

Kierkegaard for Grownups

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That extraordinary writer of stories about the "Christ-haunted" American South, Flannery O'Connor, was frequently asked why her people and plots were so often outlandish, even grotesque. She answered, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you have to draw large and startling figures." I expect Søren Kierkegaard, had he lived a century later, would have taken to Flannery O'Connor and would have relished her affirmation of the necessarily outlandish. But then he would immediately be on guard lest anyone think that he does not really mean what he says, that he is anything less than utterly, indeed deadly, serious. He exaggerates for effect and witheringly attacks his opponents who suggest that his exaggeration is anything less than the truth of the matter. He writes, as he repeatedly says, for that one reader—the singular individual who has the courage to understand him—while at the same time describing in detail, and often with hilarious parody, the many readers who refuse to take him at his word. Kierkegaard was keenly (some would say obsessively) attentive to the ways in which he was misunderstood, even as he persistently and defiantly courted misunderstanding. This, as readers beyond numbering have discovered, can be quite maddening. It is also at least part of the reason why Kierkegaard is so widely read.

There are circles of Kierkegaard scholarship, some of it academically solemn and much of it more in the nature of fan clubs. One can only guess what he would make of professors who lecture on his contempt for professors and lecturing, or of admirers who have made him, of all things he unremittingly despised, popular. Apart from the stolid academics and enthusiastic fans, reading Kierkegaard is for many people an "experience," preferably to be indulged early in life before moving on to the ambiguities and compromises of adulthood that we resign ourselves to believing is the real world. A well-read acquaintance of a certain age says that he remembers fondly his "Kierkegaard period." He was about nineteen at the time, and it followed closely upon his "Holden Caulfield period," referring to the young rebel of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. In his view—shared, I have no doubt, by many others—Kierkegaard provides a spiritual and intellectual rush, a frisson of youthful rebellion, a flirtation with radical refusal of the world as it is. Kierkegaard is, in sum, a spiritually and intellectually complexified way of joining Holden Caulfield in declaring that established ways of thinking and acting are "phony" to the core, which declaration certifies, by way of dramatic contrast, one's most singular "authenticity." Such certification does wonders for what today is called self-esteem. It is a way of thinking and acting that has the further cachet of coming with an impressive philosophical title: existentialism.

As it happened, Kierkegaard's writings were gaining currency in the English-speaking world about the same time as the appearance of *Catcher in the Rye* and other "demythologizings" of all things conventional. For many readers, especially younger readers, the encounter with Kierkegaard was part of a cultural moment marked by the beginnings of disillusionment with the American Way of Life that was so triumphantly celebrated after the Second World War. Those beginnings would build into what was later dubbed the youth culture or the counterculture, which we loosely associate with "the '60s," a curious mix of social, sexual, political, and religious liberationisms that made, as it was said, their long march through the institutions and still shape and misshape the

way we think and the way we live today. Many Americans now reaching retirement age nostalgically recall, and maybe could still find somewhere around the house, the paperbacks that were the vademecums of that time: Marcuse on one-dimensional man, Charles Reich on the greening of America, C. Wright Mills on the power elite, Malcolm X on revolutionary violence, Jean-Paul Sartre on the nausea of society-and, among those and many others, Kierkegaard on authentic existence. The arguments of these books were dramatically different and often contradictory, but they had in common what was taken to be a relentless hostility to The Establishment.

Walter Lowrie was a prime mover, if not the prime mover, in bringing Kierkegaard to an American readership. As early as the 1940s, he had misgivings about how Kierkegaard would be understood and misunderstood, used and misused. In his preface to Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*, he deplors the ways in which Europeans, who were reading Kierkegaard long before he was translated into English, deeply distorted the man and his message. They published first those writings that lent themselves to anticlerical and anti-Christian purposes, and even items of salacious interest, such as "The Diary of the Seducer," torn from its context in *Either/Or*. The result was a grave misrepresentation of-among other things, but the most important thing-Kierkegaard's profound Christian faith and commitment to the renewal of the Church. As he repeatedly says in *Training*, that renewal entails "introducing Christianity to Christendom." What Lowrie feared might happen has to a significant extent, and despite his best efforts, happened among readers of Kierkegaard in English. The result is Kierkegaard experienced as an intellectually upmarket Holden Caulfield, or as an "existentialist" compatriot of atheists such as Sartre.

Lowrie rightly notes that *Training in Christianity* is Kierkegaard's most mature and self-revealing text. It is also his last major work, written after his "conversion experience" during Holy Week of 1848. After this work and until his death in 1855, we have only the typically strident polemical tracts from his last years of open warfare with church authorities who, in his view, were determined to preserve Christendom at the price of denying true Christianity. From beginning to end, Kierkegaard's writings are marked by an intensity of argument and expression that can only be explained-if "explain" is the right word-by his uncompromisable passion for the truth. He was convinced that almost everyone-maybe everyone except Jesus Christ and a few spiritual "virtuosi" who have honestly followed Jesus-had settled for something less than the truth. Kierkegaard's many readers are fascinated, perhaps even spiritually titillated, by his pressing every question to the limits, and then beyond the limits. The pressing, the fearless exploration, never ends.

There are Christians who call themselves Kierkegaardians, much as others call themselves Augustinians or Thomists or Barthians. But Kierkegaard provides no school of thought, and most emphatically no "system," that can be a secure resting place for one's Christian identity. Kierkegaard offers only a mode of being, of thinking, of living that has no end other than the end of being "contemporaneous" with Jesus Christ, true man and true God, who has no end. The certifying mark that one has accepted what he offers-or, more precisely, what Christ offers-is martyrdom, and Kierkegaard yearned to be a martyr. The word martyr, one recalls, means witness. If Kierkegaard was not to be given the privilege of literally shedding his blood, he would bear witness in other ways. He welcomed the derision of those surrounding him, recognizing in them the same crowd that surrounded the cross of his contemporary, Jesus Christ.

To understand Søren Kierkegaard it is helpful to know something of his life. I say that hesitantly, being mindful of today's propensity for "biopathology," for psychologizing thinkers in order to fit them into the patterns that we think we know. Actually, that propensity is not so new. Kierkegaard takes obvious pleasure in skewering those who evade what he is saying by speaking knowingly about "the problem" with poor Søren Kierkegaard. Yet it is necessary to say something about his life and times.

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, on May 5, 1813, and died there on November 11, 1855. As is, I think, typically the case with men, his character was powerfully formed by his father; indeed his life was in crucial respects a conflicted recapitulation of his father's. His father had been an embittered hired hand to a poor tenant farmer in the forsaken moorlands of Jutland. One day, in a rage at his unhappy state, he climbed a hill and cursed God for his mistreatment. He would later relate this incident to his son, when the latter was in his early twenties, and it made a deep and permanent impact that was to haunt Søren for the rest of his life. He never entirely set aside the question of whether he and his family were cursed by God because of his father's blasphemy. The suspicion was reinforced by the early death of his mother and the deaths of five of his six siblings. Kierkegaard described his learning of his father's blasphemy as "the great earthquake" of his life.

Shortly after that dramatic act of defiance, his father went to live with an uncle in Copenhagen where, over time, he built a very considerable fortune by dealing in woolen goods. At his death in 1838, he left Søren and his brother a handsome legacy that relieved Kierkegaard of the need to make a living, although the money had almost run out toward the end of his life. From early on, Søren's brilliance was obvious to his father, who relished forming the boy in his strictly orthodox Lutheranism, combined-as will not surprise those familiar with the period of Lutheran orthodoxy-with a passion for formal logic. He also passed on a spirit of melancholy, closely associated with a sense of guilt joined to an intimation-or perhaps conviction-of the family curse. When it came time for university, young Kierkegaard was in a conflicted state of mind about what to do with his life, or whether anything worthwhile could be done with it, and sought relief by throwing himself into a life of general dissipation. At the University of Copenhagen, he enrolled in theology but increasingly turned his divided attention toward philosophy. Deeply shaken by the death of his father in 1838, he resumed his theological studies and two years later obtained the master's degree.

His restored sense of purpose was closely connected to another development. He had fallen in love with Regine Olsen and became engaged to marry. Very soon, however, he realized that he would never be able to communicate with such a young and inexperienced person the storm of complex and conflicted ideas raging in his mind. He broke the engagement and went off to seek refuge in Berlin, where he lived for half a year. Thereafter, Regine and the broken engagement would never be far from his thoughts. In his 1845 book *Stages on Life's Way*, the last section is titled "Guilty?/Not Guilty?" and there he examines the relationship with Regine in terms of his distinction between the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. This three-part distinction began to emerge earlier in *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, which was the huge manuscript he brought back from his months in Berlin and is probably the book that most commonly serves as an introduction to Kierkegaard today. In *Either/Or* the distinction is between the aesthetic and the ethical-religious, while two years later the ethical and the religious were more sharply distinguished.

The reader will want to keep in mind the three stages of life while reading *Training in Christianity*, since all three "types" appear in various forms. His opponents, as he depicts them, represent both the aesthetic and moral stages while Kierkegaard is, of course, the champion of the authentically religious. Each stage of life has its own dynamic and is totally-one might say existentially-different from the others. Each assumes that man is confronted by a radical decision-radical in the sense of going to the roots-between God and the world. The aesthetic life is one of pleasure, of sophisticated humanism, of a refusal to make life-determining decisions that might set limits on all that seems possible. The word "decide" is derived from the Latin for "cut," and the aesthetic life is averse to cutting off options. In the ethical stage of life, one "grows up" and accepts responsibilities as defined by general principles of moral conduct. It is only in the religious stage, however, that one becomes a "knight of faith" who makes the ultimate

leap beyond unending complexifications and beyond the despair induced by unending complexifications to a true actualization of his existence before God.

A rush of writing followed, and 1844 saw the appearance of both *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Dread*. The latter has been called history's first work of what would come to be known as depth psychology. These and other works were building toward Kierkegaard's frontal assault on Hegel and Hegelianism. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had died only a few years earlier, in 1831, but the influence of the monumental achievement that was his life's work was everywhere evident among educated people, and not least in the leadership of the Protestant churches. Kierkegaard's direct assault began in 1846 with a book bearing the remarkable title *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments. A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Composition, an Existential Contribution*. The author was named as Johannes Climacus, and S. Kierkegaard was listed as the publisher.

Hegel was the great system-maker. What others viewed as his grand achievement Kierkegaard viewed as his unforgivable crime, the attempt to rationally systematize the whole of existence. The whole of existence cannot be systematized, Kierkegaard insisted, because existence is not yet whole; it is incomplete and in a state of constant development. Hegel attempted to introduce mobility into logic, which, said Kierkegaard, is itself an error in logic. The greatest of Hegel's errors, however, was his claim that he had established the objective theory of knowledge. Kierkegaard countered with the argument that subjectivity is truth. As he put it, "The objective uncertainty maintained in the most passionate spirit of dedication is truth, the highest truth for one existing." Bringing us closer to the central concerns of *Training in Christianity*, Hegel thought it was possible to understand existence intellectually; he equated existence with thought and thus left no room for faith. In this understanding, Kierkegaard protested, Christianity-and Christ!-were reduced to being no more than part of The System. The apparently harmonious but demonically seductive synthesis of History, Thought, Morality, Society, Church, and Christ that characterized establishment Protestantism was condemned by Kierkegaard as "Christendom," and against it he intends to make the argument for true Christianity.

He does not expect to persuade everyone. Far from it. What would persuade everyone is almost by definition false. He writes for *Hiin Enkelte*, the emphatically singular individual. *Hiin Enkelte*, those were the words he wanted inscribed on his tombstone. In an 1843 preface he describes watching how his publication fares: "I let my eye follow it a little while. I saw then how it fared forth along lonely paths or alone upon the highway. After one and another little misunderstanding . . . it finally encountered that single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader, that single individual whom it seeks, towards whom it stretches out its arms, that single individual who is willing enough to let himself be found, willing enough to encounter it."

In our day the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has written powerfully about the "second naïveté" that is the mark of true faith. A century earlier, Kierkegaard wrote about "the second immediacy," the possibility of being a child or youth for the second time. "To become again a child, to become as nothing, without any selfishness, to become again a youth, notwithstanding one has become shrewd, shrewd by experience, shrewd in worldly wisdom, and then to despise the thought of behaving shrewdly, to will to be a youth, to will to retain youth's enthusiasm with its spontaneity unabated, to will to reacquire it by valiant effort, more apprehensive and shamefaced at the thought of equivocating and bargaining to win earthly advantage than a modest maiden is made by an indecent action-yes, that is the task."

The grownups, those who are shrewd in worldly wisdom, have built secure defenses against being encountered by Christ, and they will not let him become their

contemporary. With caustic wit Kierkegaard gives voice to the reasoning of the worldly wise. Of Christ the worldly wise say: "His life is simply fantastic. Indeed this is the mildest expression one can use to describe it, for in passing that judgment one is good-humored enough to ignore altogether this sheer madness of conceiving Himself to be God. It is fantastic. At the most one can live like that for a few years in one's youth. But He is already more than thirty years of age. And literally He is nothing." Another worldling says: "That one should push through the crowd in order to get to the spot where money is dealt out, and honor, and glory-that one can understand. But to push oneself forward in order to be flogged-how sublime, how Christian, how stupid!" (A little later, Friedrich Nietzsche will write with withering scorn of Christianity's "slave morality.") The anti-Hegelian barbs are scarcely hidden in the words of yet another worldling: "We all look forward to an Expected One, in this we are all agreed. But the regiment of this world does not move forward tumultuously by leaps, the world development is (as the word itself implies) evolutionary not revolutionary." The cultural Protestantism that German theologians call Kulturprotestantismus and Kierkegaard calls Christendom is as hostile to Christ as was the religious establishment of first-century Judaism. Indeed the hostility is stronger since the Pharisees did expect a radically new thing in the coming of the true Messiah, whereas Christendom thinks it has smoothly subsumed what it formally acknowledges as the true Messiah into the all-inclusive synthesis that is The System.

Christendom is the enemy of Christianity-it is, Kierkegaard says repeatedly, the "blasphemy"-that stands in the way of encountering Christ as our contemporary. Christendom assumes that Christ is far in the past, having laid the foundation for the wonderful thing that has historically resulted, Christendom. Of course we are all good Christians because we are all good Danes. It is a package deal and Christ and Christianity are part of the package. If we are good Danes (or good Americans), if we work hard and abide by the rules, the church, which is an integral part of the social order, will guarantee the delivery to heaven of the package that is our lives. But Christ is not in the distant past, protests Kierkegaard. He confronts us now, and a decision must be made. "In relation to the absolute there is only one tense: the present. For him who is not contemporary with the absolute-for him it has no existence."

This encounter with Christ the contemporary is not to be confused with today's evangelical Protestant language about conversion as a decisive moment in which one "accepts Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior." Kierkegaard did not, of course, know about the nineteenth-century American revivalism from which today's evangelicalism issues, but he had some acquaintance with the enthusiasms that were in his day associated with "pietism." As he inveighed against Christendom, it seems likely he would also inveigh against Evangelicaldom today. As he would inveigh against Christianity of any sort-whether it calls itself liberal or conservative, orthodox or progressive-that neatly accommodates itself to its cultural context. To decide for Christ our contemporary is always a decision to be a cultural alien, to join Christ on his way of suffering and death as an outsider.

Once the established order has "deified" itself by claiming to have subsumed the absolute to itself, there is nothing that it cannot presume to do. A person asks, "Do you mean the established order can assure my eternal salvation?" In one of the most scathing passages in *Training*, Kierkegaard lets the established order answer that question. "Why certainly. And if with regard to this matter you encounter in the end some obstacle, can you not be contented like all the others, when your last hour has come, to go well baled and crated in one of the large shipments which the established order sends straight through to heaven under its own seal and plainly addressed to 'The Eternal Blessedness,' with the assurance that you will be exactly as well received and just as blessed as 'all the others'? In short, can you not be content with such reassuring security and guaranty as this, that the established order vouches for your blessedness in the hereafter? Very well then. Only keep this to yourself. The established order has no objection. If you keep as still as a mouse about it, you will nevertheless be just as well off as the others." But, of course,

Kierkegaard would not keep it to himself. And that is why, as he understood it, he was defamed, derided, and dismissed as an eccentric and malcontent.

Kierkegaard's relentless polemic is not, in the first place, against what is today called "institutional religion." It is, in the first place, a polemic against the deifying of the social order, which can happen with or without Hegelian philosophy. It is, in the second place, a polemic against the church for letting itself become party to this blasphemous fraud and thus betraying Christianity for the sake of Christendom. Since a person's relationship with Christ, however, is of infinitely greater importance than his relationship with his society, the main fire of Kierkegaard's polemic is directed against the treason of the church. In this connection, Kierkegaard makes a lasting contribution to the endless-or at least unending until Christ returns in glory-debate over the proper relationship between, as the twentieth-century American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr titled his classic book, "Christ and Culture." Niebuhr proposed five main "types" of that relationship as Christians have thought about these things over the centuries. Kierkegaard, one might suggest, is polemicizing against the type of Christ as culture and is arguing for the type of Christ against culture.

Even more telling, I believe, is the similarity of Kierkegaard's argument with the chilling Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. I have sometimes suggested, half tongue in cheek, that if anything might be added to the canon of the New Testament it should be the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. Although Ivan Karamazov tells the story against the Catholic Church, it is the story of all Christians and the subtle ways in which Christianity can be displaced by Christendom, in which people can be seduced into surrendering their souls to the established order. When Jesus appears in the public square of medieval Spain, the Grand Inquisitor has him put in jail and explains to him, with sophisticated reasons, why he has no right to come back, why people do not need him and cannot bear him as their contemporary. The established order has now taken over the business of salvation, the Inquisitor tells Jesus, and it is simply intolerable that he should return to interfere. After the long night's monologue, in which Jesus says not a word, the Inquisitor opens the prison door and says, "Go, and come never again." Kierkegaard, I am convinced, would relish the tale.

Kierkegaard's influence on contemporary Christian thought is considerable, and aspects of his "existentialism" play a role in that multi-faceted phenomenon called postmodernism, although usually stripped of his radical faith in the God-man, Jesus Christ. Apart from the absolute, which was the object of his decision, today's interest in the existentialist mode of his thinking and deciding would, I expect, be of little interest to Kierkegaard. His impact on theology proper has been, in very large part, through the most influential Protestant theologian of the past century, Karl Barth. Kierkegaard's accent on "the infinite qualitative distinction" between God and man, time and eternity, was decisive for Barth's radical break with the liberal theology and Kulturprotestantismus of the nineteenth century. At the same time, and despite Kierkegaard's frequent identification with Luther, Barth thought Kierkegaard betrayed authentic Reformation teaching by his "legalistic" notion that sola fide (faith alone) is not enough, that salvation is a matter of open-ended "becoming" through authentic encounter with Christ.

Another figure pertinent to Kierkegaard's legacy, and especially to the argument of *Training in Christianity*, is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Kierkegaard was convinced that an honest following of "Christ the contemporary" necessarily entailed suffering and aspired toward the ultimate sharing in his suffering which is martyrdom. Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor in Germany, actually was a martyr, being executed upon the direct orders of Hitler on April 9, 1945, for his resistance activities and aid to Jews. Bonhoeffer's thought is indebted to Kierkegaard, and he wrote a powerful little book that is in some respects very similar to *Training in Christianity*. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote, "When Jesus calls a man, he calls him to come and die." At the same time, Bonhoeffer was critical of Kierkegaard's sharp divisions of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious life. An

editorial footnote in Bonhoeffer's Ethics cites a 1944 letter from prison in which he writes, "Perhaps, then, what Kierkegaard calls the 'aesthetic existence,' far from being excluded from the domain of the Church, should be given a new foundation within the Church. . . . Who, for example, in our time can still with an easy mind cultivate music or friendship, play games and enjoy himself? Certainly not the 'ethical' man, but only the Christian." For Bonhoeffer, the cost of discipleship was attended by a Christian liberty that frees a person to engage the aesthetic, as well as one's responsibilities in Church, marriage and family, culture and government.

The comparison between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer is instructive. Both were radically opposed to Kulturprotestantismus. Kierkegaard sought to expose it for the sham Christianity (i.e., Christendom) that it was. A hundred years later in Germany the corruption and consequent weakness of Kulturprotestantismus were exposed under the terror of National Socialism. Both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer railed against the smooth synthesis of Christ and culture, contending for the courage of personal decision and a costly form of discipleship. In the actual situation of the collapse of cultural-religious securities, however, Bonhoeffer discovered a new freedom for vibrant engagement with questions of Church, culture, politics, marriage, family, and friendship, and also with the celebration of the aesthetic. By circumstance, as well as by personal disposition and decision, such engagement and celebration was largely absent from Kierkegaard's life and thought. These two apostles of radical discipleship were very different personalities, but one cannot help but wonder what Kierkegaard would have thought of Bonhoeffer's existential decision and consequent martyrdom, or how Kierkegaard would have envisioned the imperatives of discipleship if Denmark's Christ-as-culture synthesis had been shattered in his time as thoroughly-although no doubt under very different circumstances-as it was shattered a century later in Germany.

Catholic thinkers, when they have engaged him at all, have been ambivalent about Kierkegaard. This is not surprising, since he seems to be hyper-Protestant in his relentless individualism and antipathy to ecclesiastical authority, even if, in Denmark, it was to Protestant ecclesiastical authority. One Catholic who took Kierkegaard very seriously was Hans Urs von Balthasar, probably one of the two most influential Catholic theologians of the past century. (The other being Karol Wojtyla, later to be John Paul II, who also wrote insightfully about Kierkegaard.)

Balthasar, however, was like Bonhoeffer in wanting to rethink the aesthetic, and to place it upon authentically Christian foundations. He wrote several thick volumes on the theology of the aesthetic (not, it is important to note, on aesthetic theology). I have already alluded to Karl Barth's relation to Kierkegaard, and the following passage from Balthasar on Barth's devotion to music, especially to Mozart, brings together a number of pertinent considerations:

This refutation of Kierkegaard, already evident and fully formed in the early Barth, is attributable to a final contrast: for Kierkegaard Christianity is unworldly, ascetic, polemic; for Barth it is the immense revelation of the eternal light that radiates over all of nature and fulfills every promise; it is God's Yes and Amen to himself and his creation. Nothing is more characteristic of these two men than the way they stand in relation to Mozart. For Kierkegaard, Mozart is the very quintessence of the aesthetic sphere and therefore the very contrast to a religious existence. He had no choice but to interpret him demonically, from the perspective of Don Juan. Quite different is that view of Mozart by one of his greatest devotees, Karl Barth.

Barth wrote that, although Mozart lived a rather frivolous life when he was not working at his music, and was a Roman Catholic to boot, he has an important place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation, "because he had heard, and causes those who have ears to hear, even today, what we shall not see until the end of time-the whole context

of Providence." While the aesthetic can, in its sickly form so powerfully depicted by Kierkegaard, lead to despair, it can also, as in the case of Mozart's music, lead us beyond despair, not so much by a religious leap of faith as by an eschatological prolepsis, an anticipation of the promised wholeness of creation that is to be. As with Bonhoeffer, so also with Balthasar and Barth, we can only speculate about what Kierkegaard would make of their quite different understanding of the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and man, between time and eternity, as it applies to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious in the life of radical Christian discipleship.

Although it may seem surprising, some have entered the Catholic Church under the influence of Kierkegaard. After Kierkegaard succeeds in demolishing the false securities of every form of Christendom, one's only resort is to a church that is unqualifiedly and without remainder the Church. In his 1963 study *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, the Catholic philosopher Louis Dupré argued that these converts to Catholicism misunderstood Kierkegaard. "He is a person who kept protesting, who could never accept a church which had become established, even if on the basis of protest itself. The Protestant principle has been abandoned as soon as it has developed itself to the point of becoming a church. [Kierkegaard] protested against everything, even against the protest itself. Therefore his attitude was not purely negative but [dialectically] made itself positive again." It is very different for the Catholic, says Dupré, "for the Catholic Church cannot accept the dialectical principle except in her own bosom." Kierkegaard could never be content with a dialectic operating within an ambiance of rest, with a dialectic that had found its home, and therefore, says Dupré, Kierkegaard's own relation to Catholicism was always one of "an antipathetic sympathy and a sympathetic antipathy." I am not convinced Dupré is right and therefore have greater sympathy for those who have found Catholicism on the far side of Kierkegaard. From long and hard wrestling with Kierkegaard, one may come to see the ways in which the Church is "Christ the contemporary," but that is a reflection for another time.

Kierkegaard, it remains to be said, is not a systematic theologian. We know what he thought of systems and system makers, of which Hegel was the prime example. There is hardly a page in his writings that does not prompt from the systematically minded reader a protest against disconnections and apparent contradictions. Like Flannery O'Connor, he shouted to the hard of hearing and drew startling pictures for the almost blind. Kierkegaard was eccentric in the precise meaning of that word—off center, even out of the center. He believed that the center of his time and place, and of any time and place, is where the easy lies are told. He was Hiin Enkelte writing for the singular individual who might understand him. Many have read him to experience the frisson of youthful dissent from establishment ways of thinking and being, and have then set him aside upon assuming what are taken to be the responsibilities of adulthood. That, I believe, is a grave mistake. Kierkegaard is for the young, but he is also for grownups who have attained the wisdom of knowing how fragile and partial is our knowing in the face of the absolute, who are prepared to begin ever anew the lifelong discipline that is training in Christianity.

Richard John Neuhaus is Editor-in-Chief of *First Things*. This essay is adapted from the introduction to a new edition of Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*, forthcoming from Vintage.