The Hipness Unto Death:

Soren Kierkegaard and David Letterman-Ironic Apologists to Generation X

By Mark C. Miller

Copenhagen in the mid-1800s and late twentieth-century America would appear to have little in common. Separated by one hundred and fifty years, by language, an ocean, and inconceivable technological advances, it seems there would be precious few points of comparison. But people, irrespective of nationality, are people, and people comprise the forces that shape societies. Thus, these two cultures have had similar forces at work within them. I will describe the nature of these forces later, but for now I should note one thing: There was a nineteenth-century Dane who tried to address these forces, or issues, to his peers-but he may have been better understood had he spoken to 80 million pre-21st century young Americans.

Soren Kierkegaard was, in the truest sense, a man ahead of his time. His approach to philosophy was dazzling and often confusing to his contemporaries. His first published work, Either/Or, was hailed not only as a new book but as a new kind of book. Frail, brilliant, and prolific, Kierkegaard used his sharp wit and considerable intellectual acumen to construct disarmingly persuasive arguments for the Christian faith. The manner in which he did this, however, was confounding to many. And while his roundabout style was not entirely elusive to his readers, it may well have been better grasped by another generation in another place.

Generation X is the name given by novelist Douglas Coupland to the Americans born between 1961 and 1981. A trillion-dollar debt is theirs to inherit, and Social Security is theirs to give but never receive. They feel alienated and disillusioned, and are disparaged by the baby boomers with whom they so often feel at war. Also known as baby busters, twentysomethings and thirteeners (they are the thirteenth generation raised under the U.S. flag), Xers will be the first generation in our history to not exceed their parents' standard of living. With more than half of them coming from divorced families, and with innumerable advertisements targeting their massive market demographic, they are cynical, wary, and apathetic. The American church, ensconced in its tried-and-true evangelism techniques, doesn't know what to do with them. Generation X, suspicious and indifferent, needs nothing.

But Xers need the gospel like everyone else. And Soren Kierkegaard is the philosopher-evangelist to give it to them. I submit that if the church is to communicate meaningfully with Generation X, it must adopt the strategies employed and the convictions passionately held by Kierkegaard. This study will focus on the following issues: Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" and "ethical" categories, and their relationship to Xers' ambivalence; indirect communication, especially that which employs irony and paradox; the priority of doing over knowing; and true community through the appropriation of the true individual.

Commitment to Live Well

Kierkegaard committed himself to seeking out the best way to live. Ultimately, he found such a way in Christianity. But to communicate this discovery, which became his deepest desire, he needed first to show the bankruptcy of the two most prevailing modes of living

in his native Copenhagen: the bourgeois life, which he eventually called the ethical, and the romantic life, or the aesthetic. He battled against these options and against the philosophy of Hegel, which, in Kierkegaard's eyes, systematized the bourgeois ethic: "He...came to see Hegelianism as an articulate codification of bourgeois ideals, as well as a powerful defense of those ideals. It had, therefore, to be penetrated and destroyed". {1}

The bourgeois, ethical life-one of virtue, commitment to job, family, and society-was foisted upon Kierkegaard by his religious father. He knew this life experientially. Yet Kierkegaard also had tasted of the romantic life when he was freed from his family to study at the university. This too, proved unfulfilling, however: "In his own experience he discovered that the 'aesthetical' life, that is, a life lived for enjoyment, even though it were intellectual enjoyment, leads to despair, in fact is despair, even if the individual is not aware of it". {2}

For Kierkegaard, the choice is in fact no choice at all, because we lose our souls either way. Either we embrace the ethical life and lose ourselves in the crowd, "...not by evaporation in the infinite, but by being entirely finitized, by having become, instead of a self, a number, just one man more, one more repetition" {3}, or we flee the crowd and pursue ourselves. This is the romantic life, and in it we lose our identity as we chase after enjoyable moments and events:

The point is that once concrete, passionate, and meaningful actions have been transformed, emptied of meaning, and remain only as caricatures of themselves. When this happens, life becomes theater. . . . What these [events] have in common is the expression of behavior which lacks the meaning of inwardness, form without content. . . . The effect can only be as Kierkegaard says, a dispirited cynicism and a vague longing for something genuine. {4}

Cynicism and a longing for the genuine are precisely what are encountered in Generation X. Thirteeners are an audience for Kierkegaard because they have assumed a cynical posture in both their recreation and vocation. Furthermore, they experience tremendous ambivalence: They would not mind being a cog in the bourgeois wheel of life because, first, many of them have never experienced the familial stability that would have resulted from an "ethical" commitment; and second, there is not available to them the career opportunity that existed for their parents. On the other hand, they see the consumeristic legacy that bourgeois boomers have left for them, and they want no part in perpetuating it. They would rather, in the tradition of the romantics, drop out and do their own thing. In a sense, they want both options. Kierkegaard prescribes neither.

It is easy to see why Xers, like the Copenhagen bourgeois, would find their identity in their work. Often growing up with both parents working, they have been on their own, and work gives them a measure of independence. In fact, high school students of the 1980s and '90s are working longer hours for pay than any previous generation in American history. {5} And with the way things are developing economically, they will be struggling to keep up for years to come: "When you marry, you and your spouse will both work-not for boomerish self-fulfillment but because you need to just to make ends meet". {6}

While Generation X works hard, they have felt deeply the sting of their careerist elders' absence and lack of involvement. So while they nibble at the hook of the bourgeois life style, they are not so famished that they will swallow it whole-Thirteeners are more interested in relationships than careers. Janet Bernardi, a Christian Xer, says:

The truth of the matter is that we started in the direction the boomers pointed and quickly saw that it was pointless. We Xers are reluctant to embark on the same path as

the generation before us. Career is a yuppie notion. Before careers came into vogue, people worked simply to support their families, not to gain their life's fulfillment. They had more free time, and they raised their own children. {7}

Bernardi says elsewhere: "What we do need and want is a cohesive family unit!" {8}

X Hedonism

No, Xers more often lose themselves in hedonism more than responsibility. "As they shield their eyes with . . . sunglasses, today's teens and twentysomethings present to boomer eyes a splintered image of brassy looks and smooth manner . . . of kids more comfortable shopping or playing than working or studying". {9}

This is an image of young people just getting by, living distractedly and disjointedly so that they only have to face the reality they choose. In The Sickness unto Death, Kierkegaard wags a finger at those who would refuse to become the people they were meant to be: "...he will seek forgetfulness in sensuality, perhaps in debauchery, in desperation he wants to return to immediacy, but constantly with consciousness of the self, which he does not want to have". {10}

Kierkegaard wants to arouse a sense of self in the good, in God. But Xers, in their sensuality, forget who God is. What's more, if they suspect you're going to tell them about God or their need for him, they hear a sales pitch coming. They have been a target market for too long. They will not listen. If they are to hear the gospel, they must be told subversively, and not know what they are hearing until it is too late.

This is precisely the manner in which Kierkegaard communicated with his readers. In order to challenge Denmark's concept of Christianity, he needed to maneuver around the wall rather than try to break his way through it. It was, after all, a "Christian" country populated with "Christian" citizens. He went about his task, particularly in his pseudonymous works, by employing indirect communication. He would engage his reader by speaking about things of interest to him or her, and would eventually steer the argument around to Christianity. Once arrived at this topic, however, he would speak quite directly. Kierkegaard considered himself a poet to the end of his days, and a poet uses language to entice, not to explain.

As a poet and subversive communicator, Kierkegaard jettisoned religious language so that he might more effectively talk about religious matters. This is what is needed among Thirteeners, because "what once worked in evangelism and discipleship is failing with large numbers of Xers. 'In terms of evangelicalism, we have a generation coming up that doesn't speak the same language . . . doesn't have the same needs, and isn't looking to Christianity to answer their spiritual concerns,'" says researcher George Barna. {11}

Kierkegaard often addressed an issue that was of concern to his readers, the philosophical question: how is it possible for us to know the truth? In his discussions, he usually avoided the names of God or Christ. However, "in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript the pseudonymous author . . . states specifically that his topic is the nature of Christianity. Yet here, too, the problem is stated in philosophical terms with an almost complete absence of a 'theological' vocabulary". {12}

Kierkegaard's intention was, frankly, to deceive. He lured his audience into hearing what he wanted to talk about, the truth of the gospel. Kierkegaard deepened their engagement by assuming points of view he did not hold, then dialoging with himself and his reader through his pseudonymous authors. His method of indirect communication serves as a powerful context in which to talk about Christianity with Generation X. "George Barna suggests that churches focus on Socratic teaching rather than the didactic

style of preaching typical among evangelicals. 'Don't tell them what to believe but rather create a discussion with provocative questions that will engage them.'" {13}

Employing Irony

If churches focus on Socrates, they will be turning toward Kierkegaard's mentor. It was from the Greek philosopher that Kierkegaard acquired one of his most powerful tools in indirect communication: irony. Irony was an object of substantial reflection in Kierkegaard's mind before his conversion (he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the topic), but after he came to know God in a new way, he used it to keep off balance those who would observe Christianity from a distance.

To speak ironically is to intend something different from the words used. It is to be detached from the words' meanings, while at the same time assuming your meaning is understood. Irony is a kind of hidden communication, because one can say so strenuously the opposite of what one intends be heard. So Kierkegaard, in Either/Or, could in several hundred pages give himself over to speaking in the best possible light from two perspectives which he entirely repudiated.

There is not only ironic speech, however, but the ironic way of living, which was embraced by the romantics of Copenhagen:

Irony is the detachment, the removing of oneself, and thus the freedom which comes from being explicitly self-conscious, uncommitted, and uninvolved in ordinary human purposes. The "ironist" stands back, watches, comments upon, and evaluates situations, never truly participating or getting involved himself. {14}

It was this ironic posture that Kierkegaard tried to trip up. He used irony to disarm the ironic way of living.

Kierkegaard's use of Socratic irony was complicated, but thorough. I mentioned earlier that his indirect way of communicating was confounding to many. One reason for this was that in order to defeat the ironist's stance, he needed first to create in his reader an ironic posture. That is, it was necessary for the reader to be detached from his own life in order for him to hear Kierkegaard's suggestion that it was unsatisfactory. More confusing still, Kierkegaard would then communicate ironically with the reader by detaching himself from his own words. He then was able to speak the language of his reader. "He will be more poetic than any Young German. He will be more Hegelian than any professor of philosophy. He will be more upright than any parson, more exploitive than any Don Juan". {15}

One is reminded of the apostle Paul's frenzy in making himself like a slave, a Jew, a person under the law, a person not under the law, all in an effort to win them to Christ. Kierkegaard had a similar mission. And in order to achieve his goal, he needed to obtain "mastered irony": ". . . the insight and courage to suspend or temporarily put aside your cherished commitments in order to objectively assess them as if they were not yours. . . . One must be able to be ironic and committed at the same time" {16}. If what an ironist enjoys most is his sense of superiority in life, then his irony may be fully developed, but unmastered. He can detach himself from life, but not from himself. He is a cynic. And irony and cynicism are blood brothers among Xers.

Irony has been around for centuries (recall Socrates' quip that he was not a teacher and had nothing to say), but Generation X has commandeered it and speaks it as their native tongue. Why do Xers find David Letterman (a boomer, granted) so funny? Not because he tells great jokes, but because he mocks his own jokes. He stands outside himself and

says, in effect, that the whole idea of his show is inane, and his entire twentysomething audience agrees-and laughs.

Xers-at least older Xers-who find Beavis and Butthead funny, do so not because they like vulgar humor, but because they can see these stupid kids in the same detached manner as the characters themselves do. But Xers' irony is unmastered. They are cynics. Their cynicism is betrayed by the fact that while they think they can glide through life as untouchables, they cannot view themselves in the same detached way they view their world. Speaking about Xers' favorite pastime, television, Johns Hopkins professor Mark Miller states:

Contrary to the assumption both of its highbrow detractors and its self-conscious devotees, TV is not an expression "of the people," not "vulgar" in any traditional sense, but an effective corporate instrument, whose sole purpose . . . is to sell you to the advertisers; and it does so, in part, precisely through the very irony which some now celebrate as the proof of mass immunity. {17}

Xers are not immune, although they think they are. It is their superior air of detachment from the world that betrays the second proof of their ironic cynicism: remaining lofty and attached to nothing, they can commit to nothing.

It is the supreme, unyielding commitment to God that Kierkegaard wants his audience to embrace. If he stopped with irony, he would be withholding water from the man to whom he had given a salted snack. We cannot be ironic with God. As Mullen says, "One cannot take a position of ironic detachment concerning that to which one is related absolutely". {18} This is where mastered irony is necessary: one views oneself objectively, while committing to God steadfastly. With Kierkegaard's works of direct communication, such as The Works of Love and Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing, he finished what he started with his "aesthetical" works. He compelled his reader to keep an open mind through irony, then told the rest of the story of the gospel directly. This is the kind of evangelism for which Generation X is desperate.

Clearly, Kierkegaard believes there is truth to be known. He writes, in The Works of Love: "...one can be deceived in believing what is untrue, but on the other hand, one is also deceived in not believing what is true." {19} But for Kierkegaard, there is something to be done with truth more than to be known about truth. He writes in his Journals:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know. . . . The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. {20}

What is to be done is to live by faith. This has more to do with action than belief. But faith begins with resignation, and that is both difficult and necessary. Kierkegaard explains in Fear and Trembling: "The infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith, so that one who has not made this movement has not faith; for only in . . . resignation . . . can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith." {21}

The Enigmatic Dane

Kierkegaard is an enigma. He penned thousands of pages to convince readers that one cannot be convinced intellectually about Christianity. One has reason to believe, but one cannot appeal to reason in order to believe. Thus one is thrown into paradox, forced to reckon with the reality of Christ as God and man simultaneously. We cannot control what we believe, and yet, paradoxically, there is an element of choice in what we believe. The question is: Will you choose to take the leap into resignation leading to faith, or will you not? Kierkegaard eviscerates any objection to Christianity on intellectual grounds. That is

not the issue, he says; rather, "'It is so difficult to believe . . . because it is so difficult to obey.'" {22}

Xers dislike this explanation because they, like the rest of us, are sinners. Yet their hearts resonate with Kierkegaard's emphasis on doing over knowing. While modernism-and with it the assumption that knowledge is certain-has lost its footing in this past century, X is the first generation to be raised in the postmodern era. Modernism still has its foot in the door, however, especially in American churches. It is seen in preaching and apologetics that continue to give weighty importance to reason. "To know Generation X, it is important to understand two competing paradigms-one exemplified by the apologetic style of Josh McDowell's book Evidence that Demands a Verdict; the other by MTV". {23}

It's not that Xers prefer a hip presentation to a sound argument; they just want to know what changes lives. What kind of rational argument can convince one of the truth of a mystery? But show how the mystery has changed you, and Xers want to know what happened. They eschew the boomer churches' six steps towards better living and agree with Kierkegaard: there are no precise steps to follow. There is only the action of following Christ.

Relationships

There is one final category to consider: the relationship between the individual and the neighbor, and what this means for community. Kierkegaard constantly addressed in his writings "that solitary individual." He disparaged the crowd, the mass, the herd. His objective was to bring the individual before God, where he would stand naked and alone. To truly understand what it meant to be an individual, and to walk in the freedom of that understanding, was Kierkegaard's desire for his reader.

What, then, of the community? Here I fear Kierkegaard has been often misunderstood. The community which is formed when individuals "will one thing"-the good, God-is radically different from the mass mentality he railed against, for, ". . . all clannishness is the enemy of universal humanity". {24}

Kierkegaard believed that when one stood before God as an individual, he would love his neighbor, and they would be bound together. "But to will only one thing, genuinely to will the Good, as an individual, to will to hold fast to God, which things each person without exception is capable of doing, this is what unites". {25} We are united when we seek God wholeheartedly. When we do not submit to one another, when we esteem ourselves, we do not "will the Good" and community suffers. But "Love seeks not its own. For the true lover does not love his own individuality. He rather loves each human being according to the other's individuality". {26}

Generation X needs community desperately. They are a fragmented, isolated group. But not any collection of people will suffice; like Kierkegaard, they are wary of the herd, any herd: "Generation X sees the Church as an institution like all others, and Generation X does not trust institutions". {27} The family is an institution, and most Xers' families were broken when someone loved himself or herself too much as an individual. What Xers desire are groups of people that love the individual in one another. "Restoration of community is the primary need for Generation X". {28}

Conclusion

Xers may appear to be a distracted generation, but I believe they have a firmer grasp than did their parents of what they truly want: family, relationship, transcendence. They have seen the prosperity of the boomers, and while they would like a bigger piece of the pie, for the most part they recognize the bankruptcy of accumulation for its own sake. It

is quite possible that the denial of the wealth they desire may be the very thing that focuses their eyes on God and relationships, and they will seek fulfillment outside materialism. They won't be able to look at their BMWs and say, "Maybe all there is to life is another car." If they choose to seek the Good and will one thing, they will realize that to do so is not as easy a prescription as it sounds: anything other than the God of the Bible, even if it looks good or impressive, is the wrong thing.

Kierkegaard has these words for Generation X:

For, as it is said, all ways lead to the Good, when a man in truth only wills one thing . . . But there is danger that the lover . . . may swerve out of the true course and aim perhaps for the impressive instead of being led to the Good. . . . [O]ne can bid for a woman's favor by willing something when it is merely impressive. This can flatter the girl's pride and she can repay it with her adoration. But God in heaven is not as a young girl's folly. He does not reward the impressive with admiration. The reward of the good man is to be allowed to worship in truth. {29}

May Generation X will one thing only, and may the Church help it stay on the true course.

{1} Douglas Mullen, Kierkegaard’s Philosophy (New York: Mentor, 1981), 24.

{2} Walter Lowrie, A Short Life of Kierkegaard (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1942), 92.

{3} Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Uni-versity Press, 1980), 166.

{4} Mullen, 88.

{5} Karen Ritchie, Marketing to Genera-tion X (New York: Lexington, 1995), 41.

{6} Neil Howe and Wil-liam Stauss, “The New Generation Gap,” The Atlantic Monthly (December 1992), 67-89.

{7} William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi, A Generation Alone (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 19.

{8} Mahedy and Bernar-di, 19.

{9} Howe and Strauss, 74.

{10} Kierkegaard, 199.

{11} Andres Tápia.

{12} Kenneth Hamilton, The Promise of Kierkegaard (Phila-delphia: J.B. Lippin-cott, 1969), 45.

{13} Tápia.

{14} Mullen, 18.

{15} Mullen, 39.

{16} Mullen, 38.

{17} Mark Miller, Boxed In (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Uni-versity Press, 1988), 24.

{18} Mullen, 145.

{19} Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love (New York: Harper Torch-books, 1962), 23.

{20} Søren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1938), 4-5.

{21} Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart . . . , 125.

{22} Lowrie, 86.

{23} Tápia.

{24} Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart . . . , 206.

{25} Purity of Heart . . . , 206.

{26} Kierkegaard, Works of Love, 251-2.

{27} Mahedy and Bernar-di, 137.

{28} Mahedy and Bernar-di, 82.

{29} Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart . . . , 67.

Further information about Mars Hill Forum may be obtained by writing to:

Mars Hill Forum
321 High School Rd NE 384
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110
206-842-7286
206-842-7357 (fax)
800-990-MARS (USA only)
info@marshillforum.org
http://www.marshillforum.org