

The Problem of Desperation and Christian Spirituality in Kierkegaard

by CORNELIO FABRO C.P.S.

It has been noted of late that there exist significant rapports between the piety and mysticism of Catholicism and the spirituality of Kierkegaard.¹ These rapports cannot be explained away as just mere references to pietism, as a common ground of approach between the two beliefs, but should be attributed to Kierkegaard's direct knowledge of the Catholic sources with which his library is replete.² The problem whether it be possible to trace the influence of Catholic sources in the inner body of his works and thought is harder to solve, not only because Kierkegaard rarely had recourse to direct quotations, but also because it is not easy to distinguish the direct from the indirect sources.

To illustrate this we will treat of the problem that forms the heart of Kierkegaard's spiritual drama and pervades his writings, namely, the problem of sin, with which he deals specifically in his two books entitled *The Concept of Dread* (1844) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849).

For our comparison it is important to note that the question is clearly stated in his *Journals* toward the end of 1847: »A man sins: 1) first through weakness, 2) then through desperation. Herein lies the sin. Herein, therefore, lies also his redemption. A man doubts whether the sin committed through weakness can be forgiven, he thinks all is lost, and thereby sins. Redemption is necessary, therefore, to hold him back.«³ The famous Easter experience of

¹ Cf. G. Scherz, *Alfonso di Liguori og S. Kierkegaard*, Kierkegaardiana III (1959), p. 73 ff.

² See some indications in H. Roos, *Søren Kierkegaard og Katolicismen*, Copenhagen 1952, p. 52 ff.

³ *Papirer*, 1847, VIII A 497. However the first explicit test is: VIII A 64, in which there is still missing the hint to the »doubt« of the remission of sins which unleashed the desperation. The problem of the remission of sins is prevalent in the *Journals* of the time (Cf. VIII A 663, 664, 673).

1848 throws full light upon the autobiographical background prompting the writing of the treatise which, in its subtler though truer sense, is an attempt at confession by Kierkegaard: a confession that only half succeeded because of the Anti-Climacus incident. Here is what Kierkegaard wrote jubilantly on April 19, Wednesday of Holy Week: »N.B. – My whole being has changed. All my secrecy and dumbness have been disclosed: Great God grant me grace!« The text ends: »Holy Thursday and Good Friday were for me veritable days of joy.«⁴ Borne on the wings of this new joy, he seems to catch a glimpse of victory over his melancholy and even toys with the idea of resuming his project of pastorate. But now, on Easter Monday (April 24) the scene change: »No, no, my dumbness cannot be broken . . . I indeed believe in the remission of sins; but in such wise (as he had understood it till then) that together I must bear my punishment all my life, shut in this painful prison of my dumbness, far from all intimate intercourse with men: sweetened, however, with the thought that God has forgiven me. I still cannot scale to the utmost heights of this faith, I still cannot have that candid adhesion up to the point of obliterating my painful remembrance. But by believing I defend myself against desperation.«⁵ For the rest, we have it on the authority of Jacobi, that already in 1844 Kierkegaard had called faith the »category of deperation«⁶ which is indispensable in preventing one's existence from »degenerating into trivialities.«

Now the principle that desperation is a »duplicate sin,« the radical sin, also called the sin against the Holy Spirit, is well known in Christian spirituality. It is found explicitly, for example, in such an ancient mystic as St. John Climacus, for whom Kierkegaard had a special fondness, as his selection of pseudonymous attests. The »real« John Climacus, when treating of the vice of lust, observes that the devil does his utmost to deceive man in this regard: »Our cruel enemy and the author of lust whispers designedly in our ear, telling us that God is good, and that He forgives abundantly such a natural vice. But let us be on our guard against the treachery of the devils, for it is easily ascertainable that they want us to fall into such a lie in order to preach to us a severe and unforgiving God. They act thus to drag us into sin, and then to push us on to desperation. As

⁴ *Papirer*, 1848, VIII A 640.

⁵ *Papirer*, 1848, VIII A 645.

⁶ *Papirer*, 1848, V A 40. Cf. V A 37, but see in particular the wonderful text about »silent desperation« in V A 33 which no doubt refers to his association with his father.

long as we keep ourselves in the state of fear and remorse, we will never yield to committing sin with ease; but without this fear and dread, the devil will again remind us of God's goodness.«⁷

It would be easy to glean a large number of similar citations from spiritual writers, for it deals with a very fundamental question. We must note at once, however, the difference between the theology of Climacus and his modern imitator. The devil is the author of temptation according to John Climacus, but such a devil does not even make an appearance in Kierkegaard's two Works on sin, and he, in fact, purposely excludes him when refuting Luther.⁸ Thus Kierkegaard, who will strongly criticise the reducing of Christ to a »myth« by the Hegelian left, nonetheless reduces to a »myth« the biblical narration of sin in his *Concept of Dread*. A clear confirmation of this is not only the negation of original sin as being something hereditary – since he affirms that every man finds himself in the same condition as Adam – but also the elimination of the »devil's« role in temptation. And if Luther is guilty of exaggeration by making the devil the principal agent of temptation, Kierkegaard, by eliminating the devil altogether, completely nullifies the temptation itself, »since it lacks the suggestion and the illusion of a liberty and independence which the sin envisions and can come only from a superior being.« In the face of modern Protestant-theology (and of modern thought) which »completely ignores the intervention of the devil in the guise of a power standing besides us« as Luther upheld, Kierkegaard, for his part, confines himself to considering the dialectical play of the individual »I« and its liberty.

Kierkegaard could even have read about the doctrine of desperation as a radical sin in St. Alphonsus de Liguori, whom he knew and read from the start at least of 1849.⁹ The Italian mystic, in the works accessible to Kierkegaard,

⁷ *Scala Paradisi*, Grad. XV, 101; Cf. also about this diabolical strategy: Grad. V, 56; Grad VII, 71.

⁸ One of the strongest accusations which K. makes against Luther, on the theological level, is that he is not »dialectical« and to have attributed »sufferings, scruples, annoyances and persecutions, etc.« as only the devil's work *Papirer*, 1854, XI² A 130).

⁹ The first explicit citation from St. Alphonsus is a text regarding the practice of Indulgences and he quotes the German translation: Liguori, *Betrachtungen und Gebetbuch*, Aachen 1840. Cf. N. Thulstrup, *Kierkegaards Bibliotek*, Copenhagen 1957, number 264, p. 38. K. also possessed the German translation of *The Glories of Mary (Die Herrlichkeiten Mariae)*, Bd. 1-2, Aachen 1839; numbers 625-26, p. 52) of which however I did not find any direct traces in his writings.

treats repeatedly the question of desperation, considering it as a sin of obstinacy, but St. Alphonsus never quotes (as far as I can gather) John Climacus. Here are a few illustrations from his book entitled *Preparation for Death*.

1) *CONSIDERATION XVII*, Point I: *Abuse of the Divine Mercy*: »St. Augustine says that the devil deceives men in two ways, *despairing* and *hoping*. After one has sinned, he tempts him to despair with fear of the divine justice; but before sinning he encourages him to sin with hope in the divine mercy. The saint therefore warns: *Post peccatum spera misericordiam; ante peccatum pertimesce justitiam*. Indeed, for he does not merit mercy who uses God's mercy to offend Him. Mercy is had on the one who fears God, and not on the one who uses it in order not to fear Him. He who offends against justice, says Abulene, may have recourse to mercy; but he who offends against itself, to whom shall he have recourse?«

2) *CONSIDERATION XXII*, Point 3: »St. Gregory, commenting on that passage from Job 16.15: *Concidit me vulnere super vulnus, irruit in me quasi gigas*, says: If one is attacked by the enemy and receives but one wound, he can still perhaps defend himself: but should he receive wound upon wound, then his strength will fail proportionately, until he is slain. So is it with sin: after the first and second fall the sinner still has some strength left (understood always by reason of the aid of grace), but should he continue sinning, then sin rushes upon him like a giant: *irruit quasi gigas*.«

The contents of the text agrees in substance with that of Climacus, this being the standard doctrine of Christian spirituality.

The attempts of the theologian, T. Bohlin, to attribute Kierkegaard's doctrine on desperation to the influence of Schleiermacher have been futile and have accentuated the disagreements rather than the agreements between them.¹⁰

A more likable and closer source could have been the impressive theological treatise on sin by Julius Müller; but from what we can gather, Kierkegaard

¹⁰ Cf. T. Bohlin, *Kierkegaards dogmatische Anschauung*, in ihrem geschichtlichen Zusammenhang, Ger. translation 1927, p. 210 ff. Against the positive influence of Schleiermacher on K. see: N. Thulstrup, *S. Kierkegaard: Philosophiske Smuler*, Indledning . . ., Copenhagen 1955, p. XI ff., p. XXXVIII. - C. Fabro, *Dall'essere all'esistente*, Brescia 1957, p. 329 ff.

began reading it only in 1850,¹¹ a year, therefore, after he had written his great masterpiece. Other older and more qualified sources could also be mentioned, such as the mystical writings of Tauler, the *Theologia deutsch*, and still nearer to Kierkegaard's time, the famous *Vom wahren Christenthum* of Johannes Arndt.¹² These works were certainly known to Kierkegaard and are cited by him, but as regards our problem, namely the transition from the (initial) sin of weakness to the (radical) sin of desperation, no mention is made of it in these works (at least as far as I can ascertain), as well as in Müller's work.

It will benefit to recall that, in the development of Kierkegaard's thought, the notion of »desperation« appears as far back as 1839, but only an autobiographical recollection of his association with his father who, in the frequent religious conversations with his son, had already spoken to him of »... a silent desperation.«¹³ It is not yet the formulation of an exact theological concept, which was to emerge later on when he began distinguishing between dread and desperation, but only the »nuclear embryo« – as it were – from which these notions derive. It is interesting, moreover, to note that the autobiographical recollection is confirmed by a citation from St. Gregory the Great, according to whom »... Virum solitarium ubique comitatur acedia ... ut animi remissio, mentis enervatio, neglectus religiosae exercitationis, odium professionis, laudatrix rerum saecularium.«¹⁴ Kierkegaard observes – and it is evident he is referring to himself – that it is from personal experience that St. Gregory insists on the »virum solitarium,« as it is a malady typical to the man who has reached the highest degree of isolation (the humour), and that the »solitarius«

¹¹ Julius Müller, *Die christliche Lehre von der Sünde*, dritte, vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage, Breslau 1849; *S. Kierkegaards Bibliotek*, nn. 689-690, p. 55. It begins to be cited in *Papirer* 1850, X² A 401 ff., anyway in these citations the problem of »desperation« is never mentioned and K. often assumes a critical attitude regarding Müller.

¹² K. possessed the 1777 edition (*K.s Bibliotek*, n. 277, p. 39). In the word index of Lipsian edition of 1764, which I have before me, the word *Verzweiflung* is missing, nor did I find any reference to our problem checking the words *Sünde*, *Teuffel* and *Satan*. Concerning the connections between the work of Arndt and Catholic mysticism (Angela da Foligno, Io. Tauler ...), see W. Koepf, *Johann Arndt*, Eine Untersuchung über die Mystik im Luthertum, Berlin 1912, especially p. 49 ff.

¹³ *Papirer*, 1839, II A 485. – The development of this impression, which had a decisive influence upon the whole life and works of K., may be read in the touching passage of 1844: »The silent desperation. A description« (*Papirer*, V A 33), this paternal desperation forms part and parcel with the famous passages on the »great earthquake« (II A 805–807).

¹⁴ *Moralia in Job XIII* (citation of K.).

signifies not so much the »inactive member of the Church,« he who refuses to make a confession of his sins, but rather the one who cannot make up his mind,¹⁵ that is, the one who cannot decide for himself or make a choice. Desperation, viewed from this purely psychological level, reveals itself by »dumbness«,¹⁶ and is the effect of the paralysing action which sin exercises upon the soul.

The transition of desperation from the state of personal experience to that of the theological concept and to his dialectics of dread-sin-desperation, where sin assumes a central demoniacal function, seems to be a later development, needing new and more accurate theological reflection for effecting the deeper »catharsis« of the spirit and which is one of the main causes for Kierkegaard's more mature literary activity.

In this evolution of the concept of »desperation« from personal experience or psychic »aura« to awareness of responsibility, *The Concept of Dread* (1844) may be considered as constituting the positive moment, insofar as it studies conscience in its state of indetermination, thereby attesting to the real possibility of choice, that is, as constructive liberty or as man's capacity to realize and assert itself.

His more mature book, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), expresses instead this capacity in act, that is, the capacity which man has »to lose himself,« or »to inflict death upon himself.« To be more precise, it is the capacity to cause the »spirit« (*Aand*) which is in man to die. It is the putting of one's own »spirit,« which in itself cannot die (in time), in a »state« of death, that is, beyond and in opposition to its salvific destiny, namely, infinite Love, uniting the »spirit« to the finite and uniting one's »I-ness« to one's *egoism*, to preserve this union forever. This brings Kierkegaard quite close to the best theological tradition (St. Thomas, for example) which puts at the beginning of man's historical existence the original sin and the free (negative) choice of the first man of history, upon whom desperation feeds; and which puts at the beginning of Christianity, as an effective historic reality, the »coming of God in time,« namely, the Incarnation as the free and positive decision of God, a historical

¹⁵ *Papirer* 1839, II A 484.

¹⁶ Cf. in this regard the dramatic comment to Luke 11.14: »And he (Christ) was casting out a devil, and the same was dumb« (*Papirer* 1848, VIII A 514).

fact concerning which every man *must* make a choice: against Lessing and the dissolution of Christianity produced by modern thought and the liberal school of theology.¹⁸

We can say, therefore, that if the dominant idea of desperation appears early in the works of Kierkegaard, it does not find its full evolution until later on, and it indicates a clear departure from traditional theology on sin. By distinguishing two phases in the act of sinning, Kierkegaard affirmed the dialectics of responsibility in a more precise manner, but one which necessitated the still more precise doctrine of liberty, insofar as the soul *by continuing to sin*, is capable of inflicting death upon itself.

Kierkegaard was aware that he was a pioneer, and he wanted to be a pioneer, in the life of the soul, a »spy« of Christianity, in order to lay bare the errors of modern civilization in its march through history, and thereby lead man to the life-giving springs of Christianity.

¹⁷ »Die Freiheit ist eine unerschütterliche Voraussetzung für das ganze Denken Kierkegaards. Durch jene Freiheitsakt entsteht etwas Neues im Dasein. Im »Begriff der Angst« ist diese Auffassung des Menschen das Entscheidende« (T. Bohlin, *Angst, Verzweiflung und Glaube*, Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Sündenauffassung bei Kierkegaard, in »Glaube und Ethos«, Festschrift f. Prof. D. Wehrung, Stuttgart, s. d., p. 143).

¹⁸ This is the point which K. developed above all in his monumental *Efterskrift* (1846) and in the moving *Indøvelse i Kristendommen* (1850) with the smaller writings and the Journals of his maturity.