

## Kierkegaard's God

Professor George Pattison

Sunday 20 February 2011 Trinity College Chapel

In his short life of 42 years, Kierkegaard's published and unpublished writings amounted to 27 large volumes, and most of these were either directly or indirectly concerned with God. This already poses a considerable challenge to anyone asked to talk about Kierkegaard's God for just 12 minutes! But it gets harder. As some of you may know, Kierkegaard relished being called the 'master of irony' and much of what he wrote about God and about religion in general was from the point of view of an idle, ironic scoffer, often published under a pseudonym. So how do we know when it is really Kierkegaard who is talking and not one of his many masks or *personae*? And even when he starts to get serious, he is often more at home mocking the false or childish ways of thinking about God held by many of his contemporaries than saying directly what he himself thinks. For example, he suggests that most people are so materialistic that they would only notice God if he took the form of a giant green parrot with a red beak or a man who was twelve feet tall. They can only conceive of God's greatness in material terms, not spiritually.

But what, then, does it mean to conceive of God spiritually? One way to begin answering this, according to Kierkegaard, is to note that we human beings are ourselves spiritual beings—so we are surely well-placed to know what it is to be spiritual or to think of God spiritually. Unfortunately, living spiritually is not such a simple matter, and one isn't born 'spiritual' in the same sense that one is born blue-eyed or brown-eyed, male or female, short or tall. Being spiritual is, as Kierkegaard puts it, a qualification of inwardness and it is also fundamentally a matter of freedom, of how we relate freely to our God-given possibilities. To think of God spiritually, then, is to think of God in the perspective opened up by our struggle to live as the free and responsible beings we have it in us to be.

Kierkegaard is often referred to as 'the melancholy Dane' and it is true that his writings are preoccupied with what we might call the dark side of life and the afflictions and negativities, the anxieties and depressions, that can afflict human beings in their attempts to become who they are. However, he doesn't focus on these issues for their own sake, but because he observes that we mostly fail to live the open, expansive and free-spirited lives we could be living, oscillating between asking too much and asking too little of ourselves. But even if we are all far from perfect, we do not entirely lose our capacity for living spiritually as long as we

don't give up, as long as we are prepared to go on struggling and go on believing that we are capable of better. In a sense, then, living spiritually is simply struggling to live spiritually, never getting to the end but always being ready to 'start over'.

It is in the context of this struggle to become who we are that we first learn what it means to think of God spiritually. God is not an object of detached interest that might or might not exist out there in cosmic or metaphysical space. As Kierkegaard put it, we can only truly think of God when we are subjectively, passionately, inwardly, interested in what God might mean for our lives, when our own sense of self is at stake in how we picture our God-relationship. To paraphrase a great Catholic writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what Kierkegaard is interested in is simply 'the facts and truths concerning God which are of the most importance in the spiritual life'. So, if we accept that starting-point, how might we think of God? I want to suggest three key 'facts' or 'truths' that matter to Kierkegaard: that God does not change; that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift; and that God is love.

That God does not change is one of the standard tropes of Judaic and Christian faith. God is the eternal, who was, and is to come. 'O thou who changest not, abide with me,' as Christians sing in one well-known hymn, contrasting God's constancy with the 'change and decay' we see in the world.

Kierkegaard himself gives a remarkably vivid interpretation of this idea in a meditation on 'The Unchangeability of God'. 'Imagine a traveller,' he writes, 'who has been brought to a halt at the foot of a great mountain he cannot scale. Yet... everything he wishes and longs for, everything he desires is on the other side. All that is needed is that he gets to the other side. 70 years pass, but the mountain remains unchanged, impassable. Let him live another 70 years and the mountain will remain unaltered, still blocking his path, unchanged, impassable. Perhaps he himself will be altered, and what he once wished and longed for, what he once desired, will no longer matter and perhaps he scarcely knows himself any more. A new generation finds him there, altered, sitting at the foot of the mountain that is itself unchanged, impassable. 1000 years pass, and all that is left of this so alterable man is his legend, but the mountain remains unchanged, impassable. And now imagine the one who is eternally unchangeable, for whom 1000 years are as a day ... No ... as a mere 'Now'—if you want to make progress by any other way than the one he allows—woe betide you!'

For Kierkegaard, this is in one way a terrifying thought. Why? Because such an unchanging God never forgets: he never forgets what you have confessed to him or what you have promised him. He cannot be fooled or bullied into changing his mind or his judgment. He not only sees

you as you are now, but remembers all you ever have been. Face to face with god, there is no hiding place from the reality of who you are. And yet, Kierkegaard says, a spiritual person will *want* a God who is unchanging in this way, since such a person is seeking precisely consistency and purpose in his life and only a God who is truly unchanging can help him do that. For God is not simply a silent therapist. God does not just sit and watch. God gives.

Kierkegaard often said that his favourite scriptural text was from the letter of St James: 'Every good and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, in whom is no change or shadow of turning'. Here too God shows 'no change or shadow of turning', but now this is connected to the fact that God never ceases to pour down upon us what the text calls 'every good and perfect gift'. God's constancy is the constancy of one who wants only what is good for us. Of course, much biblical language and popular piety talks of God's wrath being kindled or of God 'remembering his mercy', as if he had divine mood swings. But Kierkegaard insists that God's goodness towards us is not something that will change or fail or become qualified in some way or other.

Most obviously, Kierkegaard sees God's gifts in creation: 'The fact that you came into the world, that you exist, that "today" you have got what you need in order to exist, that you came into the world, that you became a human being, that you can see—just reflect on the fact that you can see—that you can hear, that you can smell, that you can taste, that you can feel ... is this nothing to be joyful about?' And he drives the point home by poetically evoking the wonder and beauty of each passing season of the year. This is what God is giving us constantly, unchangingly—life itself: is this nothing to be joyful about?' he asks.

But the joy of nature is not the culmination of God's good and perfect giving. Even greater is that we are given the possibility of willing the good. That we have such a possibility, the possibility we call freedom, is not something that simply emerges from our biological or social life: if it exists at all it exists as a possibility we are given from beyond ourselves. As Kierkegaard puts it: 'What is the Good? It is what comes from above ... Where does it come from? From above. What is the Good? It is God. Who is it who gives it? It is God.' Now a secularist might say freedom doesn't need explaining. It doesn't come from above. It's just a fact. Kierkegaard wouldn't necessarily argue, but he might say that if you think like that then you are denying yourself the best and most joyful exercise of freedom there is: giving thanks. To live spiritually with the belief that everything good and perfect in your life is to be received as a gift from God, is to live thankfully and in being thankful towards God we find the freedom also to be thankful towards all who have brought good into our lives, families, friends, passing strangers we'll never see again.

Now, of course, and as Kierkegaard knew as well as anyone, we don't all live thankfully all of the time. Most of us, if we are thankful at all, are thankful only in fits and starts. If God is constant in giving us every good and perfect gift, we are constantly forgetting just what an utterly wonderful and joyous gift our very own life truly is. Preoccupied with our careers or our miseries, we forget to be grateful for what we already have or have experienced. And forgetting that the best we have is given to us, we set about moulding our lives on our own terms, or, more often, trying to do so and failing. In such forgetfulness lie the seeds of all the inhumanity that human beings inflict on each other as they reduce the gift of community to a war of all against all—whether it is a war fought with cluster bombs and depleted uranium or bitter, poisonous, and disingenuous words. In short, what theologians call sin!

But, for Kierkegaard, even the wastage of human powers to which history bears such sobering witness, even the stories of private misery that social services and law-courts deal with day after day, do not deflect God from being the God of love. Where some Christian teachings say that Christ had to suffer and die to placate the wrath of God against sinful human beings, Kierkegaard sees the entirety of Christ's life as simply expressing the true spirit of the God who is love. And, for him, this is never better summed up than in the scene of the sinful woman whose many sins are forgiven because she loved much. This scene shows us with great precision, that God's love is not 'a love whose ardour has cooled because of the ungrateful human race or my ingratitude'. And when Jesus generalizes from the woman's situation, Kierkegaard makes much of the switch to the present tense. Those who are forgiven little are forgiven little because they love little. But in the moment when they begin to try to love more, forgiveness begins. Justice judges us by what we have done. Love judges us by what we are even now trying to make better.

Kierkegaard's God is the God who, unchanging, keeps on giving us the best and most perfect gift of living our lives in love, because Kierkegaard's God is, in the end, himself Love: 'Love is unchanged. Unchanged, it is the same love that lovingly waited for us, that lovingly refrained from reaching a decision about us, forbearing from seeking to divorce us but instead remaining with us. And now it is no longer justice that by way of conclusion says, "They loved little", but it is love that with joy in heaven says, "They loved little, but that was then, now it has changed, now, now they love much"'. If, then, we want to know Kierkegaard's God, we know what we must do.