

Soren Kierkegaard

by Brian Coatney

As some of you know, Sharon Roy gave me the book *Kierkegaard for Beginners* by Donald D. Palmer, a book that to my surprise immediately swallowed me in the most fantastic way, with all suspicion surprisingly set aside that once might have prevented me from an attraction to Kierkegaard, since none less than Francis Schafer wrote about Kierkegaard as dangerous and even heretical it seemed.

Yet that ever dangerous Norman Grubb loved Kierkegaard, as he loved Walter Lanyon, Walter Russell and other writers that singed my evangelical hair. But if I would question whether one should read such and such an author, Norman would say, "I see him in the sea of God." I remember Norman sitting in Page Prewitt's den reading a thick red volume of Kierkegaard and humming in ecstasy, while I wondered, "What is that all about?" And how often did we hear Norman quote Kierkegaard: "Truth is subjective," which had a lure to it, along with the follow-up statement, "We walk on 20, 000 fathoms." Why it takes so many fathoms I do not know: one or two would be miraculous to me. Yet I grasped that somehow faith always bases certainty on something that appears not certain, leaving the question of how far one can go with certainties or even what they are. This is why it always bothered me as well that Norman would say that he could not prove his message.

From Donald Palmer's book, with its quotes of Kierkegaard and Palmer's own commentary, I picked up immediately that Kierkegaard is a writer of great irony, which is to say, wit. For years, books of information, especially on theology, bored me for the lack of literary style, warmth of character, and humor; C.S. Lewis seemed one of a kind for his ability to marry truth and style; and I think that if we are called to suffer in this life, we should be allowed to suffer with enough jokes to keep us from becoming bores and outliners of systematic thought? So I wondered, when I went to the library on campus, "Will I find myself disappointed with an actual

volume of Kierkegaard himself; will I have really enjoyed Donald Palmer, but find Kierkegaard too complex, unapproachable, or beyond my ken?

So I marched in and checked out the huge volume, *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson. Immediately, I found a syntax to match Milton or Emerson--one that many readers would find unsuitable for drive-through efficiency; I found a literary style that excites me, not for sophistication that breeds the wrong kind of pride, but one that excites me for the elevation and momentum I feel from the beginning. I do not have to travel far with Don Quixote to enjoy him; each adventure leaves me with hunger to know where the road leads, but each adventure also satisfies for that day's pleasure, like when we say, "Do you remember the time when...?"

Kierkegaard also brings up in his introduction that unsettling issue disturbing to us when we want to lean primarily into a historical faith; for after all, didn't Dr. Luke, for example, write out a carefully documented, eye witness account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? And yet, the likes of Jacob Boehme and William Law frequently ATTACK worshippers knowing only a historical Christ: merely historical practitioners prove predictable, comfortable, complacent, and perhaps not even born again (it might seem frightful to question that, but questioning cannot hurt anyone; it may irritate, and we may choose to finally ignore the confronter, but questions assist us. Hm, a taste of dialectic).

So when, in italics, Kierkegaard says, "*Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other than a mere historical interest; is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?*" I recognized the voices of the past again: Jacob Boehme, William Law, and our own Norman Grubb. Along with this question, Kierkegaard brings up the parable of the ten virgins, five of whom let their lamps die out; and he says of those that they lost infinite passion, meaning that those lacking infinite passion will not be infinitely interested in truth, therefore also implying that facts of history can do such a person no good.

Platinum! Now we are on a different ground, not one that needs to discredit a Dr. Luke, but a ground that demands something from within the observer, namely the subjective, namely that which is heated to a continuously hotter flame, never diminishing. This person will know what to do with a fact, for that fact will not be separate from a condition of passion in the observer. And even observer sounds too objective, for as Norman said, "What you take, takes you," and what is taking but the passion of the taker to the degree of the desire in the taker?

This reminds me of Mississippian Pat Downs who, at a conference in 1988, in her drawl, speaking of our message, said, "This message is for the desperate." But some heard her speak of Father Desperate and later asked her about this man of whom she spoke, confusing her, until a translator of Mississippian made the point clear between Pat and her listeners. But my point is really that only desperation opens us up to the subjective. Amazingly, our ears open when we hurt badly enough, and hell is never hurting badly enough, contradictory as that sounds.

So I find myself already immersed in that mystery of freedom and desire, via Kierkegaard and will give an account again to those of you interested as I anticipate but already enjoy what I already know will be a journey further into the kept life. I don't mean kept as only a defensive posture, meaning just the willingness to be kept from sin; but I mean kept in a discovery sense, like that of a Columbus or Magellan. This is not now the prevention from evil, from Satan and his lie of independent self--a necessary keeping as we know from having hung helplessly over the flames of hell and over the torments of the devil, and having to, in our freedom, find our desire to be kept, and then find the Keeper, and then find a steady walk in the keeper.

I mean keeping now in the sense of keeping over the abyss of the good, over the abyss of freedom that hovers over all potentiality in Christ Jesus. I mean the freedom to walk with appetite in the light, with an eternal hunger for one thing: "God is love," and He is love, therefore in my form. I desire the keeping, not only to avoid Satan and evil in my consciousness, but to eat abundantly to full satisfaction of all that He is in a human consciousness. This

is to know God, both wholly and in part: wholly, because His love is One and cannot be divided, and love in part because we can never arrive at the infinite point.

However, I don't even wish to do that anymore;, for acceptance of my humanity as the vessel and as the branch on the vine of Christ means that I eternally glory in finding more; whereas when I had to be a god myself, or rather had to be God myself, to not minimize here, but acknowledge the full depth of pride, I found continual frustration at the prospect of something new to learn. So now I can have the whole and enjoy the whole in the part, and continue forever in the quest of what, or rather, Whom I know.

For those interested, I will send the next installment of the best thing since I listened to the Lone Ranger on the radio as a grade-schooler.

Soren Kierkegaard #2

Quotes from 1946 Random House *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, edited by Robert Bretall

1840 Journal entry

"And just as the individual, however freely he may develop, can never reach the point at which he becomes absolutely independent, since true freedom on the contrary consists rather in freely appropriating that which is given, and consequently in being absolutely dependent through freedom, so too with language, and moreover we sometimes find the mistaken tendency of not wishing to accept language as the freely appropriated 'given,' but of giving it to oneself, whether this shows itself in the very highest regions, where it easily ends in silence (the negation of language), or in personal isolation in complete gibberish" (12).

1841 Journal entry

"It requires more courage to suffer than to act, more courage to forget than to remember, and perhaps the most wonderful thing about God is that he can forget man's sins" (13).

1841 Journal entry

How beautiful, how true and how heartfelt are the words of J. Boehme where he says: in the moment of temptation the thing is not to have many thoughts, but to hold fast to *one* thought. God give me strength.

From *Either/Or*

"Boredom is the root of all evil."

"In the case of children, the ruinous character of boredom is universally acknowledged. Children are always well-behaved as long as they are enjoying themselves. This is true in the strictest sense; for they are already beginning to be bored—boredom is already approaching, though from a different direction. In choosing a governess, one therefore takes into account not only her sobriety, her faithfulness, and her competence, but also her aesthetic qualifications for amusing the children (...)" (22).

"Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together; then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were bored *en famille*; then the population of the world increased, and the peoples were bored *en masse*. To divert themselves they conceived the idea of constructing a tower high enough to reach the heavens. This idea is itself as boring as the tower was high, and constitutes a terrible proof of how boredom gained the upper hand" (23). (My comment: this reminds me too of church building programs at times).

Translators note on *Either/ Or*

"Either/Or was S.K.'s answer to Hegel's concept of 'mediation,' i.e. the preservation of contradictory ideas—'thesis' and 'antithesis'—in a 'synthesis which includes and somehow reconciles them both. For the principle of 'both—and' Kierkegaard had already acquired an unyielding hatred. In a rhetorical moment, he exclaims, 'either/or is the word at which the folding doors fly open and the ideals appear—O blessed sight! Either/or is the pass which admits to the absolute—God be praised! Yea, either/or is the key to heaven.'" ..."Both—and is the way to hell" (19)

Soren Kierkegaard #3

Two people sent interesting responses to the Kierkegaard quotes in "Kierkegaard #2." One agreed that there is an either/or in the sense that something cannot be both Christ and Satan in nature simultaneously. Yet, this responder also said that there is a "both-and" when it comes to issues like choice/sovereignty and the inner Christ/the Christ who will return bodily at the end of the age.

Another wrote to quote Dr. Francis Shafer that Kierkegaard abolished reason and laid the groundwork for Neo-Orthodoxy, as well as pantheism, and the erroneous teaching of Norman P. Grubb.

First, If Kierkegaard had abandoned reason, he would not have used it so much. Though he did forsake marriage to the woman he passionately loved, for reasons he considered to be a divine veto, Kierkegaard was no recluse or "touch not, taste not, handle not," person that I can tell so far. He does employ the Socratic method quite a bit in order not to inform, but to incite the listener to arrive at truth from within. In education, we praise this, not because we abandon authority figures, but because we wish to enhance the excitement of discovery.

Kierkegaard can go on and on, and I will think, "What is the point?" But in *Either/or*, he begins with the premise that boredom is the root of all evil and not idleness. He speaks tongue in cheek a lot, but the drift I get is this: people are afraid of solitude and their own thoughts, which would lead them to terror, which would lead them to divine knowledge. Therefore they stay busy and use what Kierkegaard calls the "rotation method." This is a moving from one outer pleasure to another. If one wife doesn't work out, divorce her and go on to another. If wine starts to tire you, eat. If food fails, move to entertainment, etc.

So Kierkegaard plods along with tedious detail and wit to show how the bovine mind finally exhausts all pleasures. This reminds me of Hemmingway, who later shot himself when pleasure no longer could divert his gaze from the lonely abyss inside. Kierkegaard realizes, like Jacob Boehme and William Law, and Norman Grubb, and the stream of mystics throughout history that an outer Christ does us no good without "Christ our Life" that we live from. We live from a person, not a doctrine or a church, or what others think, or from our pleasures. I see no evidence yet that Kierkegaard rejects a historical Christ, but I see evidence that he plots the path that the one who abides in Christ painfully learned by elimination—that a new something or other will not fill the inner void. As Jacob Boehme said it somewhere, "We must die to all the creatures in us" (I think he said this in *The Supersensual Life* treatise in *The Way to Christ*.)

So when Kierkegaard begins his either/or groundwork, he basically says that you can either find meaning in outer things, i.e. the rotation method, or you cannot. If you cannot, then you must have the Spirit. The delightful irony of abandoning outer things, as we know, is that then we can enjoy them or be without them as God pleases for us to have or not have. We live from the inside, and as Jacob Boehme says over and over again, like Adam in paradise, we regain the ability to live in the third principle, but only as of the second principle, without being seduced by it, which is really to say we are in the world but not of it. And that folks is the Gospel truth.