

Kierkegaard: Spy, Judge, and Friend

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I first became acquainted with the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard as an erstwhile pre-ministerial undergraduate majoring in philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. For my generation of religious types, Kierkegaard was required reading. He was fascinating and exciting, very much at the center of the existential philosophy that seemed to be dominating theological circles. Upon arriving at Yale Divinity School in 1958, I discovered that most of my entering divinity student colleagues had read and reveled in Kierkegaard. One colleague in particular enjoyed late hours of intense wrestling with me over Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky. His name was Gary Hartpence, a sober Nazarene who later became politically famous as Gary Hart, an ill-fated presidential candidate. Later in my studies, a new professor named Paul Holmer came to Yale with the reputation of being the freshest and most philosophically acute interpreter of Kierkegaard. After a year of pitch battle with Holmer, I had to admit that he was very much changing and deepening my understanding of Kierkegaard. To this day I remain in Holmer's debt for opening up Kierkegaard in ways new and compelling.

So why am I speaking on Kierkegaard today? Primarily because I find him endlessly challenging and a wonderful conversation partner, and I want to introduce him to you. But why do I need to introduce him to you? After all, wasn't he the major inspiration behind the so-called existentialist movement in philosophy and theology? Wasn't he that astute critic pronouncing with relish the death and end of that infamous arrangement between culture and church called 'Christendom'? Wasn't he the first intellectual to diagnose and identify the demonic seductions of modern mass culture and the all-powerful 'crowd'? Didn't he decisively influence twentieth century theologians such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr? Haven't hundreds of books and thousands of articles searched, scoured, and critiqued his literature and life? Haven't a host of contemporary analytic philosophers, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, found him intricately fascinating? Haven't some therapeutic types invoked his name repeatedly as truly the first great psychologist of modern humanity? Yes, all that: *he was one of the most influential intellectuals for the twentieth century.*

But today I find few entering divinity students that can spell his name, fewer still who have read anything of his, fewer yet that have benefited from his friendship. So I want you to begin to get acquainted with Søren Kierkegaard: a **Spy** who will push you into inward places of hiddenness you are reluctant to explore, a **Judge** who will indict your vagaries of life with inescapable and relentless precision and vivacity, but finally a **Friend** who might spiritually edify you on the multifaceted journey of **becoming a Christian.**

Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1813 and died in Copenhagen in 1855 at the age of 42. From 1843 till his death, he published thirty books and scores of articles in Danish. At his death, about eight more book manuscripts were discovered, including one on logic, one on a theory of communication, and one on revelation and authority, and over twenty big volumes of journals, diaries, and notes. George Brandes, a well known European cultural critic, has made the judgment that Kierkegaard did for the Danish language what Shakespeare did for the English language, and that had he been writing in English, German, or French he would have been instantaneously famous in Europe as an author. As it was, outside Denmark, Kierkegaard would have to wait until the early twentieth century to be 'discovered.'

With uncanny prescience, Kierkegaard knew he would someday be famous but feared and loathed the prospect that he would fall into the hands of the professors who would analyze and reduce his life and writings to a thumbnail sketch or footnote, or even to a voluminous narrative, but would never realize that the whole of his literature was directed even to the professor as an existing person who still had to exist

somehow. He criticized professors, philosophers, and theologians unmercifully for building grand mansions of theory and thought only to then live their actual, existing lives in the barnyard, feeding daily out of the pig trough. The point here is this: intellectuals are given to the pursuit and development of thought, concepts, and ideas, and they can easily fool themselves into supposing that if they have **thought the thought** they have also **lived the thought**. No, says Kierkegaard, to live the thought means to have one's living passions and decisions shaped by the thought. Intellectuals are inclined to forget the actual passions and concrete decisions that shape their daily living, and therefore are forgetful of their actual existing. Their theories cannot—of themselves—encompass and shape the theorist's existential reality without decision and persistence in passions.

It should take only a modest gift for irony to understand that it is not easy to be a professorial admirer and lover of Kierkegaard. But he never lets me forget that I am also 'that individual' — that 'reader' — for whom he writes in the interest of edifying me in how to live and how not to forget that the raw material of my life is there to receive some decisive form, that I can never forget that I must exist somehow in some way. He lovingly but insistently asks: are you a self, Joe, or are you a mere loose collection of grunts, hunches, aches and pains, rampant and tepid desires, desperate needs, fears and anxieties, a mere cloudy mirror-image of your time and culture, a perhaps clever and well educated individual in theory and argument who feasts on keeping the personal questions of existence up in the air for endless discussion, speculation, and postponement; are you yet a self, Joe, who is ready to decide your existence and take on responsibility for how you live? He asks with insistence: you do understand, Joe, that thinking the thought that you are called to love the neighbor is not itself loving the neighbor.

Kierkegaard can be an exacting and unyielding judge of those of us inclined to take some more time to consider the question of how we might exist, while all the time **postponing becoming a self who is decisively bringing his or her existence under the governance of an overarching moral telos**. That is the demanding part, and most of us—especially intellectually educated and gifted folk—flee from its urgent, practical implications.

Allow me now to sketch the briefest of historical notes about Kierkegaard. He was the youngest of seven surviving children born to Michael Pederson Kierkegaard and Ann Sørensdatter Lund. His father was 56 when Søren was born, and it was obvious to all in the family that little Søren was his father's favorite. A markedly melancholic person, Michael Kierkegaard was born in abject poverty on the Jutland in Denmark and spent his early childhood tending sheep. At age 12 he became an apprentice to his uncle in the hosiery business, and it was as a hosiery businessman that he made a fortune so substantial that he was able to retire at the age of 40. A close friend of the Bishop of Denmark, the father was well read in philosophy and theology, though largely self-taught.

Kierkegaard recalled for us how his father used to hold his hand in the family living room, strolling around the room narrating for little Søren fascinating adventures of the imagination. But the father brooded over life and guilt, and especially over the crucifixion of Jesus, and was intent on impressing on little Søren the tragic grandeur of Christ's sacrificial death for humanity's sin. Kierkegaard later tells us that he never had a real childhood: that he went straight from the cradle to adulthood. It was this strangely tender but brooding old father who was to be a provocative foil for much of Kierkegaard's introspective life and literary productions.

In bodily form, Kierkegaard was small and a bit humped in the spine, and no doubt this created health difficulties that would result later in his early death. His voice was raspy and could crackle with wit and laughter and sarcasm. He went to college to study for the ministry, at his father's insistence. During his 'college' days he fell into a period of riotous living and dissipation and rebellion against his father's authority. He loved to drink and party, exercising all the time the rapier and lacerating tongue for which he was already then famous. Hans Christian Anderson, later to become heralded as a children's storywriter, was one of the crowd that caroused with Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's father had to payoff a debt incurred by lavish spending in the amount of today's value about three thousand dollars. Kierkegaard apparently had cultivated a taste for fine wines, rare brandies, and foppish, avant garde clothes. He thought he had perhaps outgrown Christian faith.

A touching story survives of these times. Paul Møller, a professor of philosophy important to Kierkegaard, is reported to have said to him after a ribald party in which Kierkegaard had dominated at his wittiest best: “You are so polemical through and through that it is utterly terrible.” That remark got Kierkegaard’s attention, provoked a period of profound self-examination, and enabled him to muster sufficient seriousness to proceed on the completion of his doctoral dissertation on *The Concept of Irony in Socrates*. Møller was later to say on his deathbed: “Tell little Kierkegaard not to try to accomplish everything.”

After the death of his father in 1838, Kierkegaard became engaged in 1840 to Regine Olsen, a 17-year-old beauty. She was to remain a muse to his imagination and thought for the rest of his life. He fell hopelessly in love with her, but after the engagement was announced he began to query himself thus: “I have no doubt that I love Regine, but what is marriage morally understood, and am I fit for it?” After agonizing self-analysis and a deep probing of the meaning of marriage, including his own reckoning with the possibility of a vocation for himself as a religious author, Kierkegaard concluded that he could not marry Regine. I think he understood that marriage required an openness and forthcomingness between the spouses, presupposing that each could handle the other’s openness; it haunted him whether he could be so open to Regine and whether, if he could, she had the seriousness necessary to even understand him and his religious calling as an author. Yet he never forgot that he did love Regine. Need I indicate here that much ink has been spilled by the professorial class explaining the real meaning of Kierkegaard’s decision not to marry Regine?

Having decided against marrying Regine, Kierkegaard moved to launch a career as an author who was no more than a **mere poet without authority**. As a poet, he saw himself attacking the grand illusion of his church and culture: namely, that we all are already Christians. The grand truth for Kierkegaard was that his culture had in fact forgotten what was truly involved in becoming and being a Christian and having one’s life shaped by the decisive Christian existential categories of living.

This illusion expressed itself in Christian discourse being emptied of its decisive meanings by two astonishing historical developments. On the one hand, there were the people of town and market who were no longer shaped in their actual lives by having a crucified and gracious savior. On the other hand, there were the intellectuals among them who were rapidly reinterpreting Christian faith into concepts that omitted having a crucified savior and that were depleting Christian faith of its radical existential character. These intellectual re-interpreters of Christianity were busy translating the faith into concepts a bit more acceptable to the modern, enlightened age. They were ‘going further’ than the original terms of simple faith, which, after all, is content with merely ‘edifying.’ The paradoxical and offensive character of needing a savior was being quietly edited out of Christian theology.

How then to dismantle and subvert the grand illusion by the folk and the intellectuals that they are already Christians—perhaps even scholarly theologians—but that their lives are deeply antithetical to Christian faithfulness? He was convinced that people do not respond well when their illusions are attacked directly or head on, for that makes them defensive and stubborn, only further entrenching the illusion. No, the attack must be ‘indirect,’ to **wound from behind**, to create a literature in which persons might come to see themselves truly and honestly for the first time. As Holmer puts it, Kierkegaard was aiming to provide a map of human subjectivity, showing the characters of the various forms of passions and decisions in which persons exist.

Hence, as a ‘corrective’ to his church and culture, Kierkegaard developed a two-pronged literature. On the one hand, he composed a series of works by pseudonymous authors in which he simply and artfully depicted persons in their different ways of existing. On the other hand, he was writing in his own name for the ‘individual who was his reader,’ offering edifying discourses of spiritual discernment and encouragement, designed to lead the reader into a deeper relationship with God. His enormous literary production was moving down these two tracks simultaneously.

Incidentally, I should note that Kierkegaard regarded his literature as his own education in the faith. As his journals reveal, Kierkegaard subjected himself to continuous and excruciating introspection, examining and re-examining his own motives in every major decision. Obviously, it was in these depths of his own soul that Kierkegaard found the raw material for his profound analyses of the many shapes of the human soul—its attractions to pleasure, its proneness to dread and despair, its deep reluctance to be an accountable self,

and its ambivalence toward a gracious savior who refuses to become subservient to culture's principles of explanation and value.

In February 1843, Kierkegaard publishes *Either/Or*, a large two-volume work, and thus **begins his authorship with the aim of reintroducing to Christendom what it means to become a Christian**, but now by indirection and edifying discourses. From this date until February 1846, Kierkegaard publishes fourteen works that must comprise one of the most prodigious and profound literary explosions in the western world. Let us briefly review this literature.

Either/Or is pseudonymously published under the name of Victor Eremita in two large volumes: one narrating the personality of an aesthetic young man given to grand designs of sexual seduction and sophisticated cultivations of pleasure, and one narrating the personality of an older man, a civil judge given to expressive praise of and wise counsel about the moral life. The either/or is between the aesthetic life—preoccupied as it is with pleasure and the avoidance of pain—and the moral life—preoccupied as it is with bringing the whole of one's life under a moral ideality. Victor Emerita does not recommend one or the other, but lets his personae stand entertainingly before the reader, indirectly posing the question: how then do you live, dear reader?

Then in October came two extraordinary pieces: *Repetition* under the pseudonym Constantine Constantius, and *Fear and Trembling* under the striking pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. Consider *Fear and Trembling*: in an intellectual culture given to supposing that real thinking requires one to go further than mere faith and to grasp philosophically what is only pictorially represented in simple faith, Kierkegaard examines the situation of Abraham, referred to in the New Testament as the father of faith. Is this Abraham, proceeding up the mount to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, the one who fears the Lord above all things? In trying to fathom what faith is, Kierkegaard imaginatively examines Abraham's fear and trembling in all its terrible complexity. What does it mean to have an absolute obligation to God? Is this faith of Abraham something that philosophers know better and can go beyond, or is it something unfathomable and about which the philosophers hardly have any existential inkling of what it means to be gripped by that fear before the Lord and the Lord's commands? These are questions we are indirectly invited to ask.

In June of the next year, he publishes two pieces of singular conceptual exactitude: *Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus and *The Concept of Anxiety* [or, Dread] by Vigilius Haufniensis. *Fragments* examines in unremitting precision the question of whether it is possible to base one's eternal happiness on a relationship to a savior who existed at a point in time. Is it too slight a thing to say that Kierkegaard posed the question that stalks the halls of contemporary discussion even today? Is it too much to conclude that Kierkegaard forever discriminates between those christologies for whom Jesus is a mere Socratic occasion for the movement of faith and those christologies for whom Jesus is himself the very condition of faith and salvation? *The Concept of Anxiety* has this subtitle: *A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary [Original] Sin*. Here the concept of anxiety gets introduced into the theological discourse of the church.

In April 1845, a huge volume entitled *Stages on Life's Way* by Hilarius Bogbinder is published, developing further the depiction of stages in *Either/Or* between the aesthetic and moral stages, now going on to the religious stage. In early 1846, the monumental *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, again by Johannes Climacus, asks the penetrating question: how must the self be so constituted so that the question of basing one's eternal happiness on a relationship to a historical savior can be seriously considered? Apparently, not everyone is sufficiently a self that they can ask the central question of faith in Jesus Christ with real seriousness.

While publishing these pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard was also regularly publishing eighteen edifying discourses for his reader, who is serious about how it is to be related to God.

Our time is short. Let me be brief. Personally exhausted by this prolific undertaking, Kierkegaard takes some time off from writing and considers entering the ministry. But he decides against that for complex reasons, and finds his own voice in further publications. Forthcoming in the next few years are distinctly Christian books: *The Works of Love*, *Christian Discourses*, *Two Minor Ethical Religious Treatises*, *The*

Sickness unto Death, Practice in Christianity, For Self-Examination, and Judge for Yourselves.

Already critical of the established Lutheran church of Denmark in the 1850's, after the death of his father's friend, Bishop Mynster, Kierkegaard begins his open and direct pamphleteering critique of the institutional church. This is a bitter attack on the public, state-sponsored, established church - the attack on Christendom. Kierkegaard declared that the established church was in fact not the church of Jesus Christ as we see it in the New Testament. He refused to participate in Holy Communion and urged others to abstain as well, contending that this established institution had no real theological authority. The idea that such an institution could be so thoroughly corrupt and still be the body of Christ was an anathema to Kierkegaard. Simply put, whatever else the established church might be, it is not the church of Jesus Christ.

In October 1855, in the midst of this vicious controversy in which he was being stringently criticized by all the established personages and religious authorities, little Kierkegaard—always sickly—collapsed on the street. He was taken to the hospital where he died a few days later at the age of 42. Ridiculed and humiliated in his own time by his own contemporaries who despised his literary corrective to the illusions of their age, Kierkegaard has found friends in the twentieth century. He may not have gotten everything right in his literature, but he is sufficiently imposing as an intellect that if he thought something, it must be worth our serious consideration. I invite you to become more familiar with this brilliant author, who will spy out our deepest illusions, who will judge us harshly into decision, and who will befriend us on the arduous journey of becoming a human being and maybe even becoming a Christian.