

## **Christianity** Truth, Faith, and God

What is Truth? That's Truth with a capital "T," which is supposed to somehow designate a difference from truth (with lowercase "t"); or, in other words, what is the Ultimate Truth? Kierkegaard unequivocally believes that this Truth is subjectivity: "Subjectivity is the truth."<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard takes this truth to be, ultimately, the truth of Christianity. With this, he makes an objectivity and subjectivity into one of his *either/or* constructs: "*Either* he is in faith convinced of the truth of Christianity...*Or* the inquirer is, on the other hand, not in an attitude of faith, but objectively in an attitude of contemplation..."<sup>2</sup> This *either/or* construct is **always** related to the ethical, but we should not assume that Kierkegaard means a disjunction when he speaks of an *either/or*. In fact, Kierkegaard states plainly again, "My *either/or* does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil; it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil/*or* excludes them."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, though, we should not think Kierkegaard implies that good and evil are to be joined together in some Absolute, a direct challenge to Hegel.

This subjectivity manifests as being "infinitely and personally and passionately interested on behalf of his own eternal happiness for his relationship to this truth."<sup>4</sup> For Kierkegaard, that is what Christianity is about. It is a kind of inter-subjectivity whereby people found in a community, particularly one of faith, can focus on and discover this eternal happiness. Furthermore, it is not something one is born into, as the state of Denmark made every citizen a "Christian." This fueled a growing dislike in Kierkegaard of what he termed "Christendom" and pitted against "Christianity." Whereas Christianity was about the subjective discovery of eternal happiness, Christendom was a group of phonies posing as Christians. For these reasons, Kierkegaard defends Truth through *either/or* statements—primarily, objectivity or subjectivity—

<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, David Swenson, trans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944): 187.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, volume II, Walter Lowrie, trans. (Garden city, NY: Anchor, 1959): 173.

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 23.

that effectually dissolve Christendom. This culminates in the Truth of Christianity: ultimate subjectivity. This subjectivity, though, is not a call for relativism; it is a call for truth-in-community through history. Furthermore, Kierkegaard equates this with the concept of God. We shall explore Kierkegaard's call to subjectivity through his *either/or* statements and show how they relate to the absolute ethical of the *either/or* of good and evil.

## **2. No Historical Way!**

Kierkegaard begins the Postscript by describing two aspects of objectivity: the historical and philosophical points of view. Each presents a problem for truth because it is impossible to reach an objective truth. He frames this argument within Christianity, because it is proposed that the truth of Christianity is to be investigated “in a purely objective manner.”<sup>5</sup> With regards to the historical point of view, Kierkegaard immediately raises an issue of gathering historical evidence. From the historical point of view, “the greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is merely an *approximation*.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this approximation is not adequate on which one should base one's eternal happiness. This historical “truth” primarily includes the elements of the Holy Scriptures and the historical Church. Kierkegaard then attacks Christendom's view of each of these elements and how they cannot serve as a basis for any kind of Christian living. Because Christendom uses the Scriptures as a measure for what is “good” doctrine, Christendom must be sure of its historical accuracy. This accuracy requires a objective understanding of history, that is perfectly complete. As Kierkegaard has already stated, though, the best we can reach is an approximation. Therefore, Kierkegaard must analyze “inspiration.”

Kierkegaard does not take “inspiration” to mean the canonicity of the Scriptures, the authenticity of their authorship, the maintained integrity through time, or any kind of critical

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 25.

view of the Scriptures. Instead, “inspiration” for Kierkegaard is found in a subjective dialog between the truth of Scriptures and the self. Inspiration is an object solely of faith.<sup>7</sup> All critical approaches to Scriptures result in “objective” analyses that conclude with objective propositions. They remove subjectivity. These, then, should be seen by a believer “whether for or against, as a misdirection, a temptation for the spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard uses all of this to make his main point about both the historical and the philosophical: both require proof, which is something that faith not only does not require but also rejects.

Kierkegaard sees that this discussion on the historical objective approach to the Scriptures leads to looking at the Church in the same manner. Kierkegaard's basic premise here is that “the Church has authority only if it can prove that it is apostolic, that is the same as it was eighteen hundred years ago.”<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard also makes this case in the Fragments. Kierkegaard goes to great lengths to show that a contemporary disciple has as much access to Truth as a historical one does because “man receives the condition in the Moment, the same condition which, since it is requisite for the understanding of the eternal Truth, is *eo ipso* an eternal condition.”<sup>10</sup> Otherwise, there could be no disciples beyond the original historical one. Therefore, Kierkegaard concludes that the living word—as visible in the subjective contemporary interpretation of Scriptures—is what defines the Church. The historical may be important to Christianity; but because we are only able to attain an approximation, it should not define Christianity.

### 3. Limiting a Philosophical View

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<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Dupré, Kierkegaard as Theologian, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963): 121.

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, 77.

Kierkegaard does not give much time to the philosophical point of view because much of it depends on the historical one, which Kierkegaard has just rejected because of its specious nature. Yet, it has a better starting point than the historical point of view: “Here then we may be sure of avoiding such presuppositions as were met with in the preceding”<sup>11</sup> because it lacks presuppositions. Or does it? In Denmark, because Christianity was the official state religion, the people which Kierkegaard is critiquing assumes Christianity as a given. To Kierkegaard, one cannot be both a believer and philosophical as “he must long ago have perceived that philosophy can never acquire the same significance for him as faith.”<sup>12</sup> It is not that philosophy is “bad,” but that it may “lure him away from the certainty of faith.”<sup>13</sup> Philosophy is only temporary while faith is something eternal. For Kierkegaard, this means then to pursue the eternal.

As noted earlier, the historical and philosophical points of view are both indicative of objectivity, something which Kierkegaard vehemently attacks as being the opposite of faith, the basis of Christianity. Louis Dupre agrees: “every objective approach to Christianity is illegitimate; concerning faith, no speculation is possible except whether one accepts it or not.”<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard admits that this comes from his understanding of Lessing and spends a portion of the Postscript appreciating Lessing. They each conclude that Christianity cannot be objective because if its grounding in faith, the ultimate subjectivity. Furthermore, any form of Christianity that seeks to be objective is comical because of the contradictory nature inherent to its undertaking.

#### 4. Objectivity and the Event

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<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Dupré, 119.

Most of Kierkegaard's works focus on the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. As mentioned previously, Kierkegaard sees Christianity as being something wholly subjective and never objective. Christianity cannot be approached objectively and objectivity cannot correctly conceive of Christianity. Historically, the best evidence we have is mere approximation. Therefore, it cannot be useful in adding to anything Christian. Philosophically, we cannot make Christianity an object of speculation. Thus, both must be rejected. This complete rejection of objectivity is grounded in Kierkegaard's belief that one becomes Christian by experience of an event: one cannot be born into it nor even learn it. For this, Kierkegaard goes back to the Greek notion of Recollection. In the Fragments, Kierkegaard sets up his argument around God being the Teacher who “gives the learner the requisite condition and the Truth.”<sup>15</sup> God helps the learner understand when he is in Error through his own reasoning, which then brings him toward the Truth. Kierkegaard calls this Error Sin and continues to construct a concept of learning Truth through Christian imagery framed in the concept of Recollection. God, the Teacher, becomes necessary because the learner is unable to move toward the Truth with some kind of prompting from something that already knows it. We cannot reach Truth or Christianity through objectivity. Thus, Kierkegaard abandons it completely. Instead, Kierkegaard urges strongly to move towards a subjective approach that focuses on the eternal happiness and the passion of faith.

### **5. Subjectivity**

The first issue of subjectivity for Kierkegaard is to become subjective. How does this happen? Kierkegaard believes this to be the most difficult task for a human being because one is already a subject. One must become what one already is and this is difficult because “every

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<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, Fragments, 19.

human being has a strong natural bent and passion to become something more and different.”<sup>16</sup> Becoming subjective is a rare occurrence as is a true lover. Love and subjectivity are related to one another as love is one of the highest expressions of subjectivity. By becoming subjective, Kierkegaard implies a submission to dialectical process. This process, though, is not to be confused with the Hegelian System. It is a matter of dialog. By entering into the process of learning through Recollection, one enters into a dialog with the Teacher. As one becomes more subjective, one discards objective certainty and turns toward the subjective passion of faith: “faith constantly tends to become objective knowledge, but at the same time it keeps detaching itself from its acquired positions by an ever-renewed inward movement.”<sup>17</sup> This faith comes from the inward reflection and not from an outside source, yet it also comes from an outside source. This is because God is both inside and outside the learner yet also neither. Faith is a paradox. To attempt to prove one aspect and negate the others, one slips back into seeking objective certainty and, thus, remove oneself from the subjective.

One may ask, though, if this leads us to some kind of relativism or pantheism. Kierkegaard answers in the negative and points to something Wholly Other. This Other is the Unknown and Kierkegaard titles it as “the God”.<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard does not wish to prove God's existence, as it is an improper approach. Instead, Kierkegaard suggests we simply assume God's existence in the same manner than one assumes that “some existing thing is a stone.”<sup>19</sup> One can reach this divine object only by transcending both subjectivity and objectivity through subjectivity: “complete subjectivity is the only objectively correct approach of God.”<sup>20</sup> In the Fragments, Kierkegaard first outlines the paradox that will be of faith: man needs God (as the

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Dupré, 125.

<sup>18</sup> See Kierkegaard, Fragments, 49ff.

<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard, Fragments, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Dupré, 130.

Teacher), yet because God is absolutely different, man is confronted with the problem of transcending this difference. Further yet, man needs God to transcend the difference. Here, we have an apparent paradox as man cannot approach what man needs to approach what man needs. This is where Kierkegaard brings in the ultimate paradox which can be accepted only by faith. This paradox is what makes Kierkegaard thoroughly “Christian” in his ideology as he brings forth the concept of a God-as-man.

### 6. Faith's Paradox

The Absolute Paradox is that of Christ: a figure that is completely God and completely man. It is that “God, despite the total otherness of man (which results from sin), nevertheless enters into a relation with him.”<sup>21</sup> This is impossible for reason and philosophy because “revelation and redemption, by which God enters into contact with man, become contradictions in the situation of sin.”<sup>22</sup> This Paradox becomes the single bridge to God which man can cross. It is something accepted by a *leap* of faith. This leap is not like Archimedes’s moment of *eureka!* as Kierkegaard claims Jacobi thinks.<sup>23</sup> The leap is a subjective experience of which one becomes aware “by being there in passion and inwardness.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, this leap is not one acquires by willing it; Kierkegaard believes that willing the leap results in the impossibility of making the leap. It is something that creeps up almost by surprise which qualitatively changes one from non-belief to belief. The inwardness from the leap results in faith. The believer, because of faith, must be against seeing the object of their faith, and the paradox of their faith, as a simple philosopher of wisdom: “for the true believer it is a blasphemy to say that Christ’s words are wise or profound, for that puts them on a par with human philosophies and takes away the

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<sup>21</sup> Dupré, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Dupré, 135.

<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 231.

transcendence of Him who proclaimed them.”<sup>25</sup> Christ’s words are to be understood by belief and not by a dissecting analysis of their wisdom.

Faith, for Kierkegaard, leads to acknowledging the progress through stages, namely the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Inwardness is the constant dialog between these stages as the person transitions between each repeatedly through life. The aesthetic is mostly a “shallow” ideology in which decisions are immanently present because the immediate moment is everything for the aesthete. This is to say that possibility is higher than reality; *posse* trumps *esse*. On the other hand, the ethicist is the subjective thinker who considers things against the *either/or* of good and bad, the absolutely ethical decision. Because of its absoluteness, the aesthetic is excluded completely. Here, reality is higher than possibility and the *posse* and *esse* circulate into each other as a cycle of action and possibility: “The ethical principle is that no possibility is understood until each *posse* has really become an *esse*.”<sup>26</sup> The ethical is the real of inwardness “infinitely interested in existing.”<sup>27</sup>

The religious stage is more like an excursion of the ethical towards the divine. The person existing in the religious stage, the *man of faith*, is no different than any other person by appearance. He is still living a normal life. Yet, he makes two movements from the *posse* to the *esse*: infinite resignation and faith. Both of these are most clearly expressed for Kierkegaard in Abraham, described in detail by his Fear and Trembling. Abraham surrenders to God in resignation, yet this precedes faith. This resignation is, in effect, a break with temporality and a delving into the eternal: “In the infinite resignation the individual becomes conscious of his eternal validity, and only for the person who possesses such a consciousness can there be a

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<sup>25</sup> Dupré, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 288.

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 289.

person of grasping existence by means of faith.”<sup>28</sup> This can be seen in Abraham’s sacrificing of his son and the acceptance of the suffering to be endured. The final *leap* of faith is the leap *into* faith for Kierkegaard. Once one has accepted the temporal suffering by infinite resignation one then *believes* and understands. Faith is the understanding of the suffering and “*must not rest content* with unintelligibility; for precisely the relation to or the repulsion from the unintelligible, the absurd, is the expression for the passion of faith.”<sup>29</sup> For Kierkegaard, this is the definition of what it means to be a Christian.

### 7. The Other Christianity

As it can be seen, then, Christianity is not a matter of one’s attendance record or one’s birthplace or one’s birthright. It is a purely subjective occasion. For this reason, Kierkegaard “rebelled” against his time and what he called “Christendom.” Christendom was the exact opposite of Christianity. Where Christianity was subjective, Christendom rests on objective certainty. Where Christianity is inwardness without a changed appearance, Christendom wants its appearance known and differentiated from the others. Christendom has nothing to do with faith. Because of that, Christendom has nothing to do with God. Kierkegaard’s loudest attack comes in his Attack upon Christendom as his one thesis:

*The Christianity of the New Testament simply does not exist. Here there is nothing to reform; what has to be done is to throw light upon a criminal offense against Christianity, prolonged through centuries, perpetrated by millions (more or less guiltily), whereby they have cunningly, under the guise of Christianity, sought little by little to cheat God out of Christianity, and have succeeded in making Christianity exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament.*<sup>30</sup>

To Kierkegaard, this was most apparent in the rise of Hegelianism in Danish Christendom.

Kierkegaard takes much complaint to the Danish ideology that all Danes are Christians. His attacks on this point range from challenging the notion in the New Testament that the “gate is

<sup>28</sup> Reidar Thomte, Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Religion, (Princeton: Princeton, 1947): 57.

<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, Postscript, 540.

<sup>30</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Attack upon Christendom, (Boston: Beacon, 1944): 32-33.

wide that leads to destruction” to suggesting that God must be very comical for threatening Hell for unbelief when there are no believers in Denmark. Christendom for Kierkegaard implies that “it is as if Christ were a professor, and as if the apostles had formed a little scientific society.”<sup>31</sup>

### **8. Real Christianity**

All of this leads us to Christianity. Kierkegaard saw Christianity in terms of surrender and faith. There was no convincing someone of truth: either he believed or he did not and no attempt at objective proof would qualify as an acceptable attempt. “Christianity is not a doctrine, but new life.”<sup>32</sup> Christendom (and any attempt at an objective Christianity) was merely a “cheap edition of a Christian in perfect comfort.”<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard wanted to return to a “difficult” Christianity whereby it was something qualitatively difficult for one to do, yet not in a manner that would make it easy for intelligent people and harder for stupid people. It is something equally difficult. Christianity is communicated through existence.

Christianity is not a religion of immanence with subjectivity posited as truth. That is religiosity and is already covered in paganism. Christianity is, on the other hand, the exact opposite of paganism: subjectivity is the untruth. The truth “has come into being in time through the incarnation of God in Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Christianity is paradoxical paganism. Where paganism is simple and straightforward, Christianity is paradoxical and makes the believer paradoxical. The eternal happiness in which one should be infinitely interested (as the passion of faith is) for Christianity is “conditioned upon a relationship to the absurd.”<sup>35</sup> This absurd exists also in the appearance that Christianity is based on an aesthetic relationship with God, yet it is not because

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<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 193.

<sup>32</sup> Dupre, 187.

<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 495.

<sup>34</sup> Thomte, 93.

<sup>35</sup> Thomte, 95.

the relationship for the Christian is one based on a particular man, that of Christ. It is through inwardness that one develops this relationship.

It is also true that Christianity surfaces through ethics and this is “essentially a sphere of transition, which brings man into contradiction with himself and thus leads him to the edge of the transcendent.”<sup>36</sup> As one traveling through the stages of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, the person transitioning to Christianity experiences this ethical contradiction of himself before reaching the infinite resignation. The contradiction is one’s consciousness of sin. This comes again through the Greek Recollection in which God the Teacher leads the person to this point of consciousness. This results in the eventuality of the infinite resignation and, ultimately, the *leap*. The leap, then, leads to God.

## 9. God

One cannot come to God until making a conscious relation to God. This can only come through inwardness and subjectivity. Man’s experience before God “never grows into a mystic sense of participation: it remains a feeling of fear and trembling.”<sup>37</sup> God remains elusive and this results in the feeling of fear and trembling as one is individually relating to Truth. Experiencing God is “a process of dying away from the immediate” and transitioning to the eternal.<sup>38</sup> This is the God-relationship. This relationship further evidences itself in the God-man, Christ. That is the centrality of Christianity and to take it away would be to take Christianity away.

In a recapitulation, Truth is not subjectivity, but it is God. To construe of subjectivity and immanence as Truth is paganism. This is a step towards the redemption found in the relationship with God. But first, the person must experience contradictions within himself and then gain an understanding of his own sin. This leads one to the infinite resignation, which is the

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<sup>36</sup> Dupre, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Dupre, 82.

<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard, 432.

last step prior to the *leap* into faith. This leap implies the understanding of faith and the undertaking of suffering. In the end, the person enters into the eternal with fear and trembling before the God that is Truth. That is Christianity. Christendom is the rejection of these for objective certainty found in the immediate, which Kierkegaard equates with paganism. That, for Kierkegaard, is the problem with an institution claiming its authority based on the historical, which can only be an approximation. Faith is not an approximation.