

## NAZISM AND STALINISM IN THE LIGHT OF KIERKEGAARD'S THOUGHT

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The general aim of this article is to contribute to the answer how studying of Kierkegaard could help us to understand societal and political life. The author illustrates Kierkegaard's usefulness by example of an innovative and illuminative Bellinger's interpretation of Nazism and Stalinism given in Kierkegaard's terms of anxiety and stages of existence. Bellinger interprets Hitler and Nazism as an extreme pathological example of the aesthetic stage and anxiety before the good, and Stalinism as an extreme pathological example of the ethical stage and anxiety before the evil. On this basis we may also speak about the importance of Kierkegaard for the understanding of depth motivation for political violence and crime.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard – Anxiety before evil – Anxiety before good – Charles K. Bellinger – Nazism – Stalinism

“When the man saw Jesus in the distance, he ran up to him and knelt down. He shouted, ‘Jesus, Son of God in heaven, what do you want with me? Promise me in God's name that you won't torture me!’ The man said this because Jesus had already told the evil spirit to come out of him” (Mark 5: 6-8).

**1. Introduction.** A general aim of this paper – which is a philosophical text – is to contribute to the answer to the question how studying of Kierkegaard can help us to understand societal and political life. The foundation of good philosophy is introduction and explanation of concepts and conceptual distinctions without which our thinking is essentially – sometimes even fatally – impoverished because it is blind for important or even crucial differences between things. The most important (Kierkegaard's) concepts for this article are anxiety and its forms (before the good and before the evil)<sup>1</sup> and stages of existence (aesthetical, ethical and religious).<sup>2</sup> The other form of philosophical creativity, beside the introduction of important concepts and distinctions, is an application of them in order to throw light on certain phenomena. Also in this respect it turns out that Kierke-

<sup>1</sup> Regarding my understanding of Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety I owe a lot to Perkins (ed.) 1985, especially to the articles of Dunning and Hall. See also Repar 1998.

<sup>2</sup> For the stages of existence see Rae 2010, especially pp. 83-90, also Hribar 1987.

gaard is very fruitful and useful for social and political thought.<sup>3</sup> I illustrate this with the example of the American theologian Charles Bellinger who has given an understanding of Nazism and Stalinism in the Kierkegaard's concepts of anxiety and stages of existence (Cf. Bellinger 1992, 2001, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Bellinger interprets Hitler and Nazism as an extreme pathological example of the aesthetical stage and anxiety before the good, and Stalinism as an extreme pathological example of the ethical stage and anxiety before the evil. On this ground we may speak also about Kierkegaard's importance for understanding of depth motivation for political violence and crime.

**2. Being in Faith versus Being in Sin: Demonic and Pharisaic Violence.** Societies in which the opposition to faith and love becomes dominant can be – following Kierkegaard – only non-democratic and non-free.<sup>5</sup> The extreme examples of such societies are

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<sup>3</sup> The approach in philosophy that I practice and defend might be in a certain measure denoted as aesthetic in the sense as this term is used by Kierkegaard scholar Jamie Turnbull (cf. Turnbull 2013). Yet this doesn't mean that I agree with Turnbull's refusal of the value and meaning of the philosophical interpretation and use of Kierkegaard. This is of course evident already from the present text. One of the moments of this disagreement is Turnbull's sharp mutual exclusion of philosophy and theology. I don't see why the interpretation of Kierkegaard shouldn't be at the same time philosophical and theological. That this is the Turnbull's position we can infer from particular places in his article as is for instance the following: "To move beyond the tradition of misinterpretation that consists in reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher we need to make the ethical movement to commit to history and, ultimately, to the necessity of religious or theological interpretation" (op. cit., 61).

If we take for instance Kierkegaard's approach itself as a paradigm or as a model (for a recent detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's method see Schwab 2012) then it seems to me that neither the exclusion of philosophical approach to certain texts or thinkers nor such a sharp mutual exclusion of philosophical and theological approach is justified (not to mention that Turnbull doesn't explain what he means by theological approach).

One of the main tasks of philosophy is introduction of (new) concepts and conceptual distinctions and their creative application. The criteria of the felicitousness of this introduction are the extent and quality of understanding to which they contribute. Kierkegaard's and other texts can be in this sense inspiring, useful and fruitfully applied regardless of our detailed ideas about the historical individual Søren Kierkegaard.

However this doesn't entail that the study of Kierkegaard from the point of view of cultural or intellectual history is not important. Quite to the contrary! What I claim is only that this approach to Kierkegaard is not the only important and fruitful and that the philosophical (aesthetical) use of Kierkegaard can be (and in fact is) also such. If this was not true then the whole large number of texts written about Kierkegaard which cultivate philosophical approach would be unimportant or even harmful. Is this Turnbull's position?

<sup>4</sup> From here on I will denote this interpretation with KB.

<sup>5</sup> A good basis for this claim is provided in the chapter titled »Kierkegaard's Ethics of Love and Incarnation« in Slootweg 2009. However, this thesis is actually one of the main points of my whole article. The present article as a whole (including the references to Kierkegaard's own texts in it) is the "evidence" for it. I can't quote some particular locus from Kierkegaard's opus where he (more or less) literally claims this. But if we take into account Kierkegaard's central concepts, ideas and views this thesis (or interpretation) makes sense. I add the reference to Slootweg's essay only as additional information that also some other (respectable) authors share this account about this general moral that we can draw

Nazi and Stalinist societies. Their deeper origin can be understood exactly by means of Kierkegaard's concepts as has been convincingly shown by Bellinger. Anxiety before the good is the essence of what Kierkegaard names demonity. Anxiety before the evil is the essence of the attitude which Bellinger felicitously names pharisaic although Kierkegaard himself didn't use this term. Both demonity and pharisaity are potentially more or less violent. Therefore we may speak about demonic or pharisaic violence.

When we are anxious we have – according to Kierkegaard – fear of what we desire and we desire what we fear. Anxiety is “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy” (Kierkegaard 1980, 42).<sup>6</sup> God calls man to become a self that is an active synthesis of opposites: finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, freedom and necessity etc. Sin is despair (cf. Kierkegaard 1985). Despair is not allowing the synthesis to be realized. It is an active avoidance of becoming a self. On the other hand the way of faith is to allow that these polar oppositions coincide in one being. Hence the opposite of being in sin is being in faith (cf. op. cit.).

**2.1. Kierkegaardian Interpretation of Nazism.** The essence of the demonic way of being is the anxiety before the good. A demoniac is pervaded by fear and dread before redemption which God offers in Jesus Christ. A demoniac is closed in herself and reluctantly discloses herself. That is why a demoniac is – according to Kierkegaard – unfree because for Kierkegaard freedom is constant communication and the word is what redeems.<sup>7</sup>

A demoniac fears foremost her future transformation, becoming a self as she is called by God to become. In order to prevent this she desires to completely control her environment. A social form in which this social panic appears is a deification of state-nation which is a “holy” place of protection before the voice of God. For this reason Kierkegaard claims that the crowd is untruth.<sup>8</sup> Aesthetes can become demonic and if there are enough of them a danger of a demonic society appears. When an aesthete becomes demonic the solipsism in the root of the aesthetic stage shows its real character as refusing of ethical responsibility. The Nazis are instances of the aesthetic way of existence. Nazism was a refusal of the Western liberal political philosophy in favour of the return to pre-Christian Germanic primitivism.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the relationship between Nazism and Christianity we should point to Freud's ascertainment that Nazi's hate toward Jews at the bottom is nothing else but their hate toward Christianity (cf. Freud 2013, loc. 1529-1533).

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from the Kierkegaard's opus as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> Anxiety is strange power which grasps an individual. The individual can't get rid of it and at the same time she also doesn't want this. Cf. Kierkegaard 2012, loc. 1010-1013.

<sup>7</sup> The demonstration of the meaning of language, communication, openness and expressing in Kierkegaard is an essential part of the Hall's (1985) excellent explanation of Kierkegaard's conception of good, freedom, evil, sin, demonic life, life of faith, and his convincing demonstration of how unfounded the reproaches of individualism – addressed to Kierkegaard – are.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard 1962, pp. 113, 115.

<sup>9</sup> This claim fits well famous Heine's analysis of the German “spirit” (from his *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*) according to which its Christian element prevents it to give birth to barbarism beyond all comparison. For Heine's view see Kossoff 1983, especially pp. 125-126.

In the case of Nazism we deal with the refusing of the ethical sphere of existence. People transferred their moral responsibility to the demonic aesthete Hitler. The German state was thus left without conscience. Instead of conscience the thinking of German people was controlled by demons like “blood”, “soil”, “race” and “fatherland” (8: 4).<sup>10</sup>

According to Kierkegaard the root of sin is lack of inwardness. This lack produces extermination of the spirit and exactly this is the essence of the demonic because human spirit is created by God to be in a relationship with the eternal. Inwardness is thus the eternity in man. The anxiety before the eternal is the demonic. The voice which speaks “Did you come to destroy us” (cf. Lk 4:34) is an immature self. For Kierkegaard a demonic man is a man whose first priority is to “protect” himself of God’s mercy which is seen by an immature self as a “destructive” power. In her effort to evade the mercy a demonic personality tries to become a god of her universe. As her own god such a person defines good and bad as she herself sees them and tries to rearrange the whole world for her preservation.

A demonic person is afraid of future and tries to avoid the pain implied by spiritual growth. The society of demonic aesthetes yearns for a leader who will make it possible for them to avoid the “future” (8: 7-8).

If you want to mobilize a crowd it is crucial to give it an enemy against whom the crowd will fight and try to kill, i.e. destroy him. This was totally clear to Hitler. The immature aesthetes search for the draining for their resentment, wrath, indignation, violence that is present in them. The leader only gives them what they want. From the statements of the Nazis we can understand that the key element of the program of the Nazi’s violence was to proclaim the Jews as incurably evil or harmful (8: 9). Hence they simply had to be exterminated.

Those who held their “enemies” as incurably corrupted express by this a firm commitment to maintain their own so far existing form of existence. A society which consists of such people creates a utopian ideology about certain social group which allegedly can’t be included. The motor of political violence is thus an internal alienation of people from the eternal, spiritual, from God. Such a society was also the Nazi society which was a society of demonic aesthetes (8: 10).

Demonic aesthetes want to protect themselves from their “shadow”<sup>11</sup> which is not the shadow of their past but the shadow of their future. There is a need developed in them to attack their “shadow” as an external object. They look for scapegoats which are by their own subconscious represented as themselves as mature persons. If in a society there are enough of such aesthetes who hide from their own future then the central characteris-

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<sup>10</sup> Bellinger’s book from 2001 *The Genealogy of Violence* is accessible also at Oxford Scholarship Online. I used this version (accessed February 24<sup>th</sup> 2013). When I refer to this book I use the following enumeration: the first number in brackets means a chapter in the book, the number after the semicolon refers to the number of page in this chapter in the PDF version of the book at Oxford Scholarship Online. Whenever there is alleged no name of the author and year we are dealing with the reference to the mentioned version of the book.

<sup>11</sup> »Shadow« – in the meaning of the word as it is used by Bellinger – refers to I, me, myself as changed by the response to the call of God. Cf. Bellinger 1992.

tics of such society becomes identification and killing of scapegoats. The society becomes an aggregate of depersonalized individuals who avoid the possibility to become a true individual before God and for this reason kill the scapegoats. And this killing of the “other” is actually the manifestation of basic desire of aesthetes: to kill the possibility of their own spiritual growth (8: 10 ff).

**2.2. Kierkegaardian Interpretation of Stalinism.** The essence of pharisaism is the desire to detach one’s own self from the sinful past, to cut, suspend the connection with it. An ethical person (in Kierkegaard’s sense of the term) is aware that she is a member of a societal body to which she bears responsibility and duties which extend in time. She believes that she lives ethically and justly. She experiences herself as an ethically competent person whose maturity enables her to teach and bring up aesthetes to become mature and stable as she herself is (8: 10).

As the aesthetical stage can become a societal principle just as well can be the ethical principle embodied in a society. In the last case we get a society of ethical personalities in Kierkegaard’s sense of the word. They held themselves as better, superior compared to other groups of individuals who – according to their opinion – exist in a less mature way. They can develop a personality structure which Haufniensis from *The Concept of Anxiety* calls “anxiety before the evil” (cf. Kierkegaard 1980, 113ff). As in the case of aesthetes just as well in the case of ethicists anxiety becomes an obstacle or blockade for development of the self, I. In such a case the ethicist wants to control the process of creation by constantly comparing herself with the others who are worse or inferior than she is. It comes to her fixation on the evil of the other. This fixation originates in the ethicist’s fear of her own fallibility, incompleteness, capability for the incorrect, bad, immoral, sinful action. It is a matter of fear of the fact that I am just one of the members of the human race, only a faulty and deficient human who partakes also in the deficiency of her species and society. Bellinger in this sense speaks about the fear of the ethicist as fear of solidarity with the human race (8: 11).

According to Bellinger Stalinism is an example of the demonical form of the ethical sphere of existence. Egoistic, aesthetic individuals must be excluded in order to cleanse society of negative elements and that it can progress towards the utopia. An aesthetic demoniac thus attacks the shadow of her future and an ethical demoniac the shadow of her past. For an ethical demoniac the scapegoat subconsciously represents an immature egoistic person. The killing of it is in fact an answer to her own incompleteness and (moral) fallibility what actually means to her own humanity. An ethical demoniac tries to avoid awareness about her own sinfulness or incapability not to sin (8: 12).

**3. Conclusion.** A part of the evidence supporting KB comes from a recognition that more or less only the persons who have “resorted” to some religion, i.e. spirituality<sup>12</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> The relatively well known examples from the territory of ex-Yugoslavia are a participant in the Titoist massive killings after the Second World War, Serbian Simo Dubajić and a Slovene poet, intellectual and politician Edvard Kocbek. Dubajić later accepted the Orthodox Creed and was (because of this)

were able to speak out (publicly) about their horrible crimes. This is one part of the evidence supporting KB.

Besides that KB offers us an important insight in the difference between Nazism and Stalinism. This is the question which is still nowadays seriously considered by many people. Some of them claim that there is no important difference between the two. Both were the example of a movement which generated a totalitarian regime and caused horrible victims. But some of them – to the contrary – claim that there is an important difference for the communist movements – at least in principle – fought for noble goals while in the case of Nazism already the declared values are unacceptable.

What KB reveals us in this regard is twofold. On one hand we can see that also in the value starting points there are essential similarities. In both cases a group of people was stigmatized as incurably bad and was subjected to horrible, actually genocidal violence. Yet, on the other hand, Stalinism and Nazism are also essentially different in their conservative and “creative” direction respectively. While Stalinism in fact tries to create a new man, Nazism tries to preserve or restore the old one. Therefore from the KB point of view the observation of Stéphane Courtois, the author of the famous *Black Book of Communism*, is not surprising. He noticed that the German society - despite all damage - has still existed also after the fall of the Nazi regime while the Soviet system practically totally ruined the Russian society (cf. Courtois 2007, 136).

KB therefore warns us that we shouldn't too quickly ascribe “avant-gardism”,<sup>13</sup> i.e. the attempt to create a new man, to all totalitarian movements. We may certainly ascribe avant-gardism to communism, but this is questionable already in the case of Fascism (which is according to me not a totalitarian movement or regime), not to mention Nazism. If we follow KB, Nazism is a deeply conservative or, to put it maybe more precisely, restoratively directed movement.<sup>14</sup> At the bottom of the Nazi's “creation” of the new Reich and Nazi man lies restoration which aims to eliminate all forces which have led to the present (modern) situation.<sup>15</sup>

KB is illuminating also regarding the origins of totalitarian ideology. A necessary condition for a totalitarian thought is an opposition to Jesus' doctrine. The key and distinguishing moment of the last is his command that we must love all people, including our

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capable of regret, repentance and public talking about the horrible crimes in which he took a part (cf. Dubajić 2006). A Catholic Edvard Kocbek was one of the first (ex-) members of the Yugoslav communist elite who publicly and with regret and repentance broke the silence about these killings and who also called the then communist powers to confess the guilt. Cf. Pahor & Rebula 1975; Inkret 2011; also Juhant 2010 (the chapter on Kocbek). For some data about the rather bloody Slovene and Yugoslav history under communism see Žalec 2012.

<sup>13</sup> The term *avant-gardism* was used by Tzvetan Todorov who seems to be one of those who consider avant-gardism as the key element of totalitarian ideology Cf. (Todorov 2012, 35).

<sup>14</sup> This is another point where we can see how the goals of Nietzsche (for instance re-evaluation of all values, super-man etc.) differs from the Nazi's ideals.

<sup>15</sup> The already above mentioned (cf. n. 9) Heine's analysis of German »spirit« and anticipation of Nazism is compatible with this.

enemies. The love toward a being implies the desire for the existence of this being, not for her death, neither physical nor social.<sup>16</sup> Therefore an in-culturation and co-existence with other cultures – and not their destruction – is an essential and crucial element of the genuine Christian approach to the other.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the characteristic of totalitarian movements is that they carry out genocide against groups that play the role of a scapegoat.<sup>18</sup>

Nazism and Stalinism are not only political phenomena. They are rather also strongly religiously marked phenomena (8: 14). Without taking into account their religious aspect we can't understand them properly. KB is an important contribution to this account. Gandhi<sup>19</sup> wrote, in his autobiography (1987), that the one who claims that religion and politics are two separated things, doesn't have the slightest idea neither about politics nor about religion. I think that the same is true for democracy and violence. The depth origins of politics and violence are of (anti)religious and (anti)spiritual nature respectively. Also Kierkegaard's intellectual heritage offers support for arguing in favour of this hypothesis, for its deeper setting and understanding.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> That the essence of genocide is social – rather than physical – death was convincingly argued by the American philosopher Claudia Card (2010). See also Žalec 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Therefore we should be very careful and prudent – in the light of findings of KB – in relation to initiatives also in Christian circles themselves which (too) strongly stress the need for some kind of restoration, need for restoring some past relationships, criteria, social hierarchies etc.

<sup>18</sup> A contemporary philosopher – who deals with violence – associates immediately the term *scapegoat* with the work of René Girard. One of the tasks for the researchers of Kierkegaard's and Girard's opus (where there is still a lot of work to do) is a comparative analysis of both thinkers. Some part of it has been already done by Bellinger himself (1992, 2001, 2008, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> For the comparison of Gandhi's and Kierkegaard's conception of love see Gabriel 2011.

<sup>20</sup> I presented the drafts of this article on several occasions: at the symposium on Kierkegaard in Ljubljana in June 2013, at the conference on genocide and suicide in Celje in November 2013, at my lectures at BISLA in Bratislava in December 2013 and at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in March 2014. I thank for the questions and remarks from the public on those occasions. However, my special thanks for their comments of the versions of this text go to Mark Kleymann and Vojko Strahovnik.

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