Fall 2003

Toward Community: The Relationship Between Religiosity and Silence in the Works of Søren Kierkegaard

Joseph Swanson

Toward Community: The Relationship Between Religiosity and Silence in the Works of Søren Kierkegaard

JOSEPH SWANSON

[WINNER OF THE JOHN AND EDYTH PORTZ AWARD, 2003]

INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard was a nineteenth-century Danish philosopher whose primary concerns were tied to the individual and Christianity. He felt that the 'Christendom' of his day was hollow, and that its hollowness led to inauthenticity[1] among those people who might otherwise have been true individuals and authentic Christians. He was wary of the 'crowd', viewing it as an abstraction of modernity, and he was skeptical of any attempts to reconcile the Judeo-Christian God with reason. He firmly believed that the depths of God could not be plumbed with rationality, and that the individual's relationship to God must correspondingly be based in faith, which he saw as perpetually linked to suffering and to dread. He felt that it was his duty to "reintroduce Christianity . . . into Christendom"[2] by promoting the development of the inwardness of Christianity: a capacity for self-reflection and a tendency to struggle against the crowd. Kierkegaard felt that by this, the individual is born.

The Kierkegaardian individual is a person who has foregrounded the 'vertical' relation between the individual and God over the 'horizontal' and ethically-based relations between human beings. This action, Kierkegaard believes, is not in accordance with the status quo: it is far more common to find people who exist solely on the horizontal plane, sensing the infinity of the vertical relation only when they accidentally become curious as to the nature of the authority that underlies all horizontal ethical relations. The Kierkegaardian individual is 'rare' in this sense. By defining his or her identity in this fashion, the Kierkegaardian individual, in the search for truth, sets himself or herself up as over and against the crowd, because "the crowd in its very concept is untruth."[3] For Kierkegaard, truth is subjective, individualized, and

---

[1] I use this term in the Heideggerian sense. Cf. Being and Time, II.2, II.3.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author: A Report to History (1859),* Walter Lowrie (trans.), Benjamin Nelson (ed.) (New York: Harper & row Publishers, 1962), 23.

[3] Ibid., 112. From the essay entitled *The Individual* (1846).

religious. In undertaking this perpetual struggle against the pull of the crowd, the Kierkegaardian individual adopts a certain silence, a silence which follows from the individual's relationship to God and which is necessitated by the qualitative difference between this divine relation and everyday human relations. While one is silent in the presence of God, one is also silent about God's presence. There are things that the religious individual cannot directly say to others without corrupting that individual religious truth which is to be said. This silence acts as the touchstone for any discourse that the Kierkegaardian individual engages in; the individual must always begin from this place of silence and return to this place of silence.

Kierkegaard found himself to be in this very position; he, in all of his religiosity, felt that it was his duty to remain silent. Believing that "a direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion,"[4] he shunned direct public discourse. Instead, he dedicated himself to what he called 'indirect communication'. He used his authorship to indirectly communicate with the inauthentic individual, revealing the individual to himself or herself as an entity profoundly lacking the inwardness of individuality. He intended to hold up a mirror rather than sermonize because he understood that there was something deeply false about direct and sermonic speech. He believed that indirect communication was the form of discourse which, paradoxically, was apt to be most honestly heard. He felt that the use of indirect communication satisfied both his felt duty to God and his felt vow of silence.

This translates into a lonely life lived against the grain. A significant portion of the Kierkegaardian corpus is a polemic against the untruth of the crowd, against the inauthenticity of Kierkegaard's Copenhagen. There is a palpable divorce between the Kierkegaardian individual and the rest of humanity, and Kierkegaard is commonly faulted for this. This divorce is seemingly held in place by a necessary religious silence, a silence which, at times, seems only marginally breached by indirect communication.

Here the question of the possibility of viable community begins to emerge: How does the backgrounding of horizontal inter-personal ethical relations to the vertical relation between the individual and God affect the possibility for the sustained genuine relations between individuals that allow for the creation of community? Can individuals sustain genuine relations between one another? My thesis is an attempt to preserve both the possibility for viable community and the strong Kierkegaardian connection between religiosity and silence. I will argue that this is not only possible, but I will argue that viable community can *only* exist when one strongly connects silence and religiosity. This is not to claim that all viable communities must be religious communities. I argue that emphasis upon an indirect communication that is always already oriented by the vertical relation of the individual to God rather than horizontal inter-personal relations is critical to the maintenance of the possibility of viable community. Without this emphasis, we will continue to share our world as dust shares the air. By speaking directly, community will continue to be a myth through which we tell ourselves to ourselves, unable to say anything at all. This is the fallacy of direct communication.

---

[4] Ibid., 25.

THE BODY OF THESIS

RELIGIOSITY AND SILENCE THROUGH ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

That Kierkegaard understood himself as primarily a religious thinker is made explicit in the very first pages of *The Point of View for my Work as an Author: A Report to History*: "The contents of this little book affirm, then, what I truly am as an author, that I am and was a religious author, that the whole of my work as an author is related to Christianity, to the problem 'of becoming a Christian', with a direct or indirect polemic against the monstrous illusion we call Christendom, or against the illusion that in a land such as ours all are Christians of a sort."[5] Kierkegaard immediately makes a connection between being a religious author and silence: "There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. So long as I considered the strictest silence my religious duty I strove in every way to preserve it."[6] This connection between religiosity and silence follows from the nature of an individual's relation to God and from the everyday relations between people. The more directly an individual relates to God, the more silence plays a central role in the individual's discourse. Increasingly, in the face of the divine Other, the individual becomes silent. Kierkegaard sees this state of necessary silence in the face of God and the other as exemplified by Abraham in his response to God's command to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved and only son.[7] This example provides the foundations for the connection between religiosity and silence in what one might call the Abrahamic individual.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard explains the necessity of Abraham's silence when the realm of the ethical, i.e., our relations to each other, becomes temporarily and paradoxically suspended by the command of God.

> Abraham keeps silent—but he *cannot* speak . . . . The relief of speech is that it translates me into the universal. Now Abraham is able to say the most beautiful things any language can express about how he loves Isaac. But it is not this he has at heart to say, it is the profounder thought that he would sacrifice him because it is a trial. This latter thought no one can understand, and hence everyone can only misunderstand the former.[8]

Here Kierkegaard relates speech to a translation of the individual (the speaker) into the universal (the realm of the ethical). Said differently, it is through language that we commonly understand each other. Therefore, when the individual has transcended the scope of the universal by suspending the ethical in the face of the absolute (the realm of religiosity), then these common speech-acts become that which not only fail to aid in the trials that come with a direct conduit between the individual and the absolute, but they make the passage through such trials an

---

[5] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author: A Report to History*, 5-6.

[6] Ibid., 5.

[7] Cf. Genesis 22.1-14.

[8] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), Walter Lowrie (trans.), (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 122-123.

impossibility by annulling that paradox by which such a relation arises. This is to say that if Abraham spoke to Isaac during the three days journey to Mount Moriah, this speechfulness would drastically alter the paradoxical nature of Abraham's act of faith, warping it into an act of murder.

To explain the matter away by means of repeting devotion to its imperative is to abandon faith. It is tantamount to assuming that one has power before God, that one must not surrender all for faith, that one might retain a vestige of pride before the divine. While this is a path of relative comfort, it is, in Kierkegaard's opinion and in my own, a fundamentally hopeless path. Abraham's silence, it seems, is totally unrelated to concern for Isaac's welfare, and, in fact, such a concern would be an affront to the dignity of God's command. Abraham's silence is mandated by a relation to the divine which transcends relations between persons.

While Abraham's silence is necessary, it is clear that Abraham's silence is not a total silence in Kierkegaard's eyes. Kierkegaard writes, fairly ambiguously, that about Isaac's sacrifice, his heart's burden, Abraham "is unable to speak, he speaks no human language. Though he himself understood all the tongues of the world, though his loved ones also understood them, he nevertheless cannot speak—he speaks a divine language . . . he 'speaks with tongues.'"[9] What is this 'speaking with tongues' of which Abraham is allegedly capable? Kierkegaard might be understood as saying that because speech translates the individual into the universal and Abraham has transcended or suspended a relationship to or translation into the universal, it is the case that Abraham's speech either does not exist or is expressed in a radically different manner. This must be a manner of speech which does not translate the individual into the universal but into the absolute, a speech which is unintelligible to those for whom the ethical is the ceiling of intelligibility, a speech which 'speaks with tongues'.

While elegant, this idea brings up some very practical questions. Is this new speech unimaginably beyond that which we now conceive of as speech and common discourse? What does this 'speaking with tongues' actually sound like? Is this 'divine language' audible in the conventional sense? Does it operate discursively at all? The mystery of this proposition complicates an investigation into the nature of Abraham's necessary silence.

At this point, I can begin to frame my question about religiosity and silence. If Abraham and all Abrahamic individuals cannot communicate at all with others without surrendering to the temptation of repenting of a religious identity, then the possibility of viable community is clearly not preserved. If there is some means by which these individuals can communicate, then viable community remains a possibility. To some degree, it is a question of exactly who the 'others' are. If these 'others' are actually individuals, in the same way that Abraham is an individual, then communication, either through a mutually understood silence or by poetically indirect discursive exchanges becomes possible, or at least imaginable. If these 'others' are the members of the faceless crowd, then this possibility surely fades away.

---

[9] Ibid., 123.

The Individual and the Public

Kierkegaard tends to suggest, like Heidegger after him, that more often we are members of the crowd than we are authentic individuals. Kierkegaard's deep concern, to the point of preoccupation, with the relation between the individual and what the 'public',[10] the bodiless body, is reflective of this position. The public is described as "a phantom, its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-embracing something which is nothing, a mirage"[11]; it "is a body which can never be reviewed."[12] Kierkegaard describes how the individuals which constitute the public are fundamentally 'unreal': "Only when the sense of association in society is no longer strong enough to give life to concrete realities is the Press able to create that abstraction 'the public', consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization—and yet are held together as a whole."[13]

In short, the public retards the rise of any kind of Abrahamic individuality. "In order that everything should be reduced to the same level,"[14] the public requires the unreality of its individuals. Kierkegaard calls the means by which this requirement is met 'the leveling process', "the victory of abstraction over the individual"[15] and "the predominance of the category 'generation' over the category 'individuality'."[16] The leveling process is a simplification of that which exists to the lowest common denominator. "The leveling process is not the action of an individual but the work of reflection in the hands of an abstract power."[17]

If it is the case that the single human being, when subsumed by the phenomenon of the 'public', is unable to emerge as an Abrahamic individual due to the pervasive nature of the public's leveling process, then it follows that some kind of alternative situation must be brought forth in order to allow the potential individual to become an actual individual, a situation alternative to the simple swallowing up of the person in the public. This alternative situation comes about when the individual is set-off against the public, when the individual becomes (self)-arranged in opposition to the public, when the individual begins to define his or her self as that which is ideally (although not actually) separate from the hollowness of the public conglomeration. It happens the moment Abraham sets out to Mount Moriah, Isaac and donkeys in the dust behind him.

However, this concept of 'separateness' demands unraveling, for it is a unique kind of separateness; it is a separateness which requires a simultaneous permanent attachment, a Hegelian synthesis. The mode by which the emergent individual is separate from the public (from which the individual has emerged) is the tense relation of

---

[10] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (1846) Alexander Dru (trans.), (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962).

[11] Kierkegaard, The Present Age, 59.

[12] Ibid., 60.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 59.

[15] Ibid., 52.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 54.

thesis to antithesis. The Abrahamic individual exists because of a *perpetual* struggle against the public. Put into the extreme case, Abraham is the father of faith only insofar as others are not. While it may be the case that the Abrahamic individual desires the end of this struggle, an end which is the finitude of the oppositional identity and escape from the public, this desire is one which, if it were fulfilled, would be equivalent to the annihilation of the individual who desires it (or total assumption into the divine). This is to say that if the individual were to surrender his or her identity as the full opposition to the hollow of the public, the individual would desire to be something else altogether, something which may not actually exist. Thus, the Abrahamic individual, bound to silence by the divine, must struggle against the public with which it cannot communicate, but the Abrahamic individual cannot or must not do this without completely severing himself or herself from this public. It must be noted, however, that this necessary remnant connection by no means qualifies as what I have called 'viable community'.

TOWARDS A COMMUNITY OF ABRAHAMIC INDIVIDUALS

However, working within this Kierkegaardian framework of 'individual-public', the possibility of a community of Abrahamic individuals could be formulated antithetically. If a set of Abrahamic individuals were to emerge as defined over and against the public and alternatively oriented towards the divine, individuals whose identities had been created as both set-off-against that which is the public and in union with God, this set could have the potential to cohere into a gathering-up of individuals as individuals, into a community of individuals. However, it is by no means assured that (a) any number of such Abrahamic individuals even exists, and (b) that if they did, they would necessarily 'cohere'. To posit this potential community, is, to invert Kierkegaard's description of the public, to envision a set of real individuals who can be or are united in an actual situation or organization, individuals who can be held together as a whole.[18] Kierkegaard seems to be on the edge of breaching the idea of this type of community when he writes of those who find it their duty "not to dominate, to guide, to lead, but to serve in suffering and help indirectly. Those who have not made the leap [away from the public] will look upon his unrecognizable action, his suffering as a failure; those who have made the leap will suspect that it is a victory."[19] The community that I seek to define is, then, as Kierkegaard intimates, a gathering-up of those whose lot has become one of quiet suffering in the names of both individuality and humanity, where communication consists in suffering, in seeing one's own sufferings in the suffering of the knowing other, of recognizing that which is, to others, unrecognizable. It is a community of humility, a "representation of *humanity pure and unalloyed*."[20] It is silent and its discourse is indirect in its operations. Communication of any other kind would result in submission to the leveling

---

[18] This is an inversion of the passage quoted above from page 60 of Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*.

[19] Ibid., 83.

[20] Ibid., 55.

process, which leads to a fatal intellectualization and ossification of the viable vital community.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE PROBLEM AND THE CENTRALITY OF KIERKEGAARD

In common discourse, we are confronted with the term 'community' with almost relentless frequency. At the same time, however, our discursive familiarity with the concept 'community' belies a fundamental lack of this term's phenomenological referent. The more we speak about it, the more certain we can be that we do not 'have' it. Community, in this present age, is largely a myth.

'Community' suggests a group that is able to see itself in two kinds of different light at the same time, a group that is able to see itself as both consisting of isolated and separate individuals and at the same time as one unified and organic whole. The idea of a community of individuals is a seemingly paradoxical conception of seamed seamlessness and it is one which I have failed to see in my life. Instead, I often find myself surrounded by or subsumed in broken or false communities. What is important to see is that these communities generally do not recognize their dysfunctionality; instead, they rhetorically affirm their likeness to the aforementioned ideal 'community', that paradoxical and mythological seamed seamlessness. This rhetorical affirmation might be likened to the process of painting one's own portrait and then, with the portrait as evidence, claiming one's beauty, democracy, and freedom. This seems at best deceptive and at worst utterly destructive. The rhetorical discourse that tends to arise during this 'paint-then-show' process seems to be marked, in our own context, by such terms as 'diversity', 'multiculturalism', 'tolerance', 'interdisciplinarity' and such activities as 'community-building'. Make no mistake: I by no means intend to intimate that these terms and the ideals they represent are to be rejected. What I do mean to suggest is that these terms, in the everyday and casual understanding, lack the essential critical aspect that makes them and the ideals they represent worthwhile. For example, 'diversity' as a simple propagation of differences is by no means a desirable state of affairs. Diversity as the historically-informed study of the interrelationships and discontinuities between both subtly and radically different socio-cultural identities is both desirable and, more importantly, rare.

It is this kind of schism that exists between what the communities around us actually are and what the communities around us perceive themselves to be; it is a disjunction between casual understanding and critical understanding. Kierkegaard's 'public' is what our false and broken 'communities' actually are beneath their rhetorical portraits; the difference is purely nominal.

Furthermore, I believe that, upon reflection, these publics (which we call communities) are foregrounded by their dysfunctionality. We can recognize them precisely because of their brokenness. Conversely, this is to say that if true and viable community exists, it is something that *works well,* and that which works well does not, in most cases, 'appear' to us in the same sense as that which is broken 'appears'. True communities are undisclosed. They are inconspicuous and hard to see. They are that which allows individuals to communicate; they are forums and

they are unadvertisable. Once these forums, these real communities, begin to emerge from the background, once they begin to become conspicuous, it is because they have become problematic. This passage into conspicuousness renders the now problematic community vulnerable to passage into public-hood. Viable community is that which cannot be spoken about directly and cannot be created artificially. A lack of silence exposes the soft underbelly of true community.

Thus, the question from which the thesis blooms is this: "How is community possible?" The relevance of this question is clear; what is at stake is no less than how individuals coexist in a shared world. However, the relation of Kierkegaard's thought to the complex process of answering this question is less clear. Why Kierkegaard? Why does Kierkegaard occupy such a central position in the thesis?

Kierkegaard writes that to "sit in a room where everything is so quiet that one can hear a grain of sand fall and can understand the highest—that every person can do. But, to speak figuratively, to sit in the kettle the coppersmith is hammering on and then to understand the same thing—well, then one must have the understanding close at hand."[21] Kierkegaard was acutely aware that he was, more frequently than not, sitting in the kettle the coppersmith was hammering on; he knew that to live rightly in the actual world is much harder a task than simply knowing how to live rightly in one's own mind. Kierkegaard writes about what it is to be a person in the world, an individual before God. Kierkegaard's work indirectly discloses a means by which we, whose ears are even now in this silence still ringing from the blows of the smith's mallet, might move towards community. Kierkegaard's work is a faint but honest harmony in a sea of discord, a sea which makes the harmony all the more gripping. This is the reason for the centrality of Kierkegaard to the thesis. His voice rises above the waters.

---

[21] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (1847), Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds. and trans.), (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 78-79.