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Kierkegaard re-contextualized, part II: The agony of Pontius Pilate

Chase Nordengren | Mar. 29, 2012 Young Voices

This is the second in a three-part series examining the theological ideas of Søren Kierkegaard through the work of three contemporary church critics.The first part can be found here[1].

To me, the most memorable voice in the St. John's Passion has always been that of Pontius Pilate. After struggling fruitlessly to undo the inevitability of Christ's death, confronted with the real certainty of executing the world's most innocent person, Pilate is shaken to the core. He is left clinging to one existential question: "What is truth?"
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As we are often reminded on Good Friday, Pilate is a puppet, the local symbol of a government and a society that required Christ dead to avoid losing its own power and influence. Pilate hides his own responsibility for the death of Jesus behind the will of his people and his Caesar.

"Why is it," Kierkegaard asks, "that people prefer to be addressed in groups rather than individually? Is it because conscience is one of life's greatest inconveniences, a knife that cuts too deeply? We prefer to 'be part of a group,' and to 'form a party,' for if we are part of a group it means goodnight to conscience."

Pilate's error, Kierkegaard concludes, is a fundamental failure to recognize that Christ is the truth: more specifically, that Christ's life is testament to the truth and that truth requires participating in that life and experience. Pilate's greatest barrier to unambiguous participation in the truth was the comfort and security of a powerful institution. By Kierkegaard's time, the powerful institution was the Danish church.

The "grand cast of characters" that make up the clergy, along with their "complete inventory" of buildings and sacred objects work well, Kierkegaard argues, only when an authentic Christianity is present in the hearts of believers. If the faith of the people is weaker, however, these objects merely create the false impression of faithfulness: "The illusion of a Christian nation, a Christian 'people,' masses of Christians, is no doubt due to the power that numbers exercise over the imagination."

"He who by preaching Christianity wins honor and prestige is a liar, a deceiver, who at one point or another has falsified the truth," he writes.

The official church's history, Kierkegaard wrote, "is one of alienation from God through the gradual strengthening of appearance ... the progressive removal of God ... by a monstrous doctrinal system, with an incalculable host of preachers and professors."

In *Insurrection*, author Peter Rollins argues that a return to the truth of God can only come from a "pyro-theology," a revived Christianity in which faith and devotion come primarily from the individual and not from the church.

"On the cross we are confronted with God losing the security of God," he writes. The contemporary church, Rollins argues, robs the crucifixion of its truth by imagining the perfect church as an absolutely secure one,

expressing absolute faith in its songs and sermons.

Doubts, for Rollins, are the center of a life of faith. It is entirely possible, he argues, to imagine a church in which every member fails to consider God but remains protected by ritual and structure. Conversely, an authentic Christian ritual would enter into the crucifixion by coming "face-to-face with the transforming trauma of Christ's death" through ambiguity and mystery.

At one point or another, we are each confronted with Pilate's question, "What is truth?" The Christian life is one lived not hiding from that question but confronting it, trying to answer it through lived experience every moment of every day.

"Christ is the truth," Kierkegaard writes, "in the sense that to be the truth is the only true explanation of it; the only true way of acquiring it. Truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition, not a system of concepts, but a life. Truth is not a property of thought that guarantees validity to thinking. No, truth in its most essential character is the reduplication of truth within yourself, within me, within him."

If the reader of John, then, is left uncertain of Pilate's real complicity in the death of Christ, unclear of his place on the spectrum of good and evil, he or she has gained at least a taste of the truth of the cross.

[Chase Nordengren is a graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studies education policy. Among other projects, he edits a set of reflections on contemplative spirituality called "At Once Good and Imperfect" at goodandimperfect.net [2].]

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