

Background to Modern Theology

Soren Kierkegaard

20.11.2005

In this, the final in the series of 6 philosophers who have had a major impact on 20th century Christianity and thought, we look at the work of a Danish philosopher who only lived to 42.

Soren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen on 15th May 1813. He died as an outcast from the Danish Lutheran Church, yet a committed Christian on 4th November 1855.

Many philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre (an influential French atheist) were greatly indebted to him. The movement known as existentialism has grown from his work. It seeks to highlight the individual, our choices and living for the current time (not the future or past).

Like most Danish homes of the time, Soren's family was religious. But part of the way Soren looked at his world was coloured by his father's very depressed, doom-ridden, guilt-riddled view of life.

Soren studied to become a Lutheran minister, but gave it up as he grew more cynical and disillusioned. He turned to philosophy, drank, and his moral life fell apart.

However, in 1836 he experienced a moral revolution. He pulled his life together, and became a more reliable and responsible person.

In 1838 he chose to become a Christian, and studied theology again. But he was very critical of the state church. He knew that many people went to church without believing in Jesus. They declared the creeds, but their lifestyle away from church showed they really did not believe. Many ministers did the same.

Kierkegaard decided then to avoid the church and encourage others to choose Christ. He wrote over 20 books in 10 years, often using a pen name. When he criticised a local newspaper, it constantly criticised him.

Apart from the bitter attack from the press, Soren also felt the loneliness, flowing from an engagement he'd broken because he believed

that is what God wanted.

He felt the overwhelming academic pressure because he dared to disagree with the very widespread views of a man named Hegel, who had a big picture view of life. Hegel was concerned with the process of how our world grows through adaptation (called thesis, antithesis and synthesis), and how we as individuals blend in to the wholeness of what God is doing.

Our individual uniqueness is lost in the big picture, so Kierkegaard fought against it. He stressed the uniqueness of each person and how our individuals are important.

In 1845, in his book Stages on Life's Way, he declared that there are 3 stages we can have in life.

[1] The first is that of the aesthetic man. The person in this stage is governed by senses, impulses and emotions. Happiness is sought after. But only despair is found because happiness is fleeting. (This stage happened to him when he stopped theology and lived it up).

[2] The second stage is the ethical man. Feeling a need for more than pleasure, a person becomes a moral being, accepting moral obligations. This gives deeper satisfaction.

But the person also experiences despair as awareness of personal sin grows and guilt corrodes. As he found after two years of wild living, the third stage is required:-

[3] The religious man. In an act of faith, a person chooses to believe in God whom Kierkegaard said was beyond being able to be proven. Kierkegaard refused to put God into any sort of proof system. You either believed or you did not. Choosing to believe in God was a true leap of faith. It was the self-defining individuating choice, which completes the possibility of humanity.

Kierkegaard said that in an absolute paradox, the infinite creator is in the flesh in the humiliated

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Christ. Therefore, we become the best we can be as we choose to trust him, without proof. He didn't discount rational investigation, but even when you heard many facts, you still have a leap of faith to choose to become a Christian.

But once we choose, we must keep on becoming a Christian. Choice is the defining thing, so we must live for each moment, and not rest on the laurels of the past. Each moment needs the important act of choosing to continue becoming a Christian. If you are not choosing to become something, then he claimed, you are a nothing! He said that the decisionless life is abominable!

Our act of faith is always new, as we repeatedly affirm the truth of Jesus. He did not mean we are becoming a Christian as in 'tomorrow or the next day we might decide'. Rather he meant that we are in a dynamic state of always becoming and always affirming our choice.

Choice was so important for him.

Kierkegaard rightly reminded Christians who were heavily influenced by religiosity, that we are not just going along with the crowd. The Bible says God does not want us to simply do the religious actions without a deliberate choice of following Christ. We are to keep walking in Christ's footsteps. That involves choosing to reject sin and to keep on following Christ.

If a system removed choice, such as having a traditional credal based church in which you can be a dead Christian, as the Dutch Lutheran church was then, Kierkegaard slammed it. If the system removed choice because you had a dictator who made choices for you and told you what to do, then he also slammed it.

Each person must exercise their choosing abilities.

But truth was affected by his view of life. For apart from the truth of God suffering in Christ, there was no absolute truth. Something is only true if a person chooses to accept it as true. Truth and knowledge became clouded in a mist or shadow until someone chose to accept it as a

fact. It may be a fact for someone else, but it's not a fact for me until I accept it.

This opened the door for many people to have relative truth. What's true for me may not be true for you, because you refuse to choose it. This is very modern, but very difficult to justify from the Bible.

In his time, Kierkegaard stood as a beacon bringing people back to Jesus, but his work also led many people in the late twentieth century to accept the idea that the Bible may be truth for me, but it may not be truth for you. If I choose to accept it, that's fine for me, but I must be wary of imposing my idea of truth on others.

However, the most major influence of his work in the 20th century did not come through Christians. In the last 40 years, non-Christian existentialists, like Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasised living for now, being a chosen, special moment. Do not focus on the future, or dream about the past, concentrate on the now. We begin to live fully when we choose to live with choice. The trouble though is that the non-Christians concluded that life is absurd. They saw Kierkegaard's God as an aberration, but they ended in a deeper despair than the aesthetic or ethical man ever did. They reached the point where they really do need God.

Hopefully, if you have heard the 6 sermons, you might have thought more about why Christianity today encompasses very widespread views, and how your understanding of the faith has been affected by modern thought. If you are talking with people who claim something different from the clear meaning of the Bible, do not be afraid. Do not accuse them of being hellfire fuel. Instead think through what they're saying, and ask them where they find it in the Bible. If that scares you, ask God to fill you with His peace, and for His Spirit to give you the right words to say.

We need to hold onto the truth, yet also use the brains God has given us. But our thinking must always be guided by God's Spirit as he brings

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his revealed truth of the Bible alive in us,
convicting us of our sin, and convincing us of
the truth of Jesus.