



Lev Shestov on Søren Kierkegaard's Christianity

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ABSTRACT

Lev Shestov is one of the most moving readers of Søren Kierkegaard's writings. Even if analyses of this Russian philosopher are rather self-analysis geared towards confirming preconceived theses than an unbiased insight into the letter of the Danish philosopher's text, they are not devoid of value or inspiration. Above all, they are a testimony to Kierkegaard's manifold influence on existential philosophy and an example of the ambiguity of the Danish thinker's work. In this article I take into account the comments that appeared after the publication of the book *Kierkegaard and existential philosophy* (Emmanuel Lévinas, Nikolai Berdyaev) and the full chronology of Shestov's publications on Kierkegaard, in particular the essay *In the bull of Phalaris*: the earliest fragment of the book *Athens and Jerusalem*. On this basis, I put forward a thesis about "Kierkegaard's Christianity", which Shestov understands as a system for the self-justification of his own life. The reconstruction of Shestov's position is supplemented by the comments of authors of comparative studies on Kierkegaard vs. Shestov relations (James M. McLalchan, Joanna Nowotny, José R. Maia Neto).

KEYWORDS

Lev Shestov; Søren Kierkegaard; Christianity; self-justification; modern philosophy; existentialism

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In Lev Shestov's writings, it is not often Kierkegaard who speaks in the words of Søren Kierkegaard, but Shestov, who does not imitate Kierkegaard, though in using his words, presents his own position, one in fact deeply alien to Kierkegaard's. For this reason, studies devoted to Shestov's relationship with Kierkegaard usually focus on recognizing and revealing differences in the positions of both thinkers. The existence of these differences hidden behind the illusion of unanimity can be justified in various ways, for example as a misreading of Kierkegaard's source position (McLachlan, 1986), or as an expression of Shestov's deep-rooted Judaism (Nowotny, 2014).

Just as I do not intend to analyse here the differences between Kierkegaard and Shestov, neither do I wish to demonstrate that Shestov had common aims with Kierkegaard. Here I would like to present another possible point of view. I believe that from the beginning, Shestov exposed a double game in Kierkegaard's writings and assumed his hidden intentions. It is not out of the question that the accomplishment of this endeavour could only have succeeded in ignoring the formal complexity of Kierkegaard's works. Shestov ignores the polyvocality of Kierkegaard's works and combines their ambiguity into a unified position of historical Kierkegaard (Pattison, 2011: 369–370). Whenever Shestov discusses passages from pseudonymous writings he always attributes their content to Kierkegaard. To Shestov, in *The sickness unto death*, in *Fear and trembling* or in *The concept of anxiety*, it is always Kierkegaard himself who speaks, even if he hides behind a pseudonym. In one sole place does Shestov take note of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms (Shestov, 1969: chapter XV). However, also here he unhesitatingly interprets "indirect communication" as a strategy for covering up powerlessness in the face of inexorable necessity. In this way, Shestov argues that Kierkegaard's Christianity demonstrates an affirmation of powerlessness and a resignation from wonder. For these reasons I think that from the beginning Shestov struggled to accept Kierkegaard's position. He rejected it because he was aware of the differences between himself and Kierkegaard. In any case, right from the beginning Shestov had no intention of hiding his critical point of view, and it was his decision to develop and maintain a certain interpretation of Kierkegaard. This is how I understand the following words, ones hitherto in receipt of insufficient attention:

It must be said frankly at the risk of arousing the indignation of many of Kierkegaard's admirers: Kierkegaard's Christianity brings us what Socrates, in his first and second incarnation, had already offered — the virtuous man will be happy even in the bull of Phalaris (Shestov, 1966: 194).

Why should we consider Shestov to be critical of Kierkegaard from the beginning, when the words I use as the starting point were written in *Athens and Jerusalem*, Shestov's last publication? The reasons are very simple and result

from the chronology of Shestov's writings, which tends to be omitted in comparative analyses.¹ The fact that *Athens and Jerusalem*, perhaps the most famous work, is Shestov's last publication does not imply that the material comprising it all comes from the last period of Shestov's work. The chapters devoted to Kierkegaard were written about eight years earlier, at the time when Shestov first came into contact with Kierkegaard's thought.

Shestov first heard of Kierkegaard from Martin Buber (Pattison, 2011: 356; Nowotny, 2014; Wodziński, 1991: 181; Prokopski, 2003: 241 ff.), in the spring of 1928, and during a meeting with Husserl, in the autumn of the same year, he was ultimately motivated to read Kierkegaard's writings: "[d]uring my visit to Freiburg, learning that I had never read Kierkegaard, Husserl began not to *ask* but to *demand* — with enigmatic insistence — that I acquaint myself with the works of the Danish thinker" (Shestov, 1962: 453–454).² The reading of Kierkegaard was probably intended to serve a better understanding of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 20–21, 214), which was being studied by Shestov at the time. In reality, however, the effect of this reading had been entirely different. Letters from that period confirm that during his reading, Shestov not only discovered analogies between his own and Kierkegaard's way of thinking, but above all he became aware of the differences between them:

I am reading some Kierkegaard: it is true that there is a resemblance. [...] Sometimes I think that he had read *Apophis* or that I had read his books. The only difference is that he, in his polemics with Hegel, nevertheless wants to use Hegel's dialectics against Hegel, and the thought of not being rooted is probably unacceptable to him, and perhaps it is not even a thought at all (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 26; trans. by T.K.).

The above quoted letter to H. Lovcki of 14 February 1929 confirms that from the beginning Shestov was aware of Kierkegaard's predilection for dialectics. It is therefore impossible to formulate an accusation against Kierkegaard that this dialectic, and thus rational speculation, is simply omitted, or that he

¹ Such an unintended, erroneous chronology appears in McLachlan's article (McLachlan, 1986: 178, footnote). The lack of commentary on the mentioned works by Shestov leaves an impression that the text devoted to Kierkegaard from *Athens and Jerusalem* is the last work written by Shestov on this philosopher. The chronology of Shestov's writings is, for obvious reasons, more important to Shestov's researchers, even if they do not draw any further conclusions from this fact.

² Although Shestov's "discovery" of Kierkegaard is well documented, it remains surprising that it materialised so late (Pattison, 2011: 356; Oppo, 2020: 185). Kierkegaard's work in Russia was already known from the late nineteenth century onwards. Perhaps, then, the eagerness with which Shestov embarked on his reading in 1928 was in part due to a desire to erase his shameful ignorance in the most expeditious manner possible. All the more so because it was immediately suggested to Shestov that he would find something in Kierkegaard's writings that was very close to him.

is not aware of its existence in Kierkegaard's writings. When at the same time Shestov writes that "Kierkegaard's Christianity brings us what Socrates offered people, in his first and second incarnation" (Shestov, 1966: 194), it is because of this speculation that he might consider this.³ In another letter from the same period, sent to A. Lazariiev on 27 April 1929, he expresses even more criticism of Kierkegaard: "It seems to me that *Wiederholung* is of more interest to psychoanalysts. I think Kierkegaard is overestimated in Germany in general. And contrary to Buber, I think Nietzsche is much more important than Kierkegaard"⁴ (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 31; trans. by T.K.).

While studying Kierkegaard's writings between 1928 and 1929 (in a German translation by Christoph Schrempf), Shestov immediately recognised Kierkegaard's propensity for speculation. This fact immediately determined Shestov's attitude to this reading — always ambivalent and never unilaterally affirmative.⁵ The first tangible results of reading Kierkegaard's writings (in particular *The moment*, *The concept of anxiety* and *Fear and trembling*),⁶ were lectures given at the Sorbonne and the Academy of Religion and Philosophy in the early 1930s.⁷ I think it might have had yet another effect. Let us note the way Shestov describes the nature of his work on Kierkegaard's writings. For instance, Shestov's friend Benjamin Fondane noted that intense reading had led the philosopher to the brink of physical exhaustion. When asked what was the cause of his fatigue and emaciation, Shestov replied that it was the "struggle with Kierkegaard" that had led him to this condition (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 88). In a letter to Boris de Schloezer of 18 July 1931 he also writes:

³ Shestov does not read Kierkegaard's writings like an impartial scholar: "Shestov's reading of Kierkegaard is entirely biblical and anti-Socratic" (Oppo, 2020: 194). As a result, Shestov finds in Kierkegaard many relatable ideas, especially when it comes to the understanding of faith and sin. At the same time, he sees some innovations that are completely alien to the literal understanding of the Bible. An example is the interpretation of original sin as the effect of a cure against nothingness (Pattison, 2011: 365).

⁴ Then Shestov concludes: "I have not yet read all his books, but it seems unlikely that I will find what Buber promised. We will see, though. I will bring his books to Chatel and we will talk there" (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 31; trans. by T.K.). Wodziński, in commenting on the content of the above-mentioned letters, believes that initially Shestov was not a Kierkegaard enthusiast, but that he was to become one with time (Wodziński, 1991: 182).

⁵ In a letter to Boris Schloezer of 20 October 1933, he writes: "None of the writers were as close to me as Kierkegaard — no one, as far as I know, was so passionate and so eager to find answers to his questions in the Scriptures. From Hegel and from the 'Greek symposium' he turned to Job and Abraham, from reason to Absurd and Paradox" (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 121; trans. by T.K.).

⁶ Shestov's letter to Lovcki of 14 February 1929 (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 26).

⁷ However, it is not known for certain whether this could have happened as early as in the academic year 1930/1931, when he taught a course on the religious thought of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, or in the following year, when he started to lecture on Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 76).

Last year, my encounter with Kierkegaard, was particularly difficult for me. And so far, every time I recall this “soul”, with which I have collided in my wanderings, I must make the greatest effort not to follow the path of Kant’s criticism, which inevitably leads back to Spinoza (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 77; trans. by T.K.).

It is hard to imagine that the expressions “collision”, “struggle”, “effort”, “physical exhaustion” could adequately describe the reading of a text with which the reader fully identifies himself, finding similarities and analogies. Apparently, reading Kierkegaard’s writings caused Shestov a serious problem. There was no way to avoid confrontation — in Kierkegaard’s writings, Shestov did not find only a faithful reflection of his own position. However, he certainly found in Kierkegaard’s writings a struggle with the very themes to which he devoted his entire life (Oppo, 2020: 192).

The above quoted letter to Schloetzer comes from 1931, the year when Shestov commenced work on an essay entitled *In the bull of Phalaris* (Baranoff-Chestov, 1983: 83, 86–87). The essay appeared in French the following year, in No. 1/2 (January/February) and No. 3/4 (March/April) of the magazine *La Revue Philosophique*. It is the same text that almost seven years later, in 1938, was published as a chapter of Shestov’s last book, *Athens and Jerusalem*.

All the rest of Shestov’s writings devoted to Kierkegaard were written later, *i.e.* paradoxically, after the text contained in the last publication, published only a few months after Shestov’s death. These were, chronologically: (1) an essay entitled *Hegel or Job* (Shestov, 1964)⁸ published in 1934 in the magazine *Put*, (2) the reading entitled *Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky* in 1935 also published in *Put*, which in 1936 was included in the book (3) *Kierkegaard and the existential philosophy* (Shestov, 1969), as a foreword, (4) the essay *Kierkegaard as religious philosopher* (Shestov, 1982), from 1937. It is equally the case with these writings that the dates of publication do not usually coincide with the date of their preparation.

WHY SHOULD SHESTOV’S INTERPRETATION RAISE OBJECTIONS FROM KIERKEGAARD’S RESEARCHERS?

In response to such a question, it is enough to point out the most general conclusions of researchers who analyse Shestov’s writings on Kierkegaard: firstly, Shestov indirectly imputes to Kierkegaard his own position (McLachlan, 1986: 180), and secondly, in the polemics, he is more committed to

⁸ No English edition of this essay exists. The essay was published a second time posthumously, in the collection *Speculation and Revelation*. In the English edition of this collection of essays, three texts have been omitted, among them, the aforementioned essay *Hegel or Job* (Shestov, 1982).

self-presentation than to the presentation of Kierkegaard (McLachlan, 1986: 178). It is even believed that such an indirect self-presentation is quite typical of Shestov, who uses other thinkers instrumentally, often only to illustrate his own philosophical position.⁹ Then the analysis of other writers' works becomes a self-analysis (Nowotny, 2014). "Shestov's Kierkegaard is more an image of Shestov himself than of the real Kierkegaard" (Neto, 1995: 109), writes José R. Maia Neto, or, as put by Emmanuel Lévinas in the review of the essay *Kierkegaard and existential philosophy*, "The author [*i.e.* Shestov — T.K.] is more present therein than his subject" (Lévinas, 1937: 139). Therefore, if Shestov considers Kierkegaard to be his predecessor, it is not only because Kierkegaard voiced exactly the same arguments earlier, but because Shestov can use Kierkegaard's statements to express his own position.¹⁰ Although this is probably what was intended to happen in the case study of Kierkegaard, clearly it did not. Searching for analogies and similarities, Shestov unexpectedly found something completely different.

An instrumental use of the writings of one author by the author of another is not unacceptable, nor is it original or rare, but above all it is selective. Shestov is not a historian of philosophy, and we do not have to demand from him an objective presentation of the thoughts of another author (and it seems that sometimes such requirements are imposed on Shestov's text). The texts that Shestov wrote as a result of reading Kierkegaard's works cannot be regarded as yet another scholarly study of Kierkegaard's work, even if indeed their French editions were an important contribution to the development of existentialism in France (Pattison, 2011: 356–357). Not only was French existentialism influenced by the irrationalism of Shestov himself, but his radio readings and later the French edition of *Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle (Vox clamantis in deserto)* shaped the image of the Danish philosopher as an uncompromising intellectual scandalizer (Pattison, 2011: 358). All this was done despite the fact that Shestov's attitude to Kierkegaard's writings in general is far from a scholarly approach to the text and has little in common with the typical attempt to satisfy research curiosity (Pattison, 2011: 363; Oppo, 2020: 189).

Shestov exercises his right to select works and content. His selection of Kierkegaard's writings — coincidentally, as it has been noted, in line with Gregor Malantschuk's division into "concrete" and "abstract" writings (McLachlan, 1986: 179) — indicates a preference for the philosopher's early writings (in particular *Repetition* and *Fear and trembling*), while omitting the later works (especially those published under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus (Neto, 1995: 110–111), rarely referring to *The concept of anxiety*, *Upbuilding*

⁹ Nikolai Berdyaev believes that Shestov uses the Bible in a similar way, from which he "appropriates only that, which he needs for his theme" (Berdyaev, 2000). Cf. Sawicki, 2000: 191.

¹⁰ This is how I understand the remark from the letter to Lovcki of 14 February 1929.

discourses, and *The sickness unto death*). The principle of selection naturally reflects Shestov's position and illustrates his radicalism in criticizing rationalism and autonomous ethics. The selection of the writings and reinterpretations of the topics they deal with are the main subject of comparative analyses of Shestov's and Kierkegaard's thoughts. Therefore, it is stressed above all that Shestov interprets faith differently from Kierkegaard (Neto, 1995: 116; McLachlan, 1986: 180), and as a result, he understands "repetition" completely contrary to Kierkegaard's intention (McLachlan, 1986: 182–183), applies an entirely different interpretation of original sin (Neto, 1995: 113–114; McLachlan, 1986: 185), and almost completely ignores the incarnation and Christocentrism of Climacus (Neto, 1995: 116–117).¹¹

In what sense are these differences revealed in what Shestov describes as the "Christianity of the Danish philosopher"? Let us go back to the initial quote from *Athens and Jerusalem* and revisit the thesis formulated there.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT "THE CHRISTIANITY OF THE DANISH PHILOSOPHER IS A REPETITION OF WHAT SOCRATES OFFERED PEOPLE IN HIS FIRST AND SECOND INCARNATION"?

First of all, Shestov believes that Kierkegaard "could never bring himself to renounce the idea that our life must be determined by our thought, and so to break with Socrates" (Shestov, 1966: 201) and in fact "he never succeeded in escaping from the power of the Socratic ideas" (Shestov, 1966: 194), or in another place, on the example of Kierkegaard: "Now it appears that the Christian also cannot do without Socrates, just as he cannot do without universal and necessary truths" (Shestov, 1966: 219). If the expression "he never" were to be taken literally, *i.e.* that at the time of writing these words, in 1931 or 1932, Shestov already had a general orientation in everything, including Kierkegaard's later writings, then Shestov's interpretation would have to be considered a well-thought-out decision and not the result of an accidentally inappropriate choice of readings.¹² Of course, no one is accusing Shestov of his reckless and selective use of Kierkegaard's texts, and yet it is hard to avoid the impression that too much importance is attached to the fact that certain titles of the Danish philosopher are over-represented among the works cited by Shestov, whereas others seem to be lacking. What, according to Shestov, is the Kierkegaard inconsistency that justifies his recognition as the "incarnation of Socrates"?

¹¹ On this last point, Shestov remains a consistent Jew (Nowotny, 2014).

¹² Kierkegaard's *Collected works*, translated into German by Christoph Schrempf, published by Eugen Diderichs between 1909 and 1914 and used by Shestov, include all of Kierkegaard's major writings.

I will draw attention to one motive which is an integral part of the justification behind this judgment of Kierkegaard. From Kierkegaard's journals, Shestov reveals scattered accounts of the hidden motives of Kierkegaard's entire writing. From "insincere confessions" — as Cezary Wodziński writes — from understatements, allusions, and loose comparisons emerge the real, mundane causes of an elaborate literary game (Wodziński, 1991: 185). Here are several of them, which Shestov noted down from the German edition of Kierkegaard's journal. The first fragment concerns the motives of the publication *Either/Or*, to which Kierkegaard alludes:

In eleven months I finished *Either/Or*. If anyone in the world knew what provoked the appearance of this book! My God, a work so immense! Everyone imagines that I was impelled to write this book by some deep sentiment, but in reality it relates entirely to my private life. And my purpose — if people knew what my purpose was, they would declare me stark mad (I, 183) (Shestov, 1966: 195).¹³

The note from 1843 — read, as Shestov emphasizes, in the German edition of Kierkegaard's journal — is one of many similar ones, confirming, albeit not specifically, that it was the personal experience of life's failure that prompted Kierkegaard's to write. Further comments on the above mentioned passage ensue:

The explanation that I hide in my inmost being, the more concrete explanation that includes my dread still more precisely — this I do not write down. But, despite his efforts to bewilder us, it is beyond doubt that the "concrete" is his breaking off with his fiancée, Regine Olsen. He could not, of course, hide the breaking off itself. But he did hide the fact that he had broken with the young girl not of his own volition but because he was obliged to do so, obliged not internally by some "higher" consideration but externally — because of a circumstance that was banal, offensive to him, shameful even, and utterly repugnant (Shestov, 1966: 198).

Of course, in the writings announced in print by Kierkegaard, one would not find the confessions that he has the courage to make in his personal journal. Yet even there, says Shestov (using only the two-volume German edition of 1923):

But as I have indicated, neither in his books nor in his *Journal* did Kierkegaard ever dare say that his Isaac was none other than Regine Olsen and that it was because of Regine Olsen that he had had the audacity to proclaim his "suspension of the ethical".¹⁴ This was his "secret" that he hid from the "ethical", that he hid from the Absurd, that he was unwilling even to admit to himself (Shestov, 1966: 218–219).

¹³ Shestov quotes: Kierkegaard, 1923.

¹⁴ It is significant, Shestov stresses, that Kierkegaard always speaks of the "suspension" and never of the "abolition" of ethics. This reinforced Shestov's conviction that Kierkegaard essentially never liberated himself from the power of necessary truths (Pattison, 2011: 360).

Instead, we find pathos-filled apologies of a victim, self-denial, renunciation, and resignation: "It is for this reason that it was necessary for him to persuade himself that his break with Regine was a voluntary sacrifice — the repetition, in a way, of Abraham's sacrifice, who had agreed with God only because his was also a voluntary sacrifice" (Shestov, 1966: 219). This dissonance, between personal confession and public "teaching", is emphasized by Shestov. The discord is also the basis of the thesis formulated by Shestov: Kierkegaard's Christianity is a repetition of Socrates' teaching.

What is this "incarnation of Socrates" in this case? It is undoubtedly anchoring itself in the knowledge of what is real and valuable (Shestov, 1966: 124), it is not a presentation of what happens to me in adequate categories, but a life subordinated to categories of thinking. "Knowledge obliges man to accept the real, that is, "things that are not in our power". And it is knowledge, likewise, which suggests to him that there is at times something shameful in this acceptance" (Shestov, 1966: 201).

When Shestov writes about "Kierkegaard's Christianity", he obviously does not provide precise historical-philosophical knowledge, but only distinguishes this particular one: "Kierkegaard's Christianity" from among the many types of Christianity, contrasting it with all the types of Christianity that Kierkegaard explicitly refers to in his writings. This polyphony in speaking about Christianity can be seen in its elementary form, for instance in the division in Kierkegaard's writings between what belongs to the purely declarative, wishful thinking layer (when speaking about what Christianity should be) and what belongs to the real, descriptive layer (when talking about what Christianity is). Kierkegaard's position cannot be identified with either the former or the latter.

I assume that the real Christianity is Danish Lutheranism, and that Kierkegaard's public criticism was aimed at this particular Church (for instance in *The moment*). But according to Shestov, Christianity is also a project of which Kierkegaard's unconscious or hidden "self-criticism" is a part. When Kierkegaard writes: "But I do not have faith; this courage I lack" (Kierkegaard, 1983: 34), "I cannot think myself into Abraham" (Kierkegaard, 1983: 33), "my courage is still not the courage of faith and is not something to be compared with it. I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd" (Kierkegaard, 1983: 33–34). These are all words that express a confirmation of a lack of identification with one's own Kierkegaardian project, with what I understand by declared or wishful (faith) Christianity. Therefore "Kierkegaard's Christianity" cannot be the project (faith) he proclaims, "The Christianity of the New Testament does not exist at all" (Kierkegaard, 1998: 39; cf. Klemke, 1976).

"Kierkegaard's Christianity" (*i.e.* his "personal" Christianity), as Shestov critically writes, is a teaching,¹⁵ *i.e.* a consolation, however not a consolation of

¹⁵ Russian *nazidanie* — also means moralising, commandeering.

others, but of oneself; it is a system of self-justification of what happens to me (for example, by using the term “sacrifice”)¹⁶ and placing my individual life experience in a certain system of reference, set out by common and necessary truths, that rationalises it as meaningful (Shestov, 1966: 219). This reference system is in fact surprisingly conventional in nature. It appreciates sacrifice, devotion, effort, chivalry, *etc.* (cf. Pattison, 2011: 361). Hence, defining the effort of faith exceeding everything else in terms of “chivalry” and “greatness”, and even an attempt “to place on the ladder of human values a knight of faith one step higher than a tragic hero”, attest, in Shestov’s opinion, to the fact that

This also is a tribute to the “universal”: Kierkegaard could not resolve to break once and for all with the habits of thought that men had adopted after Socrates, who provided the principle of philosophy for all time. If Kierkegaard had wished and been able to speak all of the truth, he would have had to root out from his soul all the ideas of “greatness” and of “knightliness” that his memory suggested to him (Shestov, 1966: 217–218).

According to Shestov, breaking off the engagement with Regina Olsen was for Kierkegaard a “historical event”, an “earthquake”, an experience that he must have considered “embarrassing”, not quite suitable for a literary theme, which is why it became the most deeply hidden secret. “Orpheus in the flesh and bone” — and not the Orpheus created by literary fantasy, as Shestov aptly observed — “would not have dared fight against hell and would have been content with ‘justifying’ his submission through lofty considerations, *i.e.*, through thoughts about sacrifice, *etc.*” (Shestov, 1966: 200).¹⁷

However, we do not learn whether the obstacles preventing Kierkegaard from entering into a marriage were of an emotional or sexual nature, and if so, precisely what they were. In any case, these obstacles represent what Kierkegaard describes with horror in *Fear and trembling* as an unreasonable alternative to the systematic, rational, spiritual order of the world.¹⁸ Shestov has no doubt that this “wild, fermenting power” (Kierkegaard, 1983: 15)¹⁹ is the disgraceful

¹⁶ The inconsistent criticism on ethics and rationality by Shestov, also revealed in the language in which he writes about Kierkegaard, is pointed out by José R. Maia Neto (Neto, 1995: 112).

¹⁷ It is significant that Shestov finds in the tragic story of Orpheus a parallel to Kierkegaard’s personal situation (Pattison, 2011: 359).

¹⁸ “If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?” (Kierkegaard, 1983: 15).

¹⁹ Shestov compares it with the “dark forces” that took Eurydice away from Orpheus (Shestov, 1966: 198).

cause of his actions which he cannot accept and which he therefore neutralizes with a lie (Sawicki, 2000: 190). This lie is the “world of the spirit” defined by a constellation of such notions as “sacrifice”, “renunciation”, “infinite resignation”, with which Kierkegaard rationalizes his actions, and with which he describes what he is able to achieve instead of a life unattainable for him. It goes without saying that this interpretation is to a large extent a transfer of Nietzsche’s criticism of cognition as an illusion of the rational being’s self-adaptation to living conditions. “It is not difficult to discover behind this infinite resignation”, says Shestov, “Socrates’ bull of Phalaris, Spinoza’s *beatitudines*, or Nietzsche’s *amor fati*” (Shestov, 1966: 205).

At this point, an assumption arises that Shestov’s interpretation is an attempt at a psychological analysis of Kierkegaard’s motives, that the dissonance between the assumed image of oneself and the reality of what happens to one, *i.e.* the truth about oneself revealed in experience (“historical event”), results in the repression and sublimation of the unrealized needs of life into literary creation, justifying not so much the rightness of his further steps, but rather the acceptance of the occurrence of an entire chain of events. Kierkegaard does not identify himself with the figures of the Old Testament patriarchs (Abraham or Job), whose behaviour — as incomprehensible to the people around them as it is to the contemporary reader — justifies the certainty of exclusive faith in the impossible. As we know, Shestov interprets this faith in a very singular way, as the possibility of a not happening of the events that have happened. Shestov repeatedly stresses that if Kierkegaard had this faith (which he does not), he would regain the capacity to become a husband.

Although Shestov would have sufficient reason to psychologize in the above way, he does not do so. Instead, he formulates a general theoretical problem: “To put it differently, has there ever been a man audacious enough to think in the categories in which he lives, and to descend, despite ‘eternal laws,’ into the Hades forbidden to mortals?” (Shestov, 1966: 199). In fact, Shestov is accusing Kierkegaard of not thinking in the categories in which he lives. Kierkegaard reproached philosophers (especially Hegel) that they did not live in the categories in which they thought (Shestov, 1966: 201), while Shestov claims that it would be more correct to accuse them of not having the courage to think in the categories in which they live, and moreover “Kierkegaard himself wishes to believe that he lives in the categories in which he thinks, and it is in this that he sees his ‘merit’” (Shestov, 1966: 198). This is Shestov’s key accusation and probably the most important source of his disappointment. Shestov believes that Kierkegaard pretends before himself to live a life adequately expressed in the terms in which he thinks about it, and thus in the ethical categories of “sacrifice”, “infinite resignation”, “renunciation”, *etc.*

In the last essay that Shestov wrote about Kierkegaard, the same subject was taken up again:

What made Kierkegaard break with Regina Olsen? Both in his diaries and in his books he speaks uninterruptedly in his own name and in the name of invented characters about a man who had to break with his beloved — but at the same time he constantly forbids his future readers in the strictest fashion to try to find out the true reason that forced him to do that which for him (as well as for his fiancée) was the most difficult and tormenting of all things. More than this, he says more than once that in his writings he did everything possible to confuse the curious. Nevertheless one must say that, at the same time, he did everything possible to prevent his secret from being buried with him. In his books and diaries he constantly repeats, “If I had had faith, I would never have abandoned Regina Olsen.” These are puzzling words: what relationship can faith, as all of us are accustomed to understand this word, have with the question whether a man marries or does not marry? (Shestov, 1982: §1).

CONCLUSION

My intention was to show that the main purpose of Shestov’s polemic was to identify Kierkegaard’s personal motivation as, in essence, a non-Christian or, more generally, a non-religious commitment to necessity and rationality. Shestov does not appreciate that Kierkegaard is personally involved in a critique of official Christianity, nor that Kierkegaard criticises the Church and religion for personal motives. Shestov’s perspective is different and the motives of his own criticism directed against certain forms of Christianity, including those criticised by Kierkegaard, are also different. Shestov questions Christianity’s adherence to eternal truths, which he sees as evidence of true faith’s submission to the systemic domination of rationalism’s deterministic interpretation of reality. From Shestov’s perspective, the passionate criticism Kierkegaard engaged in failed to free himself from these constraints, and Kierkegaard himself was unable to openly admit this.

Fondane believes that Shestov was able to penetrate Kierkegaard’s real intentions and that he discovered — as he probably thought — the original nature of his thought, “which he hid under his dialectical reasoning” (Neto, 1995: 110; Fondane, 1979: 233). This is how I interpret what he writes about “Kierkegaard’s Christianity”. Hence, Fondane presupposes that Kierkegaard is hiding even from himself, and that Shestov’s analyses constitute some kind of attempt to reveal what Kierkegaard had not realized himself. “When Kierkegaard speaks of voluntary sacrifice and has nothing to sacrifice — for he has been stripped of everything — he does not even suspect that, following Adam’s example, he is hiding his nakedness under a fig leaf” (Shestov, 1966: 201). The “fig leaf” is the knowledge that offers “consolation” (Pattison, 2011: 359). Shestov discovers and reveals it, he is a hermeneutic and an analyst who brings to light what Kierkegaard hides even from himself.

Shestov does not impose his views on Kierkegaard, as his analyses of the Dane's writings have usually been judged, and Kierkegaard does not express or confirm Shestov's anti-rationalism and fideism. On the contrary, Shestov's initial enthusiasm to seek in Kierkegaard the confirmation of his own position, which must have motivated Shestov to engage in the study, led to a surprising discovery, which was probably the cause of the physical and spiritual suffering that he confessed to while reading Kierkegaard's writings between 1929 and 1931. The results of this struggle, recorded in five parts of his essay *In the bull of Phalaris*, Shestov describes as the most difficult part of his last book (Shestov, 1966: LXIX).

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