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# Offensive Revelation: Reason Leading to Faith

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern theologians have regularly wrestled with the relationship between reason, revelation, and faith. Immanuel Kant elevates reason so that it that will reach nearly any knowledge available through revelation, while Friedrich Schleiermacher attempts to divide reason from faith, making religion thoroughly subjective and thereby removing it from the judgment of reason and sparing it from harsh criticisms. More recently, process theology and movements to demythologize the Scriptures have sought to bring revelation into conformity with reason, discarding what cannot fit and moving faith to a subsidiary role.<sup>1</sup>

Many might place Søren Kierkegaard in a similar camp. Indeed, some have argued that Kierkegaard makes both reason and faith subjective to such a degree that they lose any ability to criticize each other or revelation. Reason in particular is left without a place—faith stands alone, unevaluated and unjustified.<sup>2</sup> While some passages of Kierkegaard

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard himself mentions these impulses among his contemporary theologians. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 41. Unless otherwise noted, all references are from this work.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Rose, *Kierkegaard's Christocentric Theology*, 31. See also C. S. Evans, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith," 347–62.

may be read this way, a more compelling case can be made for another vision of reason, revelation, and faith.

In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard presents an essential connection between all three of these concepts.<sup>3</sup> He argues that faith emerges in a man when his reason apprehends revelation in the form of the God-man, but, rather than being offended, he believes. In order for faith to occur, man's reason must encounter revelation.<sup>4</sup> In this encounter, reason apprehends some of the truths of revelation but is unable to account for it as a whole. The paradox of revelation, which Kierkegaard centers on Christ as the God-man, cannot be accounted for by reason. Indeed, it is offensive to reason. This point of offense is essential for Kierkegaard because it is from this point that faith emerges. When reason has grasped the revelation of God to the point of realizing the impossibility of revelation becoming fully comprehensible to reason, man is left with a choice. On the one hand, he can agree with the offense to reason and reject revelation, rejecting the God-man and accepting only those parts of revelation that he can rationally account for, making all other aspects either conform or disappear. On the other hand, he can embrace by faith what he has come to by means of reason, the paradox and offense of revelation, acknowledging reason's limitation and going forward in faith seeking understanding. Only by coming to grips with this offense and embracing it can faith emerge.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Limiting my argument to this work avoids the dangers of confusing different pseudonymous points of view. While *Practice in Christianity* is itself pseudonymous, it was published after Kierkegaard's acknowledgment of his different pseudonyms and with his own name attached to the work as editor. I will therefore treat this work as at minimum a point of view he is arguing for, if not his own position, which I think more likely. For a more extensive conversation regarding Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and their role in his writing, see Rose, *Kierkegaard's Christocentric Theology*, as well as Edward Mooney, "Pseudonyms and 'Style,'" 191-210.

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that anyone who lacks the rational capacity cannot possibly have faith, but merely sets forth how faith occurs in those who have such a rational capacity. The faith of the mentally handicapped is not, I think, a matter revealed by Scripture nor one Kierkegaard addresses, leaving such matters to the mystery of God's providence.

<sup>5</sup> While it is hardly groundbreaking to discuss Kierkegaard's thought on reason and faith, my own research found most of the articles concerned with arguing either that Kierkegaard saw faith as opposed to reason or countering that claim and arguing that faith and reason were not mutually exclusive for him. I did not find any work arguing that in Kierkegaard's view, faith is not possible without reason, for without reason there can be no possibility of offense. If anything can be said to be truly original in this paper, it would be that claim.

### NECESSITY OF REASON

Reason plays a key role in generating faith, because of both its power and also its limitation. This point may be missed in *Practice in Christianity* because of the negative way Kierkegaard regularly speaks of reason, but this should not confuse the reader. While Kierkegaard may be more concerned with pointing out reason's limitations, he still acknowledges its uses, even the uses of those limitations.

The great failure of reason, in Kierkegaard's discussion, is its inability to understand Christ as fully God and fully man. Reason can of course acknowledge that Jesus Christ was a man, and from there, judging by his works and his impact on future generations, judge him to be a great man.

But what does that demonstrate? At most it can demonstrate that Jesus Christ was a great man, perhaps the greatest of all. But that he was—God—no, stop; with the help of God that conclusion will surely miscarry. [...] If we begin in the first way [assuming Christ was a man], we cannot, without somewhere or other being guilty of a μεταβάσις εἰς ἄλλο γένος [shifting from one genus to another], suddenly by way of a conclusion obtain the new quality, God, so that as a consequence the result or results of a human being's life at some point suddenly demonstrate that this human being was God. (27)

Kierkegaard argues that one cannot reason his way from Jesus as a man to Jesus as God. No amount of evidence will allow for such a shift in categories. He goes on to say, "If God and man resemble each other to that degree [as close as two different animals], if they are to that degree kindred, consequently essentially within the same quality, then the conclusion 'ergo it was God' is humbug; for if to be God is nothing else than that, then God does not exist at all" (28). Such reasoning will not serve. One can either believe Christ is God or not, but that conclusion cannot be demonstrated by reason, no matter how many centuries of evidence pile up. He even goes so far as to say that it is blasphemy to attempt a historical demonstration of this truth (29–31).

Note, however, what Kierkegaard has done. He has used reason to demonstrate the limitation of reason. Reason has been essential to his argument. It is reason that bars Kierkegaard from leaping from a great

man to deity. It is reason that tells him no matter how many thousands of years pass, no matter how many people are impacted by Christ's life, this evidence will never be sufficient for reason to demonstrate that the man Jesus was in fact God.<sup>6</sup> This is the paradox of revelation, without which there is no offense, but without which there can be no faith. Reason, therefore, is necessary to achieve faith, for without it there will be no rational apprehension of the offense of Christ and the resulting possibility of faith.<sup>7</sup>

### **CHRIST AS REVELATION**

All of this discussion, as is apparent, revolves around Christ as the revelation of God. Reason gives one access to the Scriptures that speak about Christ and communicate his words, bringing the paradox of the self-revelation of the God-man to the fore. Christ is the impossible paradox for reason, but he is also the object of faith.<sup>8</sup>

For Kierkegaard, there is no Christianity without Christ—he is its core. He is the object of faith or offense, the point at which reason ends: “Jesus Christ is the object of faith; one must either believe in him or be offended” (12). As man can no longer encounter Christ walking on the earth, he must encounter him by reason in the revelation of Scripture in order to come to the point of offense or belief. Nor is this a false dichotomy between offense and belief for Kierkegaard. There are no other options. Reason and the offense of revelation must coexist for faith to occur. Without them, there is no Christianity: “For this is the law: the person who abolishes faith abolishes the possibility of offense [...] and the person who abolishes the possibility of offense abolishes faith. [...] But whether faith is abolished or whether the possibility of offense is abolished, something else is also abolished: the God-man. And if the God-man is abolished, Christianity is abolished” (143–4).

### **DIFFERENT KINDS OF OFFENSE**

But with what kind of offense is Kierkegaard so concerned? He divides the offense of Christ into three categories: the offense of the man against the order, the offense of the divinity, and the offense of the manhood. The first of these is distinct in that it is not unique to Christ, nor does it have to

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<sup>6</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 126.

<sup>7</sup> F. Russell Sullivan, *Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Rose, *Kierkegaard's Christocentric Theology*, chapter 1.

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do with his person as the God-man. It is rather the offense that he caused by questioning the established order, an offense many individuals have caused throughout history. The lone individual has set himself above the status quo.

Kierkegaard provides two scriptural examples of this offense: Matthew 15:1–12 and Matthew 17:24–27. In the first case, the Pharisees challenge Jesus for transgressing the traditions of the elders, specifically hand-washing before meals. Christ chooses deliberately to cause this offense and defends his actions, thereby causing offense to the Pharisees, who have deified their traditions (to use Kierkegaard's language) (86–92). In the second case, Jesus actually avoids offense, paying a tax, but doing so by procuring the money through miraculous means. In both cases, the offense or possibility of offense comes through Christ standing against the established traditions, and in both cases, either through his interpretation or through his means of payment, Christ indicates that he is not merely a man, but these offenses are not fundamentally with Christ as the God-man (83).

Kierkegaard readily admits that anyone could cause the offense of the man against the order (85). Because of the common nature of this kind of offense, Kierkegaard categorizes it as the historical offense of Christ, rather than the essential offense. Furthermore, such an offense ceased to be possible with Christ's death: "We proceed now to the real offense, which is related to the God-man. The possibility of the offense in relation to Christ about which we have spoken is a historically vanishing possibility about that vanished with his death, that existed only for his contemporaries in relation to him, this individual human being" (94). The historical offense is therefore of less concern as it is no longer possible and therefore can no longer create faith.

The other two forms of offense, however, do not cease with Christ's death. These two enduring offenses, the essential ones, are the offense at the divinity of Christ and the manhood of Christ. If the humanity of Christ is accepted, then people will be offended by a man claiming to be God. If the deity of Christ is accepted, then people will be offended by God taking up such a lowly estate, becoming a single human, and suffering unto death (103).

Matthew 11:6 provides Kierkegaard's first example of the first kind of offense, offense at Christ's deity. John's disciples come asking

about Jesus, and he responds by pointing to all his miracles, thereby indicating his fulfillment of prophecy concerning the messiah. He concludes, "blessed is he who is not offended at me" (Matt. 11:6). It is significant that Christ points to demonstrable evidence when this inquiry is made. One might think that this contradicts Kierkegaard's argument, but it does not. This evidence is not sufficient for reason to come to the conclusion that Christ is God. Christ's own words, "blessed is he who is not offended at me," prove that whatever the demonstration of miracles proved, it was not sufficient for reason to come to such a conclusion (26). Rather, these miracles, this evidence, these demonstrations were sufficient to bring someone to the point of offense (96). Without reason here, there would be no possibility of offense, and therefore no possibility of faith. This evidence, and the inherent claim Christ makes through his fulfillment of prophecy, confronts people of all times and places: "will you believe or will you be offended" (96).

The second example comes from John 6 when Christ proclaims that the disciples must eat of his flesh and drink of his blood to inherit eternal life. He asks, "does this saying offend you?" (John 6:61). While there is no response given, the answer is clearly yes, for a few verses later it says that many of his disciples ceased to follow him because of this statement. They accepted Christ as a man, even a great man, but they could not accept him as God. Notably, Christ turns to the remaining disciples and asks them if they too wish to leave. Peter responds, "[w]here else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). He does not say that he understands. He does not say that reason has made plain to him the truth of what Christ claims. To the contrary, it seems clear he does not understand, but he believes. He has come to the point of offense at Christ's divinity, the point at which his reason is offended, a point at which many have left, but he remains with Christ out of a faith that is born of reason's offense.

Christ offends some with his claims to divinity, but others he offends through his manhood. I say manhood rather than humanity because Kierkegaard is very explicit that it is not merely God joining with humanity that offends. That might be explicable (49). Rather, it is God becoming a particular man that is offensive. One man is such a small, particular, and limited thing, who will undergo such hardships and limitations. How can God become that?

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The best illustration of this chosen by Kierkegaard is Matthew 26:31–33 when Jesus warns his disciples that, “this night you will be offended by me” (Matt. 26:31). Peter, of course, denies this. Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, witnessed the transfiguration, and more than any of the other disciples had come to grips with the deity of Christ, but the human suffering of Christ, the death and betrayal, he was not able to accept. If Jesus is God, he cannot have come to die, but to conquer and rule. Even in the garden, Peter still wants to fight: “The disciples who had believed in his divinity and in that respect had passed by the possibility of offense by becoming believers come to a halt at lowliness, at the possibility of offense implicit in the God-man’s suffering entirely in accord with being only man” (105). If reason accepts the deity of Jesus, it then stumbles over his being a man, and again the offense of the revelation of Christ to man’s reason bars the way. Only faith can proceed.

#### EXAMPLES OF OFFENSE

These biblical passages ground the theological origin of Kierkegaard’s argument, but he also spends several pages giving hypothetical illustrations of how men are offended by Christ. These illustrations contribute valuable insights into Kierkegaard’s understanding of reason leading to the point of decision and thus to either faith or offense. In each case, reason has revealed truths about Christ and attracted these examples to him, but the paradox of the God-man is rejected, and reason cannot make sense of his person and deeds. Reason is offended and faith rejected.

Kierkegaard begins with the sensible man. Unlike all the other figures, this one gives five speeches rather than one. This character is emblematic of reason coming to grips with the person of Christ but unable to move past the point of offense. This character is in fact named “the sagacious and sensible person,” denoting his consistent and skillful use of reason and common sense. In his first speech, this man lauds Jesus for being extraordinary and having incredible insights into the human heart. His reason has revealed this to him. Yet when he continues on the path of reason, he stumbles. Such a wise and perceptive man like Jesus should be “haughtily and domineeringly keeping people from himself at the distance of profoundest servility.” Instead, he has made himself, “to be accessible to all or, more correctly, to go himself to everyone, to associate with everyone, almost as if being the extraordinary meant to be the

servant of all" (42). His reason cannot justify Christ's greatness, which is at least partially evident to reason, with his compassion. The sensible man laments, "this is no way to get ahead in the world," concluding, "it would never occur to me to join him" (42–3). The reasonable man has recognized some greatness, but he rejects the deity immediately as out of the question and then cannot account for Christ's actions. Reason fails him, and he remains with reason and does not follow.

In the second speech, the man again rejects "this sheer madness that he considers himself to be God" at the very beginning. This time, however, his reason trips him up in the long term planning of Jesus rather than his compassion. He says, "If one wishes to be assured of popular favor in the long run [...] one must behave differently. It will not be many months before the crowd is tired of someone who is at its service this way" (43). He gives too freely and too easily, the people will have their fill of him and what will he do then? He is without a job or home or plans. Such a life simply does not make any sense, and the sensible and sagacious man concludes, ironically, "To join him—no, thanks, thank God I certainly have not gone crazy yet" (44).

In the third speech, reason stumbles over its cousin wisdom. The sensible and sagacious man desires to cull the wisdom of Christ but avoid becoming his follower or acknowledging his deity: "This much I certainly do perceive, that there is something very profound in what he says—the only trouble is that he is the person he is" (44). Reason acknowledges the insights but wishes to cut those insights off from their source, the person of Christ—and anything that is not compatible with reason, such as Christ's divinity. The reasonable man desires the wisdom of Christ, but on his own terms.

The fourth sagacious and sensible problem with Christ is what he works to achieve: "That someone pushes his way through the crowd to reach the place where money, glory, and honor are dished out—that is understandable. But to push oneself to the front in order to be whipped publicly—how sublime, how Christian, how stupid!" (45). Jesus goes through such great labors and endures such hardships. Other men have endured similar challenges, but for goals that reason could understand—money, glory, honor. Christ lifts his terrible burden and endures hardship without any of these motives. Reason cannot account for it.

Finally, reason appeals to the judgment of time. If the results of Christ's life were known, a hundred or a thousand years from now, long



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after he is dead, then a reasonable man might come close to following him. The question of deity would still have to be set aside, but at least then reason would allow an approximation of discipleship: "Then I just might come very near to, very close to, becoming his follower" (46). In many ways, Kierkegaard uses this final speech to represent many of his contemporary Christians who have the benefit of time that convinces their reason of the greatness of Christ but still leaves them short of his divinity.

These five speeches illustrate the common man's reasonable objections to Christ. Kierkegaard goes on to present five more, these from specific members of society: a clergyman, a philosopher, a statesman, a solid citizen, and a scoffer. The clergyman grasps the importance of the expected one, the man who is coming to set all things in order. However, he cannot accept this revolutionary outsider. Rather, the expected one must come from within the established religious order: "He will recognize the established order as the authority, will summon all the clergy to a convention, present to it his achievements, together with his credentials—and then if in balloting he has the majority he will be accepted and hailed as the extraordinary that he is: the expected one" (47). The expected one must be sufficiently demonstrated to the clergy's reason, chosen in a rational, democratic manner. He cannot come from nowhere, overturn the clear boundaries and established system that has been the foundation of religious order. That is madness. He must come from the established order, out of it, created by it. The clergyman cannot accept that the expected one is greater than the order and that his greatness precedes and has nothing to do with this system. His reason cannot accept that.

The philosopher immediately rejects the coarseness, the unsystematic nature of Christ's preaching, for Christ lacks the training of a true philosopher. Most of all though, he objects to the particularity of Christ's claim to be God: "But even if the madness that *he* considers himself to be God is disregarded, it is an incomprehensible mistake [...] to think that God could reveal himself at all in the form of an individual human being. The human race, the universal, the totality, is God, but the race certainly is not any particular individual" (49). The philosopher imagines something grander for God. He can accept a unity between divinity and humanity, but only if it conforms to his vision of God. God would not be constrained by a single incarnational moment. One breathing, sweating, eating, drinking man could not be God-made-flesh.

No, the whole human race might be God, but the particularity of Christ being God, that the philosopher rejects as absurd.

The statesman is concerned not with the philosophy of Christ but with his power and his political aspirations. Will he destroy the current political system? Side with one party or another? That is what he wishes to know. He concerns himself with power, obtaining it for himself, using it, and not being crushed by it. Christ, of course, is very powerful, but foolish, in the statesman's eyes because he expends such power without gaining anything. He achieves no final end; he offends every party. Inevitably he will burn out. This is not the rational way to handle power, using it without any hope of a return on investment. The statesman will therefore avoid Christ, do nothing, and wait for Christ to destroy himself (49–50).

The solid citizen desires certainty and stability for himself and his family. He wants something that can be relied upon, counted on. The beggars and the idle, they chase after Christ for his miracles, but a sensible man looks for moderation. He keeps his sons from joining such rabble, lest his legacy be destroyed. No one of reputation or dignity speaks well of Jesus, only the lowly — and he wishes to have no part of that crowd (50–1).

The scoffer takes a more ironic line. This common, ordinary man claims to be God? Well then, if being ordinary is what it means to be God, then we are all gods, and no one can contradict us. He sees such a statement as laughable fun, not even worthy of the intellectual engagement that the other men have entered into. His words are worth a good laugh, but they are obviously preposterous, clearly counter to all reason (51–2).

In every one of these ten cases, the sticking point is the God-man, Christ's claim about who he is. In every case, this is rejected, and the resulting demand to conform to reason leaves every speaker offended at Christ. He is not reasonable; he does not conform to the way power, love, wisdom, or dependability function. He is uncertain and unconventional. He is offensive, and the offense has not been accepted.

## **BELIEF**

Reason is necessary to bring one to the point of offense so that one can acknowledge the supra-rational nature of the revelation that is the God-man. Kierkegaard gives several examples of this offense remaining in men and causing them to abandon Christ or conform him to their sense of

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reason. But there is another alternative, the acceptance of the offense that leads to faith.

Kierkegaard is very explicit that this faith can only occur in the midst of the possibility of offense. It cannot be generated in any other way: "But the possibility of offense in relation to Christ *qua* God-man will continue until the end of time. If the possibility of this offense is taken away, it will mean that Christ, too, is taken away, that he is made into something different from what he is, the sign of offense and the object of faith" (94). Without the offensiveness of Christ, there can be no faith, and without reason coming to grips with the revelation of the God-man, there can be no offense.

For faith to occur, then, a man must follow the same course as the examples of Kierkegaard, the men who ended in offense. The believer must come by means of reason to the paradox of Christ, where reason can go no further: "All human understanding must come to a halt in one way or another [the high offense or the low], must take umbrage—in order then either to be offended or to believe" (105). This is the conflict which in so many cases resolves in offense.

For it to resolve in faith, the man must come to the same place, but move past it. He must come to the point of offense but pass through it to belief (97–8). "They do not offend the true Christian, of course, for he believes. But in order to become a believer he must have passed by the possibility of offense." (99). Accepting the limitation of reason, the impossibility of rational demonstration, and instead accepting Christ in faith as the God-man who is made known by means of reason but does not conform to it: this is the step of faith. Kierkegaard laments that few Christians in his day truly come to this possibility of offense, and therefore few truly believe.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Kierkegaard's reverence for reason may pale in comparison to some of his contemporaries, and at times may seem to dismiss it entirely from Christian life, but this is an exaggeration. As this paper has demonstrated, reason plays an essential role. Without reason's apprehension of revelation, there could be no possibility of offense. Only with the

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Ben Simpson, *Truth Is the Way: Kierkegaard's Theologia Viatorum*, 34–5.

application of reason to the revelation of the God-man can one realize the offensiveness of Christ's claims. Reason cannot, though, take the next step by itself and must instead give way to faith. Reason is a necessary prerequisite for faith, but not sufficient. Only when the offense to reason is accepted, when Christ is acknowledged as the God-man—not counter to but beyond man's reason—can faith emerge.

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