

17. This article was published in January 1886 in *The Methodist Review* with the author's name given as "A Japanese." In his article, Uchimura used the term "Yamato Damashii." Although he did not use the term "Bushido" in his *How I Became a Christian*, this eventually became one of his most favorite words.

18. Inazo Nitobe, *Bushido; The Soul of Japan*, published in 1900 by Leeds & Biddle, Philadelphia, and by Shokado, Tokyo. I quoted these sentences from *Bushido*, published by Kodansha International Ltd., 2002.

19. "Bushido and Christianity," *The Biblical Studies* 186 (January 1916), *Complete Works*, vol. 22, p. 161. Cf. John F. Howes, *Japan's Modern Prophet*, p. 236.

20. He established "Collegia Pietatis" (Schools of Piety) in 1670 and published *Pia Desideria* (Pious Desire) in 1675.

21. Robert L. Gallagher, "Zinzendorf and the Early Moravian Mission Movement," *A Faith and Learning Paper Presented to the Director of the Faith and Learning Program and the Provost, Wheaton College, In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Promotion and Tenure*, 2005.

22. Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard, A Bibliography*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton University Press, 2005.

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CAN KIERKEGAARD PREACH?

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I.

Growing up in a Pentecostal Christian subculture in the American Southeast, I have often heard the phrase: "That can preach." This idiomatic sentence is a bit difficult to explain in that it means both that some idea would make for good fodder for a sermon, but also that the idea would make for a good sermon because of its ability to "move" a congregation. Interestingly, during sermons in which the congregation is so "moved," one often hears affirmative shouts of "Preach it!" Perhaps due to my own phenomenological disposition or perhaps due to my Pentecostal heritage, I think that the notion of an idea being something "that can preach," is worthy of some philosophical consideration. Are there some ideas that can't "preach," as it were? And, if so, is this due to their lack of congregational motivation? That is, is it primarily a matter of rhetorical and emotional impact? Or, is the fact that some ideas can't "preach" due to the ideas themselves? That is, is it primarily a matter of conceptual or theological content? Said slightly otherwise, in the hands of a good rhetorician, can anything "preach"? Or can that which "can preach" be preached by anyone?

Since this essay will be intentionally short, I am not going to be able to give an extended consideration to these questions here. But, as something of a springboard to what I hope will become a more thorough engagement elsewhere, I will look at the work of Søren Kierkegaard as a preliminary case study. Accordingly, the specific question that will occupy us here is: “Can Kierkegaard Preach?” I mean for this question to be heard in two ways. On the one hand, this question asks if the ideas of Kierkegaard can be translated into the mode of discourse that would make for productive (perhaps “moving”) sermons in the setting of contemporary church services. On the other hand, this question asks if Kierkegaard, himself, could deliver such sermons. The first formulation concerns primarily the subjectivity of Christian life and the second formulation concerns primarily the authority of Christian witness. In this all too brief essay, I will suggest that Kierkegaard’s thought can indeed “preach,” but whether Kierkegaard himself can “preach it” depends on how we understand the role and task of preaching itself [11].

II.

Famously, Kierkegaard’s authorship is a sustained attempt to “bring Christianity to Christendom.” There are numerous ways to understand this idea, but for our purposes here, I will understand it as a philosophical and theological challenge to any attempt to reduce/identify Christianity with social and cultural power structures [12]. A bit more specifically, we might say that Christianity is always something that should challenge the complacency of the Church as an historical institution. As Kierkegaard makes explicit in his late engagements with Bishop H.L. Martensen and the legacy of Martensen’s predecessor, Bishop J.P. Mynster, Christianity can neither be made objective as a social movement nor easy as a cultural identity. In an essay dated February 1854, Kierkegaard explains how such reductive accounts of Christianity are problematic in both the content and lives of preachers:

When proclamation is considered more particularly to be what is said, written, printed, the word, the sermon, one does not need to be especially sharp to be able to see, when the New Testament is placed alongside Mynster’s preaching, that Bishop Mynster’s proclamation of Christianity . . . tones down, veils, suppresses, omits some of what is most decisively Christian, what is too inconvenient for us human beings, what would make our lives strenuous, prevent us from enjoying life—this about dying to the world, about voluntary renunciation, about hating oneself, about suffering for the doctrine, etc.

If however, proclamation is considered more particularly to be the extent to which the proclaimer’s life expresses what he says . . ., one in turn does not need to be especially sharp to be able to see . . . that Bishop Mynster’s proclamation of Christianity was not in character, that outside the quiet hours he was not in character, not even in the character of his preaching, which indeed, as stated compared with the New Testament, has considerably scaled down the essentially Christian [9, 4]

Notice that Kierkegaard’s critique of Mynster, here, is situated within a conditional qualification regarding “proclamation.” “Proclamation”—or for our purposes “preaching”—can be understood in at least two ways:

as a specific linguistic phenomenon, and also as a life. In both cases, Kierkegaard suggests, Mynster comes up short precisely because he minimizes the difficulty and subjectivity of Christianity. In Postscript, Climacus states that “the present work has made it difficult to become a Christian, so difficult that the number of Christians among the cultured in Christendom will perhaps not even be very great—perhaps, because I cannot know something like that” [6, 587].

Importantly, and in stark contrast with Mynster, Climacus stresses the difficulty of “becoming a Christian.” Moreover, Climacus goes on to suggest that the entire Postscript “is about myself, simply and solely about myself” [6, 617]. Accordingly, when Climacus suggests that the main question with which he is occupied is “How do I become a Christian?” he makes clear that “I ask solely for my own sake” [6, 617]. The difficulty of Christian existence is not simply owing to the fact that it demands something that is hard to accomplish, but to the fact that demands subjectivity itself, which is not finally something that can be accomplished. Rather, one must “become subjective” instead of “being subjective,” which would itself be an existential contradiction insofar as being is not a matter of subjectivity, but of objectivity. Kierkegaard, himself, echoes Climacus in this respect in *The Moment* 10:

“I do not call myself a Christian; I do not speak of myself as a Christian.” It is this that I must continually repeat; anyone who wants to understand my very special task must concentrate on being able to hold this firm.

Yes, I well know that it almost sounds like a kind of lunacy in this Christian world—where each and every one is a Christian, where being a Christian is something that everyone naturally is—that there is someone who says of himself, “I do not call myself a Christian,” and someone whom Christianity occupies to the degree to which it occupies me [9, 340].

Lest one miss the target of Kierkegaard’s scorn, he continues on to say:

I cannot serve these legions of huckstering knaves, I mean the pastors, who by falsifying the definition of Christian have, for the sake of the business, gained millions and millions of Christians. I am not a Christian—and unfortunately I am able to make it manifest that the others are not either—indeed, even less than I, since they fancy themselves to be that, or they falsely ascribe to themselves that they are that, or they (like the pastors) make others think that they are that, whereby the pastor-business flourishes [9, 340].

Again, the problem with pastors, as exemplified by Mynster, is that they make Christianity something that is a matter of *objectivity*: do this, believe that, participate in this social activity, recite this confession, etc. Hence, in this way, Christianity is made easy: anyone can do it by simply being objective in these ways. For Climacus, understanding Christianity this way effectively reduces it to “paganism” [see 6, 243-5, 361-2, 600]. The key of such “paganism” is that it makes Christianity “directly recognizable”—and, thereby, accountable to, and judged by, objective criteria. As subjective, Christianity demands personal investment, risky commitment, and passionate inwardness. None of these are available for objective adjudication and social approval. As Kierkegaard will say in various places throughout his authorship, there is no final assurance when

it comes to faith—there is only trust and hope. This is not to say that there is not confidence, however. As John Davenport (2008) makes clear, the “eschatological dimension” of Kierkegaard’s thought is central to the way in which trust and hope get expressed as a lived reality [13].

Despite the fact that Kierkegaard often expresses the desire to become simply a country pastor in Jutland, he consistently seems to chastise “the pastors” for being the farthest thing from Christianity. It might appear, then, that Kierkegaard’s thought most certainly cannot “preach” since its “sermon,” as it were, is largely that pastors are destroying Christianity by making it culturally accommodating and socially acceptable. Yet, as Merold Westphal [10] rightly contends, Kierkegaard’s mode of philosophical engagement is best viewed in concert with the model of the Hebrew prophets. Like the prophets, his task is one of critique and chastisement. Like the prophets, he speaks truth to power. Like the prophets, the object of his scorn is the religious leadership that has grown deaf to the call of God—which is always a call that requires “dying to the world” and “suffering for the doctrine.” Unlike the prophets, however, Kierkegaard claims that he speaks “without authority” and so is not able to be considered “an apostle,” but merely “a genius” who makes the case for the impossibility of directly recognizing an apostle according to external evidentiary standards [see 8, 91-108].

III.

Let’s conclude by returning to our guiding question. Can Kierkegaard “preach”? Allow me to repeat Kierkegaard’s own conditional qualifier. If by preach, we mean that his thought can be translated into sermons in contemporary Christian church services, then I think that the answer is yes. Yet, the key is that those sermons would have to be interruptive of the complacency that can be invited by the cultural habituation of “going to church,” as it were. In other words, Kierkegaardian philosophy can “preach” insofar as it should motivate transformed religious existence—but this is what all authentic Christian preaching should do. It is because Kierkegaard took his own contemporary pastors to fail as this task that he targets them so directly with his critical pen. Kierkegaard can preach because he should motivate pastors to fall to their knees in humility before God. Kierkegaard can preach because he should challenge any preacher who begins to think that she or he is “directly recognizable” as an apostle. Kierkegaard can preach because he should call to repentance all pastors who have made Christianity out to be something that it is not: easy and obvious.

Unfortunately, I do not think that contemporary Christianity is very far from the Christianity of Kierkegaard’s Denmark. All too many pastors present themselves as the final authority for religious existence. In so doing, make themselves ripe for prophetic challenge as we are called to an “absolute relation to the Absolute” [3]. All too many pastors present themselves as the arbiters of religious existence and offer sermons/proclamations that identify Christianity with a moral code that eliminates God as the “middle term” in the relation to the neighbor [7]. All too many pastors present themselves as the lived examples of holiness and, hence, distract attention from the fact that Christ alone is who must be “imitated”

[5]. So, when I read Kierkegaard, I find myself shouting “Preach it!” Preach it to the preachers who want recognition and money. Preach it to the congregations who want simplicity and ease. Preach it to the churches who want social status and political power. Preach it to me when I “call myself a Christian” and think I can “go further than faith” [3].

And yet, if by preach we mean speak to with authority and occupy the location of ecclesial authority as established by inheriting the prophetic mantle, then no, Kierkegaard, himself, cannot preach. This should not trouble us, though, since this is precisely part of the “sermon” that his thought presents as a possibility. We must take Kierkegaard at his word that his task was not to preach, but to be something of a Socratic/prophetic gadfly to the sluggish horse of Christendom [9, 340-47]. In this way, I consider Kierkegaard a prophetic philosopher, but not a prophet. He is someone who calls for careful attention and invested decision. Importantly, though, there he leaves us as “single individuals” in the face of decision.

I think that much would be better about contemporary Christianity if more preachers read Kierkegaard. But this is true not because Kierkegaard explains Christianity for us, but because he invites each of us, individually, into contact with the decision of Christianity namely, whether or not we will become “contemporaries with Christ.” In this way, he challenges all egoistic assumptions of pastors who see themselves as the necessary condition for their congregation’s understanding of Christianity. The all-too-common sermon that one hears today is “come, follow the pastor.” According to Kierkegaard, the only sermon that matters is “come, follow Christ.” Importantly, because of the subjectivity of Christian existence, this is a sermon that anyone can “preach.” Overturning any arrogance that might attend the social role of being a pastor, Kierkegaard explains:

You common man! The Christianity of the New Testament is something infinitely high, but please note that it is not high in such a way that it pertains to differences among people with regard to talents etc. No, it is for all. Everyone, unconditionally everyone—if he will unconditionally, will unconditionally hate himself, will unconditionally put up with everything, suffer everything (and everyone can indeed do that if he will) then this something infinitely high is accessible to him [9, 346].

Ultimately, then, Can Kierkegaard Preach? The real question is whether you and I will preach. For my part, reading Kierkegaard doesn’t tell us what to preach, but merely makes the case that if we are to “become subjective,” it is only us we, you, I, who can.

Preach it, Kierkegaard!

References and links

1. Backhouse, Stephen. 2011. *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Christian Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Davenport, John J. 2008. “What Kierkegaardian Faith Adds to Alterity Ethics: How Levinas and Derrida Miss the Eschatological Dimension.” In J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood, eds. *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 169-96.