

11. Kierkegaard and the End of Authority

The fourth huge turning point in Church History began in an out-of-the-way place back in middle of the 19th Century. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1856) lived in Denmark on the periphery of the great debates that went on in Germany, France, and Spain. Kierkegaard participated in that ferment, but history was slow to hear from him. Nevertheless, as we look back and calculate his influence on philosophy and Christian theology, few persons of his era stand out more than he. Hegel (1770-1831) was his chief foil. Schelling (1775-1854) was an encouraging teacher. And the Russian Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), whom he may never have read, was perhaps his closest companion in launching a revolution in Christian thought. Nietzsche (1844-1900), (whom Kierkegaard, as far as we know, never met or read) was destined to become his most important companion in a basic critique of Western philosophy.

Kierkegaard has been known by many as the dismal Dane because of his writing on dread and despair, but I have found his book on despair (*The Sickness Unto Death*) to be one of the most illuminating and hopeful books I have ever read. We might better characterize Kierkegaard as an anti-Hegelian comedian, as one of the most brilliant satirists who has ever lived. He pictured Hegel as a rational system builder of beautiful systems in which the actual Hegel did not live. He satirized Hegel as one who built a huge and beautiful mansion, but lived alongside it in a doghouse.

Kierkegaard emphasized the individual existing person as the truth that was being omitted from the thinking of his time. H. Richard Niebuhr may have appropriately criticized his work as too focused on the solitary person and too little attentive to the communal nature of the Christian life. I believe that Niebuhr was right about this, but it is the role of a great prophet to overemphasize the missing pole in the great polarities of life. Today, we need to clarify that there is no authentic solitude without authentic community to occasion it, and there is no authentic community without authentic solitude to create it. I am glad that the Christian theologians, who have been living and writing in Kierkegaard's wake, have learned to emphasize the communal pole to Kierkegaard's solitariness. The communal thinking of H. Richard Niebuhr or Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a return to the collectivistic rationalism that suppresses and ignores individual human existence. Rather this fresh communal realization has been built in full honor of Kierkegaard's history-ripping breakthroughs. The views that a relevant Christianity needs to oppose are not those of solitude or communal life, but those of individualism and collectivism.

Beyond Plato and Aristotle

Kierkegaard not only gave new inner life to the interpretation of Christianity, he moved beyond the philosophical contexts in which Christianity had been articulated ever since the thought of Plato and Aristotle became known to the Christian movement. Kierkegaard ascribed to himself a type of humility that to him meant a surrender to Reality. In this context he felt humble about honoring in himself what he called "the cockiness of genius." Perhaps his most cocky statement had to do with Western philosophy. He suggested that prior to his emphasis the whole of Western philosophy was a footnote on Plato. This did not mean he saw no truth in this long heritage, but it did mean that he emphasized the experience of the existing person in a way that moved beyond Hegel and all the philosophical systems that had come before him. Kierkegaard also contrasted Socrates' emphasis on concrete lived experience to Plato's systematizing. This philosophical emphasis gave Kierkegaard an important context for his theological writings, the deliverance of religious truth from the rationalism and moralism of his times.

An Attack on Christendom

Kierkegaard's Christianity moved beyond Protestantism and Catholicism in a thoroughgoing manner. Though he was clearly a follower of Luther's understanding of faith, he saw the whole establishment of 19th Century Christianity as a betrayal of the Jesus Christ "revelation." He especially opposed any sort of authoritarianism that moved the discovery of truth beyond what can be verified in personal experience. Though it remains true that there was a type of existential orientation in the authority thinking of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, and many others, Kierkegaard helps us to abandon entirely the notion that Christianity has an authoritarian reference point. Neither the Bible nor the Church fathers (and mothers) have any authority over the depth existential experience of the individual Christian.

If we cannot find resonance in our own individual lives with a Christian doctrine, creed, writing, poem, story, etc., then that witness has to be either abandoned or it has to be interpreted in a way that is existentially persuasive. It may, of course, be the case that many sayings and teachings of this long-standing tradition are true to our personal existence, but we have yet to "grow up" in our consciousness in order to appropriate them. Indeed, most of Kierkegaard's theological writings are aimed at assisting us in that growing-up process. I will illustrate his theological gift with a quick survey of some core insights in his book, *The Sickness Unto Death*.

The Sickness of Despair and how Despair is a Fresh Definition of Sin

Faith, according to Kierkegaard, is not the opposite of vice or disbelief: faith is the opposite of despair. This is a key contribution to Christian theology. Sin is not immorality. Sin is a sickness of the "soul" – a sickness in the most primary quality that makes us human, our consciousness of our consciousness. This sickness may lead to immoralities and also to sick moralities, but sin itself is not immorality. Sin means that our basic attentionality and intentionality are corrupted in a fundamental and horrifying way.

Kierkegaard tells us what that sickness is. He gives us a vivid description of the sickness he calls "despair." All of us create despair in our lives when we flee from or fight with Reality. Why? Because Reality cannot be fled, and Reality cannot be defeated. We do not always experience the despair that we are in. We only experience our despair when we are courageous enough to experience it. Why is courage needed? Because if we experience our despair fully, it is the most horrible experience that a human being can have. Rather than endure their despair, human beings often commit suicide. Very few people commit suicide for any other reason than to escape their despair. When a returning war veteran kills himself, it is almost always because he is despairing over being a person who participated in an overwhelming amount of violence, or who in some other way is finding it difficult to handle his traumatic memories. When a mass murderer kills a bunch of adults, college students, or children and then kills himself, he is, in all likelihood, acting out some despair over himself or over how he is being perceived by others. We often see quite functional persons take their lives in the wake of being jilted by a lover or some other interruption of their self-created world. The event that sets suicide in motion may seem trivial to an outside observer, but to the despairing person some sort of upending of his or her world or vital self-image has in all likelihood occurred.

Kierkegaard describes how these suicidal or potentially suicidal persons are bearing a pain of despair so intense that most of us cannot even imagine it. Most of us are not in touch with our despair. Most of us view any whiff of despair that comes up for us as if this were just a smoking fireplace in our house. We leave the house until the smoke clears away, and then we go back into our familiar living room and sit down again.

But there are also those who carry the harsh pain of despair as a deep secret while

outwardly being a circumspect, ordinary, quite careful person. Such respectable appearing persons are the ones who may surprise us with their suicide.

But few despairers stay at this point of complete closed-in secretiveness. Rather, they plunge into debauchery or into noble work, whatever seems to dull the pain of their despair. This desperate plunge leaves a clear trace that their condition is despair.

And finally, Kierkegaard describes the defiant despairer who may be defiantly active in creating a false self to substitute for the real despairing self. This actively defiant despairer is a curious phenomena, for this self-created self can with a single choice be returned to the nothingness that it is. A second type of defiant despairer uses his or her own despairing self as an excuse to protest against Reality. With his typical humor, Kierkegaard suggests this caricature of passive defiance: it is as if an author were to make a mistake on a printed page and then that this mistake becomes conscious of its self and uses itself to prove that this author was a very poor writer.

The defiant ones are the most conscious of all despairers, but consciousness alone does not heal the despair. The turn to “faith” means trusting that the realistic living of what is truly here and truly possible is the best case scenario for living. From the perspective of such faith, despair is a doorway to health, for it reveals where realism is being avoided. Despair seems to be a horrific thing, but since it is only the result of lying to ourselves, it can disappear when our lying ceases. Trusting Reality is the health that is built into Reality itself. Trust of Reality is the Garden of Eden from which we have been expelled through eating from the “lie” tree. This psychological analysis of sin and faith is one of the key contributions of Kierkegaard to the theology of a vital Next Christianity. This vision of sin and faith illuminates the long history of Christian witnessing and shapes the witnessing of a meaningful Next Christian practice.

The Authority of Authenticity

As previously noted, both Roman Catholic and Protestant expressions of Christianity have given strong emphasis to authority as a primary test for “Christian” truth. The authority of Scripture, the authority of tradition, the authority of ecclesiastical personages have been assumed to be an ultimate test of Christian truth. Personal experience has always played a role as well – at times it competed strongly with the authority principle. But today, as we seek to dwell, think, and work toward a vital Next Christianity, authenticity (rather than authority) becomes the sole test of Christian truth. This is a primary characteristic of what I am calling “a post-Kierkegaardian era of vital Christian formation.”

Authority of a secondary sort will still play a role (*We will still treasure the Bible and the great souls of our heritage.*), but the role of authority is now quite secondary to the role of authenticity. We might say that the authority of authenticity is now more primary than the authority of authority. From now on the Christian truth about life can only be validated by authenticity, not authority. This is a radical change. It places us on a narrow path with huge ditches on both sides. On the right side of the road is the ditch of authoritarian dogmatism. On the left side of the road is the ditch of absolute relativism that denies any certainty whatsoever, including authenticity. The absolute relativist tends to view authenticity as one more form of authoritarian dogmatism; hence the absolute relativist rejects authenticity as a reliable test of truth.

Existential Truth

In order to be truthful, we must give relativist thinking its due. Any truth that a human being has created is uncertain. My latest and best theology, my philosophy, my view of being a husband or a parent, my healthcare plan, my worldview, my social ideology – all these things have at best only approximate certainty. All these human creations have room for improvement. All these human creations may be wrong in

major ways. I don't know how wrong they are. I don't know how right they are.

Anything that human beings have created is uncertain. Einstein's theory of gravity, Darwin's theory of evolution, the Pope's latest proclamation, my favorite commentator's latest rant – none of these creations by human beings are certain. All these views are without certainty. They are no more than approximate, and they are all open to improvement. Science, which in an earlier century spoke of discovering the laws of nature, has now become more modest. A law of nature is now seen as the most recent, best-case bit of order, created by humans to approximately match the empirical data so far gathered by the experts on the topic to which this "law" applies. In other words, a law of nature is merely a guess that has not yet been refuted. We have no absolute certainty arriving to us from the work of scientists. This does not mean that all guesses about nature are equally worthy, for the facts have refuted many guesses, and the guesses left standing are those in terms of which we can most successfully conduct our living. And even more humbling is the realization that the mystery of life is not being reduced by our scientific advances. Rather, the mystery grows stronger in the light of our new discoveries. The more we know about nature the more we know we don't know.

Absolute certainty is not a characteristic of anything created by the human species. Furthermore, absolute certainty does not drop into the human mind from heaven or from some other realm. Anything that the human mind can possess is uncertain. We hear it said that nothing is certain except death and taxes. Even that is an exaggeration. Death is certain, but taxes are not. Death is not created by a human being, but taxes are.

Your and my ideas about death are not certain, but death is certain. What does it mean to say that death is certain? In answering this question we discover a fundamental clue to the nature of existential truth, the sort of truth that Kierkegaard promoted. Doing theology in the wake of the Kierkegaardian breakthrough means embracing the existential type of truth we have to experience in order to understand fully any verse of Christian scripture or any valid witness to the Christian revelation.

Death, whatever else it may be, is not a human creation. We humans did not create death. It would have been the last thing our hypermagical minds and egos would ever have been concerned to create. We have created our ideas about death, but not death itself. In this sense death is certain, a certain truth. What else is certain? Life is certain. As the poet Rumi noticed, "Life and death are two wings on the same bird." Every experience as experience is certain – as certain as death. Our descriptions of an experience are approximate and capable of improvement. Thus our descriptions of experience are not certain. Nevertheless, the experience itself is certain.

Let's say that a truck runs over my toe. I am going to experience something, something more than the sight of the blood oozing from my shoe, something more than the pain in my foot, something more than all the ideas flowing through my mind. What sort of truck was it? Who was driving it? All these considerations have uncertainty built into them. Do I need to go to the hospital? Which one? How do I get there? All these sort of considerations have uncertainty built into them. But one thing is certain. I have had an encounter with Reality in the vicinity of my toe. This is certain with the same certainty that death is certain. This is *truth* of an existential sort.

Therefore, let us be clear that the increasingly popular human view that there is no certainty is not certain. In fact, that view is not true. There is certainty. When people say that the only certainty is uncertainty, that is not true. Any experience that comes to me from Reality is certain. I will inevitably have my thoughts and opinions about that experience, and all those thoughts and opinions are uncertain. *But, let us notice that the experience that all my thoughts and opinions are uncertain is certain! Why? Because that experience of uncertainty is an experience.*

If we say that we cannot sort out the certainty of experience from our thinking about experience, we are not telling the truth. We can. It is true that thinking is constantly going on and that thinking is producing “screens” through which we are viewing our experiences. This *truth of experience* may seem to imply that we never have an experience that is certain, because experience is always being limited by those relative screens of thought through which we are looking at our experiences. But we can experience those screens and notice that they are not the experience we are seeing through them. From time to time we can notice ourselves testing different screens through which to view the same experience. We can also notice ourselves allowing our experience to tell us which of several screens is best for describing our experience. So who is doing this noticing and this choosing of screens? It is “I” – the contemplative inquirer into my own “I”-experiences. It is “I” who can see the difference between thinking and experience.

If we say that what we are experiencing is not certain, we are talking about our self-created ideas about our experience, not about our experiences themselves. By experience we mean whatever is certain within that maze of thinking and responding that is being humanly created in response to that experience. Such certainty is what we are pointed to with the word “authenticity.” Such certainty is what we are pointing to with the term “existential truth.” Such certainty is what Kierkegaard uses to criticize Hegel and the rest of Western philosophy. Such certainty is what Kierkegaard expects Christian theologians to use to test, understand, or proclaim anything that has to do with Christian faith – trust of Reality, love, freedom, hope, peace, or any other such word. All these words are meaningless unless they are used to point to something real, authentic, convicting, challenging, healing, redemptive, etc.

Everyone has denied, is still denying, or can in the future deny these existential certainties. This capacity for denial is also an experience about which we have certainty. The widespread dynamic of denial is as certain as death and more certain than taxes. The widespread dynamic of denial is a part of our experience. But let us not view this widespread denial of certainty as necessary. There is no excuse for it. It is not necessary. This, too, can be our experience. We can experience the experience of experiencing our experience as an absolute certainty, and we can experience that the denial of that experience as unnecessary.

The writings of Søren Kierkegaard transport us to this kind of certainty, to this authority of authenticity. His philosophical description of human experience puts us in position to better understand the Christian heritage. For example, if you are experiencing in this moment your experience of the Awesome and are thus filled with Awe, let me welcome you to the Kingdom of God, to the Reign of Reality, to the Eternal Tao, to the Enlightenment of profound humanness, to the Truth, the Life, and the Way of Jesus. Those who created so much of our religious vocabulary join together in welcoming you and me home to the absolute certainty of our Real experience. Also, you and I are being welcomed to the historical wake of Søren Kierkegaard and thereby called to a fresh future of Christian witnessing and theologizing. This awakening means a new era in the history of Christianity. Luther conducted a reform of Christendom. Kierkegaard has led us beyond Christendom, beyond all authority to an Awe-sustained authenticity.