to believe in another believer? It means not only to tolerate the other believer, but to believe in this *further contradiction*: to believe in my truth without negating her/his truth; to believe in his/her truth without negating my truth; to believe in our truth without believing in a superior truth that substitutes both our religions with a third and higher truth. This is the logical contradiction we must believe in.

Aesthetics as philosophy of religion – whose roots I tried to find in Kierkegaard – is a discourse on perceiving the absolute other. And perceiving the absolute other means today that as a believer in the *truth* of my religion, I must not only tolerate your religion, but perceive the *truth* of your religion, without converting you to my religion and without being converted to yours. It seems to be an impossible task: on the one hand, being faithful to my belief as the truth, and on the other hand – and in a contradictory way – believing in your being in truth. This is the impossible we must face; this is the impossible we must perceive and believe.