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Robert R. Cook

Søren Kierkegaard: Missionary to Christendom

It was, we understand, Professor Gordon Rupp who coined the useful word 'rebunk' to denote a more positive activity than the much more common practice of 'debunking' ideas and people. Mr Cook, a teacher at the Scott Theological College in Kenya, offers an essay which falls into this helpful category of showing us what we may learn from a figure who has not always been appreciated by evangelical Christians.

I. A Reappraisal

Evangelicals have tended to be very wary of Kierkegaard. His profound influence on the early Barth is well known and the consequent Neo-Orthodox obsessions with God as utterly transcendent and revelation as irrational and non-propositional have been profoundly regretted. Similarly Bultmann's lamentable disinterest in the Jesus of history can clearly be traced back to Kierkegaard.¹ In fact a wide variety of modernist themes are embryonically present in lesser known strands of his thought. For example, does not the following sound like an extract from a Tillich sermon?: '... while the jesting phrase winds its way drolly through the rest of the conversation, the speaker may privately have a rendezvous with the deity, who is present as soon as the uncertainty of all things is thought infinitely.'² Or when Kierkegaard asserts that the sincere idol worshipper is enjoying a relationship with the living God for '... if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if it should happen to be thus related to what is not true',³ he is surely an unwitting precursor of such religious pluralists as J. Hick and W. Cantwell Smith who distinguish sharply between the all important quality of faith and its culturally relative content.

¹ E.g. 'If the contemporary generation had left nothing behind them but these words, "We have believed that in such and such a year the God appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died", it would be more than enough.' S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1962) 130.

² S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1941) 80.

³ *Ibid.*, 178.

At a more popular level, Francis Schaeffer's analysis of modern thought has influenced a generation, and again Kierkegaard does not fare well. He is infamous for being the first man below the line of despair; the father of irrationalism.⁴ Perhaps his reputation reaches its nadir in Hal Lindsey's cultural analysis. Kierkegaard's corpus is exposed as one of Satan's 'Thought Bombs', a salutary example of the doctrine of demons!⁵

It must be readily admitted that many evangelical criticisms of Kierkegaard have been on target. His comprehension of Christianity is deficient in many areas, from his negligible grasp of the assurance of salvation to his non-existent ecclesiology. It may be argued that he did not set out to be a systematic theologian, indeed he maintained that an 'existential system' is a contradiction in terms; in contrast he saw his contribution as 'a little pinch of spice', a corrective to the complacent nominal Christianity rife in the Danish Lutheran Church of his time. However, the point is not that he fails to discuss what the Church should be like, but rather that his most deeply held convictions about the privacy of faith and the inability of one 'knight of faith' to help another⁶ are irreconcilable with the New Testament teaching of the Church as an inter-dependent body of believers.

The purpose of this paper is not to vindicate Kierkegaard. His deficiencies are obvious enough and, as already observed, his influence has proved dangerous. He surely exemplifies Pascal's dictum, 'In great men everything is great—their faults as well as their merits'. My purpose is quite simply to draw attention to some of his great merits. In a sense, it is in the way of a testimony; a means of sharing a few of Kierkegaard's penetrating insights which have deeply challenged my life as an evangelical. I break literary convention in writing in the first person without excuse. Kierkegaard always writes to the individual and never to the mass and so I, as an individual, share with other solitary readers. With the decadent Lutheran Church in mind, Kierkegaard wrote, '... if anything is to be done, one must try again to introduce Christianity into Christendom.'⁷ In my experience, he still has an important missionary function in challenging us to that absolute commitment to the Absolute which he saw as mere Christianity.

⁴ F. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1968) 21–22.

⁵ H. Lindsey, *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1972) 87–89.

⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Anchor, 1954) 82: 'The one knight of faith can render no aid to the other.'

⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*. Ed. R. Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1946) 397.

But before allowing Kierkegaard to speak for himself, I propose to correct three common misconceptions about him which unnecessarily alienate many Christians from what he is trying to say. In the process of doing this, some of his key ideas will be introduced, only to be developed in the second section of this study. C. Stephen Evans has recently written, 'Poor Kierkegaard has suffered more than any author I know from a generation of evangelical ignorance'.⁸ It is my hope that this article, in a small way, will help dispel this ignorance.

1. Kierkegaard the Mystic?

To some, like Malcolm Muggeridge,⁹ Kierkegaard is something of a mystic. One imagines him, the eccentric solitary, smitten by the occasional overwhelming experience of the awesome God. While attracting some, such a picture of the man will alienate others. How can the mystic help me whose relationship to God seems so qualitatively different? Surely my spiritual problems are of a different order; there can be no empathy between us. However, this notion of Kierkegaard is false. For him there was no 'heaven blazing in the head' to borrow Yeats' phrase. Kierkegaard knew all about living by faith and not by sight. Perhaps borrowing from Hosea 11, he draws a striking picture of how we feel God's influence without actually experiencing him directly. God is like a mother teaching a child to walk by holding her hands out towards him and smiling encouragement. While their hands do not actually touch, yet he finds that he is '... supporting himself by the arms that do not hold on to him, striving after refuge in the mother's embrace.'¹⁰

2. Kierkegaard the Pelagian?

Kierkegaard is sometimes presented as the father of existentialism with his stress on the primacy of free-will. The human being is completely autonomous and faith is a naked act of the will. Grace is ignored.¹¹ In fact this is a simplistic interpretation. Certainly

⁸ C. Stephen Evans, 'A Misunderstood Reformer', *Christianity Today*, Sept. 21st., 1984, p. 28.

⁹ E.g. in *A Third Testament* (Little, Brown & Co., Canada, 1976) 135, Muggeridge writes of Kierkegaard's '... undoubted mystical insights'.

¹⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart* (Harper & Row, Torchbook, 1956) 85.

¹¹ E.g. A. C. Cochrane, *The Existentialists and God* (Westminster press, 1956) 39.

there is a Kantian strain in his thought which is also attributable to the influence of Lessing. Kierkegaard *can* describe belief as ‘. . . a free act, an expression of will’.¹² Nevertheless, he is also a son of Luther such that he feels bound to describe faith as a miracle. In fact his strong belief in human depravity sometimes leads him to a shockingly passive view of the role a person plays in the exercise of faith: ‘In the *Moment* man becomes conscious that he is born; for his antecedent state, to which he may not cling, was one of non-being.’¹³ Even when he stresses the possession of significant choice, he never glories in human autonomy:

The most tremendous thing which has been granted to man is: the choice, freedom. And if you desire to save it and preserve it there is only one way: in the very same second unconditionally and in complete resignation to give it back to God, and yourself with it.¹⁴

Kierkegaard was only too aware of the influence of God’s grace in his own life and the hand of what he calls ‘divine governance.’

3. *Kierkegaard the Fideist?*

Schaeffer is fairly typical when he says of Kierkegaard that ‘. . . he separated absolutely the rational and logical from faith. The reasonable and faith bear no relationship to each other’.¹⁵ Thus it is commonly held that Kierkegaard was the supreme fideist who advocated the exercise of blind faith, an irrational leap in the dark after which the truth dawns and certitude is reached; apologetics is useless for only the regenerate mind can perceive truth.

Perhaps the best way to assess this interpretation is to remind oneself of the two major epistemological alternatives to fideism.¹⁶ Foundationalism is the older of the two and is the view that truth may be discovered by rational deduction from indubitable axioms. In contrast, most philosophers today adopt some version of comprehensive theory which accepts that epistemological certainty is impossible, but offers such criteria in evaluating rival

¹² *Philosophical Fragments*, 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

¹⁴ *Journals. A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 428.

¹⁵ *The God Who is There*, 21–22.

¹⁶ Although different terms are used (Neutralism for Foundationalism, and Critical Dialog for Comprehensive Theory), a clear discussion of the three views is found in C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion* (I.V.P. 1985) 18–29.

metaphysical systems as coherence (internal consistency) and congruity (appropriateness in interpreting known facts). A tenable system is one which can constantly survive such testing. Which of the three would Kierkegaard have felt most at home with?

Foundationalism can be excluded without hesitation. Kierkegaard is adamant that there are no philosophical certitudes except one's own existence. As for the theistic arguments, they completely fail as proofs.¹⁷ Similarly, there can be no absolute certainty about historical events. Jesus is discovered through Scripture, but the canonicity and inspiration of the Biblical books are necessarily accepted by faith. Indeed, Kierkegaard maintains that, even if one had been Jesus' contemporary, there could be no rational certainty that he was God since deity is not empirically observable.

Was he then a fideist as is commonly alleged? There is undoubtedly a strand in his thinking which delights to magnify the risk of faith and which diagnoses the desire for evidence as spiritual mediocrity. He contends that such a desire is a clear indication that one's love is weak and sick, like that of a woman who is growing ashamed of her lover and therefore needs to hear admiring words about him from other people. He concludes that 'Passion and reflection are generally exclusive of one another'.¹⁸ If this were Kierkegaard's last word one might suspect him of advocating a kind of spiritual Russian roulette as one chooses one's religion.¹⁹ Surely, someone will protest, uninformed choice is worse than no choice at all. However, it will be observed that he is addressing self-confessed Christians here. Almost certainly he has in mind those smug Lutherans of his acquaintance who were convinced that a Hegelian foundation to their Christianity provided them with a rationally certain system, people for whom religion consists of intellectual acquiescence and dispassionate duty. These were his shock tactics to stress that the heart of Christianity is a passionate relationship.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard's conclusion is correct but his reasoning is suspect. In *Philosophical Fragments*, he argues that we deduce *from* existence, not *to* it e.g. the injury seeks to evaluate whether the accused is a criminal, not whether he actually exists. But in fact deductions *are* made *to* existence e.g. on the basis of the erratic orbits of Uranus and Neptune, the astronomer P. Lowell predicted early this century that a ninth planet would be discovered.

¹⁸ *Postscript*, 540.

¹⁹ J. L. Mackie accuses him of just this in *The Miracle of Theism*, (Claredon, 1982) 216.

In fact these fideistic onslaughts are not Kierkegaard's last word. There are facets of his thought which move right away from fideism towards what today would be termed comprehensive theory. As has been noted, the former teaches that only the regenerate mind can perceive truth, but in contrast through the use of pseudonyms Kierkegaard manufactures the conceit that a non-Christian like Johannes Climacus, the alleged author of *Philosophical Fragments* and its sequel, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, can write with great penetration about the essence of the Christian faith. It should also be remembered that all Kierkegaard's many pseudonymous books (his 'aesthetic works' as he calls them) have an apologetic function; they are a means of winning the outsider to Christianity.

Some of the means by which Kierkegaard seeks to persuade the non-Christian are actually in line with comprehensive theory. For example in the section of *Philosophical Fragments* entitled 'God as Teacher and Saviour: An Essay of the Imagination' he seeks to establish the plausibility of Christianity given the premise that there exists a loving God. We are presented with a thought-experiment in which Johannes Climacus discusses the dilemma of a mighty king who desires to marry a humble maiden. Immediately to make her a grand queen would cause her to feel miserable and inferior, but to force her to forget her origins by smothering her with opulent delights would be a kind of deception. The only course would be for the king to divest himself of all the trappings of royalty and court her as an equal, as a fellow peasant. This, Johannes realizes, is exactly what Christianity teaches in the doctrine of incarnation; Christianity is coherent.

Kierkegaard also endeavours to show that the Christian faith is congruous—it fits the evidence. But unlike most comprehensive theorists he is not interested in what he would call the objective (theistic arguments etc.) but rather he is keen to focus on the subjective, that is the realm of internal realities like the awareness of finitude and guilt. Being convinced that man is neither solely nor even primarily a rational being, his apologetic thrust is at the existential level. Nevertheless, he is not shy of exploiting philosophical arguments even when it is to show the rational coherence of concluding that divine matters are beyond reason. In this he is in line with thinkers like Pascal and Kant. Reason's final act is to admit its own limitation but that in itself is a worthwhile accomplishment. Thus it is no embarrassment for Kierkegaard to assert that 'No knowledge can have for its object the absurdity that the Eternal is the historical'.²⁰ Rationally the

incarnation is a paradox, an absurdity, but man is more than a thinking machine and from the larger intuitive perspective, Christianity can still be seen to be congruent and coherent.

For those who would brand Kierkegaard a fideist, his alleged emphasis on 'the leap' is often stressed. However, this is not one of his major themes and it is not a blind leap into the dark. The leap does not involve galvanizing the will to believe something for which there is no evidence (almost certainly a psychological impossibility anyway). It is not so much the leap of faith as the leap of commitment. 'The leap is the category of decision',²¹ the decision to commit one's being totally to a God whose existence is rationally uncertain and yet a God whose influence one believes one is encountering. Is this not close to the following definition of faith presented by an advocate of comprehensive theory: 'Faith is creative discernment of meaning. It is also commitment to action on the basis of that meaning, without epistemological guarantees?'²²

Virtually every philosopher today would concur with Kierkegaard's outright rejection of foundationalism. But as has been shown, fideism is not the only alternative to foundationalism. While admitting that there are fideistic elements in Kierkegaard's thought, there are clear indications that he would have felt at home with many of the insights of comprehensive theory.

II. An Exposition

Having dealt with some important misconceptions, it is time to listen to Kierkegaard the spiritual counsellor. It is ever his intention to challenge the will, never just the mind. Aware that it is always tempting for the reader to be evaluating the author, he strives constantly to force the reader into self-evaluation. Or to use his own memorable image, it is not Kierkegaard who is the performer and we the audience. Rather I am the actor, he is the

²⁰ *Philosophical Fragments*, 76. If, however, God is sempiternal, (everlasting) rather than eternal (timeless), the law of non-contradiction is not necessarily violated by the incarnation (see my 'God, Time and Freedom', forthcoming in *Religious Studies*).

²¹ *Postscript*, 91. It must be admitted that 'the leap' sometimes has another connotation for Kierkegaard. It marks the paradigm shift, the change in *Gestalt*, from perceiving life from the perspective of the bourgeois moralist ('the ethical' stage) to discerning the radical demands of true spirituality ('the religious' stage)—*vide Postscript*, p. 231.

²² D. L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (I.V.P., 1982) 72.

prompter and God is the audience. Like the mesmeric ancient mariner who arrests the attention of the wedding guest and draws him inexorably out of the jocular crowd only to lay upon him the burden of existence, so Kierkegaard isolates the reader and by every technique of rhetoric lays upon him the demands of eternity:

Eternity scatters the crowd by giving each an infinite weight, by making him heavy—as an individual. For what in eternity is the highest blessing is also the deepest seriousness. What, there, is the most blessed comfort, is also the most appalling responsibility.²³

As much as possible allowing Kierkegaard to speak for himself, let us sample what he has to say on six important topics.

Mediocrity

In one of his influential books, Dale Carnegie uncritically lists what 'almost every normal adult wants'.²⁴ There are eight, but here are the first five in the order he gives: health, food, sleep, money and possessions, life in the hereafter. There were many 'normal adults' in nineteenth century Copenhagen:

I do not know whether to laugh or to weep over the customary rigmarole: a good living, a pretty wife, health, a social position on a level with an alderman—and then too an eternal happiness; which is as if one were to suppose the kingdom of *heaven* to be one among the kingdoms of this *earth*, and to seek information about it in a textbook of geography.²⁵

Following James 4:8, Kierkegaard calls such an attitude 'double-mindedness' and with deep insight he anatomizes one by one the indulgences and compromises of so many of us so much of the time. He shows that to pursue any goal other than God leads inevitably to frustration and personal fragmentation. To begin with, so many goals are unachievable, for example there is always more and more honour to be obtained. Then so many lead to a greater and greater rage for novelty, or result either in frustration if not met, or self-disgust or uncomfortable satiety if they are. When wholeheartedly pursued, every earthly goal '... is changed into its opposite, in death into nothing, in eternity into

²³ *Purity of Heart*, 193.

²⁴ D. Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Chaucer Press, 1975; 1st. pubd. 1938) 42.

²⁵ *Postscript*, 350.

damnation.²⁶ Only the person who wills one thing: the Good, that is God himself, becomes transparent and deep like the ocean.

But Kierkegaard concludes that in fact very few people pursue even these unworthy goals with much passion. Most of us live a passive existence. We react rather than act. With remarkable percipience, he foresaw a society with few actors and a mass of spectators who live vicariously at second or third hand. The picture comes to mind of someone whose *raison d'être* is sitting in his living room avidly watching 'Dallas' which can be seen on the television in the foyer of the Crossroads motel! Kierkegaard's own image is of '... a drunken peasant who lies asleep in the wagon and lets the horses take care of themselves'.²⁷ According to Kierkegaard, such a one has no depth, no subjectivity, '... you listen to what he says in a cold and awful dread, scarcely knowing whether it is a human being, or a cunningly contrived walking stick in which a talking machine has been concealed'.²⁸

The question of immortality has been often in his mind, more than once he has asked the parson whether there really was such an immortality, whether one would really recognize oneself again—which indeed must have for him a very singular interest, since he has no self.²⁹

So much for the humourless, melancholy Dane!

Individuality

Undoubtedly a Renaissance legacy has been an unhealthy individualism and one of the important rediscoveries of the Church has been the vision of God's people as an organism of mutually dependent members of Christ's body, Yet is there not a danger that the pendulum has swung too far with the proliferation of extremist house-groups with their authoritarian 'apostles' who rid their flock of the burden of significant decision making? Should one not feel unease at the emergence of a homogeneous evangelical sub-culture with its mass holiday jamborees, its sanctioned pop-music and video-films? Does not James Barr touch a raw nerve when in *Fundamentalism* he observes that while in theory Scripture is the ultimate authority for evangelicals, in practice

²⁶ *Purity of Heart*, 60.

²⁷ *Postscript*, 276.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death. A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 356.

they tend to receive their opinions from a select group of evangelical pontiffs?³⁰

In the Lutheran Church of Kierkegaard's day there was strong inducement to conform, but he saw clearly the dangers of group pressure. Again, we can heed him with profit. Inauthenticity is to live, '... as a numeral within a crowd, a fraction within the earthly conglomeration'.³¹ 'For where there are many, there is externality, and comparison, and indulgence and evasion'.³² The Christian's task is to become an individual, someone who fully accepts personal responsibility for his own decisions and who is adept at ignoring peer pressure; someone who is practised at listening to God as he speaks through the conscience. Ironically, it was in the year that the Communist Manifesto was published with its declaration of the primacy of the community over the individual that Kierkegaard wrote:

If the crowd is the Evil, if chaos is what threatens us, there is salvation in only one thing, in becoming a single individual, in the thought of 'that individual' as an essential category.³³

With his usual psychological acuity he realized that the individual is the only truly free man for:

Each one who is not more ashamed before himself than before all others, if he is placed in difficulty and much tried in life, will in one way or another end by becoming the slave of men.³⁴

A mark of the spiritual man is his desire for periods of solitary reflection, for 'To pause is to deepen oneself in inwardness'.³⁵ He is also able to walk alone:

The spiritual man differs from us men in being able to endure isolation, his rank as a spiritual man is proportionate to his strength for enduring isolation, whereas we men are constantly in need of 'the others', the herd; we die or despair, if we are not reassured by being in the herd, of the same opinion as the herd etc.³⁶

The spiritual man eschews the crowd, certainly as a follower but also as a leader. He is aware of the danger of the personality-cult, just as Kierkegaard was when he diffidently withdrew behind his pseudonyms.

³⁰ J. Barr, *Fundamentalism*, (S.C.M., 1977) 319.

³¹ *Purity of Heart*, 184.

³² *Ibid.*, 211.

³³ S. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (Harper & Row, 1962) 61.

³⁴ *Purity of Heart*, 89.

Kierkegaard was convinced that although in this life one may find solace in the crowd from God's radical demands, one day one must stand before him as an individual,

In eternity you will look in vain for the crowd. You will listen in vain to find whether you cannot hear where the noise and the gathering is, so that you can run to it.³⁷

'For in the infinite there is no place, the individual is himself the place.'³⁸

Detachment

Materialism, the preoccupation with things, has always be-devilled Christianity but never more so than today. Asceticism is the extremist reaction, but Kierkegaard thought this was too easy. Although there was a gaunt, ascetic strain to Kierkegaard's personality every evening found him at the theatre and he managed to exhaust his father's legacy with remarkable alacrity. Undoubtedly he felt that renunciation, or resignation as he calls it, is an important preliminary stage to becoming a Christian but it is not necessarily a Christian state in itself. Indeed it is largely a matter of will-power and is exemplified in many pagan forms from classical Stoicism to the *Weltschmerz* of nineteenth century Romantics.

The Christian, in contrast, is neither attached to the world nor is he indifferent to it. Johannes de Silentio is the putative author of *Fear and Trembling* and has himself reached the stage of resignation, but in the figure of Abraham as he discerns a totally new quality which amazes him. He has no problem understanding how a resigned patriarch could give up his son to be sacrificed. What he finds absolutely astounding is that Abraham can receive Isaac back with joy! Similarly, after having renounced the world, the spiritual man can receive *it* back with joy:

... it is great to give up one's wish, but it is greater to hold it fast after having given it up, it is great to grasp the eternal, but it is greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up.³⁹

This holy detachment Kierkegaard identifies with faith. The Christian ideal is to enjoy God's creation without finally needing

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon 'Christendom'*. A *Kierkegaard Anthology*, 445.

³⁷ *Purity of Heart*, 191.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁹ *Fear and Trembling*, 33.

it, sincerely to love others without trying to own them. As Paul expresses it, '... having nothing, and possessing everything' (2 Cor. 6:10). Because the Christian is able to enjoy creation, he is outwardly difficult to distinguish from the worldly man:

The knights of the infinite resignation are easily recognized: their gait is gliding and assured. Those on the other hand who carry the jewel of faith are likely to be delusive, because their outward appearance bears a striking resemblance to that which both the infinite resignation and faith profoundly despise . . . to Philistinism.⁴⁰

Consequently there is a secrecy about the spiritual life. It exists 'incognito'. But more of this in the next two sections.

Subjectivity

In Kierkegaard's time, 'subjectivity' was a common philosophical term. For Hegel it meant the inward look whereby one discovers God in one's very heart. Kierkegaard passionately rejected such pantheism which he dubbed the 'I am I' view (cf. 'Thou art That' of Hinduism?). For him subjectivity involves turning away from the objective realm of 'facts' which can be learned by the detached observer, and immersing oneself in the subjective activity of discovering truth for oneself in the inwardness of existential engagement:

Existing is ordinarily regarded as no very complex matter, much less art, since we all exist; but abstract thinking takes rank as an accomplishment. But really to exist, so as to interpenetrate one's existence with consciousness, at one and the same time eternal and as if far removed from existence, and yet also present in existence and in the process of becoming: that is truly difficult.⁴¹

For Kierkegaard, subjectivity does not inevitably lead to the discovery of God, it rather results in an awareness of one's need for God.

Subjectivity reaches its highest pitch in faith which is an infinite passion towards an infinite Object. As already observed, this faith is paradoxical because it involves unconditional commitment to that which is rationally uncertain and even rationally improbable. Yet it is man's noblest function. 'An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.'⁴²

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴¹ *Postscript*, 273.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 182.

Kierkegaard admits that the passion of faith might appear to be akin to madness but he considers madness to be something quite distinct, namely an unconditional fixation upon a finite object; the sort of passion exemplified by Don Quixote. Another difference is that, unlike the true lunatic, the man of faith is self-aware enough to wonder if he might be mad. In his Master's dissertation, Kierkegaard advocates a healthy irony whereby one exercises the courage to suspend mentally one's passionately held commitments in order to assess them as if they were not one's own. The paradox of faith is to avoid dogmatic bigotry by the exercise of irony and yet to avoid aimless nihilism by always being totally committed. Both fanaticism and nihilism are failures of nerves.

Faith therefore requires courage. Courage because there is acknowledged risk since there can be no rational proof and even intuitive indications are fallible. 'Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty.'⁴³ Therefore faith is always accompanied by fear and trembling.

Christian subjectivity is also recognizing that what matters is not what I will have achieved to show God at the *eschaton*, but what I am now. Every 'now' is therefore the moment of judgement. Every moment is the eleventh hour, and this realization also causes fear and trembling.

Oh, eleventh hour, wherever thou art present, how all is changed!
How still everything is, as if it were the midnight hour; how sober, as if it were the hour of death; how lonely, as if it were among the tombs; how solemn, as if it were within eternity.⁴⁴

Because of its intense subjectivity and privacy, Kierkegaard realized that it is ultimately impossible to express the essence of the Christian life in language. This forced him to evolve his theory of indirect Communication which on the one hand explains why the heart of Christianity is ineffable and on the other presents the possibility of a mode of expression—elusive, indirect, suggestive, poetic—which would at least inspire the reader 'with concern and unrest'.⁴⁵ It is Kierkegaard's use of Indirect Communication

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Purity of Heart*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Postscript*, 346. Indirect Communication is also an aspect of Kierkegaard's tangential approach to evangelism. The target reader of his aesthetic works is under the misapprehension that he is already a Christian. A direct attack is counter-productive for it '... only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it'. (*Point of View*, 25).

which makes so much of his work difficult to comprehend and hard to discuss.

It follows that '... the God-relationship of the individual is a secret.'⁴⁶ In the book already referred to, Francis Schaeffer maintains that one could discuss with profit whether Kierkegaard was a real Christian.⁴⁷ Kierkegaard himself would have given a blunt response:

It requires a discipline of the spirit to honour every human being, so as not to venture directly to meddle with his God-relationship; partly because there is enough to think about in connection with one's own, and partly because God is no friend of impertinences.⁴⁸

What a corrective Kierkegaard provides to our complacent evangelical judgementalism! How close to a cult we often become as we refuse to examine the credentials of our own faith or listen to the criticisms of outsiders! How little we know of true inwardness and reflection! Surely we should be like Dr. Who's police-box, externally ordinary perhaps but open the door and you will find that there is room after room of fascinating treasures to be discovered. Instead we are so often like one of the great, antique doors on display in the British Museum, ornate and intriguing on the outside but open it and you discover a small alcove or just a brick wall.

Fame

Kierkegaard uncomfortably challenges our innate ambitiousness whether it be to become a respected scholar or a famous, sought-after preacher. The prevailing Hegelianism which so influenced Church and university in Kierkegaard's day presented a God who is developing through history such that in a real sense history is God's story. Consequently the measure of man is whether he managed to make an impact upon history. Kierkegaard completely rejected this view, being convinced that many truly godly people do not make a dent on the 'world historical'. In fact if the historical world-process were paramount, the millions of folk who have lived obscure, unrecorded lives must be considered superfluous. But this is not the case if, as Kierkegaard believed, the purpose of the world is for each individual to become subjective.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁷ *The God Who is There*, 21-22.

⁴⁸ *Postscript*, 73.

The man with worldly ambition is in a dangerous position because on the one hand there is no guarantee of success he is at the mercy of so many uncontrollable events, and on the other hand because he is tempted to measure his life by results. In contrast, the spiritual man recognizes that if the eternal is to be reflected in his life, it must be in the internal realm of the will. The outcome is recklessly left to God:

The true ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost limits of one's powers, but at the same time being so uplifted in divine jest as never to think about the accomplishment.⁴⁹

Goodness is not contingent upon outcome. This should be a liberating thought for it means that my worth does not depend on how things turn out. In this world the end is more important than the means, but for God the means *is* the end, for when a man ' . . . will only use those means which are genuinely good then, in the judgement of eternity, he is at the goal.'⁵⁰

Purity of Heart

Kierkegaard will not allow us to domesticate the phrase which we use so glibly: 'living by faith'. When Johannes de Silentio contemplates Abraham, that archetypal man of faith, his hair stands on end. He is unimpressed with the pompous obscurities and complexities of the great Hegel who purported to have extended thought further than faith can plumb,

But on the other hand when I have to think of Abraham, I am as though annihilated. I catch sight every moment of that enormous paradox which is the substance of Abraham's life, every moment I am repelled, and my thought in spite of all its passion cannot get a hairs-breadth further.⁵¹

Johannes realizes the yawning chasm between his own resignation and Abraham's faith. The story of Mount Moriah is full of pathos, but 'One cannot weep over Abraham. One approaches him with a *horror religiosus*, as Israel approached Mount Sinai.'⁵² Why? Because he was a man who was willing to commit infanticide in the name of God! 'And if it be possible but the individual was mistaken—what can save him?'⁵³ Johannes is

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁰ *Purity of Heart*, 202.

⁵¹ *Fear and Trembling*, 44.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

appalled by the torment Abraham must have experienced on the way to the sacrifice. If he were to preach on the incident,

I would remind the audience that the journey lasted three days and a good part of the fourth, yea, that these three and a half days were infinitely longer than the few thousand years which separate me from Abraham.⁵⁴

Johannes concludes:

How then did Abraham exist? He believed. This is the paradox which keeps him upon the sheer edge and which he cannot make clear to any other man, for the paradox is that he as the individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the absolute.⁵⁵

How can one without fear and trembling face the fact that the same God requires of us the same degree of commitment? The life of faith can be terrifying as God leads us ' . . . out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water.'⁵⁶ God demands of us the same dedication and singleness of purpose, for 'purity of heart is to will one thing'. It is certain to be an individual path. For some it will mean a life of strenuous activity, for others of patient suffering. But even if tragedy befalls, it is that good may result, for instance ' . . . the well is first covered only after the child has fallen in, while before this the most reasonable arguments and warnings had been to no avail.'⁵⁷ Whether one is rich or poor, clever or stupid, the requirement is the same—purity of heart. And what is the reward for such a one? 'When he leaves this world, he leaves nothing behind him, he takes all with him, he loses nothing he gains all—for "God is all to him".'⁵⁸

Kierkegaard—The Man

Commenting on Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, J. N. Darby is reported to have said, 'When we are hungry we are satisfied with the husks, but when we are famished we seek the Father.' In a unique way Kierkegaard's writings can induce that ravenous hunger. As the quiet prompter in the wings he seeks no attention for himself and yet one cannot help but be fascinated by Kierkegaard the man, with his eccentric appearance, his physical

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁶ *Postscript*, 182.

⁵⁷ *Purity of Heart*, 128–129.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

peculiarities, his studied habit of appearing to be a flippant wastrel while privately expending his energy in prayer, meditation and writing. And what an output! Between 1841 and 1851, over thirty books and almost twenty volumes of journal entries streamed from his pen. There are a few rare geniuses, for example Emily Brontë, who can somehow transmute the experiences of very pedestrian lives into striking literature of passionate intensity. Kierkegaard is one such. He lived a remarkably uneventful life, spending all his forty-two years as a bachelor in Copenhagen, leaving only four times to visit Berlin. All the drama was internal as he wrestled with acute depression, as he sought to be utterly honest and transparent with himself, and as he worked out his own salvation with fear and trembling. How well he succeeded he warns us not to judge, but he left his own poignant epitaph: ' . . . the author, who historically died of a mortal disease, but poetically died of longing for eternity.'⁵⁹ His niece, Henriette Lund, recalls those last days:

I cannot remember now whether it was in the hospital itself, or on the way there, that I heard that uncle Søren had said to those who received him: 'I have come out here to die'; but I received an impression that with the suffering and sadness there was mixed a sense of victory as I went into the little room, where I was met by the light which seemed to radiate from his countenance. I have never seen the spirit break through its earthly frame in that way, and lend it such brilliance, as though it were the glorified body at the dawn of the resurrection. Once later when I went to see him the impression was different, and the painfulness of the illness was more to the fore. But the first occasion, and his loving farewell I can never forget.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Point of View*, 103.

⁶⁰ From the memoirs of Henriette Lund; Ed. A. Dru, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1938) 560-561.