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THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF KIERKEGAARD
AND
ITS RELATION TO DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary
Department of Systematic Theology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Divinity

By
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May, 1949

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INTRODUCTION

After decades of obscurity, the religious thought of Søren Kierkegaard has emerged as one of the most significant influences on Protestant theology in our time. The only thing surprising about this is that it took so long before his influence was felt, for the problem central in his thinking, the problem of the epistemology of the Christian truth, is one of the most important and generally overlooked problems of the Christian faith, and his contribution in this area is one of the most challenging and far-reaching propositions ever formulated.

It is the presentation and analysis of this epistemological viewpoint to which this paper is dedicated. What does it mean to know the truth, the Christian truth? How is this truth apprehended? What are the implications of this position for Christian dogmatics? The scope of this paper therefore is broad, too broad, really, for adequate treatment in a thesis of this size. The paper does, however, try to cover the more obvious phases of this problem, and also to present as much of the background of the problem and of the man as is necessary to gain a reliable insight into the problem itself.

Direct quotations from Kierkegaard's major works have been adduced whenever possible, although for some sections (Chapter III, section B is the prime example here) it has been necessary to rely heavily on secondary sources.

What constituted Kierkegaard's epistemology? What is its background and setting? What positions are hereby overthrown? Does it invalidate the dogmatic approach to Christianity? To answer these questions is the burden of this paper.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

In order to understand Kierkegaard, it is by no means necessary to find out the history of his engagement, whether his father did or did not curse [God], . . . ; nay, we can understand him even if we resign ourselves never to learning if, when, why, and with whom, and whether while intoxicated or not, he was in a brothel. It is, on the contrary, obvious that we cannot understand his life unless we have understood his writings.¹

With this quotation I hope to relieve myself of the necessity of including in this paper the recitation of the melancholy facts surrounding the forty-two years allotted to Søren Aabye Kierkegaard; born May 5, 1813, Copenhagen, Denmark. If ever a man tried to communicate himself in his thinking and his writings, it was he. Consequently it would be superfluous to delve deeply into his personal history, his family background, etc.; his writings are clear in themselves. The cry he repeatedly raised while involved in his polemic against the Danish church, "I want honesty,"² characterizes

1. Philip Merlan, "Toward the Understanding of Kierkegaard," in The Journal of Religion, XLIII, p. 78 n.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, Attack Upon "Christendom", quoted in A Kierkegaard Anthology, Robert Bretall, ed., p. 439.

his every attempt at self-communication; so much so, in fact, that whenever his writings indicated a point of view which conflicted in any way with his own actual existence - whether, as in the case of Either/Or, it depicted a stage of life that was less than Christian, or, as in the case of Training in Christianity, it depicted the Christian life in the highest sense³ - he felt constrained to use a pseudonym, rather than give the impression that he represented in fact what he therein wrote.⁴ In his Journals, which he wrote anticipating that some day they would be studied,⁵ he gives the frankest picture of the turmoil that rent his soul, of his relentless self-examination. The Socratic maxim "Know thyself!" was ever in his mind. "What do I want? Simply this: I want honesty." And this meant, first and foremost, honesty with himself.

In reality, this desperate craving for personal honesty is synonymous with existential thought, as defined by Kierkegaard (hereafter, in the manner of all true Kierkegaardian scholars, referred to as S.K.). Here perhaps a definition is in order, for of late few words have suffered as much abuse as the word "existential." J. M. Lloyd Thomas advances

3. "The pseudonym is called Johannes Anti-Climacus [author of Training in Christianity], in contrast to Johannes Climacus [author of Philosophical Fragments and the Postscript] who said he was not a Christian. Anti-Climacus is the opposite extreme, that of being a Christian to an extraordinary degree - whereas I manage only to be a very simple Christian." Kierkegaard, The Journals, quoted in Walter Lowrie, A Short Life of Kierkegaard, p. 217.

4. Cf. Lowrie, op. cit., pp. 211-217.

5. Ibid., pp. 60 f.

the following definition:

"Existentialism" . . . means . . . that man must regard himself as a living active human being, a distinct individual in his particularity and concreteness, not to be mixed with the mass as "the numerical" or with the race in its universality or in its development as seen in secular history written with the presuppositions of science. This "existence" is not reality in general, and is not a closed road. "To go from possibility to reality is a progress (except in relation to evil), to go from reality to possibility is a step backwards."⁶ To pass from possibility to reality involves choice and decision. The rightness of the decision cannot be guaranteed beforehand. The decision is a decision of faith, but faith after reflection, after reflection has done its uttermost, faith by virtue of what to the pure reason and understanding is the absurd and the paradox.⁷

Existential thought, then, is the constantly-pressing concern which the individual has for his own existence qua individual. In contradistinction to the "existentialism" of Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre, S.K. could never conceive of this mode of thinking except in relation to the Christian faith - both as preceding faith and finding its fruition in faith.⁸ Nor did he feel that he could define "existence," much less "existential." Of the former he says: "If I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it."⁹

It would be a grave mistake to interpret the attitude patent in the foregoing paragraphs as indicative of a smug

6. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Thomas, "The Modernness of Kierkegaard," in The Hibbert Journal, XLV, p. 316.

7. Thomas, loc. cit.

8. Cf. Marjorie Grene, Dreadful Freedom, for a comprehensive development of this contrast.

9. Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 274.

anti-intellectualism on the part of Kierkegaard. He was indeed anti-intellectual, drastically so; but he came by this view-point honestly. For S.K. was a man of no mean intellectual capacities; he was also a man who had developed his native intelligence to an extraordinary degree, both by study and by creative thought. Indeed, at one time in his academic life, on October 17, 1835, to be exact, he put this in his Journal: "Philosophy and Christianity, however, can never be united."¹⁰ This is what S.K. asserted many times in his later life, meaning to say, Away with speculation! Here, however, it is made only too clear by the context that he means, Away with Christianity! Up with intellectual speculation!¹¹

No one ever had a better right to hate intellectualism, i.e., as applied to faith, for he had first loved it. To be sure, he used philosophy - and seldom has it been used more adroitly - to destroy philosophy, as evidenced by the Fragments and the Postscript, but even here he uses a pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, to dissociate himself from the exclusively philosophical tone of these works, although even here, as it is throughout his works, his purpose is exclusively religious.¹² "If purity of heart, in Kierkegaard's beautiful formula, is 'to will one thing', then purity of mind is to think one

10. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Lowrie, op. cit., p. 87.

11. Cf. Lowrie, ibid., p. 86 ff.

12. Cf. Kierkegaard, The Point of View.

thing - 'not to have many thoughts, but to have one thought' (like Socrates, who 'always said the same thing').¹³ And the one thought that appears so often in his writings that specific documentation is superfluous, is to determine "what it means to be a Christian - in Christendom." And this, in Kierkegaard's view, dethrones all speculation; hence, his anti-intellectualism.¹⁴

This anti-intellectualism, combined with his all-pervading honesty, dictated the unique method of communication he employed in his writings. First of all, he must never pose as an authority, for he himself was only in the process of "becoming a Christian."¹⁵ Even in his direct writings, his "Edifying Discourses," he goes to great pains to point out that these are not sermons, since they were written by one "without authority."¹⁶ But it is in his indirect writings, which constitute the bulk of his output, that this trait is most evident. As one without authority, he could hardly pose as a teacher. Consequently he used the maieutic method, the method of Socrates, which requires not a teacher, but a midwife who poses questions, never ending at a definite result, thereby forcing his hearers to attain truth for themselves.

13. Bretall, op. cit., p. xx.

14. For a much more detailed presentation of S.K.'s anti-intellectualism, cf. David Swenson, Something About Kierkegaard, ch. 5.

15. Kierkegaard, The Point of View, p. 155.

16. Kierkegaard, Attack upon Christendom, p. 180 n.

The Danish theologian, Eduard Geismar, describes the process thus:

If the truth is a living and personal existential reality, it must not be communicated as a doctrine, but as an alternative to be chosen, as a possibility to be realized. Thus the aesthetic way of life, presented without compromise or confusing admixture by an author who himself assimilates it and lives it, and exhibits its nature not only in thought but in feeling, is placed before the reader. The same thing is done for the ethical attitude toward life, the religious life as universally conceived, and finally the specifically Christian mode of existence. The reader is thus confronted with a choice between alternatives, and compelled for himself to find the answer to life's riddle. And in describing the Christian way of life it becomes necessary, in order not to deceive the reader, to portray its negative aspect, the suffering it involves, in the clearest possible manner. And if the delineation is given an adequate poetic form, and is couched in terms of a clear reflection, the reader is furnished with an understanding of the meaning of his choice, whether he accepts or rejects Christianity.¹⁷

This is the method of the "man without authority."

But there is another principle which dictated this method of indirect communication: the principle of reduplication. Reduplication is a basic category of existential thought. The existential thinker will reduplicate his thinking in his life, and insofar as he tries to communicate his thought, he must of necessity reduplicate his thinking in his very style and mode of communication; his thought must represent his own situation in existence, his communication must represent his

17. Eduard Geismar, Lectures on the Religious Thought of Søren Kierkegaard, p. 25 f.

thought. Geismar gives the following excellent example, a negative one, of reduplication:

Let us imagine a thinker who has made the discovery that truth . . . is subjective. Suppose him . . . so eager to convert all men to its acceptance that he says it directly and teaches it objectively, without reference to the art of communication. What is bound to follow? He will find himself with a group of disciples on his hands who have learned the formula by rote, who have achieved an illusory happiness in its objective acceptance, and are now ready to take their oath upon the objective truth that the truth is subjective. No reduplication!¹⁸

Put another way, the principle of reduplication precludes the communication of the results of the individual's thinking.

Let S.K. speak for himself:

If inwardness is truth, results are only rubbish with which we should not trouble each other. The communication of results is an unnatural form of intercourse between man and man insofar as every man is a spiritual being for whom the truth consists in nothing else than in the selfactivity of personal appropriation which the communication of a result tends to prevent.¹⁹

But the indirectness of communication causes the same contradiction that Kierkegaard sees to exist between thought and existence: thought can never think existence without abrogating it, yet the task of the existential thinker is to reduplicate his existence in his thought; in similar manner, S.K. "makes indirect communication finally end in directness, namely in 'bearing witness' to the truth."²⁰ The Journals

18. *Ibid.*, p. 48 f.

19. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 133.

20. Karl Loewith, "On the Historical Understanding of Kierkegaard," in *The Review of Religion*, VII, p. 236.

contain the following illuminating paragraph:

The communication of Christianity must ultimately end in bearing witness, the maieutic form can never be final. For truth, from the Christian point of view, does not lie in the subject (as Socrates understood it), but in a revelation which must be proclaimed. In Christendom the maieutic form can certainly be used, simply because the majority in fact live under the impression that they are Christians. But since Christianity is Christianity, the maieutic must become the witness.²¹

It is impossible to go into all of the many implications of this passage here without anticipating the burden of this paper; suffice it to say that here S.K. recognizes the shortcomings of the indirect method of communication. It also might be mentioned in passing that one of the underlying ideals extolled by S.K. was the role of the "prophet-martyr", which he regarded as the ultimate in "witness-bearing." But to die for the truth was an "apostle's" not a "genius's" privilege; certainly not the privilege of a "religious poet," as he regarded himself.²² The prophet-martyr must come if Christianity is to be rescued from the slough of despondency, but he would have to be a man of greater faith than I, thought Kierkegaard, although he envisaged his own role the "voice crying in the wilderness," preparing the way for such a witness.²³ Yet in the last year of his life he found it necessary to step forward himself as witness-bearer against the Danish

21. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Loewith, loc. cit.

22. Geismar, op. cit., p. 81 ff.

23. Swenson, op. cit., p. 106.

church in his "Attack on 'Christendom'," but even then he would not pose as the defender of the truth who spoke with apostolic authority. Only in the name of human uprightness and honesty did Kierkegaard present himself. "For this uprightness I will run the risk. But I do not say that I risk anything for Christianity. Supposing I should literally become a sacrifice, I should then not be a sacrifice for Christianity but only for my desire for uprightness."²⁴ And while engaged in the same struggle, he wrote this in his Journal: "Had I to carve an inscription on my grave I would ask for none other than 'the individual'."²⁵

Such was the man and his method. But what was his message? and what was its setting?

"O Luther, you had ninety-five theses - terrible! . . . The situation now is far more terrible - I have only one thesis."²⁶ And Kierkegaard's one thesis was: Everyone must realize that Christianity as it was represented in Denmark was not the Christianity of the New Testament, not insofar as its doctrine was concerned, but insofar as it failed to picture the Christian faith-life as Christ and the early church pictured it. That was his message, and his writings were all designed either to make his readers re-think their own personal

24. Kierkegaard, Attack, quoted in Loewith, op. cit., p. 236.

25. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Bretall, op. cit., p. 259.

26. Quoted in Lowrie, op. cit., p. 239.

faith or to make the Danish church admit its failure in presenting the Christian life for what it is.

As Kierkegaard saw the revolutionary movements that were sweeping over Europe at that time he perceived that they were pervaded by the spirit of levelling, aiming at creating in the outer world an equality which he, as a conservative, deemed impossible of realization. To him, the social disturbances had their root in a blindness to the real equality, the equality of all men before God. And social disturbances were rife in his century. The family, the community, and the state were all in the process of dissolution; this levelling tendency sought to bring about a mechanical aggregation of atomistic individuals to replace the organic structure of the social life. The more such a process destroys external supports, the more it becomes evident that man stands in need of religion. B.K. does not try to turn back the clock, but he does contend that when "man's sense of external authority is gone, his only salvation will lie in the inner relationship to an inner and spiritual authority, and in the inner sense of an infinite responsibility."²⁷

Sensing this need, Kierkegaard then turns to the contemporary scene to find out what sort of religious sense his fellow-countrymen did have. And here he was appalled by what he saw. He saw a Christendom that had, in practice, almost

27. Geismar, op. cit., p. 16 f.

completely abolished real Christianity. The crowd lived under pagan standards and ideals. "The change from paganism is this: that everything has remained unchanged, but has assumed the predicate 'Christian'."²⁸ S.K. illustrates this with a short article entitled "The Sort of Person they Call a Christian,"²⁹ in which he caricatures the average tradesman and his professional counterpart. In another article, "A Eulogy upon the Human Race," or, "A Proof that the New Testament is no longer True," he has the following to say:

In the New Testament . . . our Lord Jesus Christ represents the situation thus: The way that leadeth unto life is straight, the gate narrow - few be they that find it!

. . . Now, on the contrary, to speak only of Denmark, we are all Christians, the way is as broad as it possibly can be, the broadest in Denmark, since it is the way in which we all are walking, besides being as all respects convenient, as comfortable as possible; and the gate is as wide as it possibly can be, wider surely a gate cannot be than that through which we all are going en masse.

Erro the New Testament is no longer truth.

All honor to the human race! But Thou, O Savior of the world, Thou didst entertain too lowly a notion of the human race, failing to see the sublime heights to which, perfectible as it is, it can attain by an effort steadily pursued!

. . . I venture to maintain that, on the average, the Jews who dwell among us are to a certain degree Christians . . . - to that degree we are all Christians, in that degree is the New Testament no longer truth. . . . I venture . . . to submit to persons well informed . . . the question whether among the domestic animals . . . there might not be some visible Christian token. That is not unlikely. Just think what it means to live in a Christian state,

28. Kierkegaard, Attack, p. 165.

29. Kierkegaard, Attack, condensed in Bretall, op. cit.,

pp. 450 - 453.

a Christian nation, where everything is Christian, and we are all Christians, where, however a man turns and twists, he sees nothing but Christianity and Christendom, the truth and witnesses to the truth. . . .

Thou Savior of the world, Thou didst anxiously exclaim, "When I come again, shall I find faith on the earth?". . . Thou surely didst not have the least idea that in such a measure Thine expectations would be surpassed, that the human race in such a pretty and touching way would make the New Testament untruth and Thine importance almost doubtful. For can such good beings truthfully be said to need, or ever to have needed, a savior?³⁰

In still another place S.K. writes: "Once the objection to Christianity was misanthropy, and now Christianity is - humanity! Once Christianity was to the Jews a scandal and to the Greeks foolishness, and now it is - civilization!"³¹ And seeing this, he concludes that "When all are Christians, Christianity op ipso does not exist."³²

What has caused this lamentable state of affairs? Kierkegaard sees three things: the State, the Church, and the Lutheran emphasis on salvation by faith alone without the prior stress of Luther on the holiness of God. About the State he has this to say:

Comfort and the search for eternal life - these things the official Christianity of our day has made into one, or rather not Christianity but the State has made them into one with the help of the Church organization. In this country the human protects the divine. Christianity does not need this

30. Kierkegaard, Attack, in Bretall, op. cit., pp. 442-444.

31. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Loewith, op. cit., p. 231.

32. Kierkegaard, Attack, in Bretall, op. cit., p. 446.

suffocating protection of the State. It needs fresh air, persecution and the protection of God. The State is disastrous for the Church in that it keeps persecution away from it and does not allow God's protection to reach it. Above all we must save Christianity from the State.³³

Again:

With the proud air Christianity had when it first entered the world - "No," every state might say, "that religion I can't buy, and not only that, but I can say, Good Lord deliver me from buying that religion, it would be certain to ruin me." But then as Christianity in the course of some centuries had become spavined, chest-foundered, and generally made a mess of, then said the State, "Yes, now I can bid for it; and with my cunning I perceive very well that I can have so much use and profit out of it that I can really take pleasure in spending something to polish it up a bit."

If only Christianity in gratitude for its polishing doesn't become itself again and polish off the State! - "Ouch! Good Lord deliver us! Every state can see that this religion is my ruin."³⁴

But the State could never have done the damage it did without the complicity of the Church organization. It is at this doorstep that S.K. lays most of the blame. "Knowledge - a superfluity of knowledge, but possessed without reality or significance, this was Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the age,"³⁵ says Swenson, and the Church played right along with the game.

Christianity had been transformed into an objective system of doctrine; the age of the martyrs had long since given way to the age of the monks; and now finally had come the professorial-scientific age of Christianity, where the ordinary Christian

33. Quoted in W. G. Moore, "Kierkegaard and his Century," in The Hibbert Journal, XXXVI, p. 570.

34. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Lowrie, op. cit., p. 235.

35. Swenson, op. cit., p. 59.

looked up to the professor as the standard and test of Christianity, and in which the existential was altogether forgotten.³⁶

What was true of the Church was true of its pastors, says Kierkegaard. They too had accomodated their faith to the world, and thus they were unable to reduplicate their preaching in their lives, although their preaching in itself might be true enough. Geismar puts it this way:

The true teacher must be what he teaches. That Christianity regards the possession of riches as a possible danger to the soul is something that cannot be preached by a man who clings to his wealth, his comforts, his privileges, as to a personal necessity. Such unreduplicated teaching leads others to deceive themselves, and transforms Christianity into a myth, its preaching into a theatrical diversion for the imagination.³⁷

The parsons may or may not have been Christians, but they acted like professional preachers, paid rhetoricians, hired sophists, and worldly careerists. S.K. gives us a dialogue between priest and neophyte in which the priest offers his professional advice: "Thou shalt die unto the world: the fee is one guinea."³⁸

In the last issue of The Moment, published before his death, Kierkegaard wrote a polemic on the theme that "the clergy are cannibals, and that too of the most contemptible sort." They eat the heroes and martyrs of the past, they

36. Ibid.

37. Geismar, op. cit., p. 49.

38. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Thomas, op. cit., p. 318.

make a living from their sacrifices. The heroes and martyrs cry: Follow us! But the clergy pass this by as impudent folly. Follow them? No indeed; we live on them, we have them salted away in the barrel. The parson says to the martyr: "Keep silent, please, and remain where you are! What nonsense to ask me to follow you! I have to live, and I propose to live at your expense, eating you; and not myself alone, but my wife and children also. You should see how they thrive."³⁹

What was it that caused this condition to arise in the Church? Kierkegaard sees the origin in the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone. With this doctrine he agrees with all his heart, but the times have given a new twist to Luther's original emphasis. Originally this doctrine was a reaction against the false attitude of salvation via good works. Luther abolished this only to demand a living and burning faith: something infinitely more difficult than works, something which does away with any self-confidence, something in comparison with which asceticism would be quite easy. But what has remained of Lutheranism is ordinary worldliness. Nobody who omits doing good works nowadays does so in order not to be tempted to become self-righteous; he omits it because it is easier. And so the result of Lutheranism is but a worldly-er and more comfortable Christianity. Luther thought that man can be saved in spite of not doing works. The Lutherans

39. quoted in Geismar, op. cit., p. 89 f.

interpret him as if he had said that they can be saved because they do no good works. The effect is that Lutherans enjoy their life better than any pagan and have a good after-math promised in addition.⁴⁰

Concerning this point Geismar says:

The grace of God cannot be separated from His righteousness; both are infinite, eternal and immutable. The grace of God is offered to the repentant, and does not wipe out the grief and sorrow of remorse, but rather presupposes it. At this point Kierkegaard has discovered something that was characteristic of Luther's preaching, but has since his time been forgotten. The judgment of God is as much a present reality in time for the Christian consciousness as His grace. The justification which is by faith is at the same time an act of judgment, as Karl Holl says in his book on Luther.⁴¹

Thus, says Kierkegaard, the danger that confronts us is not that we hope by our good works to earn salvation; our danger is that we have no good works at all. What we have most to fear is a tepid worldliness, "especially in Protestantism, especially in Denmark."⁴²

At this place I would like to insert the opening paragraph of the "Moral" of Training in Christianity to show two things: first, to show that S.K. was not only severity but also compassion and leniency; second, to introduce an objection which has been leveled against him. The main points of

40. The foregoing paragraph has been condensed from Philip Merlan's excellent study of Kierkegaard. Cf. Merlan, op. cit., p. 79 f.

41. Geismar, op. cit., p. 75.

42. Kierkegaard, Journals, quoted in Geismar, op. cit., p. 77.

of the opening paragraph follow:

And what does all this mean? It means that everyone for himself, in quiet inwardness before God, shall humble himself before what it is to be in the strictest sense a Christian, admit candidly before God how it stands with him, so that he might accept the grace which is offered to everyone who is imperfect, that is, everyone. And then no further; then for the rest let him attend to his work, be glad in it, love his wife, be glad in her, bring up his children in joyfulness, love his fellow men, rejoice in life. If anything further is required of him, . . . God will surely let him understand; but this is required of everyone, that before God he should candidly humble himself in view of the requirements of ideality. And therefore these should be heard again and again in their infinite significance.⁴³

Now the objection which this passage has occasioned is that implicit in it is the Catholic distinction between "counsels of perfection" and the duties which are imperative for every Christian, a distinction Protestantism has universally rejected, with the result that, in the words of Walter Lowrie, "instead of being a levelling up," there has been "a levelling down of the sterner maxims of the Gospel, which literally required a following of Christ through suffering to martyrdom."⁴⁴ As S.K. put it, "place No. 1 has fallen out, and place No. 2 has become the first place;" the place of the "disciple," "the witness," the saint, "the martyr," even the monk, has fallen out, and the highest thing left, even as an ideal, is the practice of the average Christian in Christendom.⁴⁵

43. Quoted in Bretall, op. cit., p. 411 f.

44. Lowrie, op. cit., p. 220 f.

45. Ibid., p. 221.

Whether the objection is true or not, it is largely irrelevant. To put it another way, if it is true that the foregoing paragraph does express an attitude characteristic of Catholicism, then insofar as it does, to that extent the implication is warranted. For S.K. has put his finger on the danger spot of Protestantism in general and Lutheranism in particular. He will continue to rail against the disparity between the profession and life of his compatriots, but, even in his most satirical outbursts against the state of Christianity in Denmark, he will remain a Lutheran theologian. As mentioned before, he saw that Luther's formula, "Faith - not works," placed a far more difficult task on the Lutheran than a life of asceticism would entail; he realized that faith was not something that it was easy to come by; it was something that could be maintained only in fear and trembling. This then is his message: Faith is an infinite relation to the Absolute, which embraces the whole of life. And this message is always set in the question: What does it mean to become a Christian - in Christendom?

CHAPTER II

THE ATTACK ON OBJECTIVE TRUTH AS A BASIS FOR FAITH

"What is Faith? On what does it rest?" This is the question posed most comprehensively in Kierkegaard's greatest philosophico-religious work, Concluding Unscientific Postscript. S.K. never regarded this work as his greatest, since he looked upon it as preliminary in nature, paving the way for his distinctively religious writings.¹ It is a large book, comprising over 550 large pages in the English translation, and, as the title implies, is in the form of a postscript to a much smaller work, Philosophical Fragments. Both were published under the same pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, a man who is admittedly not a Christian but who wants to know how he can become a Christian.² The problem posed by both books is this: "Is a historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other but a purely historical interest; is it possible to base an eternal blessedness upon a historical knowledge?"³

Thus, although S.K. did not regard either of these books

1. Swenson, op. cit., p. 19.

2. Lowrie, op. cit., p. 171.

3. Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, title page.

as his most important, from the point of view of closely defining his religious thought ("What does it mean to become a Christian?"), that is, from our point of view, they are the most important. They are also the most important of his works for the history of Western thought, challenging as they do the very basis of the traditional European epistemology. The Postscript especially, wherein the theme set forth in the Fragments is comprehensively developed, makes a complete break with the entire Aristotelian tradition, containing "a dynamic really novel in Western thought,"⁴ as even as unsympathetic a critic as Miss Grene is forced to admit. Still other scholars refer to the Postscript as the greatest combination of philosophic and poetic genius to appear since the Dialogues of Plato.⁵ In view of this, then, I hope it will not appear as presumption on my part if, in developing this section of the paper, I restrict my study to the afore-mentioned Postscript.

S.K. starts out by examining the three grounds for an historical basis for faith: the Scriptures, the existence of the Church, and the testimony of the centuries. And the attack he makes on all three is this:

When Christianity is viewed from the standpoint of its historical documentation, it becomes necessary to secure an entirely trustworthy account of what the Christian doctrine really is. If the

4. Grene, op. cit., p. 23.

5. Cf. Lowrie's Introduction to the Postscript and Swenson's introduction to the Fragments.

inquirer were infinitely interested in behalf of his relationship to the doctrine he would at once despair; for nothing is more readily evident than that the greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is merely an approximation. And an approximation, when viewed as a basis for an eternal happiness, is wholly inadequate, since the incommensurability makes a result impossible.⁶

When S.K. says that anything historical is an approximation, he means it is subject to the disciplines of scientific research, which, particularly in regard to history, will never yield an absolute yes or no answer. For example, even in the case of something as well-documented as Julius Caesar's death, the most an honest historian can say is that the most trustworthy documents we have (this also must be established by approximation) indicate that this is how it happened. In other words, the most that any historian can tell us is that such-and-such a fact is "almost" as good as absolutely certain, and as soon as you say "almost," you have an approximation. In the same paragraph from which the above quotation is taken, S.K. satirizes the professor who spends his whole life in establishing a historical truth upon which he can base his salvation, and then in his seventieth year, just two weeks before his death, looks forward to the publication of a new work which will throw a new light upon one whole side of his inquiry. But if you base your hope for an eternal salvation on anything less than absolute certainty, from an objective point

6. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 25.

of view the basis is wholly incommensurate with the hope.

Kierkegaard applies this objection first of all to Scriptures:

. . . even with the most stupendous learning and persistence in research, and even if all the brains of all the critics were concentrated in one, it would still be impossible to obtain anything more than an approximation; and . . . an approximation is essentially incommensurable with an infinite personal interest in an eternal happiness.⁷

But some will say that a barrier can be erected between faith and such dialectics. S.K. has anticipated it. It is impossible to exclude dialectics, he asserts, that is if you stake faith on an historical fact. For a long time people believed they could effect this distinction by saying that their conviction rested upon some authority, whether divine or human. "This is merely an illusion," he says. "For the dialectician has merely to change his point of attack, so as to ask him . . . to explain, what authority is, and why he regards just these as authorities."⁸

This means that a long parenthesis takes the place of faith.

One generation after another departs from the scene, new difficulties arise and are overcome, and new difficulties arise again. Each generation inherits from its predecessor the illusion that the method is quite impeccable, but the learned scholars have not yet succeeded - - and so forth. All of them seem to find themselves becoming more and more objective. The infinite personal passionate interest of the subject . . . vanishes more and more, because the decision is postponed, and postponed as following

7. Ibid., p. 26.

8. Ibid.

directly upon the result of the learned inquiry. That is to say, the problem does not arise; we have become so objective as no longer to have an eternal happiness.⁹

S.K. then asks what anyone, either the defender or the critic of Scriptures, hopes to gain by all this scholarly effort,

. . . where in spite of all learning and talent pro and contra, it is, in the last analysis, dialectically uncertain what the dispute is about. If it is a pure philological controversy, let us honor learning and talent . . .; but in that case the dispute is no concern of faith. . . . Whoever defends the Bible in the interest of faith must have made it clear to himself whether, if he succeeds beyond expectation, there could from his labor ensue anything at all with respect to faith, . . . Whoever attacks the Bible must also have sought a clear understanding of whether, if the attack succeeds beyond all measure, anything else would follow but a philological result.¹⁰

He then makes the issue still more pointed by assuming that the defenders of Scripture

. . . have succeeded in proving about the Bible every thing that any learned theologian in his happiest moment has ever wished to prove about the Bible. These books and no others belong to the canon; they are authentic; they are integral; their authors are trustworthy - one may well say, that it is as if every letter were inspired. . . . Furthermore, there is not a trace of contradiction in the sacred writings. . . .

Well, then, everything being assumed . . . what follows? Has anyone who previously did not have faith been brought a single step nearer to its acquisition? No, not a single step. Faith does not result simply from a scientific inquiry; it does not come directly at all. . . . Has anyone who previously had faith gained anything with respect to its strength and power? No, not in the least. Rather it is the case that in this voluminous knowledge,

9. Ibid., p. 28.

10. Ibid., p. 29.

this certainty that lurks at the door of faith and threatens to devour it, he is in so dangerous a situation that he will need to put forth much effort in great fear and trembling, lest he fall a victim to the temptation to confuse knowledge with faith. . . . For if passion is eliminated, faith no longer exists, and certainty and passion do not go together. Whoever believes that there is a God and an over-ruling providence finds it easier to preserve his faith. . . in an imperfect world where passion is kept alive, than in an absolutely perfect world. In such a world faith is unthinkable. Hence also the teaching that faith is abolished in eternity.¹¹

"I assume now the opposite," continues Kierkegaard in the person of Johannes Climacus, "that the opponents have succeeded in proving what they desire about the Scriptures, with a certainty transcending the most ardent wish of the most passionate hostility." What then, he asks, has Christianity been abolished?

By no means. Has the believer been harmed? By no means, not in the least. Has the opponent made good a right to be relieved of responsibility for not being a believer? By no means. Because these books are not written by these authors, are not authentic, are not in an integral condition, . . . it does not follow that these authors have not existed; and above all, it does not follow that Christ has not existed. In so far, the believer is equally free to assume it; equally free, let us note this well, for if he had assumed it by virtue of any proof, he would have been on the verge of giving up his faith. . . .

Here is the crux of the matter, . . . For whose sake is it that the proof is sought? Faith does not need it; aye, it must even regard the proof as its enemy. But when faith begins to feel embarrassed and ashamed, like a young woman for whom her love is no longer sufficient, but who secretly feels ashamed of her lover and must therefore have it

11. Ibid., p. 29 ff.

established that there is something remarkable about him - when faith thus begins to lose its passion, . . . then a proof becomes necessary as to command respect from the side of unbelief.¹²

At this point S.K. levels a broadside at those clergy-men who preach as though faith is something the unintelligent have to use to apprehend something they should be able to understand. "The humbler folk (alas, he feels his humility in a very wrong place) must be content with faith." Poor, misunderstood, highest passion 'faith', to have to be content with such a champion! . . . the faith which transformed fishermen into apostles, the faith which removes mountains - when one has it!¹³

But the greatest of all dangers in a faith "approached from the historical point of view" is this:

When the question is treated in an objective manner [and all historical examinations presuppose this] it becomes impossible for the subject to face the decision [i.e., whether or not to stake eternal life on the Paradox that God became man] with passion, least of all with an infinitely interested passion. It is a self-contradiction and therefore comical, to be infinitely interested in that which in its maximum still always remains an approximation. If in spite of this, passion is nevertheless imported, we get fanaticism. For an infinitely interested passion every iota will be of infinite value. The fault is not in the infinitely interested passion, but in the fact that its object has become an approximation-object.¹⁴

The danger then is two-fold: Either the individual is honest about his historical point of departure, in which case he

12. Ibid., p. 31.

13. Ibid., p. 32.

14. Ibid.

will have to become more and more objective, with the result that his salvation will have a decreasingly real relationship to his inquiry, or he will be dishonest and refuse to become objective toward the inquiry, importing passion into an equation which by its very nature precludes any degree of subjectivity, at which point he becomes a fanatic.

But what then shall we say about S.K.? Does he hereby deny the doctrines contained in Scripture? Not in the least; actually he remained very orthodox - for his age, at least - in his theological positions. He simply denies that these doctrines "qua historical, and precisely by means of the historical," can "have decisive significance for man's eternal salvation."¹⁵ But does this position perhaps preclude the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture? S.K. doesn't seem to think so.

The incommensurability between inspiration and critical inquiries is analogous to the incommensurability between an eternal happiness and critical considerations; for inspiration is solely an object of faith. Or is it because the books are inspired that the critical zeal is so great? In that case, the believer who believes that the books are inspired does not know the identity of the books he believes to be inspired. Or does inspiration follow as a consequence of the critical inquiry, so that when criticism has done its work it has also demonstrated that the books are inspired? In that case, one will never be in a position to accept their inspiration, since the critical labors yield in their maximum only an approximation.¹⁶

What does Kierkegaard mean to say about inspiration on

15. Ibid., p. 26 n.

16. Ibid.

the basis of the foregoing paragraph? First, that the position of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture does not solve a single one of the problems encountered by the individual who attempts to arrive at an historically certain basis for his faith, since it does not speak to the question of canonicity. Second, that the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is an object - not the basis - of faith; therefore it follows after faith and has no relation to the certainty of faith; that is, it is based on faith and cannot therefore prove that on which it itself depends. By inspiration I take it that S.K. means the belief that what Scripture says is to be believed; the writer cannot be more specific because Kierkegaard himself assumes that the meaning of the term is understood by his readers without further explanation.

But to proceed with S.K.'s attack on historical evidence. After having abolished to his satisfaction the idea that the Scriptures represent an objective authority for the Christian faith, he proceeds to examine the contention that the existence of the Church, where the "living Word" is carried, is proof of the truth of Christianity.¹⁷ This theory was the invention of a fellow Dane, Grundtvig, at whose expense S.K. has a lot of fun. "As for Grundtvig's theory, the author does not precisely feel any great amount of pain in the moment of parting, nor any special sense of isolation at being in

17. For a fuller presentation of this theory of J. L. Neve, Introduction to Lutheran Symbolics, p. 51 f, n.

disagreement with this thinker. No one could wish to have Grundtvig for an ally who desires to know definitely where he is, . . . ¹⁸ He does, however, have some admiration for Lindberg, the chief defender of the "matchless discovery," through whose dialectical skill "the discovery took on form, . . . became less affected with hiatus, less matchless - and more accessible to common sense."¹⁹

But just what is the supposed advantage of the "matchless discovery?"

Just as in the preceding paragraph it was the Bible which was to decide objectively what is Christianity and what is not, so now it is the Church that is to serve as the certain objective recourse. More specifically, it is the living word in the Church, the confession of faith, and the word in connection with the sacraments.²⁰

On this point Grundtvig's theory has merit: . . . the Church eliminates all the proving and demonstrating that was necessary in connection with the Bible because it was something past, while the Church exists as a present reality. To demand that it prove its existence, says Lindberg quite correctly, is nonsense, like asking a living man to prove that he exists.²¹

So then the Church exists; and from the Church as something present, as contemporaneous with the inquirer . . . , one may learn what is essential to Christianity; for this is what the Church professes.

Quite right. But . . . after it has been asserted of the Church that it exists, and that one may learn from the Church what Christianity is, it is further asserted of this Church, the present Church, that it is the Apostolic Church, the same Church which has persisted for eighteen centuries. The

18. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 44.

19. Ibid., p. 36.

20. Ibid., p. 37.

21. Ibid., p. 38.

predicate: Christian, is thus more than a present predicate. . . . Thus if someone were to say to a man: prove that you exist, the other will answer quite properly that the demand is nonsense. But if he says on the other hand: "I who now exist had an existence over four hundred years ago as essentially the same person," the other man has a right to reply: "Here a proof is needed."²²

Thus, says S.K., the issue is brought back to precisely the same place where it was in the Bible theory. Once again we will have scholars trying to prove the "primitive character of the confession of faith, its identity of meaning everywhere and in every moment through eighteen centuries," where, he adds in a note, criticism will stumble on difficulties the Bible theory never knew, "and so again there will be a nosing about in ancient documents."²³ The presence of the "living word" in the Church doesn't solve a single difficulty, he adds. The "living word" does indeed declare the existence of the Church, but "the living word does not suffice to declare that the Church has been in existence for eighteen centuries, that it is essentially the same, that it has persisted in a wholly unaltered form, and so forth."²⁴ So we are right back at the approximation-process which S.K. ridiculed so roundly once before: "the parenthesis is launched, and no one can say when it will end; for it is and always remains an approximation, and thus has the remarkable property of being able to

22. Ibid., p. 39.

23. Ibid., p. 40 n.

24. Ibid.

continue indefinitely."²⁵

But before he leaves the question of the Church theory, Kierkegaard takes time out to hurl two more epithets at it which it is important that we keep in mind, since they constitute the cornerstone of his attack on epistemology. The first epithet is the word "objective," which we have met before.

The Church theory has been quite sufficiently praised as being objective, a word which in our age is an exquisite honorable by which thinkers and prophets imagine they are saying something big to one another. . . . In relation to Christianity . . . objectivity is a most unfortunate category; he who has an objective Christianity and none other, is eo ipso a pagan, for Christianity is precisely an affair of spirit, and so of subjectivity, and so of inwardness. That the Church theory is objective, I shall not seek to deny. . . .²⁶

The second epithet, "superstitious", we meet here for the first time, although we had a presentiment of it when, in attacking the Bible theory, S.K. introduced the word "fatic" in describing the importation of passion into a historically-based faith.

Precisely because Grundtvig, as a poet, is tossed about and stirred tumultuously in immediate passion . . . , he feels a need . . . to have something certain to cling to, and so to keep the dialectical at a distance. But such a need is only a craving for superstitious security; for . . . every limit that is intended to keep the dialectical away is eo ipso superstition. Precisely because Grundtvig is stirred in immediate passion, he is no stranger to doubts and temptations. With respect to these, one finds

25. Ibid., p. 41.

26. Ibid., p. 42.

a short cut, by depending upon something magical; and so one has plenty of time to occupy himself with world history. But it is just here that we have the contradiction: with respect to one's own life and its problems, to take refuge in something magical, and then to be so busily engaged with the whole of human history. When tests and temptations assail dialectically . . . a man will always have enough to do with himself.²⁷

But, as if these two epithets were not enough, S.K. asks if a far more drastic one is not in order with respect to Grundtvig's accentuation of the sacrament of baptism, on the mere performance of the rite, as a basis of faith. In respect to this notion he asks

Whether in addition it is not unchristian, respecting one's eternal happiness to rest in the assurance that one has been baptized, just as the Jews appealed to circumcision, and to their being the children of Abraham, as the decisive proof for the validity of the God-relationship, and so to rest not in a free spiritual relationship to God . . . but in an external event, keeping doubts away by means of this magic rite of baptism.²⁸

This argument, i.e., the Church theory, thus dispensed with, our author turns his attention to the last argument, the one which purports to prove the truth of Christianity by appealing to the eighteen centuries of Christian progress. This he gives short shrift. "The argument cannot really be treated in a dialectical manner at all, for at the very outset it transforms itself into an hypothesis," he states. "And an hypothesis may become more probable by maintaining itself

27. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 43 f.

against objections for three thousand years, but it does not on that account become an eternal truth, adequately decisive for one's eternal happiness."²⁹ Anyone who thinks otherwise could just as easily prove that Mohammedanism is the one source of truth, he adds.

The guarantee of the eighteen centuries, the circumstance that Christianity has interpenetrated all the relations of life, has transformed the world, and so forth - all this assurance is nothing but a deceptive snare in which the resolving and choosing subject is held captive, lost in the wilderness of the parenthesis. Eighteen centuries have no greater demonstrative force than a single day, in relation to an eternal truth which is to decide my eternal happiness. But the eighteen centuries, and all the countless things which in that connection may be narrated and asserted and repeated, have contrariwise a power to distract the mind, and serve that purpose admirably.³⁰

The very fact that faith can be supported by arguments as "slender as toothpicks," such as this one, only proves that faith has become passionless in our generation, he states. This particular argument can only be stated in a rhetorical form. True eloquence would hesitate to use such an argument; he continues: "perhaps this is the reason it is so often heard." The speaker who uses it doesn't try to convince; he tries to impress, yea, to intimidate his hearer by confronting him with the hosts of past generations:

"How dare you to be so insolent as to deny the truth? Dare you really imagine that you are in possession of the truth, and that the eighteen centuries, the innumerable generations of men, millions

29. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 45 f.

upon millions, have lived their lives in error? O wretched solitary man, do you dare thus to plunge all these many millions, all mankind indeed, into destruction? Behold, they arise from their graves, they pass as in review before my thought, these generations upon generations of believers, whose minds found rest in the truth of Christianity. Their glances condemn you, O insolent rebel, until the separation of the judgment day snatches you from their sight, because you were weighed and found wanting, were thrown into the outer darkness, far from eternal bliss, etc., etc." Behind the tremendous barrage of the many millions the cowardly speaker sometimes trembles in his boots when he uses the argument, because he dimly feels that there is a contradiction in his whole procedure.³¹

And there is indeed a contradiction here. "All who propose in this manner to give the individual a rhetorical push into Christianity, or perhaps even to help him by administering a beating, all these are deceivers."³² For if a man becomes a Christian, "it will be a matter of indifference whether he has the eighteen centuries for him or against him."

But in the final analysis, such a speaker cannot do the sinner much harm.

Such a rhetorical shower-bath from the height of eighteen centuries is very stimulating. The speaker performs a service, if not precisely in the way intended, by separating the subject out for himself against other men - ah, and this is a great service, for only a very few are able to do this for themselves. . . . The eighteen centuries ought precisely to inspire fear. As a proof pro they are in the moment of decision worth precisely nothing to the individual subject; but as fear-inspiring contra they are excellent. The only question is whether the rhetorician will succeed in getting the poor sinner under the shower-bath.³³

31. Ibid., p. 46 f.

32. Ibid., p. 47.

33. Ibid.

Finally, S.K. sums up his objection to an historically-certain basis of faith in these words:

The problem is posed objectively. The self-adequate subject thinks as follows: "Let the truth of Christianity only be made clear and certain, and there need be no fear that I shall not prove myself ready and willing to accept it, and that quite as a matter of course." The difficulty is, that the truth of Christianity has, in consequence of its paradoxical form, something in common with the nettle: the self-adequate subject merely succeeds in stinging himself, when he seeks thus to lay hold on it without further ado. Or rather - for since this is a spiritual relationship, the stinging can be understood only metaphorically - he does not lay hold of it at all; he grasps its objective truth so objectively as to remain himself outside.³⁴

But the attack on historical evidence is only introductory. S.K. would abrogate the search for objective truth by denying that the mind can know truth objectively. He opens this new phase of his attack by ridiculing the System.

Lessing has said that, if God held all truth in his right hand, and in his left hand held the lifelong pursuit of it, he would choose the left hand. . . . When Lessing wrote these words the System was presumably not finished; alas! and now Lessing is dead. Were he living in these times, now that the System is almost finished, or at least under construction, and will be finished by next Sunday: believe me, Lessing would have stretched out both his hands to lay hold of it. He would not have had the leisure, nor the manners, nor the exuberance, thus in jest to play odd and even with God, and in earnest to choose the left hand. But then, the System also has more to offer than God had in both hands; this very moment it has more, to say nothing of next Sunday, when it is quite certain to be finished.³⁵

By System Kierkegaard means primarily the Logic of Hegel,

34. Ibid., p. 46.

35. Ibid., p. 97.

but this attack on Hegel has far-reaching implications for ontology as such;³⁶ for the "systematic idea" to which S.K. constantly refers is the idea that thought can be perfectly equated with reality. By "System" he does not mean the expository procedure of philosophy; by "System" he means the ontological epistemology which underlies Hegel's philosophy as well as the whole transition of Western thought.³⁷

The systematic idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. . . . Thought is understood as being pure thought: this corresponds in an equally abstract-objective sense to its object, which object is therefore the thought itself, and the truth becomes the correspondence of thought with itself. This objective thought has no relation to the existing subject. . . .³⁸

Thus the "systematic idea" is no invention of Hegel's; Hegel simply happened to be the leading exponent of it at S. K.'s time, completely identifying, as he did, thought with being. But if this be its definition, then "System and finality are pretty much one and the same, so much so that if the System is not finished, there is no System."³⁹ Yet even the defenders of the System admit its incompleteness, although they promise to remedy this deficiency soon. Nonsense, says Kierkegaard; this fact alone discredits the whole idea.

Kierkegaard then suggests some of the methods by which

36. Grene, op. cit., p. 17.

37. At this and at many other points in this section I lean heavily on E. A. Smith, "Kierkegaard and Dogmatic Theology: An Epistemological Impasse," in The Evangelical Quarterly, XVII, pp. 106-123.

38. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 112.

39. Ibid., p. 98.

the systematic hoax succeeds. It illegitimately introduces predicates of value into logical arguments, "bad infinity," for instance. "Is bad a dialectical determination? How do scorn and contempt and means of terrorization find a place as admissible propelling forces in logic?"⁴⁰ To effect logical transitions Hegel uses verbal ruses, for example the play on "Wesen/ gewesen": "Wesen ist, was ist gewesen; ist gewesen is a tempus praeteritum of sein, therefore Wesen is 'das aufgehobene Sein,' the Sein that has been. That is logical movement!"⁴¹ The System deceives, finally, by the grand vistas it displays. "It draws attention from the more humble problems, which, in Kierkegaard's opinion, properly concern the finite knower, to the dizzying processions of the world-mind, persuading the student that, in comparison with '6,000 years of world history,' his own small existence is of no importance."⁴²

But Kierkegaard decides to challenge the systematic Idea all the way down the line. He starts with the concept of "pure thought." Hegel did not conceive thought as an activity of the thinker; as something impossible to conceive apart from him - thus S.K. claims. For Hegel, thought itself was an objective something. He abstracted thought from the individual who thinks. To this S.K. quotes the Socratic maxim that when

40. Quoted in Grene, op. cit., p. 19.

41. Ibid.

42. Grene, op. cit., p. 19 f.

we posit flute-playing we also must posit a flute-player.⁴³

Smith has this to say:

Thought naturally seeks an object. In order to apprehend its object, thought subjects it to the process of abstraction. Kierkegaard points out that it was through abstraction that Hegel distinguished thought from the thinker. Thought discovers objects in their character as objects-of-thought (i.e. [sic], abstractions created by thought, which Hegel conceives to be their "real" character) apart from the varying forms in which any given object may be experienced. An object is known, according to Hegel's epistemology . . . , only when thought has taken the object to itself through abstraction. By this process, an object of thought is itself a thought.⁴⁴

What, then, becomes of the concept of truth, asks S.K.?

How can we ever be sure of the universality of a truth-judgment? The concept of truth loses all significance, he answers, since "the truth becomes the correspondence of thought with itself," as was previously quoted.

False reasoning produced this preposterous conclusion, he continues; the notion of "abstract-objective thought" is absurd, since all that thought indicates is that there is a thinker. The fatal flaw in Hegel's epistemology is that

This objective thought has no relation to the existing subject; and while we are always confronted with the difficult question of how the existing subject slips into this objectivity, where subjectivity is merely pure abstract subjectivity . . . it is certain that existing subjectivity tends more and more to evaporate. And finally, if it is possible for a human being to become anything of the sort, it is merely something of which at most he becomes aware through the imagination, he becomes

43. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 50.

44. Smith, op. cit., p. 107.

the pure abstract conscious participation in and knowledge of this pure relationship between thought and being, this pure identity; aye, this tautology, because this being which is ascribed to the thinker does not signify that he is, but only that he is engaged in thinking.⁴⁵

How is it possible for any man to attain pure thought, i.e., thought which is unconditioned by the thinking individual in the midst of existence? Insofar as he exists - and if he ceases to exist, thought ceases - his individuality will destroy the detachment of his thought, for thought does not occur as a "thing-in-itself" but as the functioning of the existing thinker's mind. There is nothing S.K. enjoys more than satirizing the "pure thinkers":

One must therefore be very careful in dealing with a philosopher of the Hegelian school. . . . Is he a human being, an existing human being? Is he himself sub specie aeterni, even when he sleeps, eats, blows his nose, or whatever else a human being does? Is he in himself the pure "I am I"? . . . Does he in fact exist? And if he does, is he then in the process of becoming? And if he is in the process of becoming, does he then not face the future? And does he ever face the future by way of action? And if he never does, will he not forgive an ethical individuality for saying in passion and with dramatic truth, that he is an ass?⁴⁶

Kierkegaard's dispute with Hegel is then two-sided: the systematic idea destroys reality by identifying it with mere ideation, and by insisting on the identity of thought and reality it makes the concept of truth ridiculous and its discovery impossible since thought is relative to the thinker.⁴⁷

45. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 112.

46. Ibid., p. 271.

47. Smith, op. cit., p. 108.

Kierkegaard's contention that thought and reality are discontinuous rises out of his concept of Existence. Smith states that "That in which any individual's existence consists is explained sometimes in terms of human emotional experience; at other times psychologically, referring to the functioning of the mind; and other times conceptually, referring to the ideas of the temporal and eternal. Always the existing individual is central."⁴⁸ S.K. is at least consistent in that he never attempts to define Existence, but only to describe it.

One of the primary characteristics of existence is movement: "It is impossible to conceive existence without movement."⁴⁹ By this S.K. means that there is no such thing for the individual as "being" or other such static characteristics. The existing individual, as he moves through life from one minute to the next, is always in the process of "becoming." "Kierkegaard views the Self as a complex of movements and dynamic relations."⁵⁰

Another characteristic of the existing individual is thought. But thought has a dual character which presents a special problem. On the one hand, "all logical thinking employs the language of abstraction, and is sub specie aeterni. To think existence logically is thus to ignore the difficulty,

48. Smith, op. cit., p. 109.

49. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 273.

50. Smith, loc. cit.

that is, of thinking the eternal as in a process of becoming."⁵¹ Since thought is sub specie aeterni, i.e., unmoving, it cannot give a reliable account of existence, which always involves movement. "To think existence sub specie aeterni and in abstract terms is essentially to abrogate it. . . ."⁵² As shown before, he ridicules Hegel's attempts to put movement into logic in the form of transition categories. Swenson agrees with him here.

. . . It is impossible, for example, logically to bridge or construe the transition from one quality to another, as is so clearly shown by Zeno's paradoxes; and it is my opinion, also, the principal lesson of Plato's dialogue, *Parmenides*. Some modern logicians have indeed imagined it possible to transcend the difficulty by the positive conception of the infinite, but this is, I believe, a confusion and a misunderstanding. The category of transition does not belong in logic; the fundamental principle of logic is the Eleatic doctrine that everything is, and nothing comes into being. But since transitions do take place in Reality, it follows that the historical disciplines, and all the knowledge which rests on the basis of the historical, and particularly ethics, operate with this concept. But the fact that the concept does not belong in logic makes it impossible to treat transitions as necessary; they obey the principle of cause and effect, but not the principle of ground and consequent.⁵³

Movement, then, is alien to the very nature of thought.

But there is another side to thought.

But insofar as all thought is eternal, there is here created a difficulty for the existing individual. Existence, like movement, is a difficult

51. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 273.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Swenson, *op. cit.*, p. 53 f.

category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it. It might therefore seem to be the proper thing to say that there is something which cannot be thought, namely existence. But the difficulty persists, in that existence itself combines thinking with existing, in so far as the thinker exists.⁵⁴

Here is the baffling aspect of thought: "despite its static character, it is an integral function of the existing individual, who is immersed in becoming and movement."⁵⁵

But existence is equally as baffling, since it is the "child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore a constant striving."⁵⁶ "Infinite" and "eternal" both express changelessness, and yet the individual, by virtue of his finitude and temporality, is always in the process of becoming. So thought, which is eternal, "expresses with peculiar clarity the contradiction which is the very definition of existence."⁵⁷

In so far as existence consists in movement there must be something which can give continuity to the movement and hold it together, for otherwise there is no movement. . . . The eternal is the factor of continuity; but an abstract eternity is extraneous to the movement of life, and a concrete eternity within the existing individual is the maximum degree of his passion.⁵⁸

A further determination enters here: there are two different kinds of thought (for thought is that "eternal" of which S.K.

54. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 274.

55. Smith, op. cit., p. 109 f.

56. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 85.

57. Smith, op. cit., p. 110.

58. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 277.

speaks as giving continuity to life) and one imaginary type: "Just as existence has combined thought and existence by making the individual a thinker, so there are two media: the medium of abstract thought, and the medium of reality [the same things as an "abstract eternity" and a "concrete eternity" referred to above]. But pure thought is still a third medium, quite recently discovered."⁵⁹ Pure thought differs from abstract thought in that the former pretends to make an absolute beginning, without any presuppositions (e.g., Descartes' absolute beginning, "I doubt"), while the latter remains permanently dependent on the experimental data from which it abstracts.

But the highest of these is "concrete", or "real", or "existential" thought.

It has been said above that the abstract thinker, so far from proving his existence by his thought, rather makes it evident that his thought does not wholly succeed in proving the opposite. From this to draw the conclusion that an existing individual who really exists does not think at all, is an arbitrary misunderstanding. He certainly thinks, but he thinks everything in relation to himself, being infinitely interested in existing. Socrates was thus a man whose energies were devoted to thinking; but he reduced all other knowledge to indifference in that he infinitely accentuated ethical knowledge. This type of knowledge bears a relation to the existing subject who is infinitely interested in existing.⁶⁰

Smith sums up this point thus: "Existential thought not only consciously depends on objects, like abstract thought; it

59. Ibid., p. 278.

60. Ibid., p. 281.

knows that its whole meaning derives from its participation in the life of a particular thinker. Existential thought is chiefly interested in functioning in the total life of the individual."⁶¹

But here again we meet the same insurmountable difficulties that were encountered before: existence is the only proper object of thought as far as the individual is concerned, yet to think existence is to abrogate it. Evidently an entirely new point of departure is necessary. Preparing for that, Kierkegaard again states the aim of cognition: "The extreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something which thought cannot think."⁶²

This then is Kierkegaard's mature view of the epistemological problem: Movement and change are intrinsic aspects of existence; but thought functions sub specie aeterni, which perfectly expresses the paradox of existence, but which cannot picture existence, any more than a motion picture camera can photograph motion.⁶³ Thought lays hold only of a "suspension of the dialectical moment,"⁶⁴ that is, when thought approaches the problems, the decisions, the necessary tensions and alternatives that inhere in "becoming," it "suspends" the movements of existence; it must of necessity abstract from

61. Smith, op. cit., p. 111.

62. Kierkegaard, Fragments, p. 29.

63. For the simile of the photographer I am again indebted to E. A. Smith. Cf. Smith, op. cit., p. 112 f.

64. Quoted in Smith, loc. cit.

reality. Thus, in thought, reality becomes mere possibility; movement becomes the projection of a present cause into a future effect. "Becoming" is a category which always has reference to the present "now," yet the mind can only conceive of it in terms of futurity and possibility, thus, perhaps, giving thought the illusion of movement in the same way a motion picture does. But existentially speaking, the idea of a photographer is nonsense. Such a suspension of the moments of existence is unreal; more, such a suspension would be a violation of the fundamental ethical principle of existence, since most fully to exist is the highest duty of every person. For such a suspension is an attempt at objectivity, and objectivity is the antithesis of existence; it does violence to ethics.

All knowledge about reality is possibility. The only reality to which an existing individual may have a relation that is more than cognitive, is his own reality, the fact that he exists. Abstract thought requires him to become disinterested in order to acquire knowledge; the ethical demand is that he become infinitely interested in existing.

The only reality that exists for an existing individual is his own ethical reality. To every other reality he stands in a cognitive relation; but true knowledge consists in translating the real into the possible. . . . The real subject is not the cognitive subject, since in knowing he moves in the sphere of the possible; the real subject is the ethically existing subject.⁶⁵

"Kierkegaard's theses that 'existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual' and that 'his interest in his existence constitutes his reality' render

65. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 230 f.

epistemology unimportant,"⁶⁶ says Smith. If by epistemology we mean the processes by which thought apprehends reality, then we can go further still: Kierkegaard's theses render epistemology impossible.

66. Smith, op. cit., p. 113 f.

CHAPTER III

THE DISCOVERY OF TRUTH

Had Kierkegaard's remark that "Existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual, and his interest in his existence constitutes his reality"¹ remained unsupplemented, it would have been logical to assume that he denied the existence of objective reality altogether. He did, however, make some important assertions about reality apart from his definition of personal (existential) reality.

An existential system cannot be formulated. Does this mean that no such system exists? By no means; nor is this implied in our assertion. Reality itself is a system - for God; but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality. It may be seen, from a purely abstract point of view, that system and existence are incapable of being thought together, because in order to think existence at all, systematic thought must think it as abrogated, and hence as not existing. . . .²

Reality itself is a system - for God. Is S.K. here inconsistent in even introducing the idea of God? Not at all. He is merely assuming that God is a being in whom thought and being are one; granted such a being, then for him an

1. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 279.

2. Ibid., p. 107.

existential system is possible. He personally believes there is such a being, but he makes no attempt to prove it. He simply assumed by hypothesis that point of view which is absolutely different from the human point of view. "God is a highest conception, not to be explained in terms of other things, but explainable only by exploring more and more profoundly the conception itself. The highest principles for all thought can be demonstrated only indirectly (negatively)."³

Does S.K. here imply that God after all can be known, albeit via a negative epistemology? First of all let us see how the mind got to the position where it first posited the idea of a God. Reason, he says, has a paradoxical nature; "without rightly understanding itself, it is bent on its own downfall,"⁴ that is, it hopes to find something which it cannot think. S.K. compares this to the paradoxical nature of love.

. . . Man lives undisturbed a self-centered life, until there awakens in him the paradox of self-love, in the form of love for another, the object of his longing. (Self love is indeed the underlying principle, or the principle that is made to lie under, in all love. . . .) The lover is so completely transformed by the paradox of love that he scarcely recognizes himself; . . . In like manner the paradoxical passion of the Reason, . . . retroactively affects man and his self-knowledge, so that he who thought to know himself is no longer certain⁵

But what is this unknown something with which

3. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

4. Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, p. 30.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 30 f.

Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man's knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown. It is not a human being, insofar as we know what man is; nor is it any other known thing. So let us call this unknown something God. It is nothing more than a name we assign to it. The idea of demonstrating that this unknown something (God) exists, could scarcely suggest itself to Reason. For if God does not exist it would of course be impossible to prove it; and if he does exist it would be folly to attempt it. For at the very outset, in beginning my proof, I will have presupposed it, not as doubtful but as certain. . . ., since otherwise I would not begin, readily understanding that the whole would be impossible if he did not exist. But if when I speak of proving God's existence I mean that I propose to prove that the Unknown, which exists, is God, then I express myself unfortunately. For in that case I do not prove anything, least of all existence, but merely develop the content of a conception. . . .

It is obvious from the foregoing that S.K. does not adhere to the ontological proof for the existence of God. As he here uses the term God it is a purely arbitrary designation of the limit of Reason. But perhaps he still hopes to develop a negative epistemology, defining the Unknown as the antithesis of the Known. We shall see.

What then is the Unknown? It is the limit to which the Reason repeatedly comes, and in so far, substituting a static form of conception for the dynamic, it is the different, the absolutely different. But because it is absolutely different, there is no mark by which it could be distinguished. When qualified as absolutely different it seems on the verge of disclosure, but this is not the case; for the Reason cannot even conceive of an absolute unlikeness. The Reason cannot negate itself absolutely, but uses itself for the purpose, and thus conceives only such an unlikeness within itself as

it can conceive by means of itself; it cannot absolutely transcend itself, and hence conceives only such a superiority over itself as it can conceive by means of itself. . . .⁷

Thus the answer to the previous question is a decided No! Reason cannot discover God even negatively. If man attempts to define God negatively he is only fooling himself, for eventually he will end up describing the Unknown in terms of the Known, for Reason cannot transcend itself. Everytime an attempt is made at this sort of definition "it is essentially an arbitrary act, and deepest down in the heart of piety lurks the mad caprice which knows that it has itself produced its God."⁸ Such a God becomes "the most horrible of deceivers, because the Reason has deceived itself. The Reason has brought God as near as possible, and yet he is as far away as ever,"⁹ since Reason will invariably confound the unlike with the like.

. . . From this there would seem to follow the further consequence, that if man is to receive any true knowledge about the Unknown (God) he must be made to know that it is unlike him, absolutely unlike him. This knowledge the Reason cannot possibly obtain of itself; we have already seen that this would be a self-contradiction. It will therefore have to obtain this knowledge from God. But even if it obtains such knowledge it cannot understand it, and thus is quite unable to possess such knowledge. For how should the Reason be able to understand what is absolutely different from itself? . . . Here we seem to be confronted with a paradox. Merely to obtain the knowledge that God is unlike him, man needs the

7. Ibid., p. 35.

8. Ibid., p. 35 f.

9. Ibid., p. 36.

help of God; and now he learns that God is absolutely different from himself. But if God and man are absolutely different, this cannot be accounted for on the basis of what man derives from God, for in so far they are akin. Their unlikeness must therefore be explained by what man has brought upon his own head. But what can this unlikeness be? Aye, what can it be but sin; . . . which he indeed could no more teach to another than another could teach it to him, but only God - if God consents to become a Teacher. But this was his purpose, as we have imagined it. In order to be man's Teacher, God proposed to make himself like the individual man, so that he might understand him fully. Thus our paradox is rendered still more appalling, or the same paradox has the double aspect which proclaims it the Absolute Paradox; negatively by revealing the absolute unlikeness of sin, positively by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness.¹⁰

This then is the legitimate function of absolute thought, of Reason, as S.K. here uses the term: to discover the Unknown, to realize that, because of the paradoxical nature of Reason, it cannot escape the Unknown, and then, in the moment of its discovery, to destroy itself.

The paradoxical passion of the Reason thus comes repeatedly into collision with the Unknown, which does indeed exist, but is unknown, and in so far does not exist. The Reason cannot advance beyond this point, and yet it cannot refrain in its paradoxicalness from arriving at this point and occupying itself therewith. It will not serve to dismiss its relation to it simply by asserting that the Unknown does not exist, since this itself involves a relationship. But what then is the Unknown, since the designation of it as God merely signifies for us that it is unknown? To say that it is the Unknown simply because it cannot be known, and even if it were capable of being known, it could not be expressed, does not satisfy the demands of passion, though it correctly interprets the Unknown as a limit; but a limit is precisely a torment for passion,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

though it also serves as an incitement. . . .¹¹

Before any progress can be made on the road to truth not only does Reason have to abrogate itself, it must also arouse passion. And the first form this passion will have to take is that of existential thinking, since "a concrete eternity within the existing individual is the maximum degree of his passion;"¹² such a thinker "thinks everything in relation to himself, being infinitely interested in existing."¹³ This then brings us to the second step in the discovery of truth, to the function of existential thought.

"What is concrete ^{thought?} ~~through?~~ It is thought with relation to a thinker, and to a definite particular something which is thought."¹⁴ The existential thinker must be infinitely concerned with his situation in life; he must continually ask himself the question "where am I, where am I going, what sort of person am I, what sort will I become?" As we have seen in the preceding section, this self-examination must end in the concept of sin if truth is to be found, yet we also saw that the concept of sin must be taught by God. But before man can reach this stage where the true fact of his nature is really opened before his eyes he must first pass through three stages of life, each of which must be overthrown by three different forms of despair. Thus a psychological or

11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

12. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 277.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

anthropological approach to man is indicated, the sort of approach which in dogmatic theology takes the form of "preparatory acts."

"The subject matter of Kierkegaard's anthropology can be formulated as follows: Man's nature is an objectivity and is alien to him; man's task is to appropriate his own nature and, thus, to become a subject."¹⁵ So Philip Merlan describes the task of the existential thinker. To say that man's nature is an objectivity is the same thing S.K. says when he describes man as the "child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal."¹⁶ But what does it mean, to appropriate one's nature? How is this done? The task of describing this process is the chief burden of Kierkegaard's writings; such works as Either/Or, The Concept of Dread, The Sickness unto Death, and Stages on Life's Way are devoted solely to this problem. To describe this process then is to summarize what he has to say in these works.¹⁷

In the chapter "Guilty/Not Guilty" in the Stages S.K. gives an example of what it means to appropriate one's nature by indirectly referring to a crucial experience in his own life. A young man and a young girl fall in love and become engaged. Everything seems to be fine. But the young man is a serious lover and a thoughtful one; he ponders over the future marriage and over his own ability to satisfy his fiancée,

15. Merlan, op. cit., p. 82.

16. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 86.

17. In summarizing this process I use the framework suggested in Merlan's above-mentioned article, pp. 83-90.

finally concluding that, for her sake, it would be better to part. This is no sign of fickleness or faithlessness; even in the moment when he tells her this he loves her with all his heart. The girl is of course appalled, since she too genuinely loves him. She forgives him in advance; she declares she will run whatever risk is necessary, will suffer anything. Finally, after all else fails, she accuses him of never really loving her. But our young man is so sure of his love, so sure that it requires the break, that he actually leaves her.

But for our lover the story just begins. He knows that he has made his fiancée unhappy, but to him that is the proof of his love. But only if he continues to love her will this be so. Therefore he cannot allow his love to become something of the past; he has to renew it every day, and renew his decision to leave her every day also. Thus, if he can keep his love a present reality, so that he can say in his last hour "I still love her with my first love; it still would be the greatest happiness of my life to be united with her: the agony that I must part with her is still as terrible and as fresh as it was then; nevertheless I do not repent of having broken"¹⁸ - if he can say all that, then he has truly become a lover. First, he was a lover, because his love had seized him; eventually he became a lover in a new and deeper sense, because he had seized his love.

18. Quoted in Merlan, op. cit., p. 85.

This is an example of the appropriation of a single feeling, of a single part of man's whole nature. Now just as the lover was first overtaken by his love, just so we are overtaken by our nature, by the physical as well as by the psychic. But if there should be something analogous to that break, something that would cause us trouble and incite us to assure ourselves of our nature, then we would have to accomplish the lover's task with respect to our whole nature; we would be compelled to appropriate our nature or fail in the attempt. But what does this task entail? In the words of Merlan,

Is it an easy, is it an agreeable task? Love is a noble passion; he who appropriates it and sticks to it, becomes nobler himself. He suffers, perhaps, but he has no reason to be ashamed of the object of his appropriation. However, the task is to appropriate one's whole nature. If human nature is not such as to cause one to be ashamed of it, then the task is, at worst, difficult; but it is a promising, even inspiring, task, because its fulfilment means freedom. But if human nature is not of this kind, if to appropriate it, to become responsible for it, would mean at the same time to confess one's self guilty of being what we are - then, of course, appropriation would most likely become repulsive.¹⁹

But if freedom is an unhappy prospect, bondage is just as unattractive, and if we are really bound within our nature, then we cannot help but long for freedom; thus the appropriation of one's nature would be attractive as promising freedom but repelling in so far as it presupposes the confession of guilt. What sort of a condition is this? Kierkegaard uses the Danish word Angest (German - Angst) to describe this

19. Merlan, op. cit., p. 86.

paradoxical situation. This word has been translated into English by "dread" and also as "anxiety." "Anxiety" seems the better word, since it has the ambiguity necessary to express both the anticipation of an impending evil and solicitous desire, the attractive-repellent quality which S.K. means to express.²⁰

An example of anxiety is offered by Merlan. Imagine a man who has a very quick and very fiery temper; his outbursts bring him relief, but they are at the same time humiliating and degrading. So he resolves to control himself. Then a situation develops which tempts him to a new outburst. "Now, the feeling, the mood, accompanying the development of the situation; a presentiment that it will perhaps be impossible to resist; a certain anticipation of the sweetness of non-resistance; a certain anticipation of the horror of nonresistance - this state of being attracted and repelled at the same time is anxiety."²¹

What is the importance of anxiety? It throws us on our selves; it forces us to make the decision; it challenges our freedom. Kierkegaard sees anxiety as a basic mood, one which underlies our whole nature; indeed, he identifies it with original sin, since it both keeps us in bondage and makes us dissatisfied with our bondage.²² Hence, when anxiety presents

20. Cf. Merlan, op. cit., p. 86 n.; Swenson, op. cit., p. 63.

21. Merlan, op. cit., p. 87.

22. Cf. Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, p. 7.

itself in a certain particular of the individual's existence, it troubles him and incites him to appropriate his nature; it is analogous to the break which caused the lover to appropriate his love. But this appropriation does not follow anxiety automatically; anxiety only challenges it. To escape the bondage of his nature or of any one part of it, the individual must make a leap.

It is against this background that S.K. treats the progression through the stages of life: the esthetic stage, the ethical stage, the stage of "religiosity A" (religion of immanence), and finally the stage of "religiosity B" (religion of transcendence, i.e., Christianity).

The esthetic life is characterized in extracting from life the maximum amount of enjoyment for its own sake. The esthetic man lives statically; he lives on the basis of what he already is, taken immediately. In other words, he is the natural man. This stage not only comprises the sensual, but those who live for their health, or in the conscious enjoyment of beauty, or for the development of a business, poetic, or philosophic talent. And, as Swenson says, "it includes all mediocrities, in so far as their lives are determined essentially by the contrast between the agreeable and the disagreeable."²⁰ In the banquet scene in the Stages S.K. has a young man describe the theory of the esthetic life. Its

20. Swenson, op. cit., p. 169.

essence is the use of memory or forgetfulness to heighten or erase emotional experiences, the chief requisite being freedom from every deeper enthusiasm, a detachment from every intense hope and aspiration, a refusal to enter into any permanent or binding relationship such as marriage.²¹ The esthetic individual thus refuses to take the plunge into existence; he lives for the moment - nay, rather for its recollection - and fears boredom more than anything else in life. This type of life breaks down whenever the external circumstances of life change (either mental or physical health, or economic or social conditions), and is rendered ridiculous by the category of repetition (i.e., the impossibility of reduplicating a recalled pleasure).²²

How anxiety enters this picture is presented in the "Diary of the Seducer" in Either/Or. Kierkegaard held that sexuality represents better than any other part of our nature our bondage within our nature,²³ therefore this serves as a perfect example of anxiety. This seducer is a man who, by conscious and calculated seduction, thus giving the impression of the wilful use of his sexuality, seems to be perfectly free. Actually, every seduction is a new yielding to his nature - "it is he who yields, not his victim"²⁴ - which rai-

21. Cf. Swenson, op. cit., p. 170 f.

22. Cf. Kierkegaard, Repetition, in Bretall, op. cit., pp. 136-152.

23. Merlan, op. cit., p. 83.

24. Ibid.

ses anxiety. Every new seduction intensifies this anxiety, seems to make the bondage of his nature more and more irresistible.²⁵ The only way out of this dilemma is by a leap, by repentance, by confessing the guilt of yielding to one's nature.

The next stage on life's way is the ethical. Whereas the category of repetition destroys the esthetic life, it is the meat of the ethical life; the same things are done each day out of a sense of obligation. Whereas repentance is the admission of the futility of the esthetic life, it is the dynamic of the ethical life, since constant improvement is the essence of this mode of life. The ethical life is therefore one of self-expression, if not of self-assertion.²⁶ The ethical individual always strives to realize the ideal possibility latent within him.²⁷ Enthusiasm, as contrasted with enjoyment, characterizes this stage. Many people would undoubtedly want to call this life the true religious life, but S.K. says no.

The trouble is that the ethical ideal can never be realized. The ethical task requires an absolute devotion to the absolute end, but the individual always finds himself absolutely committed to relative ends.²⁸ If he could, by repenting, appropriate his whole nature, then his ethical task

25. Cf. Kierkegaard, "Diary of the Seducer", in Bretall, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-80.

26. Swenson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

28. *Ibid.*

would again be accomplished. But what is possible with regard to a single deed or to a single trait seems senseless and impossible with regard to his whole nature. Merlan states the situation in these words: "It is impossible to repent one's self. If repentance is the only way to freedom, then there is no way at all. . . . And, finally, what help would repentance bring, if its object were our whole nature? Can we get rid of it? Obviously not; we cannot be born again and born another person."²⁹ And this condition of man, anxious to become free yet realizing that the task is impossible, is termed by Kierkegaard "despair" or sickness unto death."³⁰

It is at this point that religiosity A, the religion of immanence, begins. This is essentially a passive relation to the divine, accompanied by suffering and a sense of guilt. As Swenson summarizes it "it is distinguished from religion B, or transcendent religion, in that the tie which binds the individual to the divine is still, in spite of all tension, essentially intact. The individual's eternal existence is indeed placed in jeopardy, but it is not forfeited."³¹ To S.K., Socrates best personifies this sort of religiosity. Transcendent religion, or Christianity, on the other hand, consists of a transformation of the sense of guilt into the

29. Merlan, op. cit., p. 89.

30. Cf. Kierkegaard, Sickness unto Death.

31. Swenson, op. cit., p. 175.

sense of sin, which breaks off all continuity between God and man. Swenson: "The personality is invalidated, and thus made free from the law of God, because unable to comply with its demands. There is no fundamental point of contact left between the individual and the divine; man has become absolutely different from God."³²

But existential thought (which is what we have been describing) can go no further than despair and religiosity A. The true nature of sin is something man cannot find out for himself. It is, however, absolutely necessary that man does come this far. The "preparatory acts" of existential thought must be carried through to their extreme if truth is ultimately to be discovered.

It is at this point that S.K. introduces three terms distinctive of his whole theology: the Moment, the Absolute Paradox, and the Leap.

Since man is outside the truth, has lost the capacity for receiving the truth, and, worse yet, is in error - which means that he is "polemic in his attitude toward it; . . . that the learner has himself forfeited the condition and is engaged in forfeiting it"³³ the Teacher must be more than a teacher, in as much as he not only gives the individual truth but also the capacity for receiving it.

32. Ibid., p. 175 f.

33. Kierkegaard, Fragments, p. 10.

What now shall we call such a Teacher, one who restores the lost condition and gives the learner the truth? let us call him Savior, for he saves the learner from his bondage and from himself; let us call him Redeemer, for he redeems the learner from the captivity into which he has plunged himself. . . . And still we have not said all that is necessary; for by his self-imposed bondage the learner has brought upon himself a burden of guilt, and when the Teacher gives him the condition and the Truth he constitutes himself an Atonement, taking away the wrath impending upon that of which the learner has made himself guilty.³⁴

But as soon as we posit such a Teacher, says S.K., we must also posit a Moment, a period in time when the Truth becomes manifest to men who have lost the truth and all means of apprehending it. "Such a moment ought to have a distinctive name," says our author in the person of Johannes Climacus; "let us call it the Fullness of Time."³⁵

The Moment is that place where the eternal comes into time, when the eternal resolve of God to save man is occasioned in history; in other words, it is the life of Christ.³⁶ But this is also a paradox for reason; it is an absolute impossibility.

But how does the learner come to an understanding with this Paradox? We do not ask that he understand the Paradox, but only that this is the Paradox. How this takes place we have already shown. Cf. p. 49 f. It comes to pass when Reason and the Paradox encounter one another happily in the Moment; when the Reason sets itself aside and the Paradox bestows itself. The third entity in which this union is realized (for it is not realized in the Reason,

34. Ibid., p. 12.

35. Ibid., p. 13.

36. Ibid., p. 18.

since it has been set aside; nor in the Paradox, which bestows itself - hence it is realized in something) is that happy passion to which we shall now assign a name. . . . We shall call this passion: Faith. This then must be the condition of which we have spoken, which the Paradox contributes.³⁷

This quotation puts still another construction on the Moment; in this sense the Moment is that point in time when the individual receives faith and thereby realizes the Paradox. But for Kierkegaard this is one and the same Moment, for the strictly historical character of the moment means nothing; what makes the Moment decisive is not the question of whether or not a man was contemporaneous with the historical Jesus; what makes the Moment decisive is "knowing him even as he is known,"³⁸ that is, realizing that this man is God.

. . . the Teacher of our hypothesis was not immediately knowable; he could be known only when he himself gave the condition. Whoever received the condition received it from the Teacher himself, and hence the Teacher must know everyone who knows him, and no one can know the Teacher except through being known by him. . . . When the believer is the believer and knows God through having received the condition from God himself, every successor must receive the condition from God himself in precisely the same sense, and cannot receive it at second hand; . . . But a successor who receives the condition from God himself is a contemporary, a real contemporary; a privilege enjoyed only by the believer, but also enjoyed by every believer.³⁹

Thus the first generation of Christians stand in precisely the same relation to Jesus as the last generation, and it is no easier for the first generation to believe

37. Ibid., p. 47.

38. Ibid., p. 55.

39. Ibid., p. 56.

that Jesus was God, the saving God, than the last generation, for immediate contemporaneity means nothing, since the God-man "was not immediately knowable."⁴⁰ Therefore the Moment is something which enters every believer's life, for he alone knows God and God alone knows him. In other words, S.K. would here invert the adage "seeing is believing" to "believing is seeing."

And how does a man come to faith? In the preceding quotations S.K. made it very plain that faith is a creation of God in the face of the Paradox, in which man is at the same time condemned and saved. The Absolute Paradox proclaims itself "negatively, by revealing the absolute unlikeness of sin, positively, by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness."⁴¹ (To Kierkegaard this is the same thing as the paradox that God became man, since the one is contained in the other.) But described psychologically, from man's point of view, what best expresses this coming to faith?

The term that S.K. here uses is the leap. Between unbelief and faith yawns a chasm. It makes no difference how wide this chasm is because it denotes a breach of continuity,⁴² a qualitative difference, not a quantitative one.⁴³ "An infinitesimal difference makes the chasm infinitely wide, because it is the presence of the leap itself that makes the chasm

40. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

42. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 306.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 340.

infinitely wide."⁴⁴ He uses the term Leap for another reason, namely, because there can be absolutely no assurance, objectively speaking, that the Leap is toward the Truth; an "objective uncertainty" must accompany this Leap; indeed, it is precisely because there can be no objective certainty that that a Leap has to be dared; here also all continuity is broken.⁴⁵ And he uses the term Leap for still a third reason: this Leap "cannot be taught or communicated directly, precisely because it is an act of isolation, which leaves it to the individual to decide, respecting that which cannot be thought, whether he will resolve believingly to accept it by virtue of the absurdity."⁴⁶ Therefore there can be no introduction to Christianity that will make believing any easier, no argumentation which can serve the purpose of making faith more reasonable or logical.

But if the real difficulty is to become a Christian, this being the absolute decision, the only possible introduction must be a repellent one, thus precisely calling attention to the absolute decision. Even the longest of introductions cannot bring the individual a single step nearer to an absolute decision. For if it could, the decision would not be absolute, would not be a qualitative leap, and the individual would be deceived instead of helped.
 . . .⁴⁷

S. K. thus has no use for any sort of "Christian Evidences," or for any sort of presentation that reputes to make

44. Ibid., p. 105.

45. Ibid., p. 182.

46. Ibid., p. 92.

47. Ibid., p. 343.

Christianity more palatable than it actually is. And to him it was the Absurd, the Paradox.

But if the truth is an Absolute Paradox, it cannot be discovered objectively; hence truth comes only via subjectivity.

Kierkegaard's definition of the Paradox was the God made man, the eternal made historical. His definition of the Moment was that place in time when the eternal enters history. Does Kierkegaard's faith then have an historical orientation after all? In the Fragments he states that

the absolute fact is also an historical fact. Unless we are careful to insist on this point our entire hypothesis is nullified The absolute fact is an historical fact, and as such it is the object of faith. The historical aspect must indeed be accentuated, but not in such a way that it becomes decisive for the individuals a simple historical fact is not absolute, and has no power to enforce an absolute decision. But neither may the historical aspect of our fact be eliminated.
 . . . 48

What Kierkegaard is saying here is that there is indeed an historical aspect to the object of the Christian's faith; indeed, that was his definition of the Paradox. But the historicity of the incarnation, for instance, is not the basis of the Christian faith; it is not in this that his certainty lies, since the historicity of anything is subject to the processes of reason, which can only end in an approximation completely incommensurable with the intensity of the Christian

hope. There can be no proof for the paradoxical, but the paradoxical is precisely the object of faith, and it is paradoxical precisely because it is historical. But what then is the basis of the Christian's hope? Where lies its certainty? What proof is there that the Christian's faith is true?

The "proof" of faith is in the nature of faith itself.

When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is in the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be related to what is not true.⁴⁹

In case anyone should think that by this last phrase Kierkegaard is admitting that an individual can be in the truth outside of the Christian faith, his own footnote to this phrase is "that it is precisely for the sake of clarifying it as inwardness or as subjectivity that this contrast is drawn."⁵⁰ He believes with all his heart that truth can result only from the individual's passionate relationship to the Paradox. "This how can only correspond with one thing, the absolute paradox."⁵¹ But he also believes that faith can never ask behind itself to determine whether it is true or

49. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 178.

50. Ibid., p. 178 n.

51. Ibid., p. 840.

not, which is all that he wants to express by this overstatement, by this self-admitted overstatement. But he feels that the point is so important that this contrast must be drawn. It must be shown that the intellect, that objective certainty, is in no way related to faith. Faith is not proved genuine by a final submersion in an intellectual vision of God; precisely the opposite is true:

I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is objective uncertainty. But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire passion of the infinite. . . .

Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy-thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.⁵²

Thus faith is exhibited most truly in the believer who remains passionately loyal to God simply because this is a "life-necessity,"⁵³ while realizing that God is not only incredible, but unknowable as well. "A believer who believes, i.e., believes against the understanding, takes the mystery of faith seriously and is not duped by the pretense of understanding, but is aware that the curiosity which leads

52. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 179 n.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 505.

to glimpsing is infidelity and betrayal of the task."⁵⁴ But just what function does this then leave to the understanding for the man of faith? "The dialectical aspect of the problem requires thought-passion - not to want to understand it, but to understand what it means thus to break with the understanding and with thinking and with immanence, in order to loose the last foothold of immanence, eternity behind one, and to exist constantly on the extremest verge of existence by virtue of the absurd."⁵⁵

Near the very end of the Postscript S.K. finally sums up his concept that "Truth is Subjectivity."⁵⁶

The thing of being a Christian is not determined by the what of Christianity but by the how of the Christian. This how can only correspond with one thing, the absolute paradox. There is therefore no vague talk to the effect that being a Christian is to accept, and to accept, and to accept quite differently, to appropriate, to believe, to appropriate by faith quite differently (all of them purely rhetorical and fictitious definitions); but to believe is specifically different from all other appropriation and inwardness. Faith is the objective uncertainty due to the repulsion of the absurd held fast by the passion of inwardness, which in this instance is intensified to the utmost degree.⁵⁷

This is not the statement of a relativistic Humanist; Kierkegaard does not say that "man is the measure of all things." He says that truth is subjectivity, but this subjectivity of which he speaks is the subjectivity of a God-created faith. "Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded

54. Ibid., p. 305.

55. Ibid., p. 305.

56. Ibid., p. 306.

57. Ibid., p. 340.

from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion."⁵⁸

58. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 100.

CHAPTER IV

DOES EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT INVALIDATE DOGMATICS?

The crucial word in the above heading is "dogmatics." On its exact connotation depends the answer to the question. By dogmatics is meant the precise formulation of the content of faith, the "objective truths" of Christianity. But the point is, what is meant by the term "objective truths?"

First of all, what does Kierkegaard say specifically about doctrine? In the Fragments we read the following: " . . . the disciple is so related to his Teacher as to be eternally concerned with his historical existence. Now if we assume that it is as we have supposed . . . , that the Teacher himself contributes the condition to the learner, it will follow that the object of faith is not the teaching but the Teacher."¹ And in Sickness unto Death there is this rather surprising statement under the chapter heading "Sin is not a Negation but a Position:"

For the truth of this affirmation the orthodox dogmatic as a whole has consistently contended, and it has rejected as pantheistic every definition of sin which makes it something negative - weakness,

1. Kierkegaard, Fragments, p. 50.

sensuality, finiteness, ignorance, etc. Orthodoxy has perceived very rightly that here is where the battle has to be fought, or . . . that it is here the end must be made fast, that here is the place to put up resistance. Orthodoxy has rightly perceived that, if sin is defined negatively, all of Christianity totters. Therefore orthodoxy insists that there must be a revelation from God in order to teach fallen man what sin is, a revelation which, quite consistently, must be believed, since it is a dogma. And naturally paradox, faith, dogma, these three determinants, form an alliance and accord which is the firmest support and bulwark against pagan wisdom.

So it is with orthodoxy. By a strange misunderstanding, a so-called speculative dogmatic, which certainly has suspicious dealings with philosophy, has entertained the notion that it is able to comprehend this definition of sin as a position. But if this is true, then sin is a negation. The secret of all comprehending is that the very act of comprehension is higher than every position it posits. . . .²

From these two passages three things are evident: 1) The object of faith is God, not teachings about God; 2) Christian dogma which makes no pretense of accommodating itself to reason (in this case the dogma which treats of the true condition of man's nature and how man can discover it) is the ally of faith and the paradox; 3) Speculative dogma, that is, all dogma which purports to comprehend or to explain the basic facts about man or about God, is a hoax and a delusion. With these three principles orthodox theology can whole-heartedly agree. Equally important is the fact that none of these principles compromise existential thought in any way; aye, they flow from it. The proper subject of existential thought is

2. Kierkegaard, Sickness unto Death, p. 156 f.

the individual as he finds himself in existence; whatever in the Law would indict him at his particular stage in life can help to bring him to despair. The concept of sin itself is something that must be revealed to man in the moment of his conversion; it is something that the mind cannot discover or even apprehend; sin must be felt inwardly. For the Christian existential thinker the relationship to God is all-important; it is by being in this relationship, faith, that he knows God. The object of his faith is really another subject: the God-man, the Savior, the Absolute Paradox.

But S.K. has a great deal more to say about doctrine, particularly about the communication of doctrine. I quote from the Postscript:

Christianity is not a doctrine but an existential communication expressing an existential contradiction. If Christianity were a doctrine it would so ipso not be an opposite to speculative thought, but rather a phase within it. Christianity has to do with existence, with the act of existing; but existence and existing constitute precisely the opposite of speculation Precisely because Christianity is not a doctrine it exhibits the principle . . . that there is a tremendous difference between knowing what Christianity is and being a Christian. In connection with a doctrine such a distinction is unthinkable, because a doctrine is not relevant to existing. It is not my fault that the age in which we live has reversed the relationship, and transformed being a Christian into a triviality. To assume that this denial that Christianity is a doctrine should imply that Christianity is contentless, is merely a chicane. When the believer exists in faith his existence acquires tremendous content, but not in the sense of paragraph material.

. . . If I were to say that Christianity is a doctrine of the Incarnation, of the Atonement, and so forth, misunderstanding would at once be invited. Speculative philosophy would immediately pounce upon this doctrine, and proceed to expound the more imperfect conceptions of paganism and Judaism and so forth. Christianity would become a phase of speculative thought, perhaps a highest phase, but essentially it would become something identical with speculation.³

In order not to misunderstand his meaning it had best be said here that by doctrine S.K. has reference to philosophical postulates. In a long footnote to the very first sentence of the foregoing quotation he explains that because the nineteenth century is so dreadfully speculative the word "doctrine" will at once be interpreted to mean a philosophical doctrine which demands to be understood, and ought to be understood. To avoid this danger I have chosen to call Christianity an existential communication, in order definitely to indicate its heterogeneity with speculation.⁴ "Surely it is one thing for something to be a philosophical doctrine which desires to be intellectually grasped and speculatively understood, and quite another thing to be a doctrine that proposes to be realized in existence."⁵

This then is the situation. The difference between a "speculative" doctrine" and an "existential doctrine" is not a question of content; it is a question of the method of presentation and the approach of the individual. Any attempt to

3. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 341 f.

4. Ibid., p. 341 n.

5. Ibid.

comprehend or understand or speculate about a doctrine renders it invalid. "If I were to say that Christianity is a doctrine of the Incarnation, of the Atonement, and so forth, . . . Speculative philosophy would immediately pounce upon this doctrine" ⁶ Kierkegaard certainly believes in these two doctrines, as has been made manifestly clear before, ⁷ but he does not believe that these doctrines constitute Christianity. The existential fact of being a Christian, of faith, of the relationship whereby the Christian is related to these doctrines (which are indeed the content of faith) - this is what constitutes Christianity; for these doctrines can only have meaning in faith. . . . there is a tremendous difference between knowing what Christianity is and being a Christian." ⁸ If Christianity is presented merely as a doctrine, this distinction vanishes, says S.K.; then all the individual has to say is "Well then, if this doctrine is right I don't have anything to worry about," and that's the end of faith. This is precisely what had happened in Denmark, thought Kierkegaard. Everyone assumed the Christian doctrine was true and nobody worried about faith any longer.

How then is the Christian doctrine to be communicated if this situation is to be avoided? How can a Christian communicate the content of his faith to another person?

6. Ibid., p. 340.

7. Cf. Kierkegaard, Fragments, pp. 9-14.

8. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 359.

. . . (a) He can inform him that he has himself believed this fact i.e., the Paradox, which is not in the strict sense a communication . . . , but merely affords an occasion. For when I say that this or that has happened, I make an historical communication; but when I say: "I believe and have believed that so-and-so has taken place, although it is folly to the understanding and an offense to the human heart." then I have simultaneously done everything in my power to prevent anyone else from determining his own attitude in immediate continuity with mine, asking to be excused from all companionship, since every individual is compelled to make up his own mind in precisely the same manner. (b) In this form he can relate the content of the fact. But this content exists only for faith, in the same sense that color exists only for sight and sounds for hearing. In this form, then, the content can be related; in any other form he merely indulges in empty words⁹

According to this, all communication of doctrine must be in the form of a confession of personal faith, never in terms of an apology or defense of faith, and above all, never in terms of a system of thought. Preaching is conceived of as an occasion for faith in precisely the same way that the Socratic questioning was an occasion for the recollection of the dormant, inborn truth, except that in this case God must give the individual truth and the organ (faith) for receiving it. "Everything is Socratic; the relation between one contemporary and another in so far as both are believers is entirely Socratic: the one owes the other nothing, but both owe everything to God."¹⁰ In short, there is indeed a need for the preaching of Christian doctrine, but the

9. Kierkegaard, Fragments, p. 86.

10. Ibid., p. 53.

individual can come into the right relation to it only by a leap, and the necessity of this leap must underlie the very presentation of the content of faith. Thus, with this understanding of dogmatics, existential thought does not invalidate it.

But if it is true, as Smith seems to think, that "all dogmatic philosophies presuppose an epistemology which relates intellection to reality in some reliable way,"¹¹ if it is true that Christian dogmatics represent objective truth (which S.K. never denies) which can be known as objectively true (which he denies vehemently) - then existential thought does invalidate dogmatics, for then it would come under the same attack that was levelled against the System.

There is some doubt as to whether or not Catholicism has actually met this issue. In the Catholic Encyclopedia Daniel Coghlan assails the Modernism of LeRoy in these terms:

There are truths such as the Trinity, the Resurrection of Christ, His Ascension, etc., which are absolute objective facts and which could be believed even if their practical consequences were ignored or were deemed of little value. The dogmas of the Church . . . have an objective reality and are facts as really and truly as it is a fact that Augustus was Emperor of the Romans and that George Washington was first President of the United States. The Catholic serves God and in the duty of keeping the Commandments; and he believes in them as objective and immutable truths. . . .¹²

To all of which S. K. might merely reply that it is foolish

11. Smith, op. cit., p. 114.

12. Catholic Encyclopedia, V, p. 91, quoted in Smith, loc. cit.

to speak of objective truth in this manner, for while such truth might well exist, it can exist only for God, with whom alone thought and reality are one; for only when this pure identity does exist can anyone be said to know objective truth as such.¹³

Smith does meet the issue head on. "Reformed theology is based on an objectivist epistemology. Calvin never doubted that ideas about God derived from nature and revelation truly reflect God. This is so obvious as scarcely to require documentation. . . . His entire theology set out to ramify and systematize God's revelation of Himself, to the end that the human mind might grasp the meaning of God's relation to the world."¹⁴ Concluding his article, Smith, a Reformed theologian himself,¹⁵ says: "Dogmatic theology flatly contradicts Kierkegaard's exclusive subjectivism in that its epistemology affirms the eternal reality of absolute truth . . . and the witness of the Holy Spirit in Christian thinking."¹⁶

What is the position of our church on the question of objectivity vs. subjectivity of doctrine? In John Theodore Mueller's Christian Dogmatics we find this statement: ". . . we must strenuously uphold the objective nature of salvation, that is to say, the objectivity and reality of the vi-

13. Cf. Kierkegaard, Postscript, p. 107.

14. Smith, op. cit., p. 114 f.

15. Associated with the Westminster Foundation, Washington, D. C.

16. Smith, op. cit., p. 123.

serious atonement, as not being conditioned on any act of man, and the objective character of the means of grace as offering forgiveness of sins outright to man and exercising their power in every case where they are applied."¹⁷ It is obvious that at this point the word "objectivity" is used in an entirely different sense than Kierkegaard used it. Here it means that the efficacy of the vicarious atonement and the means of grace do not depend on anything outside of God. The only phrase in the entire section that S.K. would speak to is the last, where the word "applied" appears. What does that mean, to have forgiveness of sins applied? That means that it must become a subjective reality for the individual, he would say.

I quote again from Christian Dogmatics: "In this connection we must warn our hearers also against the error of making faith its own object; that is to say, believers must never base their faith upon their faith. Faith must be based alone on the Gospel We are certainly required to believe, but only because by faith the promise of the Gospel is accepted, never because faith in itself, as a good quality, could reconcile God."¹⁸ What did S.K. say in this connection? First of all, there is indeed an object of faith outside of man: the Absolute Paradox; second, hope and certainty (not objective certainty, but a certainty of passionate

17. Mueller, Christian Dogmatics, p. 456.

18. Ibid.

devotion) rest on faith, on the fact that I am in the right relationship to God, for faith is the only way in which I can know God (this is not the same thing as saying that faith is its own basis); Third, faith is not the basis of justification; faith is that miracle by which God makes justification subjective. But faith is the only assurance the individual has that he is justified, for without faith the promises of the Gospel mean nothing.

Now to our question: "Does existential thought invalidate dogmatics?" Yes, if dogmatics is conceived of as a series of facts which must be comprehended by the mind as objective truths; No, if dogmatics is conceived of as the necessary content of faith, as the form in which faith expresses itself. The object of faith is the Teacher, not the teaching, for Kierkegaard. In the latter sense dogmatics still retains an absolutely necessary place in the promotion of faith, for it is only in relation to it that faith can spring. If this view of dogmatics is deemed wrong, then dogmatic theology must refute Kierkegaard's attack on the System to survive.

One more thing needs to be said. If any man ever tried to be consistent with himself, if ever a man tried to be honest in expressing his beliefs in his life, that man was Kierkegaard. Yet, until the day he died, Kierkegaard never once broke with the Lutheran faith. As far as it can possibly be determined, Kierkegaard died as a confessing Lutheran,

firmly believing the Lutheran doctrine. When he was asked on his deathbed if he took refuge in God's grace in Christ, a question asked by the ministering pastor, he replied: "Why, of course. What else?"¹⁹ So if existential thought does do away with doctrine, this certainly was not evident in the life of The existential thinker, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard. His message was a one-sided emphasis, true. But no one recognized this better than he himself.

Oh, the governance of the world is a prodigious housekeeping and a grandiose painting. Yet He, the Master, God in heaven, behaves like the cook and the artist. He says, "Now there must be introduced a little pinch of spice, a little touch of red." We do not comprehend why, we are hardly aware of it, since the little bit is so thoroughly absorbed in the whole. But God knows why.

A little pinch of spice! That is to say: Here a man must be sacrificed, he is needed to impart a particular taste to the rest.

These are the correctives. It is a woeful error if he who is used for applying the corrective becomes impatient and would make the corrective normative for others. This is the temptation to bring everything to confusion.

A little pinch of spice! humanly speaking, what a painful thing to be thus sacrificed, to be a little pinch of spice! But on the other hand God knows well the man whom He elects to employ in this way, and so He also knows how, in the inward understanding of it, to make so blessed a thing for him to be sacrificed, that among the thousands of divers voices which express, each in its own way, the same thing, his also will be heard, and perhaps especially his, which is truly de profundis, proclaiming: God is love.²⁰

19. Quoted in Lowrie, op. cit., p. 255.

20. Ibid., p. 260.

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