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Abraham against the Political

Kierkegaard on Nationalism and Duty

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The question of nationalism's relationship to religion is by no means new, but has gained renewed attention within the past few years. In particular, the question of Christian nationalism – a conception and narrative of a nation-state that is connected to the Christian religious tradition[1] – is of general interest for the ways in which Christianity has historically ruled or connected itself to the state. The question of Christian nationalism is concerning in the twenty-first century, given the ways in which political partisanship in the United States has coopted religion as a way of influencing the population in areas such as one-issue voters, textbook debates/bans, and the use of religious language within political slogans.

While Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) precedes current tensions, he, too, was concerned with the ways in which the Christian religion was connected to nineteenth-century Denmark. Although Kierkegaard is sometimes regarded as only opaquely discussing the political, he focuses much of his work on the tension between the individual and the communal, specifically for him the Christian community, which is often referred to as Christendom (*Christenhed*) in Kierkegaard scholarship and used to distinguish his thoughts on Christianity from the failings that he saw in Christian Denmark. While there is less scholarship on the topic of Kierkegaard and Christian nationalism than on his conception of Christendom, Stephen

1. This is a preliminary definition that will be fleshed out later on in the article.

Backhouse's *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism* is a crucial work on the former topic.[2] While Backhouse examines Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole and traces the themes throughout his works, I would like to focus more deeply on the early pseudonymous text *Fear and Trembling* (1843), which contrasts tragic heroes from the knight of faith. The tragic heroes adhere to the ethical *qua* universal and sacrifice their individual moral duty for the good of the nation, whereas the knight of faith disavows the nation entirely for the sake of an individual's obedience to the divine. I argue that the ethical *qua* universal can be taken as the kind of ethical duty that Christian nationalism adheres to, and Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham, the knight of faith, and the religious[3] sphere points precisely to the problems that emerge from Christian nationalism and provides a better way of understanding Christian duty. The failure of nationalism is its attempt to systematize what cannot be explained rationally. On the other hand, Abraham is successful because he focuses on what is most important: to maintain the right relationship first and foremost with God.

The Ethical as Christian Nationalism

Although Kierkegaard does not use the language of Christian nationalism, his concept of the ethical *qua* universal within *Fear and Trembling* fits descriptions and definitions that other scholars have proposed. While Robert Bellah (1927–2013), in his article "Civil Religion in America", does not use the language of Christian nationalism, he pulls at the strings of Christian nationalism, and scholars such as Rhys H. Williams invoke his thinking for their own frameworks. Bellah situates his concept of civil religion in the American context, but some of the theoretical framework can be seen in Christian nationalism writ large. Specifically, he argues, "the answer is that the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension [...] there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share".[4] Regardless of the actual faith or personal beliefs of individuals within a state, there comes to be a shared sort of religion *vis-à-vis* being a citizen or political being of a country. The framework of a political narrative and political

2. Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism*, New York 2011, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199604722.001.0001.

3. I will use the terms "Christian" and "the religious" interchangeably in this article, as Kierkegaard uses "the religious" several times in *Fear and Trembling* but is clearly referring to Christianity, given his statement in the preface that he is concerned with faith in his contemporary, Danish Lutheran age as well as his larger preoccupation with what it means to be a Christian in his authorship overall.

4. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", *Daedalus* 134 (2005), 42, https://doi.org/10.1162/0011526057744314 64.

goals coopts specific religious narratives and language. As Bellah describes, "Europe is Egypt; America, the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all the nations".[5] Even if the actual religion is not taken seriously, the coopting of such narratives is accepted politically.

In "Civil Religion and the Cultural Politics of National Identity in Obama's America", Williams uses Bellah's argument on civil religion and connects it to an understanding of Christian nationalism:

> Although there exists some definitional variation (as with the concept of "religion" itself) the central thrust is clear – civil religion is composed of understandings and practices that treat the sociopolitical collectivity as having sacred dimensions and finds both its collective identity and its history religiously meaningful.[6]

Specifically for Williams, this understanding is connected to "blood" and "land" – blood in bloodlines, but also actual shed blood of the citizenry and land, as in the physical way of binding communal identity to an actual locale.[7] It provides a narrative of who the people are, where they came from, and why they should continue to exist. Philip S. Gorski, who writes extensively on twenty-first-century American Christian nationalism, has a similar approach to Williams on blood and land. Gorski writes:

> I argued that the American version of religious nationalism draws on Biblical discourses of apocalypse and blood conquest. [...] it draws on a Protestant reading of the Jewish scriptures governed by the metaphor of blood: blood conquest, blood sacrifice, blood atonement and blood purity.[8]

Backhouse too provides a definition in his book: "The family or set of ideas and assumptions by which one's belief in the development and uniqueness of one's national group (usually accompanied by claims of superiority) is combined with, or underwritten, by Christian theology and practice."[9] Where nationalism differs from a simple political body or an actual state or

5. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", 46.

6. Rhys H. Williams, "Civil Religion and the Cultural Politics of National Identity in Obama's America", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52 (2013), 240, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12032.

7. Williams, "Civil Religion", 239–240.

8. Philip S. Gorski, "Christianity and Democracy after Trump", *Political Theology* 19 (2018), 361, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1476053.

9. Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique*, xii.

government is that it sets up a shared narrative for the people encompassed by that nation. For Christian nationalism, the religious text is coopted into this narrative and is employed to justify and to sustain nationalism and political rule or regime. Backhouse writes:

> I find "nationalism" to be the best way to describe the ideological tie that binds the disparate elements that contribute to the self-deification of society – claiming for their nation the arbitration of destiny and identity that for the Christian should properly be the domain of God.[10]

All four scholars frame Christian nationalism as the way in which Christian discourse has been drawn into a political framework that seeks to refine its communal and citizen identity using elements of Christian theology.

I choose to use Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* specifically because of the way in which this book illuminates the dangers of the state that coopts Christianity. His focus on the single individual, who stands apart from the Christian community yet remains a Christian, highlights the importance of individual choice and the relationship to the divine as well as the problems that arise when such a relationship with God becomes subordinate to a relationship with the community at large. Secondly, although Kierkegaard does not use the language of Christian nationalism, his analysis of the narrative of Abraham and Isaac centres his thinking squarely on a concern about the national whole. The ideas of the four scholars above are reflected in the key figures Kierkegaard discusses in *Fear and Trembling*: the tragic heroes (Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus) and the knight of faith (Abraham). Each man contributes to nation-building and a national story, one that is built on blood and land. Agamemnon is the legendary hero-ruler for the Greeks, Jephthah saves the Israelites from the Ammonites, Brutus validates the rule of law in the Roman Republic with the execution of his sons, and Abraham is known as the founder of all three major monotheistic religions.[11] Each man is called to sacrifice their child for the sake of their nation. In particular, Abraham is distinguished in the Christian tradition because he is promised by God to become the father of a great nation, the kind of language that the scholars above argue is essential to an understanding of a Christian nation-state. Bellah goes further by saying that "behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes; Exodus, Chosen People,

10. Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique*, 29.

11. While Abraham is also considered the father of Judaism and Islam, the scope of this paper is concerned with Christian nationalism, and Kierkegaard's concern with Abraham is his role within the Christian tradition specifically.

Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth".[12] Generally, Abraham is presented under these archetypes: he is called by God to go into the land that will become Israel, he is promised by God that his descendants will be a great nation, the story of Abraham and Isaac is one of sacrificial death and salvation, and so on.

However, what is most interesting, and why I argue that Kierkegaard is a good resource, is that he flips the understanding of Abraham as a Christian nationalist figure on its head. Instead, Abraham is glorified because he rejects the expectations of Christian nationalism, whereas the other three fall into this trap. He is portrayed as an individual whose faith cannot be understood by anyone else. Such a reading of the biblical text calls into question Christian nationalism and whether Christianity can be associated with the building of a nation-state.

Although Bellah, Williams, and Gorski are concerned with an American Christian nationalism, the descriptions they use reflect the observations Kierkegaard made about his own Danish Lutheran society. Historically, Kierkegaard was very concerned with the connection between the Danish state and the Danish Lutheran church, and his writings reflect his criticism that such a close tie between church and state would be dangerous for the development of Christianity in nineteenth-century Denmark. He directly addresses his contemporary Danish Lutheran society in the preface of *Fear and Trembling*:

> In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further. It perhaps would be rash to ask where they are going, whereas it is a sign of urbanity and culture for me to assume that everyone has faith, since otherwise it certainly would be odd to speak of going further.[13]

Kierkegaard juxtaposes several other narratives, which represent Christian society, with the story of Abraham, whose faith Kierkegaard believes his fellow Danes have lost. Instead, Danish Christianity has become the state religion, and the foundation of Christianity is coopted as an aspect of the national Danish narrative. It becomes not about individual, human faith. Rather, it is about one's identity as a citizen of the Danish state.

Textually, this distinction becomes more apparent. Within *Fear and Trembling*, the ethical is the universal, and the universal is tied directly to the nation. Each tragic hero must choose between his duty towards his child as a father and his duty to his nation as a leader. In each case, they tragically

12. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America", 54.

13. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Princeton, NJ 1983, 7. Danish original in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 4, Copenhagen 1997, 102.

decide to kill their child for the good of the nation. The tragic hero is one that adheres to the ethical *qua* universal and therefore must put aside other, lesser ethical duties for the sake of the universal, that is, for the sake of the nation. As Kierkegaard writes:

> When an enterprise of concern to a whole nation is impeded, when such a project is halted by divine displeasure, when the angry deity sends a dead calm that mocks every effort, when the soothsayer carries out his sad task and announces that the deity demands a young girl as sacrifice – then the father must heroically bring this sacrifice.[14]

Each tragic hero has a duty to their child, but also a duty to their nation, and they all choose their duty to their nation over their duty to their child, moreover actively killing their child. However, each hero is justified because they are following the requirements of the ethical, and each hero is remembered as the hero of their nation for doing so. The tragic heroes represent the ethical *qua* universal, and the ethical sphere of *Fear and Trembling* is a kind of Christian nationalism. The social whole establishes a set of ethical duties that is deemed universal moral law (hence the ethical *qua* universal), and it is specifically set up to establish a political *and* religious narrative. The tragic heroes are heroes because of the way in which they adhere to these moral laws while still sacrificing for the good of the nation. They represent what a good citizen should be: one that sacrifices for the good and well-being of the nation at large.

Although Abraham may seem at first glance to be another tragic hero, Kierkegaard sets him apart as the knight of faith who lives not in the ethical sphere but in the religious. Abraham, the knight of faith, must move out of the ethical *qua* universal and stands alone as the individual. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham does not set aside his personal duty to his son for a greater, ethical demand. Instead, Abraham actually acts against the ethical *qua* universal, and he is praised for doing so. As seen in the Problemata, Abraham is not called to kill Isaac out of some greater duty to the nation, for Kierkegaard makes it very clear that Abraham's only ethical duty is to his son: "In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself."[15] Several pages later, he reaffirms this:

14. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 151.
15. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 151.

> It is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the state that Abraham does it [...] there is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than that the father shall love the son. The ethical in the sense of the moral is entirely beside the point.[16]

Unlike the tragic heroes, Abraham has no justification for his action. Indeed, in attempting to kill Isaac, Abraham is simultaneously failing to perform his duty towards his son *and* to his nation, because God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a nation specifically through Isaac.

Kierkegaard disabuses us of the claim that Abraham acts according to ethical duty entirely in a footnote:

> The tragic hero gives up his wish in order to fulfill this duty. For the knight of faith, wish and duty are also identical, but he is required to give up both. If he wants to relinquish by giving up his wish, he finds no rest, for it is indeed his duty. If he wants to adhere to the duty and to his wish, he does not become the knight of faith, for the absolute duty specifically demanded that he should give it up.[17]

There is no ethical, rational reason for Abraham to kill Isaac. The duty for Abraham is clear: the duty towards his son as son and the duty towards his son as founder of a great nation is the exact same – Abraham should not kill his son. However, God has called him to do so. This movement to kill Isaac cannot be absolved ethically or politically – filicide necessitates violating the ethical and destroying the potential for a nation. What Abraham should have done if he had remained in the ethical sphere is to save Isaac. However, Kierkegaard states that the ethical duty becomes secondary to the personal duty to God: "The ethical expression for his relation to Isaac is that the father must love the son. This ethical relation is reduced to the relative in contradistinction to the absolute relation to God."[18]

Although Abraham violates the ethical *qua* universal, he does not fall into sin but is considered to have acted from a higher order. Instead, Kierkegaard puts Abraham higher than the tragic heroes, and there is a higher mode of being than the ethical *qua* universal (that is, nationalism). As Kierkegaard explains, the individual becomes higher than the universal because of faith: "Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, is justified before it, not as inferior to

16. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 59; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 153.

17. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 78; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 169.

18. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70–71; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 162.

it but as superior."[19] Abraham, the knight of faith, triumphs over the tragic heroes and is no longer within the ethical *qua* universal because of his faith, even though the person who breaks from the ethical should actually be in sin.

Within the ethical sphere, this type of justification does not hold up, because there is no way in which an individual can act that breaks from universal moral law, and yet they remain justified in doing so. The ethical is supreme, as it is universal and must be obeyed by all. However, what Kierkegaard is showing through the story of Abraham is that this justification is possible if and only if the individual comes into personal relation with God. As he says, "God is the one who demands absolute love".[20] The demand of Isaac's death is about God's relationship with Abraham as deity to individual, and it is a personal demand asking for Abraham's love of God to trump his love for his son. Yet Abraham is justified within the narrative of *Fear and Trembling* precisely because he is obeying his duty to his personal relationship with God. For Kierkegaard, the story of Abraham shows that the ethical *qua* universal is not the ultimate way of existence and that the human individual still has an important role as a single individual.

The Problem of the Ethical *qua* Universal and Christian Nationalism

Although he knowingly and willingly violates the ethical by attempting to sacrifice his son, Abraham is elevated by Kierkegaard because he finds problems with such an iteration of the ethical. In fact, I argue that Kierkegaard has a greater criticism of the ethical because of the ways in which it ignores the fullness of human existence.

Christopher B. Barnett connects the ethical to the universal that seeks to systematize existence within it. He explains: "Self-deification emerges as the gravest danger facing not only Hegelian philosophy but in fact all who crave systematic clarity and total knowledge."[21] The danger of what Barnett calls Hegelianism is the danger of systematic thinking, that is, of prioritizing the universal over the individual. This connection of Hegelianism[22] to systematic thinking is affirmed by Brian Stiltner, as he argues that

19. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55–56; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 149.

20. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 73; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 165.

21. Christopher B. Barnett, "From Hegel to Google: Kierkegaard and the Perils of 'the System'", in Stephen Minister, J. Aaron Simmons & Michael Strawser (eds.), *Kierkegaard's God and the Good Life*, Bloomington, IN 2017, 136, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxxxq2.12.

22. Or at least the version of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) that Kierkegaard argues against in his works. Whether or not this is an accurate representation of Hegel's thinking is up for scholastic debate. It is not the purpose of my paper to make this argument. I will use the term "Hegelianism" here because these scholars use the term.

Kierkegaard's ethical sphere is Hegelian because the morality of the individual gives way to a socially understood and agreed-upon morality.[23] This is exactly the scope of the ethical realm as the tragic hero must put aside his own individual duty to his family for the good of the nation, that is of the whole. The crux of this invocation comes as relational: Hegel thinks that the divine can only be reached through the universal, whereas Kierkegaard's narrative on Abraham is a direct critique of this. As John Lippitt writes:

> What this claim amounts to, at its most basic, is that an individual can have a relation to "the absolute" – understood by Johannes as (Abraham's) God – in a more direct way than by being "mediated" through the universal. Whereas for Hegel, a person cannot approach the divine without some kind of intermediary.[24]

I take systematization to be an implicit part of Christian nationalism because of how Christian nationalism incorporates aspects of the human experience under its umbrella. Bellah, Williams, Gorski, and Backhouse discussed how the state uses the Christian narrative to create a national story under which the individual is subsumed. It becomes less important what an individual actually believes or values. What is most important is that the individual adheres as a citizen to the political narrative that has been presented. The individual's religious experience is funneled through their adherence to the political social structure. Religious experience is important only in so much as it performs a role for the community.

As stated in *Fear and Trembling*, all individuality is subsumed under the ethical, universal system:

> Thus in the ethical view of life, it is the task of the single individual to strip himself of the qualification of interiority and to express this in something external. Every time the individual shrinks from it, every time he withholds himself in or slips down again into the qualifications of feeling, mood, etc. that belong to interiority, he trespasses, he is immersed in spiritual trial.[25]

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23. Brian Stiltner, "Who Can Understand Abraham? The Relation of God and Morality in Kierkegaard and Aquinas", *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 2 (1993), 224, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40015169.

24. John Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling, New York 2016, 100.

25. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 69; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 161.

To assert oneself outside of the universal is to fall into sin. The ethical *qua* universal sets up the system of morality, and this morality is supposed to be valid for every person in every instance. What is problematic, according to Barnett, is that the system becomes supreme without acknowledging that the system is inherently flawed because human reason is inherently incomplete: "The system is framed by human knowledge, and, precisely for that reason, it is discontinuous with transcendence."[26]

The problem of the ethical *qua* universal and of this type of systematic thinking is that the individual loses sight of their relationship with God as an individual. Instead, that relationship is replaced with a relationship to the system at large. As Kierkegaard explains:

> The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God. For example, it is a duty to love one's neighbor. It is a duty by its being traced back to God, but in the duty I enter into relation not to God but to the neighbor I love.[27]

The human being does not enter into relationship with the divine except in God's role as giver of the moral law. Instead, the individual's attention is turned to the other people who exist in the moral system. While this may be the right orientation in a secular society, Kierkegaard is writing to his Danish Lutheran contemporaries in which the theology and dogma of Christianity are still prevalent. The question of salvation and what it means to seek and gain salvation becomes unanswerable in such an ethical framework.

The downfall of Christian nationalism is that it believes that it can make right relationships with other people without first coming into right relation with God. Christian nationalism tries to codify and systematize the very human and imperfect way of relating to other people into a solid system. What the ethical seeks to do is to bring the divine into human comprehension. According to Kierkegaard, what becomes dangerous is that the ethical then demands that we sacrifice ourselves to the system and uses the sake of the other as justification for losing the individual:

> Thus if the Church were to insist on this sacrifice from one of its members, we would have only a tragic hero. The idea of the Church is not qualitatively different from the idea of the state. As soon as the single individual can enter into it by a simple mediation, and as soon as the

26. Barnett, "From Hegel to Google", 136.

27. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 160.

> single individual has entered into the paradox, he does not arrive at the idea of the Church; he does not get out of the paradox, but he must find therein either his salvation or his damnation.[28]

What the tragic hero gets wrong is also what nationalism cannot fully grasp – that humans cannot distill themselves into one single desire or motivation. The tragic hero is asked to put aside their other desires, interests, and ethical commitments for the sake of the nation, and the nation becomes the end of everything. What nationalism ignores is the complexity of human life – that humans do not simply have one commitment or meaning but consist of multiplicity. Subsuming the human being under a system fails because it seeks to conceptualize what cannot be put into human language. It is easy to fall from Christianity into Christian nationalism because Christianity is beyond human communication whereas the nation, a human, social creation, is easily comprehensible.

Furthermore, nationalism is incredibly alluring because it seems to make transparent the often murky and complicated questions of life. It is this temptation that makes it dangerous, because we delegate our thinking to the nation as a whole. We turn to the ethical *qua* universal and Christian nationalism because they make easier the difficulties of what it means to be human and what their relationship is to the divine. As Stiltner argues, the fact that God's command is right because God commands it goes against human rationality. The concern (and move away from the religious into the ethical) is that God might ask something of his people that goes against human sensibility or a human understanding of the good.[29] Under such concerns, a human system of morality would understandably seek to excise the concerning ways that God undercuts a universal system. Nationalism and the ethical *qua* universal are "tempting" (to use Kierkegaard's language in *Fear and Trembling*) because they simplify humans into apprehensible and controllable objects. As Backhouse writes, "one of the key problems of nationalistic ideology is that is attempts to simplify the messy reality of modern identity by singling out only one layer of this construct from many, granting it exclusive priority and imbuing it with an inviolable nature".[30] However, human beings are complicated, eluding classification.

Furthermore, just as human beings resist simple understanding, so, too, does divinity. As Backhouse writes: "The natural response of Christendom to such a proposal is to remove the sting of the offense by suppressing the

28. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 74; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 166.
29. Stiltner, "Who Can Understand Abraham?", 222–223.
30. Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique*, 201.

humble ordinances of Christ and expounding instead on his 'obvious' glory."[31] In *Fear and Trembling*, the knight of faith is an offense for its paradoxical nature – how can an individual become higher than the universal? How can the individual be justified for committing what is morally considered a sin? How could God, giver of the moral law, command Abraham to break the moral law? In the ethical, there cannot be such an offense, and it cannot fathom paradox. As Lippitt explains:

> The Abraham story offends such a consciousness in that Abraham's relation to God seems far more "direct". Rather than God's will being revealed through such intermediaries as a priest, a holy book or the incarnate son of God, in the Genesis narrative Abraham has *direct* access to God.[32]

Instead, the ethical *qua* universal is fixated on the external tangibles: follow these laws, perform these traditions, count how many people participate every week, and so on. It makes it easy to define what it means to be Christian. While these are valid political and social interests, they have no place within Christianity because such an endeavor goes against the expectations of Christianity (which calls for a relationship with the divine), so either the religious needs to be excised completely or the political cannot encompass a religious dimension. In either case, the conflation of the religious and the political can only be a failure.

Right Ordering of Christian Values

The ethical of *Fear and Trembling* sets up a wrong way of understanding the world – that the nation-state or the human community is the one that dictates what good and evil are. Any move to conflate the ethics of the individual with that of the nation is already a problem that Kierkegaard is fighting against. There can be nationhood and nationalism, but we cannot import the language of loving one's neighbour or any sort of individual Christian moral duty to the nation because these are two separate entities, two different ways of thinking and being. Trying to conflate the duties of individual Christians with the duties of the nation at large falls dangerously close to Christian nationalism once more. Within the ethical, there is no other way to rightfully exist except as a part of the whole: "Thus in the ethical view of life, it is the task of the single individual to strip himself of

31. Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique*, 120.
32. Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling, 100.

the qualification of interiority and to express this in something external."[33] It is not that the political is unimportant or that nationalism as a political concept has no viability. Rather, Kierkegaard is concerned by the way in which the political and the religious become conflated and the political becomes prioritized over the religious. It is about the right orientation for the individual in the world.

This is not to say that the neighbour does not matter – Stiltner is quick to also tell his audience that God does not give arbitrary commands, and the fact that Abraham could not stop loving Isaac proves that. As he says, "for Johannes, Abraham must love Isaac *and* God; he may only act on God's command in the faith that this action is required by his love of God and of Isaac".[34] Backhouse, too, discusses a better sort of interpersonal relation. According to Backhouse, we can only come into right relation with other people if we are in right relationship with God to begin with:

> In the human's relation to the eternal, every person faces the same task – the task of authenticity of becoming a self [...] Authenticity is not grounded on one's right relation to the others in the group, but instead on one's right relation to the ground and source of all being.[35]

What comes out of this push against nationalism is exactly the right relation to God and the right relation to other people – to regard and interact with other people not as entities of the system but as individuals with their own interiority. Human community is not tossed out the window in such an account, but it is put in its proper place: a good Christian prioritizes their relationship with God first and foremost before they can attend to their human relationships, and their human relationships will only flourish if they are already in right relation with the divine. It is not that Kierkegaard is claiming that the ethical has no place in the world, only that an ethical that is separated from the religious or has coopted the religious within itself is ultimately a failure. This is worth noting, as Evans explains that Kierkegaard is separating out the ethical here to make a specific point about what he sees in his Danish, Lutheran society, which is more concerned with the ethical without its corresponding religious commitments.[36]

This is evident in how Kierkegaard sets up the religious in opposition to the ethical when he explains that true duty is the duty to God:

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33. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 69; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 161.

34. Stiltner, "Who Can Understand Abraham?", 230.

35. Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique*, 149.

36. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, Waco, TX 2006, 214.

> The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute. [...] From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor – an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty.[37]

It is only through the individual's duty to God that they have a duty to the people around them. The individual is called into relation with other discrete individuals, not to relate to others only as part of a community or political body. What is most important is the human–human relationship that is cultivated – the love of one human to another, not the love of nation: "No one who was great in the world will be forgotten, but everyone was great in his own way, and everyone in proportion to the greatness of that which *he loved*." On the same page, Kierkegaard notes that the one who is greatest is the one who struggles with God, "for he who struggled with the world became great by conquering the world, and he who struggled with himself became great by conquering himself, but he who struggled with God became the greatest of all".[38] He states clearly that the struggle for the world or for the self is lesser than the struggle to come into relationship with the divine, and this is a relationship of love. As Louis Pojman (1935–2005) argues, ethical knowledge of right and wrong makes sense as a set of universal truths: "Our apprehension of the universals involves not faith but knowledge. The moral order is intuitively and rationally ascertainable: its edicts are self-evident truths." On the other hand, a religious understanding of what is right and wrong is not known rationally because the God–human relationship defies external standards.[39] This is not to say that it is completely arbitrary; rather that such a religious understanding can never be comprehended by the social group, but can only be undertaken by an individual. Stiltner argues similarly that the ethical becomes relative in light of the human individual's relationship with God. The commandment to love one's neighbour is not done for the sake of the other person but for the sake of God first and foremost.[40] The priority in *Fear and Trembling* is very clear: right relationship with God comes as the priority over our obligations to

37. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 162.

38. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 16; Cappelørn (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 113.

39. Louis Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*, Auburn, AL 1984, 82.

40. Stiltner, "Who Can Understand Abraham?", 225–226.

the world or to our nation. Christianity is one's relationship with God, not about cultivating a Christian nation.

Kierkegaard argues that it would be impossible to fully love the neighbour or be in relationship with other humans if the Christian individual is not already in right relationship with God. Indeed, Christian nationalism would also not resolve this problem, because an individual's relationship with another individual is also subsumed under their duty towards the nation as a whole. This is seen in the decision that each of the tragic heroes makes, as each man sacrifices his relationship with his child for the greater good. On the other hand, Abraham is able to retrieve his relationship with his son because of his decision to follow the personal command of God.

This is the content of the faith of Abraham and why he is exalted above the tragic heroes. It is because Abraham comes into right relationship with God that he is able to become the father of a nation – that he has faith in God to preserve Isaac despite any human logic or communal duty. Christian nationalism, on the other hand, demands that the individual must be in right relation with the group by becoming subservient to the group. However, Christianity dictates that the individual must first come into right relationship with God as an individual. The difficulty is that Christian nationalism comes out of a genuine desire to seek the good and to love the neighbour. However, it becomes caught up in its own project and loses sight of its original goal. In setting up the story of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard reminds the reader of that goal: Abraham becomes justified precisely because he has the right prioritization: absolute love of God over the demands of the system.

Although Kierkegaard was addressing his contemporary Danish Lutheran society – as stated in his preface – his concerns about the political have a larger impact. Whatever place the political and the nation-state should have in our lives, the political should not be consumptive of individual experience. The concern of Christian nationalism is that it tries to make systematic what cannot be systematic – that is, the human individual and the individual's relationship with other people and the divine. First, interhuman relationships are not easily codified – human beings are messy and driven by mixed motivations, not pure rationality. Second (and this is what I believe makes Kierkegaard so fearful of the political), coopting the divine within a human system is a doomed enterprise – we cannot use human rationality to make sense of what lies beyond human reason. Any attempt to do so either fails immediately or attempts to subsume the divine (therefore the religious) *within* the political and makes the political the ultimate focus, to the detriment for both the religious and the political. Considering again the current

political climate and the relevance of Christian nationalism especially in the United States, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* warns the contemporary reader of the problems that arise when we conflate the political and the religious, as it becomes easy to subsume religious commitments under political narratives. The contemporary Christian must recognize Kierkegaard's critique of the political: that their faith and duty to the divine must be their supreme commitments over any duty to society or the state. It is only after they are in right relation with the divine that they can seek right relation with other people or with any political body. ▲

SUMMARY

This article is concerned with Søren Kierkegaard's implicit critique of Christian nationalism in *Fear and Trembling* (1843). By comparing the story of Abraham and Isaac to the stories of three tragic heroes, Kierkegaard unveils the problems of Christian nationalism: that it seeks to systematize what should not be systematized and that in such a political system, the individual is subsumed under the communal. The example of Abraham – someone who forgoes both his ethical duty to his child and to his promised nation for the sake of his relationship with the divine – reflects Kierkegaard's concerns about nationalism: that humans would be forced to sacrifice their individuality out of a so-called good of the whole. Instead, Kierkegaard praises Abraham because he obeys God instead of the ethical. For Kierkegaard, interpersonal relationships are what are most important for communal and political living. Abraham's faith enables him to preserve his relationships with God and with Isaac because he does not fall into the temptation of the ethical *qua* universal.