

A Very Short Life of Kierkegaard

by Charles K. Bellinger

Søren Kierkegaard was born in 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark, as the seventh child of a wealthy businessman. His father was a self-educated man who had a brooding, deeply religious spirit. The father's pietism and philosophical interests had a great impact on his last son, Søren, who went on to become one of the most important figures in modern Christian thought.

Kierkegaard was a bright student and he received a high quality private school education. By the time he was 17, he could read Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, and French, as well as his native Danish. He entered the University, where his father hoped that he would study to become a pastor. Kierkegaard was more interested in studying literature and philosophy, however, and he adopted the carefree, expensive lifestyle of a prodigal son. He wrestled deeply with religious ideas, however, and at the age of 25 he had a profound conversion experience. He was reconciled with his father shortly before the latter's death, and he dedicated himself to the cause of Christian faith for the rest of his life.

The Kierkegaard family was deeply touched by tragedy. By the time Søren was 25, 5 of his 6 siblings had died, as well as his mother and father. Søren himself did not expect to live past the age of thirty. (As it was, he died at the age of 42 in 1855.)

He went on to complete the prerequisites for ordination in the Lutheran church, but he never did become ordained. Through his writings, he became a kind of pastor-at-large to the country of Denmark. In 1841 he earned a doctoral degree in philosophy, with a dissertation on *The Concept of Irony: with Constant Reference to Socrates*.

At the age of 27 he became engaged to Regine Olsen. For the next year he agonized within himself as to whether or not he had made a mistake. He broke off the engagement, believing that a marriage between them would not be viable, due to his personal eccentricities and his intense preoccupation with becoming an author. This engagement and its dissolution became one of the main inspirations for his subsequent authorship.

Since he had inherited a large sum of money from his father's estate, he was able to embark on a career as an independent author. Between the years of 1843 and 1851 he published a stream of books which are remarkable in their number, literary complexity, philosophical perception, and theological profundity. Since he wrote in Danish, he was only noticed at first by a handful of Danish intellectuals. It was not until the 20th century that he became a well-known and widely read figure on the Western intellectual scene.

His authorship can be divided into two time periods and six writing styles. The first time period is referred to as his "first authorship," from 1843 to 1846; the second period consists of works written between 1847 and 1855, which are known as his "second authorship." The first authorship consists primarily of pseudonymous works which were published under pen names such as Victor Eremita, Judge William, Hilarius Bookbinder, and Johannes Climacus. These pen names were attached to imaginary authors whose viewpoints did not necessarily coincide with Kierkegaard's own viewpoint. A novelist writes a novel by imagining characters and placing them in a setting and a plot. Kierkegaard imagined characters and had these characters write books. An understanding of this point is crucial for the project of interpreting his writings. In his own voice, Kierkegaard said, "if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine" (CUP, 627). After publishing his work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard intended to end his career as an author. But at that time a satirical newspaper called *The Corsair* began to lampoon him, at Kierkegaard's own request. As a result, Kierkegaard became a laughingstock in Danish society, and this incident spurred him on to continue writing. The books he wrote subsequently have become known as his second authorship; they are

mainly religious works, published under his own name.

Kierkegaard's authorship can also be divided into six main writing styles or genres or thematic subdivisions. The six categories are as follows, with a listing of the titles which fit into them:

- 1) Criticism: *Early Polemical Writings* [c. 1838], *The Concept of Irony* [1841], *Two Ages* [1846], *The Book on Adler* [c. 1847], *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* [1848].
- 2) "Fiction": *Either/Or* [1843], *Repetition* [1843], *Fear and Trembling* [1843], *Prefaces* [1844], *Stages on Life's Way* [1845].
- 3) "Philosophy of Religion": *The Concept of Anxiety* [1844], *Philosophical Fragments* [1844], *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [1846].
- 4) Pastoral Theology: *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* [1843-44], *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* [1845], *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* [1847], *Works of Love* [1847], *Christian Discourses* [1848], miscellaneous later discourses [1849-55]. [88 discourses total]
- 5) Polemical Theology: *The Sickness Unto Death* [1849], *Practice in Christianity* [1850], *For Self-Examination* [1851], *Judge for Yourself!* [c. 1851-2], miscellaneous later writings [i.e., *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon Christendom*, 1855].
- 6) Autobiographical Works: *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* [c. 1848], *Journals and Papers* [1829-55].

The first category contains works of literary, philosophical, cultural, and religious criticism. The second category contains works which are "novelistic" in character; they focus on the boundaries between different spheres of existence, such as the aesthetic and the ethical, and the ethical and the religious; they often focus on the subject of marriage; they can be traced back to Kierkegaard's relationship with Regine. The third category consists of pseudonymous works of a highly philosophical character; they address the themes of original sin, the Incarnation, and Christian existence. The fourth category includes Kierkegaard's religious/upbuilding discourses; these are in effect sermons, but they are meant to be read in published form rather than preached in church; they are addressed to a general audience and they speak in a pastoral and comforting, yet challenging, tone. The fifth category contains late works in which Kierkegaard analyzes and speaks out prophetically against what he sees as the spiritual bankruptcy of Western Christendom. The sixth category is made up of his remarkable autobiographical work, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, and of his voluminous journals, in which he carries on a running commentary on his life and times and the inner workings of his writing career.

These various writing styles can be understood as growing out of Kierkegaard's relationships with the various kinds of people he knew. His "fiction" was addressed to the literary intellectuals of his day, but it also grew out of his engagement to Regine; his "philosophy of religion" was directed at the philosophers and theologians of his time, who were largely under the sway of Hegelianism; his pastoral theology was intended for a general audience; his polemical theology was directed to the leaders of the state church, Bishops Mynster and Martensen. There is also a sense in which everything he wrote was addressed to God. Thus his authorship reveals the intricate nexus of relationships in which he lived. (This nexus of relationships is well illustrated in the volume *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, edited by Bruce Kirmmse, which contains all of the extant accounts of Kierkegaard by those who knew him.)

During the last months of his life, Kierkegaard carried out a relentless verbal attack on the state church in Denmark, which he judged as having departed from the path of genuine New Testament Christianity. He finally collapsed one day in the street, was carried to a hospital, and died about a month later. His older brother Peter, the only other surviving member of the family, went on later to become a bishop in that same state church.

Note: I am sometimes asked: "If I want to read something by Kierkegaard, where should I begin?" I consider *The Sickness Unto Death* to be his most important book. In my opinion, it has no equal in the modern world as a work of philosophical anthropology. Its

companion work, *Practice in Christianity*, is also very important. Generally speaking, the works in the pastoral theology category are very accessible to lay persons, and they express Kierkegaard's own viewpoint most clearly and directly. A good place to start is with *Works of Love* or *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. The first part of this latter work has previously been published in English under the title: *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. Its translator, Douglas Steere, said this: "As a devotional classic, the nineteenth century produced almost nothing in either Catholic or Protestant circles that can compare seriously with *Purity of Heart*."

Relatively short, accessible works about Kierkegaard include the following: C. Stephen Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology*; Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*; Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth*.

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