ON BECOMING A TRANSFORMED CHRISTIAN

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 After reading The Concept of Anxiety and The Sickness Unto Death along with other Kierkegaard works I have come to see sin and salvation in a new light. Sin is not just a theological concept but rather a sense of alienation. Salvation is not only a doctrine but rather an experienced transformation of life. This redefinition is attractive and intuitively appealing to me as it must have been to Kierkegaard too who wrote:

…What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except insofar as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die…what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had no deeper significance for me and for my life; what good would it do me if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized her or not, and producing, in me a shudder of fear rather than a trusting devotion? I certainly do not deny that I still recognize an imperative of understanding and that through it one can work upon men, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing… (Bretall, 1973, p.4)

Once I adopted this stance concerning what it means to “be” a Christian I began to wonder what a transformed person might be like. What I mean by a “transformed person” or “transformed Christian” is someone who is trying to, as Brother Lawrence would say, “practice the presence of God” in their lives in a very personal and experiential way. I wondered how such a person might think, feel and behave. Thus, the topic of this paper emerged. What I will attempt to do in this paper is describe a transformed person using some of Kierkegaard’s constructs as markers by which to contrast a transformed person from a purely intellectual Christian. My goal is to describe a person who Kierkegaard would agree has made his or her knowledge of Christianity and psychology relevant to their own existence.

The first construct I will discuss is that of ontology. According to Kierkegaard, persons are both creaturely and spiritual. Another way he has put it is that persons are, “a synthesis of finite and the infinite.” As such, persons are different from animals that are merely creaturely. Kierkegaard points out that in the animal world the offspring of a species only repeats the characteristics of the species without contributing anything new to the development. In contrast, with humans there begins a new development which constantly creates new elements which in turn alter the race. This is due to the infinite part of persons or their connection with the eternal. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes that the animals are transient, temporal beings whereas humans are destined for eternity.

In addition to being a synthesis of the finite and the infinite and the temporal and eternal, our ontology is unique in that we are free to choose our movements. Kierkegaard has written that “human existence is choice.” Humans are also unique in that we can transcend ourselves. We are self-conscience, responsible agents who become what we are and are what we become. Animals on the other hand are bound to drive and instincts and have no ability to transcend their creatureliness.

This brings us to the following question: How does a transformed Christian relate to his or her ontology? The answer is that a transformed Christian lives according to his or her ontology or true nature. The transformed Christian strives to “be oneself in truth relentlessly” as my former professor, Dr. John Finch once stated. In being oneself there is no pretense before God and no masks. One is simply being transparent to God. This type of person may be called authentic. They are “their own person,” using their freedom to be what they were intended by God to be. They act from their own center, and see reality on its terms. Such a person is no longer isolated and out of harmony with nature. He or she recognizes their dependence on God.

Kierkegaard calls this type of person a “Christian hero.” He writes in Sickness Unto Death: “It is Christian heroism—a rarity, to be sure—to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility (Hong & Hong, 1983, p.xi).”

This person who is living authentically is also unlearning defenses which previously prohibited the authentic self from emerging. These defenses can include things like unreasonable self-expectations, perfectionism, and bondage to other people’s opinions, doormat mentality, and self-hatred to name a few. These defenses all serve to offset and postpone the crisis of self-discovery. Finch has stated, “Being (living in accordance with our true ontology), is like breathing. It takes place naturally unless we do something that gets in the way.” The transformed Christian is one who is able to breathe naturally.

The next construct I will consider is that of anxiety. Finch offers an excellent definition of anxiety based on the writings of Kierkegaard. He believes that anxiety is “the creative directive to be oneself in truth relentlessly.” Anxiety will persist and grow until a more authentic way of living, of being, is chosen. Anxiety is both positive and constructive for it motivates persons to achieve true selfhood. It is a gracious gift from God and cannot be done away with. Kierkegaard has stated, “To have self, to be a self, is the greatest concession made to man, but at the same time it is eternity’s demand upon him (Hong & Hong, 1983, p.344).”

Kierkegaard believed that anxiety comes from an acknowledgement of freedom. It reminds us that we are using our freedom to exclude our drive inward. As my Professor, Dr. Colin Brown has said, anxiety is “our schoolmaster bringing us up to God by teaching us to unlearn our repressions.”

Now to the question of how a transformed Christian experiences and deals with anxiety. First of all, a transformed Christian knows the difference between what could be termed pathological anxiety and what could be termed existential anxiety. The transformed Christian has little pathological anxiety or anxiety about the finitudes as Kierkegaard might put it. He or she is not unduly aroused or disturbed by the circumstances of life. This type of person does not get excessively worried or upset because some situation did not go as well as planned. On the other hand, the transformed Christian does have a healthy sense of existential anxiety. This is the anxiety that reminds the person of their utter dependence upon God for meaning, value, and purpose. It is the anxiety that directs one to become their true self and in doing so to encounter God. Kierkegaard has written that a person who has no anxiety is spiritless. Therefore, the transformed Christian sees this existential anxiety as a friend. Kierkegaard has written in regards to the preceding discussion:

In one of Grimm’s fairy tales there is a story of a young man who goes in search of adventure in order to learn what it is to be in anxiety. We will let the adventurer pursue his journey without concerning ourselves about whether he encountered the terrible on his way. However, I will say that this is an adventure that every human being must go through—to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety. Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate (Thomte & Anderson. 1980, p.155).

 Thus, the transformed Christian knows anxiety well and listens to what the anxiety is saying. By not avoiding the anxiety through the use of cleverly devised defense mechanisms, the transformed Christian retains his or her freedom of action and choice. This person continues to let the anxiety remind him or her that there is more to his or her ontology than the finite. There is also an infinite part that seeks, through the exercise of faith, to ground itself in the creator.

 Next, I will turn to the concept of despair which was thoroughly discussed in The Sickness Unto Death. C.S. Evans has defined despair as “the mood in which the lack of self-hood reveals itself (Benner, 1985 p.623).” He goes on to describe it as a universal human condition though most people are not conscience of it. Despair is a sickness that overtakes those who fail to ground themselves in God. The only cure for this sickness is the passion of faith. According to Kierkegaard despair which is fully experienced becomes a catalyst for the transformed life.

 Becker (1973) sees despair as a misrelation in the synthesis of the finite and the infinite. On one end of the continuum is the person who splits away the self from the body. This person overemphasizes the infinite. Becker describes the full blown schizophrenic as “abstract, ethereal, unreal; he billows out of the earthly categories of space and time, floats out of his body, dwells in an eternal now, is not subject to death and destruction. He has vanquished these in his fantasy, or perhaps better, in the actual fact that he has quit his body, renounced its limitations (Becker, 1973, p.76).” Kierkegaard has discussed this phenomenon in different terms:

Generally the fantastical is that which so carries a man out into the infinite that it merely carries him away from himself and therewith prevents him from returning to himself. So when feeling becomes fantastic, the self is simply volatilized more and more… The self thus leads a fantastic existence in abstract endeavor after infinity, or in abstract isolation, constantly lacking itself, from which it merely gets further and further away (Becker, 1973, p.77).

 On the other extreme of the continuum of despair is the depressive psychosis. It consists of too much finitude, “too much limitation by the body and the behaviors of the person in the real world, and not enough freedom of the inner self, of inner symbolic possibility (Becker, 1973, p.78).” This is how we understand depression today. This type of person feels stuck in a routine without any sense of available alternatives. This person cannot release himself or herself from daily obligations even though the obligations no longer add any meaning to their lives. Kierkegaard has put it this way:

But while one sort of despair plunges wildly into the infinite and loses itself, a second sort permits itself as it were to be defrauded by “the others.” By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself…does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd (Becker, 1973, p.79).

Becker points out that this is an excellent characterization of the “culturally normal” person, the one who dares not stand up for his or her own meanings because this is too scary. For this type of person it is the better to be like the others rather than oneself. It is safer to be stuck in a safe world of social and cultural obligations and duties. Oftentimes people who are experiencing this type of despair make sense out of their situation by seeing themselves as worthless and guilty. Becker points out that in the extreme of this depressive psychosis everything becomes necessary and trivial at the same time—which leads to complete despair. In a sense this person is afraid to make the journey inward to where the true self lies. This person cannot draw the necessary strength to face life. Becker states,”One chooses slavery because it is safe and meaningful; then one loses the meaning of it, but fears to move out of it. One has literally died to life but must remain physically in his world. And thus the torture of depressive psychosis: to remain steeped in one’s failure and yet to justify it, to continue to draw a sense of worthwhileness out of it (Becker, 1973, p.81).”

Most people avoid the extremes of the continuum and take the middle ground of what Kierkegaard calls “philistinism.” The Philistine trusts that by keeping at a low level of personal intensity he or she can avoid being pulled off balance by experience. Kierkegaard described this type of despair as one in which a person “tranquilizes itself with the trivial.”

Kierkegaard also describes person’s who are despairing even though they outwardly look like they are living authentic lives. One of these types he calls the introvert. This type of person tries to cultivate interiority and self-reflection. This person enjoys being alone and is a little more concerned with their uniqueness. But this person is still despairing because they are so concerned with withdrawing from the world that they fail to realize their vocation and talent within the context of the world. Becker writes, “And so he lies in a kind of incognito, content to toy—in his periodic solitudes—with the idea of who he might really be; content to insist on a ‘little difference,’ to pride himself on a vaguely-felt superiority (Becker, 1973, p.83).” Kierkegaard offers an excellent description of the introvert as follows:

…outwardly he is completely ‘a real man.’ He is a university man, husband and father, and uncommonly competent civil functionary even, a respectable father, very gentle to his wife and carefulness itself with respect to his children. And a Christian? Well, yes, he is that too after a sort; however, he preferably avoids talking on the subject…He very seldom goes to church, because it seems to him that most parsons really don’t know what they are talking about. He makes an exception in the case of one particular priest of whom he concedes that he knows what he is talking about, but he doesn’t want to hear him for another reason, because he has a fear that this might lead him too far (Hong & Hong, 1980, p.64).

This brings us to the final type of despairing person. Kierkegaard refers to this type of person as demonic at the extreme. This person tries to be a self-created person, in a sense his or her own God. This person will not be shoved around by others and will not let life get them down. Kierkegaard writes that these people will plunge into life, “into the distractions of great undertakings, he will become a restless spirit…which wants to forget…Or he will seek forgetfulness in sensuality, perhaps in debauchery (Becker, 1973, p.84).” This person is hedonistic, living for the day alone. There is an immersion of the body in sensual pleasures. This person refuses to see any possibility in life. To this person all that is in store is death and decay and so one might as well “live it up” while they can. Becker points out that this type of despair carried to its demonic extreme gives us people like Hitler and wars like Vietnam. These people feel that if they don’t have the power of Gods they can at least destroy like Gods (Becker, 1973, p. 85).

The previous discussion may very well cause the reader to wonder whether or not it is possible for a person to achieve a way of living without despair. In fact, it is impossible for any person through his or her own efforts to avoid despair. As I mentioned earlier, despair must be experienced prior to transformational living. But then the question arises, “How does one move from despair to transformational living?” Perhaps Augustine, a precursor to Kierkegaard answered this question most eloquently when he said, “Thou madest us for Thyself and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee.” Kierkegaard has referred to this as “grounding oneself in the power which constituted the self (Bretall, 1973, p.351).” This grounding is achieved through what Kierkegaard calls “the leap of faith” which will be discussed in more detail shortly. For now I will just say that the authentic and transformed Christian has realized their own inability to truly become the self they were destined to be. This person recognizes that his or her self-hood is a gift made possible by faith in the God in whom all things are possible.

Before I discuss the notion of faith, I will pause to provide a description of the person who has overcome despair through faith. This person is qualitatively different from the types of despairing individuals described earlier in this section. Perhaps Kierkegaard has stated it best: “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests (or, has its ground) transparently in the power that established it (Thomte & Anderson, 1980, p.xvii).” For Kierkegaard this power is God. The God-relation is an ontological quality of the self, apart from which the self cannot fully become itself or have an awareness of itself as a synthesis of the infinite and finite self. In other words, a transformed Christian has found the eternal within himself and is trying to actualize it. This involves a humbling of oneself before God and a desire to rest in God’s grace.

Now I return to the big question, “How does a person move from the mood of despair to a posture of transformed living.” First, anxiety speaks through one’s conscience to reveal to that person his or her condition of alienation. By using the term conscience, I am referring to an ontological or inborn element present in humans that is not to be confused with the Freudian superego, or with any cultural or environmentally socialized characteristics of persons. I am referring to what many Christians might call a “still small voice” from within.

The conscience, via anxiety, reminds a person of their responsibility to be oneself in truth and to fulfill one’s destiny as both a finite and infinite being. This realization implies that one has the freedom to choose. If one refuses to choose, guilt is experienced, not for things done but for whom one refuses to be. Guilt is the condition of alienation and anxiety is the symptom. Refusing to make the choice ultimately leaves one in one of the various states of despair discussed earlier. However, the good news is that through faith one can conquer anxiety and place oneself in the right relation to God. Kierkegaard calls this the “leap of faith.”

But what is faith? Faith is the opposite of sin (i.e. missing God’s purpose for our existence). It is ultimately what enables us to be ourselves in truth relentlessly. Kierkegaard has defined faith as follows: “Faith is the objective uncertainty along with the repulsion of the absurd held fast in the passion of inwardness, which precisely is inwardness potentiated to the highest degree (Bretall, 1973, p.255).” As I understand this definition, the objective uncertainty comes when a person tries to seek meaning and purpose through theological or philosophical systems because eventually they all break down into paradoxes. Even those people who say this is not true are so confusing and inconsistent that their systems are of no use. Furthermore, as systems of objective thought become more and more complex in order to tolerate inconsistencies they begin to drift away from what persons in this world actually experience. Thus, Kierkegaard does not favor a person blindly proclaiming that there is uncertainty in this world. However, as one honestly and with integrity tries to make objective, reasonable and rational sense out of the world one experiences, one will run into several epistemological roadblocks. In short, as one tries to find certainty through the use of human intellectual capabilities one will be left in despair and disappointment.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard does not favor resting content with unintelligibility because he believes we can know truth subjectively. To Kierkegaard it seems absurd that persons would be created unlike the animals with a self-transcendent, free and responsible spiritual nature only to decay and die like the animals do. This would be a terrible joke or a “hoax” as Kierkegaard states.

The “faithing” person refuses to see one’s existence as a bad joke and refuses to be pessimistic about one’s relation to God. The “faithing” person assumes a posture of humility before God, realizing that only a loving God can enable a person to overcome despair and have a true ground for their meaning. The “faithing” person recognizes their guilt and alienation and cries out to God in the abyss. The leap of faith is taken as one symbolically throws their arms in the air and says, “God I need to be grounded in you.” Through this grounding of our spirit in the ultimate Spirit (God) we discover identity meaning and purpose. The “faithing” person develops a sense of awe in the presence of the Divine incognito. Becker (1973) sees this act of faith as the central point of integration between psychology and theology. Becker writes about the “leap of faith” as follows:

…He links his secret inner self, his authentic talent, his deepest feelings of uniqueness, his inner yearning or absolute significance, to the very ground of creation. Out of the ruins of the broken cultural self there remains the mystery of the private, invisible, inner self which yearned for ultimate significance, for cosmic heroism. This invisible mystery at the heart of every creature now attains cosmic significance by affirming its connection with the invisible mystery at the heart of creation. This is the meaning of the merger of psychology and religion in Kierkegaard’s thought (Becker, 1973, p.91).

In conclusion, I would like to add that it is really impossible for one person to know whether another person is a “philistine” an “introvert” a “demonic” or a transformed Christian. What I have described in this paper are the types of meaning filled experiences these various types of people might have. However, one cannot know with certainty the experiences and their associated meanings solely by observing behaviors. As C.S. Evans had stated, all human actions are constituted meaning. The behavior of immersing one’s body in water might represent various meanings. For one person it may be taking a bath, for another going for a swim and for yet another it means the acceptance of the baptism of the living God.

Thus, one can see that the road to transformed living is a very personal one and the criteria for its attainment highly enigmatic. One’s assurance of living authentically can only come from oneself. It is adequate and incomplete to study persons only by their behaviors. Such an analysis tends only to perpetuate the problem of people running from their true ontology by hiding behind culturally acceptable behaviors and attitudes. If Christian counselors are going to be effective in Kierkegaard’s terms, they will have to pay attention to persons as persons. This means not looking at persons as merely experimental variables to be studied but rather to create an environment in which their clients can move ultimately to a place of grounding their spirit in the one, Holy and true Spirit.

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