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„I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN” - A “‘SUBLIME LIE’”?
OR:
„WITHOUT AUTHORITY”,
PLAYING DESDEMONA TO CHRISTENDOM’S
OTHELLO

The attack on the Church which marked Søren Kierkegaard’s final year has always been a stumbling block. This attack was undeniably of great importance and equally undeniably has been a source of considerable embarrassment. Scholars in general and theologians in particular have avoided the issue like the plague. Nonetheless it is important to keep our eye on Kierkegaard’s concluding polemic: His exit, like that of his mentor Socrates, casts a decisively important retrospective light of urgency and radicality upon all his previous achievements.

Still, it is difficult not to be troubled, in particular, by what is perhaps the core pronouncement of Kierkegaard’s attack, namely his repeated insistence that „I am not a Christian.” How are we to understand this assertion? Just because it may make us uncomfortable does not mean that it is permissible to go „behind” his statement, to cajole Kierkegaard, as it were, to get him to confirm that, „After all, *unter uns*, we all know that you ‘really’ are a Christian, right? - that you only said those outrageous things to tease the Danish bourgeoisie, but that ‘really’ you are a Christian, right? (nudge, nudge, wink, wink).” Any attempt to „save” Kierkegaard in this manner is clearly impermissible. Kierkegaard’s statement must be allowed to stand in all its starkness and radicality.

And yet, suppose Kierkegaard’s statement was a lie?

If one cannot speak with „authority” about the most important things, we know that one tactic is to use pseudonyms. And during much of Kierkegaard’s career he did just this. But after the publication of *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* (Concluding Unscientific Postscript) in 1846, with the exception of two relatively minor works - *Tvende ethisk-religieuse Smaa-Ajhandlinger* (1849; Two Minor Ethical-Religious Essays) and the essay on the actress Johanne Luise Heiberg, „Krisen og en Krise i en Skuespillerindes Liv” (1848; The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress) - Kierkegaard wrote only in his own name and in the name of the transparent pseudonym Anti-Cli-

macus, a pseudonym-mity which was in any case revoked during the heat of his attack on the Church.

We will return to the revocation of the Anti-Climacus pseudonym later, but for now we will keep attention focused on the fact that after February 1846 Kierkegaard wrote almost exclusively in his own name. So the question immediately arises: If one feels oneself unable to speak with authority on the most important things, and if one has renounced pseudonymity, what then? Some, starting with Peter-Christian Kierkegaard in his funeral eulogy of his younger brother, have argued that even when Kierkegaard wrote in his own name it was in effect just another pseudonym. But we ought to reject this sort of reasoning as destructive both of the notion of the pseudonym and of the name; it plunges us into the infinite night of so-called postmodernity and its inherently self-contradictory notion of „absolute relativity.”

The problem remains: How do we construe the statement, „I am not a Christian”?

Toward the end of William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, as Desdemona is dying at the hands of her husband, a third party, Emilia, enters the room, and the following exchange ensues:

Emilia. O, who hath done this deed?

Desdemona. Nobody. I myself Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord.

O, Farewell!

Othello. Why, how should she be murdered?

Emilia. Alas, who knows?

Othello. Your heard her say herself it was not I.

Emilia. She said so. I must needs report a truth.

Othello. She’s like a liar gone to burning hell: ‘Twas I that killed her.

Emilia. O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil!¹

A lie is a statement the teller knows to be untrue, told with the purpose of deceiving the hearer. By this criterion Desdemona’s statement is certainly a lie. But there are lies and there are lies. There are lies which are told to gain some advantage for the teller, but there are also lies which are told for the sake of the hearer or of a third party. Here Desdemona is lying, but certainly not for her own advantage. She lies to protect the husband she loves, a man gone mad.

Desdemona’s example has not been seized out of the air, at random. In 1799, the German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi defended his understanding of Christianity in a letter to Johann Gottlieb Fichte in which he attacked the latter’s notion of the ego as the only starting point for knowledge of the True:

By the True, I understand something *prior to* and *beyond* knowledge. ...

With one’s reason a person is not given a capacity for *knowledge* of the True.

On the contrary, one is given only the feeling [Gefühl] and the consciousness of one’s *ignorance*: a *presentiment* [„*Ahndung*,” i.e., *Ahnung*] of the True.

Just as surely as I possess reason, with this human reason of mine I do

¹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 5, Scene 2, lines 126- 134.

not possess the Good and the True in their entirety. And just as certainly as I do *not* possess these things - and *know* I do not possess them - with that same certainty I *know* that there is a *higher* Being, and that I have my origin in Him. In connection with this, the watchword for myself and for my reason is not „I.” On the contrary, it is „More than I! Better than I! - someone quite *Other*.”

I do not, and I *may* not exist, if *He* does not exist! I myself, indeed, cannot be the highest being for myself. - So my reason teaches me instinctively: *God*. That which is *highest* in me points with irresistible force to a supremely high Being [*ein Allerhöchstes*] above and beyond me - indeed to believe in what is in its concept *impossible* - within me, beyond me, from love and through love.

... [A]s soon as I assume that there is no connection to higher Being of Truth, everything I have called good, beautiful, and holy is only destructive to my spirit, is only a chimera [*Unding*] that tears my heart from my breast. ...

So I admit that I do not know that which *in itself* is *Good* [*das an sich Gute*] or that which *in itself* is *True*, that I only have a distant *presentiment* of it. I declare that it offends me when someone wishes to force upon me *the Will to Nothing* [*den Willen der Nichts*] - this hollow shell of independence and freedom in absolute unconditionality - and then, when I struggle against this, to be accused of atheism, of true and genuine *godlessness*.

Yes, I am an atheist and a godless person, a person whom those who will the *Will to Nothing* find revolting. I will lie like *Desdemona* lied when dying, lie and deceive like *Pylades* when he presented himself as Orestes. ... I am this godless person, and therefore I mock the philosophy which calls me godless. I mock it and its highest Being because I know, with the holiest conscience I have, ... that the true majesty of a human being, the seal of one's worth, is one's godly nature.

... *To be in unison with oneself* [*Einstimmigkeit des Menschen mit sich selbst*], *lasting unity*, is the highest notion. ... But this unity is not the *Being*, not the *True*. This unity itself, in itself, is merely void, deserted, and empty. Nor can its laws become the heart of a person and truly elevate one above oneself. ... Transcendental philosophy may not rip this heart out of one's breast and put in its place *merely* a sheer instinct of *I-ness*. I will not permit myself to be freed from the dependence of *Love* to find happiness only in *Pride*. - If the highest thing I can think of or contemplate is my unalloyed, empty, naked, sheer „I,” with its independence and freedom, then thoughtful self-contemplation and reasonableness are a curse to me - I damn my existence.²

We should pay special attention to Jacobi's praise of *Desdemona*'s lying and, in connection with this, to Jacobi's proud acceptance of the epithets „*atheist*” and „*godless*”. Jacobi gives lying and atheism strikingly positive connotations: It is better to lie like *Desdemona*, to be an atheist - as Jacobi says he has been accused of being - than to go along with Fichte's egocentric pantheism. Some lies are worth telling.

² „Jacobi an Fichte.” In: *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's Werke*. 3. Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer, 1816; rpt. Friedrich Roth and Friedrich Köppen, eds. Damlstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968, 32-41. All translations in this essay are by the present author.

Frygt og Bæven (Fear and Trembling) was published in October 1843. In an article written shortly thereafter and published on January 1, 1844, Bishop Mynster, writing under his semi-transparent pseudonym „Kts.,” had warm, if qualified praise for Kierkegaard’s book. and he specifically linked it to Jacobi’s praise of Desdemona’s lying:

I have also read the remarkable book *Fear and Trembling*, and despite whatever lacks I may note in the book, it is certainly not lacking in a deep religious foundation, nor in a spirit which is capable of attending to life’s most important problems. In a lively fashion, it has reminded me of the famous passage in Jacobi: „Yes, I am an atheist and a godless person, a person whom those who will the *Will to Nothing* find revolting. I will lie like *Desdemona* lied when dying, lie and deceive like *Pylades* when he presented himself as *Orestes*, etc.” (*Jacobi to Fichte*, 32). The book is in no way an imitation or an echo of Jacobi, however. But why does the book have the title *Fear and Trembling*? Because its author has vividly apprehended, has deeply felt, has expressed with the entire force of language the terror with which a person’s soul is gripped when he is confronted with a task which contains a challenge from which he dare not shrink - a confrontation in which a person’s understanding remains unable to dispel the apparent fact that the challenge, *seems* to call him away from the eternal order to which every being must submit.³

Mynster’s reference to Desdemona and Jacobi was not lost on Kierkegaard. Whether or not it was Mynster who directed Kierkegaard’s attention to this particular passage in Jacobi, it certainly seems to have struck a sympathetic chord. From his university education and particularly from Hans L. Martensen’s lectures, during the academic year 1838-39, on the history of philosophy from Kant to Hegel, Kierkegaard had at least a passing acquaintance with Jacobi. Among Kierkegaard’s papers there is a set of notes on Martensen’s lectures, a fair copy written in a hand other than Kierkegaard’s. It cannot be confirmed with certainty that they are a copyist’s version of Kierkegaard’s own notes, though this seems likely. In any case the notes make fascinating reading and contain a number of passages, descriptive of Jacobi, which could easily be applied to Kierkegaard himself. Still, however suggestive these notes on Jacobi may be, it must be remembered that they are notes on what Martensen said in his lectures and not necessarily on Kierkegaard’s own thoughts. But there is one possible exception: In the middle of summarizing Martensen’s remarks on Jacobi, the narrative pauses and there is an exhortation set off from the rest of the text by slashes and colons: „Read him”!⁴

When he was in Berlin in the winter of 1841-42, Kierkegaard once again heard Jacobi mentioned in a lecture series, this time by Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, but there is no concrete evidence that Kierkegaard did much to make good on any intention of reading Jacobi before he encountered Mynster’s review in January 1844. And it was precisely in 1844 that Kierkegaard became preoccupied with reading Jacobi. (As an

³ „Kts” (J.P. Mynster), „Kirkelig Polemik.” In: *Intelligensblade, udgivne af J.L. Heiherg*, 41-42 (January 1), 1844, 105-06. Mynster cites the wrong page number from Jacobi. The passage in question is from page 37, not page 32.

aside, particular-ly in view of how Kierkegaard's life ended, we should note the irony in the fact that it was Martensen who first really introduced Kierkegaard to Jacobi, and Mynster who rekindled that interest.) One of the journal entries from 1844 which alludes to Jacobi is of particular interest in the present context: „However much I would like someone to share my views, do I have any right whatever to use my artistic talent to win over a person? Isn't that *deceiving* him in a way?"⁵

Not long after this, in *Stadier paa Livets Vei* (Stages on Life's Way), which he wrote in late 1844 - early 1845 and published at the end of April 1845, Kierkegaard referred expli-citly to Jacobi's mention of Desdemona: „Desdemona is great because of her 'sublime lie' [ophøiede Løgn]. We admire her, we must admire her."⁶ And yet there is something strange here. Neither Jacobi's original passage nor Mynster's discussion of it makes any reference to a „sublime lie" but Kierkegaard nonetheless cites the phrase in quotation marks.

⁴ The notes on Martensen's lectures are published in Pap II C 25 (1838-39), printed in Pap XII 280-331; Jacobi is discussed on pp. 301-04. The exhortation to „read Jacobi" appears near the beginning of the summary of Martensen's remarks on Jacobi. The context is illuminating:

[Jacobi]

Jacobi said that the Truth is to be grasped by faith. Although faith also existed for Kant and Fichte, it was only something to fill the lacunae which appeared - while Jacobi said that faith was what was primary. His standpoint is that of reflection, however. He cannot resolve the opposition between faith and knowledge, while the others disputed about thought and being. J. testifies to what he has experienced in his innermost soul. His presentation is beautifully belletristic. But he has no system, only individual thoughts in wonderful variation, which he pours forth out of his innermost soul. He was really a philosophical preacher, and it is therefore not possible to depict the life which found expression in his writings; we can only depict the basic elements /: **Read him!** :/ (301).

Other interesting excerpts from these notes follow below:

For Jacobi, the Ding a.s. exists and cannot be grasped by the understanding, but by means of faith, which grasps the thing itself, while reflection only talks *about* the thing. Therefore all philosophy exists only at *second hand*. He has thus posited the *immediate religion consciousness* subsequently grasped by Schleiermacher. - Fichte says that the Beautiful, etc. and God exist only for the person who knows them, while Jacobi says that the Truth does not need us or need to be known by us, but that we cannot do without it (301).

He [Jacobi] says, „A God who can be known is no God", „to know Him in a purely scientific fashion is to annihilate Him" etc.; also „all knowledge has an interest in the proposition that no God exists" (302).

His [Jacobi's] relation to Xstnity: ... he sometimes compares Xstus with Socrates and Fenelon. ... Truly religious being is to have no form" (303).

He [Jacobi] himself was half a philosopher, half a believer (304).

We know that Kierkegaard owned Jacobi's collected works (in the edition referred to in note 2), but it is not known when he purchased them. It is of interest to note that after Kierkegaard's death his good friend and distant relative Hans Brøchner purchased his edition of Jacobi at the auction of Kierkegaard's library. In his recollections about Kierkegaard, Brøchner tells us, with respect to another book he purchased at that auction, that he bought it as a keepsake to remind him of Søren Kierkegaard (see Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996, 226). It is at any rate plausible that Brøchner purchased the Jacobi edition precisely because he knew it had been of special significance to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's copy of Jacobi's works is now in the collection of the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

⁵ Pap V A 47; emphasis added.

⁶ *Stages on Life's Way*. In SV I; hereafter SV I VI, 136 (KW 11, 142).

Moreover, Kierkegaard's peculiar preoccupation with Jacobi and Desdemona's „sublime lie” was no passing fancy. In the *Postscript*, written immediately after the publication of *Stages on Life's Way* (late April - late December 1845) and published at the end of February 1846, Kierkegaard again alludes to the Jacobi-Desdemona passage, this time referring explicitly to Mynster's review of *Fear and Trembling*:

In my view, it is appropriate to call this book „a sublime lie” [*eine erhabene Lüge*] as the firm Kts [Mynster] did when recalling Jacobi and Desdemona, inasmuch as the term [„sublime lie”] itself contains a contradiction. The use of the opposite form is absolutely necessary in every production in these spheres. In the form of direct communication - of bellowing -, fear and trembling are insignificant because direct communication means precisely that the direction is outward, on the order of yelling - not inward, into the abyss of inwardness. where „fear and trembling” first become terrifying, where what is expressed can only exist in a *deceptive* form.⁷

This time, Kierkegaard attributes the phrase „sublime lie” to Mynster (though he now cites it in German rather than in Danish, as he had done *Stages on Life's Way*). The fact is, however, that Mynster does not use the expression at all, in either language, and that, as noted, „sublime lie” is not to be found in Jacobi either. It is clear that Kierkegaard has appropriated the term for his own use and has filled it with his own meaning: To recall Kierkegaard's previously cited journal entry from 1844, a „sublime lie” means „*deceiving a person, in a way.*” A sublime lie is a form of indirect communication. In its very concept it contains an internal contradiction between *sublimity* and *apparent truth value*; this contradiction is required when the most important things must be communicated - when, as Kierkegaard writes in the *Postscript*, „what is expressed can only exist in a *deceptive* form”.⁸ Thus, if a person: 1) wishes to communicate the most important things; 2) believes that he or she is „without authority”; and 3) has renounced the use of pseudonyms - then one is compelled to be a sublime liar.

But this is not the end of the story because, as has already been noted, Kierkegaard did not entirely renounce the use of pseudonyms after 1846, inasmuch as two of his most important books, *Sygdommen til Døden* (1849; *The Sickness Unto Death*) and *Indøvelse i Christendom* (1850; *Practice in Christianity*) were of course attributed to Anti-Climacus, albeit with Kierkegaard's name on the title page as „editor.” In these books Kierkegaard was free to speak with radical strictness - to rake the established

⁷ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. SV 1 VII, 221-22 (KW 12.1, 262); emphasis added. In his autobiographical piece *Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed* (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*) (written in 1848, but published posthumously in 1859) Kierkegaard again makes favorable mention of Mynster's review of *Fear and Trembling*: see SV 1 XIII, 528.

⁸ It should be noted that it was on precisely this topic, lying, that Søren Kierkegaard's older brother Peter Christian had written his first doctoral thesis, *De Notione Atque Turpitudine Mendacii Commentatio*, which he successfully defended at the University of Göttingen in 1829. The dissertation was presented in summary form and made the subject of a very favorable review by Poul Martin Møller, professor of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen and an important influence on Kierkegaard during the latter's years at the university. P.M. Møller's review was published in *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, 7 (1832), 65-85 and was reprinted in Møller's *Efterladte Skrifter*, 5, 3rd ed. Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel. 1856. 182-201.

Church quite literally over the coals of Hell - while still of course remaining „without authority.” After all the books were not by him, but by an „ideal” authorial voice, that of Anti-Climacus, who in any case also gave his readers some respite in the „Moral” to the first part of the book, just as Kierkegaard himself provided his readers with a bit of breathing room in the book’s thrice-repeated „Editor’s Preface.”

But then, on May 16. 1855, in the heat of his battle against the Church, and just prior to transforming his campaign from a series of newspaper articles into an independently published magazine, *Øieblikket* (The Moment), Kierkegaard publicly retracted all the buffers, all the layers of insulation, in which he had packaged Anti-Climacus’ *Practice in Christianity*. Although Kierkegaard clearly included himself under his indictment of Christendom, he was saying serious and terrible things, and now he was saying them in his own name. He was neither invoking authority nor, any longer, speaking under a pseudonym.

The terrible things Kierkegaard says during the attack on the Church essentially boil down to statements of two sorts: 1) you people who call yourselves Christians are not Christians; and 2) „I am not a Christian!” These statements are combined in an article from the last issue of *The Moment* entitled „My Task”:

I am not a Christian, and unfortunately I can make it apparent that the others are not either - indeed, that they are even less so than I, because they imagine that they are, or *they lie their way* into it [being Christian]. ... The only analogy I hold before myself is Socrates. ...

So no one is going to fool me: I do not call myself a Christian. In a certain sense it seems easy enough to get rid of me, because the others are of course fellows of a completely different sort, they are true Christians. Yes, yes, so it seems. But it isn’t so, and precisely because I do *not* call myself a Christian, *it is impossible to get rid of me*. ...

And they want to say that this about me not being a Christian is a concealed form of pridea because I must certainly be what I can show the others are not. But this is a misunderstanding. *It is entirely true. I am not a Christian.*⁹

So: Was Kierkegaard telling the truth when he said, „I am not a Christian?” Kierkegaard’s claim is analogous to Socrates’ claim that he was ignorant. The statements of both figures were at the same time both true and untrue.

In Socrates’ case, measured against his notion of what true knowledge was, he was indeed right in maintaining his own ignorance. Thus he was telling the truth about his ignorance. But his fellow citizens were ignorant in a deeper sense. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that Socrates did, after all, know *something*, and something very important, namely concerning his own ignorance. So Socrates’ claim of ignorance can also be seen as a sort of lie, a lie he gave his life defending. But his fellow citizens were ignorant in a deeper sense.

In Kierkegaard’s case the claim that he was not a Christian was similarly both true and untrue. Measured against the standard of „the Christianity of the New Testament”

⁹ *The Moment*, 10. SV I XIV, 351-2; emphasis added.

as advanced in his book *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard was certainly no Christian. Kierkegaard says, in effect: „I stand under the judgment of Christianity like the rest of you. If Christianity is what ‘the Christianity of the New Testament’ says it is, then I am no Christian. I am not a Christian, but I know it. And you’re not Christians either, but you don’t know it. My only analogy is to Socrates, who was at least aware of his own ignorance. If you continue to say you are Christians, you are liars.” So Kierkegaard’s statement was no lie. But his fellow citizens were liars.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard knew that his own sense of inadequacy in relation to Christianity in fact positioned him a good deal closer to Christianity than his fellow citizens who claimed to be Christians.¹⁰ Kierkegaard said, in effect, „If Christianity is what *you* people say it is, then I am no Christian. If it is what ‘the New Testament’ says it is, then I am still no Christian. But nonetheless I am a lot closer to Christianity than you are.” So to this extent Kierkegaard was lying when he categorically denied being a Christian. But his fellow citizens were liars in a deeper sense.

Kierkegaard’s statement was a sublime lie, a statement in an ironic form, containing concealed knowledge like Socrates’ concealed knowledge that he did, after all, know *something*. Similarly, Kierkegaard’s statement was a parallel to Jacobi’s confession of atheism in the face of Fichte’s pantheism. Sometimes it is better to lie - and die - like Jacobi’s Desdemona, like Socrates, or Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard’s friend Emil Boesen reports that Kierkegaard refused the sacrament on his deathbed, because he would not accept it from a government official!¹¹ This cannot have been an easy decision for Kierkegaard. It was his hemlock, and like Socrates, Kierkegaard can be said to have chosen to die as he did for the sake of his city, in order to shock the conscience of his fellow citizens. If, in accordance with Jacobi’s prescription, Kierkegaard went to his death „a liar” like Desdemona, he did so, as she did, in order to shock the rest of us into the knowledge that our easily acquired cultural Christianity makes of us much „blackier devils” than he.

Almost 150 years later, we are still at the ground zero of Kierkegaard’s attack on the Church. Kierkegaard said to his society: „You ‘lie your way’ into Christianity. The only way to fight a lie is with a lie. Then you will never be able to get rid of me.” And to this day we have been unable to get rid of Søren Kierkegaard. He was without authority, but he was a sublime liar.*

¹⁰ See *The Moment*, 10, op. cit., 353.

¹¹ See Kirmmse, 125-6.

* Ovaj tekst, koji se na izričitu želju autora štampa u *ARHE*, prvi put je štampan u *Anthropology and Authority: Essays on Soeren Kierkegaard*, Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, pp. 129-136.