

Faith, Community, and Kierkegaard:
Beyond Slaughtered Sons and Lonely Prophets
by Karen Rustad

Kierkegaard and Meaning in Life
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In his book *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard presents a radical view of faith life. This faith has nothing to do with what is morally right, and certainly nothing to do with one's self interest. It is a faith that, at its extreme, can lead a man to slit the throat of his only son for a reason that no one else will ever understand: "Because God said so." What place does religious community have in this understanding of faith? If faith is really so unintelligible as to be virtually impossible to accept oneself, let alone communicate to others, then any spiritual social structure (anything from talking about God with one's best friend to organized religion proper) is folly. In this paper, I will first attempt to show that while Kierkegaard's conception of faith is not logical, to a certain extent it is still "reasonable" in that reason can hint at its existence both negatively and through a relational understanding. Secondly, I argue although Abraham was unable to communicate his terrifying burden with anyone, under Kierkegaard's understanding of faith it is still possible--even advisable--share one's faith with others.

I. The Challenge of *Fear and Trembling*

Kierkegaard's task in *Fear and Trembling* is to turn faith into something appalling. Short of painting a picture of Abraham bringing the knife to Isaac's young, struggling neck, he does a pretty good job of it. Kierkegaard shakes the story of Abraham sacrificing out of its usual context in church sermons, where everyone already knows the happy ending and the attempted murder is euphemized as "offer[ing God] the best he had," by following the story from Abraham's perspective on his long, three-day ride to Moriah (Kierkegaard "Fear" 58). If the image of Isaac "[clinging] to Abraham's knees,

plead[ing] at his feet, begg[ing] for his young life” is not enough to make one “sleepless,” what is (Kierkegaard “Fear” 45, 58)? Kierkegaard rightly points out that if someone took the story of Abraham seriously and did likewise, no sane person could avoid screaming in horror: “Loathsome man, dregs of society, what devil has so possessed you that you wanted to murder your own son?” (Kierkegaard “Fear” 59). The depth of Abraham’s faith seems to defy every sense of logic. Though Abraham was infinitely resigned to the fact that he must sacrifice his son, at the same time “[h]e believed on the strength of the absurd” that he would get Isaac back because “for God all things are possible” (Kierkegaard “Fear” 65, 75). To say that with Abraham “[a]ll human calculation had long since been suspended” would seem like an understatement (Kierkegaard “Fear” 65)! How can Isaac be killed and yet live? Common sense revolts at the whole idea.

Any conceivable ethical system also condemns Abraham’s sacrifice. There is no apparent higher goal that might have explained and justified the Isaac’s murder:

It is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the State, that Abraham did it, not to appease angry gods. If there was any question of the deity’s being angry, it could only have been Abraham he was angry with... There is no higher expression of the ethical in Abraham’s life than that the father shall love the son. (Kierkegaard “Fear” 88)

The only way to save the Abraham story is to find grounds for “teleological suspension of the ethical”: in other words, to argue that duty to God overrides ethics (Kierkegaard “Fear” 83). “If faith cannot make it into a holy deed to murder one’s own son, then let the judgement fall on Abraham as on anyone else” (Kierkegaard “Fear” 60). Unfortunately, proving the existence of God is impossible with logic, never mind any duty to the deity. While we cannot disprove the existence of such a duty either, there still remains every

logical reason to condemn Abraham. And yet Abraham and the idea of faith continue to be praised all the while! What is one to do?

II. Reason in “Unreasonable” Faith

The matter of Abrahamic faith, as presented by Kierkegaard, appears to be a frightening muddle. However, unlike the most radical fideists, Kierkegaard’s “unreasonable” faith still has plenty of reason to it. To begin with, anyone with faith must at the very least believe in the logic rule “A=A”:

If...it is revealed that God calls human beings to believe that Jesus of Nazareth died for the sins of the world, then it must be presupposed that *this* is what is revealed; it is not revealed that Jesus did *not* die for the sins of the world" (Evans 21).

An even more salient response to extreme fideism is the question: *Which* faith?

"[T]he stance of the theologian who rejects reason...is...a barrier to apologetic argument on the part of the theologian. ... [T]aking such a view seriously implies that one cannot, for example, give any reasons why one should have faith in Jesus of Nazareth rather than Mohammed (or vice versa)" (Evans 23).

If faith, not reason, is the only true currency, faith becomes both 100% absolute and 100% arbitrary. Thus, there must be some sort of logic involved.

According to Kierkegaard, reason may be “refuted” by faith insofar that it is shown to be incomplete, but this is “not the simple falseness of a binary logic” (Westphal 112). Rather, reason is “dethroned” in the Hegelian sense: “transcended and restored to its (limited) truth by being both negated (as putative whole, as absolute) and preserved (as designated part, as relative” (Westphal 112). Reason is still important; it merely is baffled by some truths that faith is able to accept.

While reason may not be able to see faith, it can still blindly feel it out. Reason is self-critical. One can reasonably perceive that humans’ capacity for rationality is flawed

or “corrupted.” Past experiences, socioeconomic backgrounds, emotional temperaments, and the like all threaten to topple a person’s attempts at objectivity. Even the most logical individual’s viewpoint is constrained by his or her ego.

The claim that faith is not only above but against human reason is rooted, not merely in the recognition of human finitude, but in the charge that human reason is radically defective. ... [First,] Kierkegaard believes that reason has what we might term a restless, domineering quality, in that it is always striving to master or appropriate whatever it encounters. ... The second feature of human sinfulness that Kierkegaard sees as damaging lies in what we could term the egoistic or selfish character of human reason. ... Existential thinking, or thinking about life and what is related to life, is...necessarily 'interested' thinking. "For an existing person, existing is for him his highest interest, and his interestedness in existing is his actuality." ... [W]hen we do our calculations, the cost and benefit to ourselves seems to weigh heavily, however much the ethicists may prescribe a strict objectivity. (Evans 96-9)

We naturally think much more about things that directly affect us than about things that don’t. We *want* to matter. To risk putting it flamboyantly, how often is a person *truly* aware that she is a lone organism on a small-sized planet orbiting an average star in one of the arms of one of millions of galaxies in a stupendously gigantic universe that mostly consists of darkness and empty space? Given the amount of time we spend reading about Britney Spears’ divorce or writing philosophical treatises, probably never. While reason is not strong enough to fix itself and correct our perspective, it can tell that there is a gap in our abilities--and thus hint that, maybe, something beyond reason could occupy that empty space.

Kierkegaard’s book *The Sickness Unto Death* demonstrates this phenomenon when he identifies the many kinds of human despair. Any psychologist can tell you that many people in this world do not want to be themselves--because they have unreasonable priorities for themselves or cannot accept particular personality flaws or their general

weakness.¹ The idea that a person who realizes this problem would respond by trying to come up with a suitable identity for themselves, and that they will have to constantly run from realizing the flimsiness and arbitrariness of their chosen identity or else face existential crisis as they “[want] in despair to be themselves,” seems a logical extension of this reality (Kierkegaard “Sickness” 98). The way that Kierkegaard divides despair up might seem rather abstract, but the ideas resonate with our experience of despair and his arguments are logically founded.² This may seem strange, since the book’s conclusion is that only faith can save us, but that conclusion is terse and unexplained. Kierkegaard leaves out any discussion of exactly *how* a person can come to faith; faith is the ‘negative space’ within Kierkegaard’s logic-based text. Though never explicated, the subject of faith cannot fail to draw the reader’s attention; indeed, it is *because* Kierkegaard is so silent on the subject that the reader latches onto it. *The Sickness Unto Death* demonstrates, in a literary way, the ‘gap’ in reason.

Finally, the nature of faith, while defying logic, can arguably be considered “reasonable” on other grounds. “[T]here is another sense of understanding, where understanding is equivalent to grasping some kind of sense. Here understanding is not equivalent to seeing the truth of a proposition, but rather is a recognition of the sense of a proposition” (Evans 20). Faith is not a statement, like $1+1=2$, that one just assigns a truth-value to and immediately decides to accept. Faith is more akin to a relationship. Committed relationships, too, can be seen as illogical. “How can one give absolute trust to another when the future is so uncertain? Surely, such absolute trust is irrational”

¹ C.f. Kierkegaard’s discussion of “weak” despair in Part One of *The Sickness Unto Death*.

² Categories such as the demonic are predicated upon a person’s belief in a God, but Kierkegaard’s overall argument does not require God to actually exist.

(Phillips 51). Nevertheless, most people consider the vows of unconditional love and trust at marriage to be perfectly reasonable things. In “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage,” Kierkegaard argues that such bonds make one’s life sensical and continuous. Unlike temporary or conditional relationships that lack that sense of the eternal, committed relationships set an anchor from which one can develop a sustainable identity. According to Kierkegaard, married people “constantly have in the present...both hope and recollection” and, with this unified sense of history, can thus find their true selves (Kierkegaard 92). Similarly, in *Fear and Trembling*,

Abraham’s life has taken on a particular shape and has followed a particular direction under the conditions of divine guidance and human trust. His decision to leave the land of his birth, to set out in obedience to the call of God without knowing where he was going; the divine gift of the child Isaac and the promise of blessing through him, had all combined to give Abraham’s life an overall coherence and intelligibility. (Rae 318-9)

This is not to say that Abraham ‘owed’ God trust in exchange for particular miracles; as stated above, close relationships are continuous, not discrete. This is also not to say that these precedents made the decision to sacrifice Isaac anxiety-free: given God’s promise of descendants, killing off Abraham’s only heir seems like “a terrible breach in the framework” that had been established because that promise lies “in [Isaac’s] loins” (Rae 319; Kierkegaard “Fear” 88). However, the depth of the existing relationship between Abraham and God make the prospect of God making a difficult demand of Abraham seem more, though not entirely, reasonable. One is more likely to accept a seemingly-nonsensical order from one’s husband of thirty years than from some guy you just met in a bar.

III. Speaking the Unspeakable

Having gleaned some (limited) internal reasonability out of the concept of faith, we move to the problem of sharing it with others. In the third Problemata of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that faith cannot be communicated to others. If one received messages from God in a public way, through, say, a soothsayer, faith could be shared.

[A]n augur's utterance is intelligible to all[;] ...the individual can understand that what an augur is conveying to him is a decision of heaven's... [T]he augur's utterance is intelligible not just to the hero but to everyone... [S]hould he want to speak he can perfectly well do so, for he can make himself understood... On the other hand, if the will of heaven...had been made known to him in some quite private way...then he could not speak however much he might wish to. (Kierkegaard "Fear" 119)

When the message is private, however, there is no way to talk about it with others. If Abraham had tried to speak to Isaac, Sarah, or anyone else, they would just reply, "Why do you want to do this, you can after all refrain," failing to understand that in his faith the sacrifice must be done (Kierkegaard "Fear" 138). If Abraham continued to try to explain and said that it was not what he wanted, others "would be offended in him and believe him a hypocrite" (Kierkegaard "Fear" 138). The experience of the divine message is necessary background to talking about it. No outside observer can be assured that one is not mistaken, lying, or crazy. If this is correct, there can be no justification for religious community; faith must be strictly internal. After all, how can you have a faith community if no one can communicate faith?

At the same time we have the complicating fact that, according to Kierkegaard and Christian doctrine, the faithful *have to* share their faith! Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard emphasizes that faith is not just attending church on Sunday. He even divides religiousness into three categories to make this point.

Religiousness A...acknowledg[es] as true only the truth we find within ourselves... [It] filter[s] out all those putative divine voices that do not echo the voice of the people.

...

Religiousness B is the repudiation of this religious ideology. ... In Religiousness B we cannot preside over our truth but in humility must accept as a gift the truth we cannot discover or even recognize apart from God's grace. (Westphal 115-6)

An improvement, but it still falls short because it “says to God, in effect, ‘We’re willing to accept this element of epistemic risk...if in turn you will drop the suggestion that we accept the ethical risk involved in actually carrying out the teleological suspension of the ethical’” (Westphal 118). True faith, Religiousness C, means that “Christ is not merely the Paradox to be believed but the Pattern to be imitated. ... God's truth must always suffer in the world. Truth is a way and a life... This is the way that leads to the Cross, and he invites us to follow him on that path” (Westphal 116-7). True faith is all-consuming. The Bible states that Christians should “preach the good news to all creation” and “make disciples of all nations”; this is part of doing as Christ did (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19). Thus, it appears that acting on Christian faith must include sharing it, even though doing so may be painful. Indeed, it makes little sense to be a silent prophet. How is this to be resolved?

The problem in Abraham’s case was not that he *could* not say what he was going to do and why. While saying “God told me so” might not exactly convey the grandeur of divine communication, it still expresses the plain and simple truth of Abraham’s predicament. The problem was that there was no way on earth that Sarah, Isaac, or anyone else could be expected to understand that truth. Attempting would just make Isaac’s sacrifice even more difficult and painful. Abraham could articulate his faith; he

just could not articulate it *usefully*. This is not a fault of faith in itself. It is a fault of the world for lacking the radical, religious trust that faith requires to be understood.

D. Z. Phillips interprets Kierkegaard's use of the idea of 'love of one's neighbor' in *Works of Love* as a command to trust in this radical way.

Consider [Kierkegaard's] treatment of the example of someone who is let down, again and again, despite the financial support he has given to a person. Discouraged, he decides to terminate the financial support. As Kierkegaard says, the money which he would have given to the other remains in his pocket. The person is richer than he would have been had he given the money away. ...

Suppose I give up placing trust in the other? Can I say that the trust remains unused in my pocket like my money? Of course not. Neither can I call myself 'trusting' ... [I]n ceasing to trust religiously, I am the loser, since I no longer see the other as a neighbour, as a child of God. This is, at the same time, to cease to trust God, since it is to cease to trust the things of God. (Phillips 50-1)

The world is not a trustworthy place. But faith requires one to trust others all the same: "hoping for others constitutes the hope there is for oneself" (Phillips 51). It is natural--and perfectly justifiable--for others to see the faithful as mistaken, lying, or crazy. Logically, how can they not? Nevertheless, who knows? While it might still be hard to imagine Abraham's mission being externally accepted, other, slightly less extreme examples of faith could happen across a trusting ear. Talking about faith might be unproductive most of the time, but that does not deny the possibility that it could, on occasion, do some good.

IV. Conclusions

Faith might be our only hope to avoid despair, but sometimes it doesn't even feel like that. Humans are imperfect, and although they might be capable of the absolute faith Kierkegaard demands, remaining in that state is extremely difficult. Listening to others'

ideas and experiences can help sustain committed faith instead of having one's faith life hop from mountaintop to mountaintop with huge gulfs in between. It is similar to the way that commitment in marriage deepens love:

“[I]f in the present year the individual experiences an erotic moment, this is enhanced by the fact that he recollects it in the preceding year, etc. In a beautiful way this has also found expression in married life”
(Kierkegaard “Aesthetic” 92).

Likewise, participation in a religious community can help deepen one's faith. It is not “hold[ing] on to [another's] coat-tails” but trusting in a relationship with other children of and before God (Kierkegaard “Fear” 62). As C. Stephen Evans argues, “the goal of the moral and spiritual life [is] *community*, communion with others committed to one's own flourishing as well as the flourishing of others” (Evans 32). To put it Biblically, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 3:12).

Arguably, a religious community also has the effect of moderating the views of its members. In the Quaker tradition, each individual has her own “inner light” and is capable of direct communion with God. Yet Quakers meet as a community for meditation. Why? The reasoning is that it is sometimes difficult to tell whether something is God speaking or just your own thought. Thus, by meditating as a group, others' inner lights serve as a “spirituality check.” This functionality is pragmatic--perhaps too pragmatic for Kierkegaard's kind of faith. Many religious communities are extremely trusting and devout, but one would be hard pressed to find any that would support a modern Abraham. For Kierkegaard, one must always be able to make decisions independent of the community and follow one's own calling; one's relationship with

one's faith community can never be at the same level as one's relationship with God.

Nevertheless, that does not require constant solitude and silence.

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