Other Abrahams: Sacrificing Faith

Augustine – Kierkegaard – Kafka

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Abstract

This article analyses the complex intermingling of positivity and negativity in the circular definition of faith, as well as the different sacrifices deemed necessary to keep the “circle” intact. The analysis departs from the first paragraph of Saint Augustine’s The Confessions, Søren Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling and two short excerpts by Franz Kafka: a reflection on “other Abrahams” in a letter to Robert Klopstock in 1921, and a fragment named “Die Prüfung”. Kafka being one of the most original interpreters of modernity’s drastic implications for religion, the aim of the article is to display and reflect upon both a continuity and discontinuity from Augustine and Kierkegaard. In Kafka, the structurally dynamic tension inherent in humanity’s relation to the divine has been stretched all the way to its breaking point, leaving us with a religious structure but without access to a living core, a faith without a possible life form.

Keywords

sacrifice – Christian faith – Kafka – Kierkegaard – Augustine – Borges

1 Introduction

In a famous commentary on the literary universe of Franz Kafka, Kafka and His Precursors, Jorge Luis Borges reflects on the particular ability of Kafka’s texts to create bridges to other historical epochs and writers. Borges recognises “[Kafka’s] voice, or his habits” in excerpts of Zeno, Han Yu, Søren Kierkegaard, Robert Browning, Léon Bloy and Lord Dunsany, that is, in literary texts that are highly disparate in genre, style as well as cultural and historical setting.
Kafka was familiar with some of these authors, whereas others were probably unknown to him. The question of direct influence, however, is beside the point. The connections Borges speak about are not empirical in nature, and they surely don’t correspond to traditional methods of tracking and establishing intertextual relationships between different literary works or tropes, especially since Borges’ genealogy covers such a long and linguistically diversified period.

Borges’ short reflection might seem too close to his own poetics and too far from conventional literary history to have any real impact on academic Kafka studies. Yet, I would like to stress both the accuracy and the productiveness of Borges’ perspective. He writes:

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is what is most significant. Kafka’s idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist.1

In the final analysis:

The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.2

By virtue of his well-documented ability to disclose aporias and inconsistencies, his unique way, both humorous and disconcerting, of portraying the frailty which characterises our human efforts to make sense of this world, Kafka also has an uncanny capacity to open up our literary canon. In order to give an accurate account of Kafka’s texts, it is necessary to take these asymmetrical and often surprising intimacies between Kafka and other authors seriously. Only by allowing for the kind of counter-intuitive genealogies highlighted by Borges can we hope to shed light on this peculiar potentiality of Kafka’s writing. When I wrote my dissertation, I stumbled on such an unexpected “Borgesian” kinship, between Kafka and Augustine. The present article is a reworked and extended version of a subchapter in my dissertation (written and published in Swedish). Compared to its Swedish precursor, the notion of sacrifice plays a more important role, and Kierkegaard is given a decisively larger part. In this article, the notion of sacrifice is used to identify a primary

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exclusion mechanism operative in the conceptualisation of Christian faith in mainline Christian theology, here analysed through key passages in Augustine and Kierkegaard.³

At the very start of the first book of Augustine’s *The Confessions* (AD 397–400) we find ourselves in the midst of the paradox that the Christian faith constitutes, and in the midst of the hermeneutic circle from which Christian theology unfolds:

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you [...] You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you. Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first: to call upon you or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you? But how can people call upon someone in whom they do not yet believe? [...] But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise him, for as they seek they find him, and on finding him they will praise him. Let me seek you, then, Lord, even while I am calling upon you, and call upon you even as I believe in you [...] My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher.⁴

These lines offer in condensed form the framework of a text in which autobiographical content, existential and theological reflection all take place under the sign of praise. Only seldom does Augustine address his readers directly. Our position is that of the spectator, or, with Augustine’s own words: the “witnesses” of he who confesses.⁵ And indeed, the *Confessions* positions us as witnesses of an inner drama, in which Augustine alternately reasons with himself and

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³ I decided to rework this material for the workshop “Doomed to Sacrifice: Existential and Phenomenological Perspectives on Sacrifice and Gender”, held at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menchen in Vienna in November 2021, as it corresponded to the theme of the conference, and had not yet been presented to an English-speaking public.

⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 1.1.1. All quotes from *The Confessions* are from Maria Boulding’s translation.

⁵ “Truth it is that I want to do, in my heart by confession in your presence, and with my pen before many witnesses.” Augustine, *The Confessions*, 10.1.1.
addresses his speech to an invisible Thou, to God. Recurrent throughout the whole book are the kind of penetrating questions that we see in the quotation above, interrupting the initial praise and interrogating its premises with regard to human experience and reason. The text enacts an oscillation between the believing point of departure – the language of prayer and liturgy, ultimately deriving from the Bible – and the point of departure of human reason, putting the assured faith immanent in praise into question: “Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you? But how can people call upon someone in whom they do not yet believe?” One of Augustine’s philological commentators, James J. O’Donnell, summarizes this oscillatory movement while commenting upon the opening praise of the Confessions: “A. seeks to praise. In the implicit question whether he succeeds is encompassed the tension of the whole text. At the moment of giving praise, his words fall back into self-reflection and doubt.”

By virtue of this “self-reflection and doubt”, Augustine interrogates the possibility of faith in an especially acute manner. For what is it that makes it possible for a human being to hear the Word of God? What does it mean to live on earth and to “know” God? And how do we get to know God? Wouldn’t that presuppose that God had already called on us? But if so, how, then, is one to know if one has been called or not? As witnessed by Augustine’s exposition of his earlier life as a Manichean, there seems to be the possibility of having been called without being able to hear the call or mishearing it. As long as we are humans there is always the risk of making a mistake: of praising someone else in the place of God. And yet the language of tradition, the Bible, prayers and liturgy, speak as if they possessed knowledge of God, and thus, from a formal perspective, they speak as if from within God. Augustine’s text confirms that human being on his/her own cannot gain access to faith’s affirmative modus,

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6 For an in-depth study of the role of fiction in the Confessions, see Cullhed, The Shadow of Creusa.
7 Some Augustine researchers make a sharp distinction between the theological montage – the quotes from biblical sources – and the biographical narrative. In such a vein, Josef Lössl has written: “In a certain sense, the autobiographical narration only forms the most superficial layer of theological reflection in [Confessions]. Therefore, it is only in a limited sense suited for opening its deeper layers, as opposed to the use of Bible citations, and especially citations from the Psalms, specifically applied in order to convey the central theological message.” (Own translation) In my view, such a perspective fails to understand the intricate intertwine-ment of narration and theological content, so unique and characteristic of The Confessions. Cf. Lössl, Intellectus Gratiae, p. 225 et seq.
and so the language of praise would seem to be seated in that within us which is not of the fallen order of creation but of the living God. In other words, God makes room in us and fills us, and only then is the affirmative speech of faith made possible: “My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher”.\textsuperscript{10} Or, in impeccably precise terms: “I believe, and so I will speak”.\textsuperscript{11} The speech of praise is consequently not only an expression of God’s gift of faith to humanity, it is \textit{in itself} – as spontaneous affirmative language – that very gift of faith. For this reason, Augustine seems inclined to believe that the answer to the question of the possibility of faith is to be found in the tentative assumption: “Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you?” as he further down makes an impressive interpretative montage of different biblical sources, pinpointing the inverted logic of faith: “those who seek the Lord will praise him, for as they seek they find him, and on finding him they will praise him”.

Here a perfect circle is being drawn, beginning and ending in praise. The temporal aspect inherent in the verbs “search” and “find” is both kept and suspended: searching and finding are separate events in time, which in the circularity of faith paradoxically coincide in one singular movement. Faith presents itself both as a temporal development and as consummated time. In the shape of faith, the linearity of time appears annihilated, and seeking, finding, and praising lose their temporal succession. From within this faith we cannot any longer discern the temporal order that these concepts imply – seeking, finding, praising –, since seeking and praising are presented as simultaneous activities, and since finding somehow seems to precede our seeking. The believer, however sure of being one of God’s chosen ones, is therefore destined to mediate between the consummated language of assured faith (praise) and the limited human perspective. This circularity of faith, of which Augustine’s formula is a perfect expression, is also mirrored in the structure of the first chapter of the \textit{Confessions}: Augustine starts out with praise, relapses into a seeking questioning and in the end comes back to praise. Yet also \textit{Confessions} as a whole can be put in relation to this formula, as the seeking of which the first ten books is an expression is enacted within the framework of the already realised faith of the writing present, where the doubt of his earlier life not only is shown to end up in praise but, as it were, is even \textit{transformed} into praise. A confession is a speech made possible by God, a speech ultimately sanctioned by God.\textsuperscript{12} It

\textsuperscript{10} Augustine, \textit{The Confessions}, 1.5.5.
\textsuperscript{11} Augustine, \textit{The Confessions}, 1.5.6.
is a seeking whose final aim is to return to the home of faith and praise: God (“our heart is unquiet until it rests in you”). However, the primary importance of praise in the articulation of the circle of faith does not imply that one could skip the intermediate link, the human speech about God. When it comes to this point, Augustine is very clear: “After saying all that, what have we said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What does anyone who speaks of you really say? Yet woe betide those who fail to speak”. The demand to speak is rooted in the fact that the human cannot cast aside her/his human finite shape in order to wholly become one with God. He or she cannot continuously live in the spontaneous affirmation of the language of tradition but is instead always thrown back into her/his own reason’s fumbling efforts to make faith comprehensible from within the perspective of the (fallen) world.

At this junction I would like to emphasise a polarity which has become almost exclusively connected to the Protestant tradition in the historical development following on Augustine, but which is clearly present already in this early Christian text. It is no coincident that the reformation took place in a time which in many ways rediscovered Augustine, or that Luther was an Augustinian monk. Bringing faith’s oscillation between assuredness and doubt, between God and world, to its breaking point, faith, in fact, becomes impossible regarded from the strictly “human” side of the spectrum. The separation between Creator and creation, emanating originally from Adam and Eve’s original sin, is present to us through the possibility of doubt; the possibility of experiencing the world without at the same time experiencing God as instigator and driving force of the world. And on the contrary: that within us which believes is, as we’ve seen, already of God, a God who by means of the faith of the believer in a way brings her/himself to life in his/her creation.

Irrespective of where we draw the line between identity and separation, between natural and revealed theology, God is not yet “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). The doubtful questions posed by reason and the affirmation inherent in the praise chafe against each other, something which can be seen implicitly in the opening quotation from Augustine: the transition from the question “And how can they believe without a preacher?” to the circular assertion that follows – “those who seek the Lord will praise him, for as they seek they find him, and on finding him they will praise him” – isn’t quite that easy to follow. The latter does not constitute an answer to a question, but instead suspends the question by

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incorporating it in the scriptural self-affirmation of faith. The answer is transferred to the enigmatic faith of Scripture: “But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise him [...]” In other words, there is never any real fusion between the perspective of the world and that of faith, which means that each effort to transform faith into something like a human identity to be inhabited or “owned” by the individual is destined to fail.

To “be” a believer, then, for Augustine thereby seems to imply that one exists in an insurmountable gap between the “interior perspective” of faith and the earthly existence where no safe harbour is possible. The sense of insecurity is never thoroughly soothed, as the power to instigate a contact with God is not on the side of humans. Augustine underlines this insight at the end of the *Confessions*:

> What human can empower another human to understand these things? What angel can grant understanding to another angel? What angel to a human? Let us rather ask of you, seek in you, knock at your door. Only so will we receive, only so find, and only so will the door be opened to us. Amen.

2 The Sacrificial Logic in the Structure of the Call

In the post-Augustinian Christian reflection on the concept of faith, faith is – in much the same way as the circular structure displayed by Augustine – defined by a twofold determination. On the one hand, faith is regarded as a gift from God, beyond the believer’s control and with no regard to his or her efforts. On the other hand, faith is firmly rooted in the notion of a human choice. Faith is at the same time *klesis* and *energeia*, call and act. This corresponds to Augustine’s formula above: the act of faith presupposes the call, but the call only makes itself known in and through the act of faith: praise. Stated in other terms, faith is a gift only recognisable as such when it has already been received, i.e. when the individual has already “made the choice” to believe. What for those who stand outside of faith appears as a movement from humanity towards God, reveals its true direction – from God to the human being – only from within received and realised faith. And yet, as the acts of faith (praise in the broader sense of the term) presuppose that the human being has been called and has

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15 O’Donnell, *Confessions*, Vol. 1, p. xviii: “Anxiety so pervades the Confessions that even the implicit narrative structure is undermined.”

received the call, and consequently are possible only from within faith, it
appears impossible for those outside to ever get in: the “circle” is hermetically
sealed. To phrase it in an Augustinian fashion: how is it possible to invoke with-
out first possessing faith? Does not an invocation of God already presuppose a
minimum of faith: faith in the very possibility of a call?

In a certain sense, Augustine himself confirms the closedness of the circle of
faith by stating in the tenth book:

Yet charity believes without stint, at least among those who are bonded
by charity, and so I also confess to you, Lord, in such a way that people to
whom I can offer no proof may discern whether I confess truthfully. I can-
not prove it, but all whose ears are open to me by love will believe me.17

Those who find themselves outside of the Christian faith or out of reach of the
call will not have access to the truth of the Augustinian confession. We might
say that they are sacrificed in order to keep the “circle” intact: those out of
reach of the Christian faith are no concern of ours. But that is not all: according
to Augustine’s argument it seems that they must also be regarded as stand-
ing outside of love. Only those who are joined with him in “love” will be able
to understand what is at stake in his book. This mode of expression evinces
a subtle rhetoric, where the text’s inability to convince and communicate its
message to others than those already inside the circle is depicted as an imper-
fection on the part of the reader, “uninitiated” in love. The humble insecurity
as to whether the book’s attempt at praise succeeds seems to end up in a con-
fident assurance of success.18

The implicit assurance of faith underlying the Augustinian text is brought to
the fore through the confrontation with those standing outside of the Christian
faith. These “outsiders” present such a threat to the brittle paradox of faith – if
faith is a gift from God, and creation is called to praise its creator, how come
there exist non-believers? – that they must be sacrificed in order to secure the
safe interiority of the faithful community.

Now, how is one to understand this premise? How understand this final claim
on faith, so contrary to the topoi of humbleness and uncertainty expressed
earlier? The answer must be searched in the circularity of faith, as reflected
on at least two different levels: 1) in the sealed self-referentiality of ritual lan-
guage, and 2) in the greater circle encompassing that oscillation between
assured faith and doubt of which Augustine’s Confessions in its own right is

17 Augustine, The Confessions, 10.3.3.
an expression. In correspondence with the nature of the circle, an exterior is in both these cases being produced. On this side of the world the doubt can never be soothed, the questions never receive satisfactory answers, and faith must constantly be born again in the ritual space of praise. Yet, as Augustine's text shows, this circle is simultaneously widened so as to also encompass the oscillation between doubt and faith, which **stricto sensu** suspends the doubt by inscribing it in that movement of faith which transforms searching into finding and non-assurance into assurance. In this way, the circular movement of faith enacts a sacrifice in order to maintain its paradoxical functionality: those standing outside of faith must be annihilated, if not in the flesh so at least rhetorically and conceptually.

3 Abraham's Silence – Kierkegaard on Faith and Sacrifice

When Søren Kierkegaard ponders Christian faith roughly 1400 years later, it is an analogous sacrificial logic that comes to the fore. Interestingly, of all the narratives in the Bible addressing the faith of human beings and the relation between God and the single individual, Kierkegaard's choice falls upon the Akedah, Abraham's offering of his dearly beloved, long awaited son Isaac. In *Fear and Trembling* (originally published in 1843) he connects the “movement of faith” with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac when tested by God. But in reality, the outer act of sacrifice is not the focus of Kierkegaard's reflections. In this tormented analysis of faith, the sacrificial logic discloses itself, but in a displaced, disproportionate and distorted form, as a direct consequence of the pressure on Christianity to defend itself in Kierkegaard's time, at the peak of modernity.

Kierkegaard's reading of the biblical figure of Abraham re-opens the wound Augustine so laboriously tried to conceal: the implicit sacrifices necessary for upholding the Christian notion of faith. What has – to some degree – been kept together in the “system” of Christian theology throughout the ages is beginning to fall apart. Kierkegaard recognises the remarkable force in this paradox, being as it is the glowing yet unfathomable core of the Christian faith, and *Fear and Trembling* is indeed dedicated to it. What troubles Kierkegaard is the lack of understanding in his own time of the profundity, greatness and

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19 Kierkegaard is in no way unique in turning his interest towards Gen. 22:1–19: many modern philosophers and writers use this episode to discuss philosophical, ethical, and theological issues. For a good overview, see Tschuggnall, *Abrahams Opfer*, pp. 289–318; and Tschuggnall, *Der gebundene Isaak*, pp. 304–316.
immense difficulty of the Christian faith. He finds that – with address especially to the Hegelians\(^\text{20}\) – faith has become something regarded as simplistic and out-dated, rather barbaric in comparison to the heights achievable by human reason alone. He therefore sets out to present the complexity of the Christian faith as well as the exceptional ingenuity needed to stay and live within this faith, by contrasting the religious with the ethical.\(^\text{21}\) His example is Abraham, and the resounding lament informing the book has to do with the writer’s own inability to take the “leap” of faith (a lament rooted in Kierkegaard own biography, connected to his breaking the engagement with Regine Olsen).\(^\text{22}\)

There are many layers to Kierkegaard’s most famous and interpreted book, but here I will single out two aspects that connect it to the Augustinian circle of faith as analysed above: 1) The disproportion in the text between an understanding of the faith of Abraham as call and act, where the active, receptive aspect of faith so much agitates the writer as to make the other aspect, faith as an unconditional gift from God, almost invisible; 2) The circular structure of Kierkegaard’s own analysis, which also creates two circles, but not the same ones as those found in Augustine.

On the most tangible level of the text, it seems obvious that Kierkegaard regards Abraham’s faith as an impressive act. The term “knight of faith” expresses a view of Abraham as a kind of hero, albeit of a different kind than the “tragic” and the “aesthetic” hero – two conceptual constructs used by Kierkegaard to contrast and thus make the paradox of faith “appear”. Let us look at a few (out of many) emblematic examples in the text that lead the interpreter in this direction. As noted above, the writer’s fascination with Abraham’s faith is throughout the book contrasted with his own “failure” to make the movement:

> It takes a purely human courage to renounce the whole temporal realm in order to gain eternity, but this I do gain and in all eternity can never renounce – it is a self-contradiction. But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd,

\(^{20}\) For a thorough discussion of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Hegel, see Taylor, Journeys to Moriah, pp. 305–326.


\(^{22}\) Such is the focus of most of the reception, and it is commented at length in the “Historical Introduction” to the English translation used here: Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, pp. 10–56. Kierkegaard admitted as much in later diary entries.
and this is the courage of faith. By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac.  

But this movement I cannot make. As soon as I want to begin, everything reverses itself, and I take refuge in the pain of resignation. I am able to swim in life, but I am too heavy for this mystical hovering. To exist [existere] in such a way that my contrast to existence constantly expresses itself as the most beautiful and secure harmony with it – this I cannot do. 

Be it a duty or whatever, I cannot make the final movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, although there is nothing I wish more. 

The movement is associated with an activity on the part of the believer, who has the “courage” to “grasp”, and the “ability” to “hover” and “exist” in a certain paradoxical manner. There is a strong tension in the text arising from Kierkegaard’s neglect to deal expressively with God’s part in Abraham’s faith, or in the faith of any believer for that matter. The paradoxical nature of the paradox has its root in the line drawn within the believer, where the believing part of her or him, by touching the divine, becomes separated from the order of the world. Here we notice the same pattern as in Augustine: the immanent human condition, characterised by doubt, chafes against faith’s affirmative partaking of the divine, and these two sides within the human being who experiences faith can never be completely harmonised. It is this gap, which, as we have seen, was present already in Augustine, that for Kierkegaard turns into a veritable abyss. Kierkegaard is trying to save the dignity of the Christian faith in a time that seems to have lost interest in matters pertaining to religion. But by forcing the paradox to its breaking point, he exposes that the movement of faith has become incapable of encompassing the doubting part of the human being within its larger circle.

What is it, we might ask, that makes it seem necessary for Kierkegaard to conceptualise faith in this manner? Is it because the fundamentally ambiguous structure of the call is beginning to unravel? Has the call stopped calling, so that the idea of God calling creation and human being to communion with her- or himself is no longer tenable for the individual that perceives him- or herself as modern? In Fear and Trembling we can still find traces of the dual

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23 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 151.  
understanding of faith as both divine and human, in terms resembling those we found in Augustine, even though these occurrences are rare:

A person can become a tragic hero through his own strength – but not the knight of faith. [...] Faith is a marvel, and yet no human being is excluded from it; for that which unites all human life is passion,* and faith is a passion.²⁶

Initially in this quote, we recognise the classical understanding of faith as a gift of grace, inaccessible through human endeavours. But the identification of faith with passion at the end of the quote is more ambiguous. Does the passion and love for God arise from fallen humanity in and of itself, or is it, as we saw in Augustine, to be regarded as an act of grace coming one-sidedly from God to us? If faith is an act of grace performed by God within the human being, what would then Abraham's bravery consist of?

The circular structure, as well as the sacrificial logic of the circles thus construed, binds Augustine and Kierkegaard together. If in Augustine it was the non-believer that had to be sacrificed in order to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith, in Kierkegaard the threatening destruction of the paradox of faith has moved inside of the believer, and now demands the sacrifice of humanity itself. In Augustinian terms: the part of the believer where doubt arises anew throughout the whole course of a human life, the indispensable “human” aspect of the dual source of every theology, has become so predominant that it must be sacrificed in order to safeguard the divine mystery of faith. In Kierkegaard, consequently, Christian faith is given its paradigmatic expression in the implacable cut which God's call carves into the world, where no mediation any longer is possible between the believer's worldly I and her or his identity as a servant of God.

As a consequence of this position, two impenetrable circles are being drawn: one encompassing the world, and the other created when God makes her/his will known to the believer. Kierkegaard identifies the ethical as the universal, concerned solely with the human race, and thereby as an immanent order in relation to which the traditional notion of God can only be "an invisible vanishing point". By this step, the ethical is turned into a human sphere from which the faithful servant of God departs in absolute terms when taking the leap of faith:

The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine. [...] For example, it is a duty to love one's neighbour. It is a duty by its being traced

²⁶ Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 188.
back to God, but in the duty I enter into relation not to God but to the neighbour I love. [...] The whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere, and then the ethical is that which limits and fills at one and the same time. God comes to be an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought; his power is only in the ethical, which fills all of existence.27

But through the paradoxical movement of faith, the single individual is related directly to God as the absolute, and thus he is raised higher than the universal:

The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual [...] determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God [...] Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for thereby it is cancelled. Faith is this paradox, and the single individual simply cannot make himself understandable to anyone.28

The effect of this conceptualisation of faith is that every form of community of faith is made impossible, since Abraham has no means of communicating with other people while fulfilling his duty towards God:

Partnership in these areas is utterly unthinkable.29

The knight of faith is assigned solely to himself; he feels the pain of being unable to make himself understandable to others, but he has no vain desire to instruct others.30

So Abraham did not speak, he did not speak to Sarah, or to Eliezer, or to Isaac.31

It is no longer sufficient to rhetorically safeguard the Christian faith from the sceptics or unbelievers; the believer’s humanity, her or his partaking of the

27 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 190 et seq.
28 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 196 et seq.
29 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 197.
30 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 215.
31 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 279.
“human race” and thus of the universal ethical order, must be sacrificed in the movement of faith. It seems now as if even the fact that the human being stays human while living on this side of eternity, has become too much of a threat to the Christian faith. Thus, the real sacrifice, of which Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice the beloved son is only the most perfect expression, is the speech-act deemed so essential by Augustine. The transformation can be captured in the distance – both historical in nature and a-historical in scope – between the following two quotes:

Augustine:
After saying all that, what have we said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What does anyone who speaks of you really say? Yet woe betide those who fail to speak.32

Kierkegaard:
The relief provided by speaking is that it translates me into the universal. [But s]peak he cannot; he speaks no human language. And even if he understood all the languages of the world, even if those he loved also understood them, he still could not speak – he speaks in a divine language, he speaks in tongues.33

4 Kafka’s Broken Circle

Having witnessed Kierkegaard’s idolisation of Abraham and of the unparalleled greatness of the Christian paradox of faith, it is not difficult to find solace in the more down to earth observation made by Franz Kafka in a letter to Max Brod in 1918:

In Fear and Trembling, for example – which you ought to read now – his affirmativeness turns truly monstrous and is checked only when it comes up against a perfectly ordinary helmsman. What I mean is, affirmativeness becomes objectionable when it reaches too high. He doesn’t see the ordinary man (whit whom, on the whole, he knows how to talk remarkably well) and paints this monstrous Abraham in the clouds.34

32 Augustine, The Confessions, 1.4.4.
33 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 282.
34 Kafka, Letters to Friends, p. 231.
Three years later, in a letter to Robert Klopstock, Kafka has:

[...] been meditating a good deal on this Abraham, but these are old stories, not longer worth discussing; especially not the real Abraham; he had everything long before, was brought up for it from childhood, I cannot see the leap. If he already had everything and yet was to be led even higher, then something must have been taken away from him, at least seemingly – that is logical and no leap.

Instead, he imagines:

[...] another Abraham. One who wants to sacrifice altogether in the right way and who has quite the right scent for the whole thing, but cannot believe that he is intended, the repulsive old man and his son, the filthy boy. The true faith is not lacking him, this faith he has, and he would sacrifice in the right state of mind, if only he could believe that he was indeed intended. He fears that he would, as Abraham, to be sure ride out with the son, but on the way be transformed into Don Quixote. The world at that time would have been horrified at Abraham, if it had seen him, but this one fears that the world would laugh itself to death at the sight. [...] An Abraham who comes uncalled! It is like when at the end of the year the best student is to be honoured with a price, and in the hush of expectation the worst student, because of a hearing mistake, comes forward from his last dirty bench, and the whole class bursts out laughing. And perhaps it isn’t a mistake at all, his name was really called, the reward of the best is at the same time, according to the design of the teacher, supposed to be a punishment of the worst.35

In other words: an Abraham who comes uncalled, or at least an Abraham doubting that God’s call concerns him. With an incredibly light gesture Kafka thwarts or rather distorts the sternness surrounding the biblical tale of Abraham’s offering of Isaac, and takes it to a point where it appears at the same time thoroughly familiar and unsettlingly foreign. In Kafka’s depiction of the Akedah, it is as if he departed from Kierkegaard’s severe notion of faith, and more or less explicitly confirmed the depth of the condensed thoughts on how to understand the Christian faith in Fear and Trembling.36 But then, in the very

36 The passage has been the focus of a quite a few readings, highlighting the suspension of the power of religion by the power of literature (Danta, Literature Suspends Death),
moment in which Abraham accepts God’s call and is on the verge of acting, he lets the banal facticity of everyday life come between, like a compulsive thought that interrupts the pious sternness. For in Kafka’s rendering of the biblical episode it is not – as Emmanuel Levinas interprets it – the voice of human morals that intervenes, not the ethical “nobility” of the individual that revolts against such a lethal divine logic. No, the other Abraham really wants to sacrifice, he wishes nothing more than to remain in the religious earnestness and to show that he is worthy of his faith, but is overcome by a pathetic doubt – do you really mean me? Shall I? This other Abraham by no means precludes the first one: it is not a matter of denying the first Abraham or even the possibility of a pure faith. The passage should rather be read with reference to Kafka’s perhaps most famous dictum: “There’s an infinite amount of hope, only not for us.”

Kafka’s other Abraham can be related to an excerpt from another of his texts. In “Die Prüfung” (“The Test”), published by Max Brod in “Konvolut 1920”, the reader is confronted with the thematic of the call in a particularly acute form. The text is only one and a half pages long, and gives no indications as to whether it reaches its end or should be regarded as a fragment. Its immediate relevance for this context lies in the fact that it could be read as a description of a world that hasn’t been reached by a summons, which even lacks a vocation or perhaps only has lost its ability to hear the call aimed for it. I will only focus on the first paragraph, thereby disregarding the peripety of the text, which has also given this short story its name: “The Test”. This is due to the focus of this article on the thematic of faith and the call to faith. In these condensed first sentences, it seems to me that the spherical structure created by the conceptualization of faith in Augustine and Kierkegaard, and the sacrifices necessary to keep these spheres intact, are demystified. Kafka’s light yet decisive gesture consists in imagining the whole of the religious setting as being intact, putting it in relation with the question of the Jewish identity in the modern world (Derrida, Abraham, the Other), or seeing in it a powerful depiction of the eclipse of the monotheistic traditions (Hamacher, Uncalled). But focus has also been directed towards how Kafka makes us attentive to human suffering (Shafer, Bound and Undetermined, pp. 215–221). I will discuss Hamacher below. Danta’s book is thematically close to my reading, since it deals with the relationship between Kafka and Kierkegaard. Danta’s thesis that literature comes to suspend and supersede the religious through Kafka’s reading of the Akedah is interesting and not entirely unconvincing, but in my view, he makes too much of the blasphemous aspect of Kafka, losing sight of the strong force of the religious still infused in Kafka’s writing more generally.

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37 Levinas, Difficile liberté.
39 Kafka, The Test, p. 441 et seq. (German original: Die Prüfung, p. 379 et seq.)
though in lack of the call that would make the faithful life in the service of God a life of dignity and truth: the call that ultimately is the hinge on which both the biblical narrative of Abraham and the conceptual construct of the Christian faith rest.

The I of the text is a servant who lacks occupation, and whose existence is defined by the absence of a call, by not yet being called to serve. It begins with the passage:

I am a servant, but there is no work for me. I am timid and don't push myself to the fore, indeed I don't even push myself into line with the others, but that is only one reason for my nonemployment, it's even possible that it has nothing to do with my nonemployment, in any case the main thing is that I am not called upon to serve, others have been called yet they have not tried harder than I, indeed perhaps they have not even felt the desire to be called, whereas I, at least sometimes, have felt it very strongly.

Kafka presents the reader a peculiar case of “nonemployment”. Essential is, in fact, not that the I of the text lacks occupation, but that he is a servant who doesn't serve, and consequently isn't able to practise his vocation. He is waiting not to be employed in general, he is waiting for the call that would enable him to fulfil his vocation, his vocation as a servant: he is waiting, one might say, to become what he is (“I am a servant”). But the call hasn’t come. Meanwhile others are being called, without him seeing that they have any particular advantages. His attempts to rationalise the situation and find a reason for why he of all people hasn’t yet been called don’t even succeed in convincing himself. What’s important is the fact that he isn’t called, and that his days pass in idleness.

Even at a first glimpse of this passage, the classical biblical image of the “servant” springs to mind. Kafka’s servant appears to be a parody of the biblical servant, a figure here painfully distorted and displayed in his helplessness and exposedness. The servant as trope is of central importance in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and as we know finds its paradigmatic Christian expression in the figure of the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who is called by God to serve the world: he or she is the Lord’s servant. The call calls to service and the servant is the one who gives her or his life to serve this call. In the Christian tradition the believer, too, is described as a servant of God, but only insofar as he or she resembles the first and only, who already in the womb was called by the Father: Christ, who now in turn calls humanity to discipleship.

40 Kafka, The Test, p. 441.
Once again, we are standing in front of the paradox of faith as expressed by Augustine and Kierkegaard, being both *klesis* and *energeia*, call and act. Read as *precursors* to Kafka in the “Borgesian” sense mentioned at the outset of this article, we discover the same confusion, insecurity and faltering in these canonical texts of Western thought – albeit in different ways – depicting the Christian faith. The Augustinian as well as the Kierkegaardian circle is, in fact, identical with this structure of call and serving. One could therefore say that the circle of faith as depicted by both these authors constitutes a form of reproduction of the relationship between vocation, call and serving underlying the biblical concept of the Messiah. In Kafka’s text we stand, on the other hand, in front of a servant who hasn’t been called to service, which, if we stick to the parallel above, would equal a believer without faith or a Messiah without a mission – something of a round square within the Christian tradition. As Werner Hamacher noted in a text dedicated to “Die Prüfung”: “The philosophical and religious texts of the European tradition know only a world that follows a call, a world called forth and called on to do something, in which everything has a vocation and everything is addressed as that which it is.”41 This is a labouring world that has (given itself or) been assigned an assignment, and consequently understands itself in relation to a call. It is a world called to act, and where the act in turn is founded in the call’s calling forth of meaning. And yet, starting from Kafka’s text, the possibility of another world appears, a world without a summons. The dialectic and in a certain sense self-generating circle of call and serving around which the Christian tradition is centred, becomes, if we follow Hamacher’s perspective, the emblem of a structure characterising Western thinking more broadly. Hence the radicality of Kafka’s servant, who by the same token would be the embodiment of an uncalled world.

It is true that Kafka’s servant wishes nothing more than to be called to service, but – Hamacher says – you cannot even define his existence as a waiting for the call, as that would already imply an anticipation of the call’s giving of meaning, a form of call to await the advent of the call:

Nowhere in Kafka’s text is waiting mentioned: even waiting would be in the service of the expected, and an attentional tension is, like every other intentional relation, impossible outside of stable salvational economies; every salvational economy is, however, an economy of calling and vocation.42

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41 Hamacher, *Uncalled*, p. 74.
42 Hamacher, *Uncalled*, p. 81.
The awaiting of the call plays a central role in the Christian tradition as the eschatological prefiguration of the final summoning, the day of judgement. Hamacher tries to show how Kafka’s servant is not apt to play the role of the suffering servant, waiting for his judgement, salvation or mission (although there are actually several passages in Kafka’s text that could lead us to such an assumption).

Hamacher argues that both “Die Prüfung” and the passage about the other Abraham are outside of every economy of salvation, outside of every messianic promise and consequently thoroughly irreligious. They speak about “the unaddressed, those forgotten by the messianic religions, by their call, their language, their logos, and its parables”, and hence from a position entirely out of reach of the circle of faith sketched above. They speak, that is to say, about those who lack the first and necessary point of contact with these traditions, which alone would let their truth be experienced and their call acknowledged – the same people, we might say, that Augustine declares as out of reach of the truth of his book. On the one hand, I think Hamacher is right in emphatically arguing that Kafka speaks about those forgotten by the messianic creed; those who in one way or another fall outside of the circle which in Augustine, as in the Christian tradition at large, already is presupposed when the theological reflection begins. In Kierkegaard, the structure is on the verge of crumbling, and therefore in need of more drastic sacrifices than the unbelievers in order to cling on to its force in the modern world. On the other hand, it is difficult to see – and here I depart from Hamacher’s reading – that Kafka’s servant and his other Abraham thereby should fall outside of the call structure itself. What is interesting about the unemployed servant and the other Abraham is precisely that they are inside this structure, but despite this fact are not reached by God’s call. Here it is necessary to look closer on the crucial distinction between vocation and call. Kafka’s servant understands himself as having a vocation, he is a servant. But the call, the summons from God that would activate this vocation and incite him to act, to start his life of serving, fails to appear. The absence of a call makes the vocation inoperative, empty – leaves us with the structure of vocation but without guidelines for acting, without meaning and without aim. The fact that Kafka’s servant regards himself as a servant despite his not being called to serve, implicates that he strictly speaking is within the vocative structure, but that the circle that would generate the act, that would transform vocation into serving as it did searching to praising, is not working. Something has fallen apart. By the simile with the poor pupil Kafka also implies that the doubt taking hold of the other Abraham and thus the failing of his mission

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43 Hamacher, *Uncalled*, p. 80 et seq.
quite possibly doesn’t even depend on his own deficiencies, but, rather, should be ascribed to God – indeed, was intentionally meant as a punishment to make the other Abraham look ridiculous. By this move, Kafka interestingly gives the power of faith back to God, the exact move that was lacking in Kierkegaard’s conceptualisation of faith.

Bringing Kafka’s two anti-heroes together with Augustine and Kierkegaard, we may now conclude that Kafka, by carrying out a movement inherent in the articulation of the circle of faith, reveals how the Christian understanding of faith’s circularity and its exterior ultimately risks excluding the believer too. Kafka’s two figures help us to perceive the Christian paradox which, on the one hand, prevents an understanding of faith which risks identifying the world with the divine, and where human and divine reason ultimately coincide, and yet, on the other hand, because of the gap thus postulated between God and the world has the consequence that it, ultimately, makes not only God but faith itself unattainable for the human being. The believer cannot by her or his own virtue live up to the ideal of faith. As Augustine continuously stresses, faith is ultimately grounded in God, and the call is inherent in the notion of creation. But apart from this initial call, the faith in the call, too, must come about: the summons to live in accordance with the vocation of creation must be received by the believer. In fact, it is this act of receiving which Kafka’s two figures render problematic. May it derive from a human deficiency – a sudden deafness to God’s call, an inability to understand – or else the call has really stopped calling. In each case a cleavage between vocation and call has taken place, and the force of the call has been made inoperative.

Both the unemployed servant and the other Abraham has a fascinating ability to make us see both Augustine’s and Kierkegaard’s quest in a new light: How is a life of faith possible in this world? When we read these two authors as precursors to Kafka, we find, as did Borges, that Kafka’s “idiosyncrasy is present in [both] of these writings” and that “if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist”. Moreover, Kafka’s writing doubtlessly has a unique and exceptional ability to “modify [...] our conception of the past, as it will modify the future”.

Kafka’s anti-heroes shed light on the most fundamental trust and confidence in the mere possibility of the call without which the Christian message would be inaccessible to humanity. It is a truism that everything taking place in this world can be doubted. The Christian tradition, however, is founded in a something, a quid, which withdraws itself from doubt, a point allowing the believer to act in accordance with the notion of a call and a vocation. But what

both Kafka’s servant and the other Abraham uncover is, in Hamacher’s words, “the internal decomposition of the structure of the call in general.” Our world doesn’t know Abraham, as it does not know any new founder of religion. Our world only knows other Abrahams, Abrahams who go to work uncalled, or who gather the pieces of the shattered world religions and try to make them into a new whole, or who uncalled spread death around them. It may make no difference whether the call has disappeared from the world or whether we have become unable to hear its calling – in each case we are left with a structure urging us to search for a vocation, an assignment and a realisation, but without the soothing and inspiring metaphysical structure positing human reason as being in accordance with God’s will. If it is true that the circle of faith always demands a sacrifice in order to safeguard an interior space of faith, we all, believer and non-believer alike, find ourselves excluded from this interior perspective, sacrificed in order for the notion of faith to live on.

Biography

Anna Sjöberg has her doctoral degree in Systematic theology from Lund University, Sweden, June 2020. She is currently teaching theology for university students at the Newman Institute in Uppsala, as well as working as an editor for the Swedish cultural review Subaltern. In her research, she is focusing on the late modern period and the notion of a crisis for religion in general and Christianity in particular. Her interests are mostly in the field of secularisation theory, phenomenology, philosophical theology and philosophy of religion.

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