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3. Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth

Abstract

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) seldom left his native city, Copenhagen, and, except for two brief visits to Berlin, never left Denmark. The externals of his life were rather ordinary for the son of a wealthy hosier. He always employed at least one servant and dressed in the best of fashion, but his death found him with the last of his income in his pocket. He was a lonely man seeking only one or two intimate friends, passing the daily pleasantries with everyone, but warding off with his masterful use of irony most of those who tried to befriend him. When he asked for and received the ridicule of a local scandal journal, his slightly twisted frame — he had an injury of the spine — became his trade mark because of the journal's cartoons. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth

Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIII: Theological Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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3. Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) seldom left his native city, Copenhagen, and, except for two brief visits to Berlin, never left Denmark. The externals of his life were rather ordinary for the son of a wealthy hosier. He always employed at least one servant and dressed in the best of fashion, but his death found him with the last of his income in his pocket. He was a lonely man seeking only one or two intimate friends, passing the daily pleasantries with everyone, but warding off with his masterful use of irony most of those who tried to befriend him. When he asked for and received the ridicule of a local scandal journal, his slightly twisted frame -- he had an injury of the spine -- became his trade mark because of the journal's cartoons.

Probably only three events of his life ever deeply affected Soren Kierkegaard (often abbreviated S. K.). They were his father's revelation and death, his engagement to Regina, and his Easter experience of 1848. Once as a poor shepherd boy on the barren wind-swept heath of Denmark, his father, Michael, had cursed God for his horrible existence. The father considered his later wealth and long life not as blessings but as condemnation. The deaths of his second wife and all but two of his children within a brief time had convinced him of God's condemnation, and then his youngest and most beloved, Soren, severed relations with him. Eventually a reconciliation took place, but the price must have been the father's revelation of his cursing God. Shortly thereafter the old man died. His dying wish was partially fulfilled a few years later when Kierkegaard passed his theological examinations, but he could not go on with ordination because he was not sure that he was a Christian. The memory of his father remained so strong that all of his religious writings were dedicated to "Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, formerly a hosier of this city."

The engagement to Regina could compare with the greatest of tragic love affairs, and it is not by accident that Don Juan, especially as Mozart's opera presents him, and Hamlet were two of Kierkegaard's favorites. Kierkegaard met Regina when she was but fifteen and waited three years before declaring his intentions. The engagement was but a brief one, for he came to realize that to marry would mean also to bring this young beautiful flower under the condemnation which he believed he had inherited from his father. He fled to Berlin, and played the scoundrel. Regina married another, but Kierkegaard constantly worked out his relationship to her in various ways in many of his early writings. His will left her all his possessions. The breaking of the engagement, he felt, had been a divine command and had forced him to write. His first writings were of two kinds, which he thought complemented each other: pseudonymous writings which were to provide the opportunity for true Christianity, primarily by clearing up the Hegelian confusion of reason and faith, and Edifying Discourses which explored the possibilities

of Christianity within the experiences of man.

The details of the Easter experience of 1848 are unknown. His journals for this period are full of exclamations of joy and release. Whatever it was, it had made direct exposition of Christianity possible for him. His vocation as an author now had divine confirmation, and he took up the task of explaining what real Christianity is. In the few years before his death, his exposition of Christianity became a frontal attack upon the religion which the established church was fostering. In the heat of this battle, he collapsed in the streets and after a month died. On his deathbed he scorned the sacrament from the hands of mere civil servants as he thought of the clergy, hirelings of the state, profaners of the faith, and hypocrites of the first order.

The selection from his journals which follows is from his student days when he decided the direction his life must take. He had to find that truth for which he could live and in which he could truly exist. But to find it, he had to first find himself before God.

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This work is not presented as an example of good punctuation or grammar. Kierkegaard never intended to publish this part of the journals. Rather he kept them to help himself to know himself, since for him only by knowing one's self could one understand anything that was really decisive. To share the universal knowledge of mankind may be interesting to the intellect; it may exercise the mind; it may distract one from the unpleasantnesses of life; but of what good is general knowledge for one's life when he has to decide what to do and, worst of all, when he must give an account before God for his choice? That the individual must stand alone before God makes general information absolutely irrelevant, completely uncertain, and totally unreliable. General information gives him only a degree of assurance, which is fine for conducting experiments and producing rockets. If an experiment fails, mankind has learned something and maybe the next will not fail. But suppose the individual ultimately fails in the eyes of God. A second try is not possible because God's judgment is final. Therefore, man must act with a certainty which general information and general agreement cannot give.

Kierkegaard wrestled with this problem during his student days at Copenhagen University where he had become a "perpetual

* Reprinted from The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 15-20. Used with permission.

student," exercising a privilege of one who had passed certain examinations. Instead of being content with passing the necessary examinations for entering the clergy (which he later did with ease to fulfill his father's dying wish), Kierkegaard wanted to be sure first of all that he was a Christian. With reflection he became increasingly uncertain, first about himself and then about his contemporaries. He wrote that at one time to profess to be a Christian was a matter of life and death, but that in his day one became extremely suspect if he had doubts about his being a Christian. What was once the hardest thing in the world had now become the easiest, so easy that a child of two weeks was baptized and registered by the state as a Christian. Consequently, citizenship in the state and membership in the church were identical. His passionate reflection on himself before God went through four stages.

First, he asked, "Is it possible to be a Christian?" He found that there could be no real assurance in the word "possible." Literally, all things are possible. The mind cannot stand the vague "possible," and so it limits itself to something that guarantees in advance both precision and results: a system of logic. Desires also cannot endure the vague "possible," and so they limit their fulfillment to selected goals. Least of all can the individual's quest for eternal happiness be directed by the vague "possible." Certainty, then, cannot come from either the mind or the desires, for it is only an illusion that they have solved the problem. Actually they flee before it, and, when caught, stand numb and mute before the questions: "Why that particular logical system?" "Why that particular fulfillment?"

Second, he decided that revelation alone provides certainty. I am certain that I am doing the right thing when I obey the revelation. This revelation is found in the Bible and all Christians agree to it. Kierkegaard viewed revelation as having dethroned logic. Indeed, it is to the credit of revelation that it is not logical, but rather goes beyond the limits of logic. Revelation is that which logic cannot contain. Revelation is the paradox which joins what logic cannot join, namely opposites. The supreme paradox is the God-man, Jesus Christ. In a like manner, desires give way to willful obedience to God's commands.

Third, he doubted that even intellectual acceptance and obedience could really insure one's salvation. If they could, Christianity would be like a profession or a skilled craft, but God does not judge performance as men do. God searches the heart of a man. One may discipline his mind and his desires but may still hate himself and even God. Thus, such acceptance and obedience are a way of false comfort, a way of mutual assurance among men without God, an objective test of Christendom that completely obscures the real test, the testing of the inner man. The question: "Am I a Christian?" has nothing to do with the opinion of anyone, but is answered by God who gazes upon the truly naked inner self.

Fourth, he believed that to be a Christian one must be true to one's self before God, for it is this inner self that God has given him to be. The individual finds this God-given self not by searching the world about him, but by searching within, by introspection. To Kierkegaard Socrates was the greatest of the pagans and greater than the Christian leaders of Kierkegaard's day because he sought to help the individual know himself. Yet one greater has come in the form of a servant, Jesus Christ, who helps the individual overcome the greatest obstacle to this self-knowledge and thus to all certain knowledge, namely, the obstacle of the will. Truth, meaning, and knowledge cannot be inspired by logic since logic speaks in generalities, is impersonal, and becomes a way of escaping the God-given self. Only the true self before God can know the truth and meaning in which the individual must live even though he dies.

Kierkegaard has been an inspiration for the modern theological concern to take man's existence, his situation, with extreme seriousness. One who has been thus inspired is Karl Barth (1886). Barth, like Kierkegaard, found the religion of his time inadequate to fulfill man's deepest need, the need for certainty and truth. However, whereas Kierkegaard found the answer in the depths of the individual, Barth finds it beyond man and his activities.

Barth has attempted to restate the Reformation insights which he finds also in Augustine and Paul. He is credited with beginning a new school of theology, formerly called the school of crisis theology and now more often the neoorthodox school. His original intention was simply to write a footnote to theology, but he injected so much new life into theological discussion that he was called from his little Swiss parish to a university post in Germany. During the early years of Hitler, Barth fled from his German professorship and now makes his home at the University of Basel, Switzerland.

Like a man climbing the stairs of a bell tower in the dead of the blackest night, feeling himself slipping, grasping at something in despair, only to find with dismay that he has grabbed the bell rope and to hear its alarming toll breaking the peace and the stillness of the night and waking the sleep of troubled dreamers, Karl Barth published in 1918 his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans and woke theological thought from its dreamy complacency about man, his world, and his time. However, it was probably less the guns of the kaiser's army than the weekly questions of his Swiss congregation -- "Is what you preach true?" "What is the Word of God?" -- that led him to question liberal theology.

Liberalism had tended to bottle Christianity in the feelings (the consciousness of absolute dependence, as with Schleiermacher), in the mind (Hegel's dialectic was an observation of God's work), in the drives, or in history (considering it a

movement among others that has shaped Western Civilization). Barth's commentary either broke the bottle or pulled the cork, because he was attacked from all sides. To better explain his ideas, he immediately rewrote the book which went into six re-printings before it was finally translated into English in 1932. By this time Barth had already turned to the writing of his Church Dogmatics, a huge life's work still in progress, threatening in size and comprehensiveness the Summa of Aquinas.

His attack on liberal theology is a two-edged sword. The liberals limited God's activity to a given sphere, the religious aspect, or the divine part of man. This to Barth is a manifestation of man's pride and a denial of God as God. Secondly, the liberals too easily identified God with man when they asserted that one's sense of humanity is divine, or that one's reason or life-force was really God's realizing Himself in man. This to Barth makes God the easy friend, the mental giant, or the naked power which denies God's transcendence, his "otherness" from man, indeed His judgment upon man. For Barth not even a part of man is divine, and not one little fragment of life avoids the condemnation of God.

Truth and meaning are God's alone. Man's questions about and questings for them are really his effort to keep God silent, keep Him out, and drown His voice with shouts and His activity by busyness. In fear of God's "No!" and in pride in our sufficiency, we ask for truth and meaning so that we do not have to listen to His answer. Man's quest is really futile flight from God. Man and his time stand in the crisis of decision when his ability to know both truth and meaning are questioned by the failure of even his best efforts.

The towers of peace are crumbling. The foundation of science is cracking. The structure of history is vaporizing. All are taking place under man's critical search. Man's emotions are rationalized and his reason is emotionalized. At no other time has the question of truth and meaning been so evident, prevalent, and crucial to existence itself.

Thus, the frustration of man's greatest efforts, the veiling of the goddess of reason and the end of the nineteenth century romance, is seen by Barth as the judgment of God: God's "No!" to man's weak "Yes." Man must lose his hope to receive God's promise. Man must lose his blind faith in himself in order to receive God's revealing trust. All man's achievements deny God and his failures give God a chance to speak and act. At best man's achievements are but prolegomena, that which is said before God speaks and which is finished and forgotten after He speaks.

The Bible and the great witnesses of the Christian faith do not contain the truth and the meaning of life. They are like a crowd looking up. One does not see what they see by looking at them, but by looking with them. One does not hear what they

hear by reading their words aloud, but by attuning his ear in the direction to which these words point. One does not live as they live by imitating their actions, but by relating his life to the source of their lives.

Meaning and truth are not found; they are received. One is prepared to receive them when one has given up trying, either by himself or with others. The failures of man are God's judgment, but this judgment also implies His grace which is His presence and concern. Thus, the crisis of modern man is caused by man's pride and by God's presence. The solution comes when man surrenders to God. God has neither abandoned man nor identified Himself with man, but has remained what He is, which man may accept or reject to His glory or to his damnation.