



Kierkegaard and Christian Renewal

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Even a hurried testing of the pulse of contemporary Christianity leaves no doubt that the adrenalin of renewal is in its bloodstream. Paralleling the desire for Christian unity there is a restlessness within the Protestant and Catholic churches for reform. Christianity is mustering its forces to meet the challenge of militant atheism, widespread poverty and suffering, religious indifference, and ignorance of the Gospel. This is current history. But the idea of Christian renovation did not start with us. The cry for Christian renewal was heard in the tenth, twelfth, and sixteenth centuries. The cry was also taken up in nineteenth century Denmark by the lone voice of Søren Kierkegaard. He laid stress on personal renewal. "A reformation

should begin" he said, "with each man reforming himself."¹ He understood that Christianity would be only as strong as individual Christians. As he put it: "The individual—with this category the cause of Christianity stands or falls. . . ."² The message which he uttered a hundred years ago is remarkably pertinent today. If we find him a noble spiritual companion we will not be alone. For Barth, Tillich, Buber, Unamuno, Marcel, and others have also found him such.

A Christian Socrates

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) looked out upon his nineteenth century Danish world and discovered that Christendom was no longer Christian. This did not mean that Paganism was on the increase or that Atheism was in vogue, but simply that vitality had vanished from "Christian" Denmark. Everyone professed faith in Christ but scarcely anyone realized what this profession really meant.

A sensitive and restless soul, Kierkegaard was moved to action by this apathetic situation. He took upon himself the task of jarring out of their complacency the nominal Christians of his time. "I wish to make people aware," he wrote, "so that they do not squander and dissipate their lives."³ He laid no claim to superior holiness, private revelation, or divine authority for his "mission." His only qualification was an awareness of what being a Christian really meant. And even here he admitted that he had much to learn. Thus in later years he wrote, "I believe I have rendered a service to the cause of Christianity while I myself have been educated in the process."⁴

But Soren knew well that prophets are not accepted in their own country. The problem before our Christian "gadfly" was a weighty one: How to sting men into examining their lives without arousing their indignation. A direct frontal attack promised only to harden men in their ways. Kierkegaard therefore adopted an "indirect" dialectical approach more subtle than that of Socrates. He decided to write under pen names, characterizing and dramatizing the types of people he knew so well. Virtues and vices were exaggerated to sharpen the contrast; personified in flesh and

¹ The Present Age, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall, (N. Y.: Random House, 1959), p. 263.

² *Point of View of My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (N. Y.: Harper Torchbook, 1962), p. 134.

³ *Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru, (Oxford University Press: 1938), Entry 638.

⁴ *Point of View*, p. 96.

blood to make them real. Christendom came alive in his pages. His books, like the Socratic dialogues, aimed at inviting his readers to think, to examine their lives in the light of fictional characters and eventually to choose the good life.

The characters he wrote about were basically of three types: *aesthetical*, *ethical* and *religious*. By his mellow satire he presented Christians with a choice: either select the immature life of the aesthetical sphere, or the responsible life of the ethical and religious spheres. Thus the title of his first book: *Either/Or*.

Either . . .

The aesthetical life as portrayed in *Either/Or* is the realm of the would-be Don Juans for whom life is a game. Theirs is an existence of vibrant instability where life is not savored but is raced through. The mind and affections can scarcely rest and are constantly on patrol for new objects of pleasure. The total personality seems engaged by some object—painting perhaps, or literature or foreign travel. But boredom eventually forces the aesthete to search for something new. He travels with a crowd and is indistinguishable from it. The passing fad becomes his taste. The common opinion his thought.

We must mention here that for Kierkegaard the stages on life's way are never static but always in flux. There is a constant dynamic process bringing men to the brink of the next level of existence. Thus the man living an aesthetic life is like a homing pigeon blown off course. Despite the tempest of his passions he retains an innate tendency to return home. And home for the aesthete is a life more in keeping with his human nature. Sooner or later the aesthetic life will bring forth the fruit of ennui and finally despair. For Kierkegaard, however, despair is simply a realization of the shallowness of aesthetical living; an awareness of the incongruity of a human life squandered by the emotions. The hope in despair lies in the fact that conversion to the ethical life is at hand.

/Or . . .

The ethical life as typified by the character, Judge Williams, in the *Or* of *Either/Or* is a higher sphere of existence. No longer is the self an emotional tumbleweed blown now this way, now the next, picking up then dropping one interest after another. The ethical man assumes responsibility for his life, deciding that happiness lies in living according to the moral law. He is sober, clear-eyed and self-reliant, shaping his own personality

by positive commitment and choice. In this deliberate choosing he leaves behind the aesthetical life. In this regard Kierkegaard has Judge Williams say:

The act of choosing is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the ethical. . . . The only absolute either/or is the choice between good and evil, but that is also absolutely ethical. The aesthetic choice is either entirely immediate [unreflective] and to that extent is no choice or it loses itself in the multifarious."⁵

Religious Living

Although Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* hinted at the religious sphere of existence, he did not explicitly mention it there. He corrected this defect later on especially in his *Fear and Trembling, Stages on Life's Way*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In this latter work he also attacked the Hegelian philosophy and theology of his day for being overly speculative, disdaining to dirty its hands in the existential order, and neglecting the individual; he also summarized all of his pseudonymous works, and admitted authorship of them.

While the ethical life conforms to human nature and stands above the aesthetic, Kierkegaard did not conceive of it as complete in itself. It is but the halfway mark in man's journey to God. For a while, man may live as though the ethical life with its Kantian devotion to duty satisfied all his needs. But this ethical autonomy soon gives way to "fear and trembling" at the realization that one cannot lead a good life without help. When a general sense of helplessness arises man is on the threshold of the religious stage. He must now forge a relationship with God since he realizes that the moral law is no longer a sufficient norm.

Kierkegaard distinguishes two types of rapprochement with God: religiousness A, and religiousness B. The first is a pre-christian religion of immanence wherein a man determines to abandon himself to the absolute and renounce the world. "It is a natural turning to God; a religion without revelation. "Religiousness A can exist in Paganism, and in Christianity it can be the religiousness of everyone who is not decisively Christian."⁶ It is called a religion of immanence because there is no awareness yet of a transcendent God. Like faith in the philosophy of Hegel or the intuition

⁵ *Either / Or*, Vol. 2, trans. Walter Lowrie, (N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), p. 170-1.

⁶ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 495.

of Schliermacher and the Romantics, time and eternity are confused. God and the self are not distinguished. Hegel's rationalism and German romanticism are considered arch-enemies but on the matter of abolishing a transcendent God, Kierkegaard points out that each in its own way accomplishes the job quite well. If Hegelianism makes men into gods, Romanticism reduces God to an inner feeling.

To attempt to reduce religion to this state would be abortive, and doomed to failure. Nevertheless Religiousness A is an indispensable antechamber, for through it a man must pass groping his way to the Transcendent. "Religiousness A" says Kierkegaard, "must first be present in the individual before there can be any question of becoming aware of the dialectic of B."⁷

Religiousness A like life everywhere is in flux. The dialectic within it moves from infinite resignation to suffering and lastly to guilt. The incipiently religious man has left the ethical life behind as insufficient for his new spiritual capacity. He has resolved to search unceasingly for God. Now he will restrain his unruly passions and moderate his use of the world not because of the moral law, but because he wishes to know God. He wishes to "annihilate himself" before God, to establish an "absolute relationship" with Him and a "relative relationship" with the things of earth.

Inevitably, however, this noble ideal proves beyond man's inner reserves. He cannot always distinguish the relative from the Absolute. This inner frustration causes him great suffering. Religiousness A reaches its peak when a man feels culpable for the dichotomy within his soul. This sense of overwhelming guilt marks the end of the line for religiousness A. We are on the very threshold of the fullness of the religious life, but without Christian revelation we can go no further.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between consciousness of guilt and consciousness of sin. The former is the apogee of natural religion while the latter is the door to religiousness B. And there is but one key to this door—revelation. God cannot be found by our introspective brooding. *He* must take the initiative and reveal Himself as infinitely transcendent. Only when we realize the infinite distance between God and ourselves does any transgression against Him become inexcusable; only then does consciousness of guilt become consciousness of sin. Only when he stands before the infinite God does a man realize that he is a sinful individual. He knows now that an infinite abyss separates him and his goal. Were God to leave him in this

⁷ *Postscript*, p. 494.

state, a crushing despair unknown in any other stage of life would engulf him. But God smiles lovingly upon the contrite sinner and through faith will lift him to Himself. Thus we see the paramount importance for Kierkegaard of an awareness and a sorrow for our sins. "All ways," he says, "come together at one point, the consciousness of sin—through that passes 'the way' by which He draws a man, the repentant sinner, to Himself."⁸

Faith in Christ

It is only through faith in Christ that a man can leap across the abyss that separates him from the Transcendent. More correctly, through faith he believes that the Eternal has intervened in time, become a man, entered into the human milieu. This is the great "paradox" of Christianity before which a man's reason stands stunned. This is what ultimately separates immanent religiousness A from paradoxical religiousness B. "There is no longer any immanent fundamental kinship between the temporal and the Eternal, because the Eternal itself has entered time and would constitute there the kinship."⁹

But the fact of God's becoming man does not absolve us from professing faith in Him. It is the *sine qua non* of religious living. Kierkegaard often compares this act of faith to a "leap" into the unknown, or to swimming over "70,000 fathoms of water." In the grip of dread the soul feels alone, unsure, apprehensive. It is reluctant and yet desirous to begin a new life. "Dread," says Kierkegaard, "precedes [our leap of faith] and discovers its consequences before they appear, so that we are aware of a storm brewing in the air."¹⁰ A man never eliminates dread, but after the leap of faith it no longer menaces his soul. Through faith he has the, "courage to renounce dread without any dread."¹¹

The moment when a person acknowledges faith in Christ is called by Kierkegaard "the instant." What then takes place in the instant? What, more precisely, is faith? Kierkegaard describes faith in his *Postscript* as, ". . . the objective uncertainty due to the repulsion of the absurd held fast by the passion of inwardness . . ."¹² The absurd of course is the paradox

⁸ *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (N. Y.: Oxford, 1941), p. 155.

⁹ *Postscript*, p. 508.

¹⁰ *Repetition, An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton University Press, 1941), 114

¹¹ *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1946), p. 104.

¹² *Postscript*, p. 540.

of the God-man. If our minds could make divine things crystal clear then there would be no need for faith. But such is not the case. Religion, therefore, cannot be judged by the standards of philosophy. Faith does not pay tribute to reason as the Hegelian dialectic would have it. "Faith," says Hegel, "is satisfied with its symbolic images and performances. . . . True thought nevertheless will proceed to comprehend them."¹³ "Philosophy thus understands religion as one of its own presuppositions and as a particular articulation of the absolute totality."¹⁴ But for Kierkegaard to attempt to reduce faith to a moment in the evolution of absolute thought is a travesty. To attempt to eliminate the mystery from religion and the "risk" from faith is presumption. Man's reason cannot understand the paradox, the absurdity of God becoming man. It is therefore faith not philosophy which is the highest level of life. Faith stands beyond reason as God's gift enabling a man to adhere passionately to that which he cannot comprehend.

Kierkegaard's *credo quia absurdum* does not abolish reason from religion. Such phrases as "the crucifixion of reason" must be understood in the light of his reaction against Hegel. Kierkegaard gives reason two duties to perform as a handmaid of faith. First of all, although proofs of the truths of faith force no one to believe, they do provide the occasion for belief. Apologetics then brings the doctrine to mind and makes it an unavoidable question in point. Secondly, reason must point out the difference between mystery and impossibility. For the Christian does not believe nonsense:

The believing Christian not only possesses but uses his understanding. . . . But in relation to Christianity he believes against the understanding, and in this case also uses understanding—to make sure that he believes against the understanding. Nonsense therefore he cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and will prevent him from believing it.¹⁵

Christian Witness

During Holy Week of 1848 Kierkegaard experienced what he called a "metamorphosis," a decision to switch from an indirect to a direct communication of his message. Even though some of his "aesthetic works" had sold well, their purpose had not always been grasped. Some literary critics

¹³ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, trans. Gustav Mueller, (N. Y.: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 281, para. 465.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 283, para. 471.

¹⁵ *Postscript*, p. 504.

had so misunderstood his Socratic dialectic that they had censured him for marring his works by introducing moral themes. His *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* was virtually ignored (only 60 copies were sold in his lifetime). His *Edifying Discourses* (written sermons), published simultaneously with the aesthetic works and in his own name, were not appreciated. He decided, therefore, to explain his life's work in plain terms. "My task," he said, "is a Socratic task, to revise the definition of what it is to become a Christian."¹⁶ *The Works of Love, Sickness unto Death, Training in Christianity, The Point of View of my Work as an Author* and other books are all examples of "direct communication." He never again reverted to indirect writing. If he used pen names for some works it was only to avoid the opinion that he had already reached the heights of Christian perfection described in them. Kierkegaard explained:

I have never fought in such a way as to say: 'I am the true Christian, others are not Christians.' No, my contention has been this: I know what Christianity is, my imperfection as a Christian I myself fully recognize—but I know what Christianity is.¹⁷

While his right hand wrote of Christianity as he saw it, producing some of his best religious writing, his left hand scolded the mediocrity of Danish Christians. "Orthodoxy flourishes in the land," he wrote, "no heresy, no schism, orthodoxy everywhere, the orthodoxy which consists in playing the game of Christianity."¹⁸ Still he wished to make it known that his purpose was not to attack Christianity but to fraternally correct Christians:

To attack it [Christianity] has never been my thought. No, from the time when there could be any question of the employment of my powers, I was firmly determined to employ them all to defend Christianity, or in any case to present it in its true form.¹⁹

Kierkegaard while scolding, also instructed and encouraged Christians, returning again and again in his later works to a central theme: the Christian's encounter with Christ. He wrote:

If a man's life is not to be led unworthily, like that of the beast which never erects its head, if it is not to be frittered away . . . with what makes a noise indeed at the moment but no echo in

¹⁶ *Attack on "Christendom,"* trans. Walter Lowrie, in Bretall's anthology (n. 1), p. 466.

¹⁷ *My Activity as a Writer*, trans. Walter Lowrie, in *Point of View*, p. 153.

¹⁸ *Attack*, p. 437 in Bretall's anthology.

¹⁹ *Point of View*, p. 77.

eternity—if a man's life is not to be dozed away in inactivity or wasted in bustling movement there must be something higher which draws it— . . . the Lord Jesus Christ. He from on high will draw all unto Himself.²⁰

One of Kierkegaard's most striking expressions of the Christian's relation to his Savior is his notion of becoming "contemporaneous with Christ." The centuries intervening between Christ and the Christian become irrelevant in the instant of belief. Through faith He is present to us, instructing and encouraging us by his word and example, just as he was present to the apostles. Kierkegaard insists that being Christ's contemporary means much more rubbing shoulders with Him. It entails believing in Him as the God-man. Thus Christ is not limited to one time or to one place but is at all times and everywhere at the side of every believer:

So long as there is a believer, such a one must, in order to become such, have been, and as a believer continue to be, just as contemporaneous with His presence on earth as were those [first] contemporaries. This contemporaneousness is the condition of faith, and more closely defined it *is* faith.²¹

A Christian Death

At forty-two years of age Søren Kierkegaard was an old man. Unceasing activity had left its mark on his frail body. After his collapse in a Copenhagen street on October the second 1855, he had but one month to live. He remained calm to the end thanking God for the grace shown him and praying that he might know when his time had come. Kierkegaard also prayed for his fellow Danes for whom he had spent his life. Perhaps he recalled a prayer which he had written five years earlier:

O Lord Jesus, Thou didst not come to the world to be served, but also surely not to be admired or in that sense worshipped. Thou wast the way and the truth—and it was followers only Thou didst demand. Arouse us therefore if we have dozed away into this delusion, save us from the error of wishing to admire Thee instead of being willing to follow Thee and to resemble Thee.²²

²⁰ *Training*, p. 414 in Bretall.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

²² *Training in Christianity*, p. 227 in Lowrie translation (n. 10). In the anthology, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, ed. Perry LeFevre, (University of Chicago—Phoenix, 1963), p. 96.