

Kierkegaard and Faith

Kierkegaard's conception of faith was not congruent with the mainstream view held by most religious people. Kierkegaard has been known as the "Christian Socrates" because of the way he challenged traditional beliefs like Socrates did. Kierkegaard's faith is one of an individualistic re-choosing of faith in the impossible.

Kierkegaard thought that many Christians held an inauthentic faith that relied on doctrine and obedience. He wanted to get away from that and maintained that the movement of faith is up to each individual and his or her personal relationship with the impossible. He believed that what many people called "faith" was actually "hope" because with hope there is a probability for something to be true, whereas true faith is believing in something even though one knows it is impossible and there is no reason for one to believe in it. Hope does not have any relevance in the realm of impossibility, only faith does. There is an abandonment of reason when one chooses to have authentic faith. Kierkegaard maintained that faith was higher than reason. This means that reason has its limits and faith begins where those limits of reason are found. This choice of faith is not a one-time thing, according to Kierkegaard. One must make the movements of faith over and over again and constantly re-choose to abandon reason and believe in the impossible. This re-choosing is cyclical and no developmental progress is made, one just re-chooses the exact same thing over and over again.

The mainstream Christian view would see faith as being higher than reason as well, however, it probably does not include a constant re-choosing of faith that gets one nowhere, but only to where one started. Kierkegaard held that the leap of faith had to be done over and over again because to believe the impossible simply requires this never-ending re-choosing. The ideas of "fellowship" and community are also key aspects to the traditional Christian view. Church brings people together and allows them to discuss their beliefs and take comfort in the fact that others believe the same thing that they do. Many people go to church for this very reason, to see that others believe the same thing they do.

Kierkegaard thought that all notions of "fellowship" were a distancing from true faith. To be in a community of people requires a certain level of rational discourse, that is, expression. One needs to communicate what they think and what they believe in. This is an adequate way to discuss issues that involve everyday reason and solving practical problems, but according to Kierkegaard, true faith cannot be communicated because of the solitude that faith requires of each individual.

The very nature of faith as an extremely personal choice renders it incommunicable to others. Solitude is necessary for one who believes in the impossible because there is no way he or she can find adequate expression for what he or she believes. For this reason, Kierkegaard rejects the church as an adequate setting for faith because of its reliance on community and fellowship.

Also, faith cannot be taught. Listening to a clergyman discuss issues such as faith is fairly worthless because faith is something that can never be thought. One cannot teach another how to give up on impossible and then accept the impossible as being true. One cannot learn such a thing either because it is up to each individual to make the leap of faith.

Another important concept, touched on earlier, is the dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic faith. Authentic faith is an active faith in that the movements of faith are chosen again and again. Active faith is for the individual in his or her own solitude to find meaning. Inauthentic faith is inactive and complacent. Complacent faith is faith for comfort's sake. Comfort comes from the community and the idea that others believe what one also believes.

Faith for Kierkegaard was much different from the traditional Christian view of faith. One must re-choose faith in the impossible and that renders one to a solitary existence within the realm of faith. To embrace everything in the temporal world because of the belief in the impossible is not really a traditional Christian view either. Fellowship requires rational discourse, but faith is inexpressible. Faith is something for each individual and his or her relation to that which is impossible, not something that brings comfort and complacency.