

The Christianity of Søren Kierkegaard

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ALTHOUGH it is no longer sufficient to speak of "existentialism" and although for the sake of clarity one must distinguish the existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard from later existentialisms—e.g. those of Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger—and each of these from the others, no one can deny the importance of the insights of Kierkegaard as a key to the understanding of all that is commonly labelled "existentialism." Moreover, although during the past century existentialism has often been discussed more as a "philosophy" than as a "theology," even those existentialists who have decisively parted company with Christian theology must recognize the part played by theology as well as by philosophy in the shaping of the existentialist tradition—and, above all, the profoundly Christian inspiration of Kierkegaard's own work. Consequently, the usefulness of a brief introduction to the theological thought of Søren Kierkegaard as an indication of the common heritage of all brands of existentialism seems indisputable.

My intention in this study is to present a brief conspectus of Kierkegaard's thought regarding Christianity and Christian life. I do not claim to have provided a thorough study of any particular phase of SK's spirituality or even a deeply penetrating synthesis of the whole. My purpose has been merely to give to the reader an over-all view to acquaint him with the general lines and key terms of Kierkegaard's thought.

As a framework for my study, I have made use of the work *Training in Christianity*—and this for several reasons. *Training* was published in 1850, seven years after the publication of *Either/Or*. The only other major works that followed *Training*, before the extremely polemical *Attack on Christendom* of 1854–55, were *For Self-Examination* (1851) and *Judge for Yourself*, written in 1851 but not published until 1859, four years after the author's death. *Training* is broader in scope than either of the 1851 works and, since polemics are much less prominent in it than in the *Attack*, it is marked with fewer polemical emphases and distortions than these later writings. I have tried to rely on *Training* and other primary sources rather than upon secondary studies for the major ideas that enter into this synthesis.

The structure of *Training* is tripartite. Part I concerns the confrontation in contemporaneousness of Christ and the Christian. Most of the concepts basic to any discussion of SK's views on Christianity are introduced in this section: contemporaneousness, offence, paradox, faith, imitation, Christendom. Part II takes up in greater detail the possibilities of offence, and hence of faith, that are inherent in the confrontation of Christ and man. Part III

is a further development, in the form of seven discourses, of the notions presented in the earlier units.

I. CONTEMPORANEOUSNESS WITH CHRIST

The notion of contemporaneousness with Christ is one of the key notions in SK's theory of Christianity. In order to become a believer one must be a contemporary; in order to remain a believer, one must continue to be just as contemporary with Christ's presence on earth as were those who lived on this earth with him. SK goes so far as to say that this contemporaneousness is the condition of faith and, more closely defined, is faith.¹

Contemporaneousness implies a confrontation with Christ as an individual, existing person, the sort of confrontation one has with someone along the street. Christ encountered in this manner is a real person and not a stylized idea overlaid with centuries of Christianity.² Therefore, the contemporaneous Christ is not a majestic human being, but one who is despised and lowly, one whose poverty and suffering are quite real and alarming, as are the personal demands made on him by his followers.

When one becomes contemporary with Christ, one becomes contemporary with the "absolute"—a term used by SK in varying contexts and which for him seems to signify the absence of any sort of condition, qualification, or reservation.³ For instance, in relation to the absolute there is only one tense, the present. Therefore, unless one is contemporary with the absolute, it has for him no existence.⁴

Considered from another point of view, contemporaneousness is the difference between poetry and reality. Poetry is the possible, the imaginary; whereas history is what has really occurred. But even though something really occurred at some time in the past, it has no personally felt relevance or significance for me. It lacks, as SK says, the "for thee," the quality that the reality I confront at this moment has.⁵ Thus every man can be contemporary only with the age in which he himself lives and with Christ's life on earth, for the first obviously has meaning for the individual, and the second—Christ's life on earth, or sacred history—"stands for itself alone outside history."⁶ The narrowing of the possibility of contemporaneousness to these

1. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 9. For a thorough treatment of contemporaneousness, including many of the other points we shall touch upon in this section, cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), ch. IV and V.

2. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 43.

3. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), pp. 123-26; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 431-33; *Papers (Efterladte Papirer)*, as quoted in Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Harper, 1962), II, 489.

4. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 67.

5. SK's definition of truth as inwardness seems to be implied in all of this. Truth is not abstract propositions; it is that which has personally significant implications for my life. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 182: "An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual."

6. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 68.

two areas makes clear the strength that SK intends to give to the notion of contemporaneousness with Christ.

Since contemporaneousness is the condition of faith or even, when defined more precisely, as will be done later, faith itself, it seems clear that the contemporaneity that is related to faith is more than an imaginary presentation to oneself of the historical Christ. SK would seem to be indicating that contemporaneity with Christ is a *grace*, precisely the *grace* or *condition* or *possibility* for faith; or, most precisely, the relationship that one has to Christ when one believes in him. Further confirmation of this view can be found in the fact that merely living at the same time as Christ ("immediate contemporaneity") does not guarantee "actual contemporaneity" with him.

Only the believer, i.e., the non-immediate contemporary, knows the Teacher, since he receives the condition from him, and therefore knows him even as he is known.⁷

Whoever received the condition received it from the Teacher himself, and hence the Teacher must know everyone who knows him, and no one can know the Teacher except through being known by him.⁸

If thou canst not prevail upon thyself to become a Christian in the situation of contemporaneousness with Him, or if He in the situation of contemporaneousness cannot move thee and draw thee to Himself—then thou wilt never become a Christian.⁹

In contemporaneousness, then, one confronts the God-Man and, in this confrontation, the possibility of offence or of faith. Let us first consider the possibility of offence. SK summarizes the reasons for offence upon encounter with Christ under four heads.

First is the offence (A) that has to do with Christ as a mere man who comes into collision with an established order. Here SK sees Christ as a champion of inwardness, of the pre-eminence of subjectivity and inner conviction over the objective externality, of the single individual over an established order that plumes itself on being objective and therefore higher than every individual in his subjectivity.¹⁰ Christ is the champion of the God-relatedness of each individual, a notion that the established order cannot tolerate because it loosens its grip on the mass and sets a limit to its own deification.¹¹ To emphasize this God-relatedness of the single individual is to emphasize what it means to be a man, but he who disparages the established order to hold such a view is regarded as one who makes himself more than man and people are offended in him.¹²

But the essential offence that one takes at Christ has to do with his claims to be the God-Man. Its first form (B) is offence at the fact that an individual man says of himself that he is God or speaks in such a way as to betray this

7. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 84.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 85; cf. pp. 83–88, 131.

9. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 68.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 87.

11. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 92.

12. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 86–95.

thought.¹³ That Christ foresaw the possibility of offence that would arise from these claims is clear, for example, in his dealings with the messengers from John the Baptist, for when after recounting the marvels that the disciples were to relate to John, he added: "And blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me."¹⁴

Miracles, then, do not guarantee the acceptance of Christ's claims to be the God-Man. Rather, they, along with the claims, are themselves the occasion either for offence or for faith.

That is, He makes it evident that in relation to Him there can be no question of any proofs, that a man does not come to Him by the help of proofs, that there is no *direct* transition to this thing of becoming a Christian, that at the most the proofs might serve to make a man attentive, so that once he has become attentive he may arrive at the point of deciding whether he will believe or be offended. For the proofs remain equivocal: they are the *pro et contra* of the reasoning intellect, and therefore can be used *pro et contra*. It is only by a choice that the heart is revealed (and surely it was for this cause Christ came into the world, that the thoughts of all hearts might be revealed), by the choice whether to believe or be offended.¹⁵

The second possibility (C) of essential offence is the lowliness of the one who claims to be God.¹⁶ It is Jesus who lived in this world and as he lived there who invites us to approach him. He is the lowly one and not the God of glory, one whose life falls essentially under the concept of humiliation.¹⁷ He is a lowly man,

living in poverty, with twelve poor fellows as His disciples who were drawn from the simplest classes of society, who for a while was singled out as an object of curiosity, but later was to be found only in company with sinners, publicans, lepers, and madmen; for it might cost a man honour, life, and property, or at any rate expulsion from the synagogue (for this punishment we know was imposed), if he merely suffered himself to be helped by him.¹⁸

Finally, there is the offence that arises from the realization that to be a Christian means to be treated as Christ was treated.

But now it appears that to be a Christian, to belong truly to Christ, i.e., when one is in truth what he says he is, this it appears is the most exalted thing a man can be. And then, that to be a Christian in truth should mean in the world, in the eyes of men, to be abased, that it should mean all possible hardships, every possible sort of derision and insult, and mean at last to be punished as a criminal! Here again is the possibility of offence.¹⁹

And yet the essence of Christianity is the imitation of Christ.²⁰

But Christian suffering is not any suffering. It is precisely suffering that is

13. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 84.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 98. For a recent study of SK's views on apologetics, cf. M. L. Diamond, "Kierkegaard and Apologetics," *The Journal of Religion*, 44 (1964), 122-32.

16. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 105.

17. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 41. SK makes a study of this aspect of the life of Christ, period by period, on pp. 40-60.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

20. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 108-9; *Judge For Yourselves!*, pp. 215-17.

voluntary, suffering that could have been avoided, suffering that comes from the pursuit of the good.²¹ The believer is required to make the greatest possible sacrifice, that of his whole life—and there is no sure recompense, certainly none in this world. And the fact that the man who does take offence at this possibility, who does not believe, often makes good in the world, adds further to the offence that the believer must face.²²

Offence, then, is one possibility when we confront the lowly God-Man in contemporaneousness. The other is faith.

II. THE FAITH OF THE CHRISTIAN

Faith is the highest stage of inwardness for an existing individual.²³ It is the objective uncertainty due to the repulsion of the absurd held fast by the passion of inwardness, which in the instance of Christianity is intensified to the utmost degree.²⁴

Inwardness is the decisive term here; sometimes called "suffering," it is descriptive of the religious stage of existence,²⁵ as contrasted with the "imaginary inwardness," "the world of probabilities leading to despair," and the "enjoyment-perdition" of the aesthetic sphere,²⁶ and the "sufficient inwardness to lay hold of the ethical with infinite passion and understand the eternal validity of duty and the universal,"²⁷ and the "struggle-victory" of the ethical sphere.²⁸ Faith, then, occurs at the summit, or depth, of the development of the individual human person, although, as will be seen, it is not the fruit of this development, which merely makes faith possible without guaranteeing its occurrence.²⁹ In this sense, only an adult can become a Christian.³⁰

To illustrate more clearly what faith or belief is, SK uses the example of the lover who, without giving any indications of his love, asks the beloved whether she believes that he loves her. She is thus forced to choose the character which she believes to be her lover's true one—and in choosing she reveals whether she believes in him or not. This is faith. In the case of these lovers, it would have been possible for the one to show proofs of his affection to the other. But in his dealings with man, the God-Man had no choice but to require faith.³¹ As God-Man he is qualitatively different from every other man, and therefore must refuse direct communication, must require

21. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, pp. 111, 117.

22. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 121.

23. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 259.

24. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 540.

25. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 256, 261.

26. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 227, 261, 265.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

28. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 256, 261.

29. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 251, 259.

30. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 523, 532. SK makes a further distinction between two spheres within the sphere of religion, namely "religiousness A"—the religion of immanence—and "religiousness B"—Christianity, the religion of transcendence. Cf. *ibid.*, 493–98. An excellent study of the relationship of these two levels was made by J. Weldon Smith, III, in "Religion A/Religion B," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 15 (1962), 246–65.

31. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 142: "In a certain sense He can do no otherwise, and He would do no otherwise."

that he become the object of faith.³² Why? Presumably because direct communication is impossible if what is to be communicated is a paradox. Such is the case with the statement that "this man is God," because it is "contrary to the understanding" that the absolute should come into time.³³

The act of faith, therefore, grasps something that cannot be attained through any sort of reasoning. As SK shows more fully in the *Postscript*, neither the conclusions of scriptural scholarship, nor any sort of theological examination of the historical continuity of the church or of the articles of the faith, nor the fact of the impact that the life of Christ and the work of the church have had across the centuries has any relevance to faith. Consequently, such argumentation can never arrive at the conclusion that someone is God or that one can rely on such and such an historical incident or fact for one's eternal happiness. The conclusion that someone is God demands a qualitative leap, and eternal happiness has nothing to do with the probability which is as far as human reasoning can reach. Thus SK writes:

Everyone who has the least dialectical training can easily perceive that the whole argument about consequences is incommensurable with the decision of the question whether it is God, and that this decisive question is presented to man in an entirely different form: whether he will believe that He is what He said He was; or whether he will not believe.³⁴

For whose sake is it that the proof is sought? Faith does not need it; aye, it must even regard the proof as its enemy. But when faith begins to feel embarrassed and ashamed, like a young woman for whom her love is no longer sufficient, but who secretly feels ashamed of her lover and must therefore have it established that there is something remarkable about him—when faith thus begins to lose its passion, when faith begins to cease to be faith, then a proof becomes necessary so as to command respect from the side of unbelief.³⁵

In several other places also, SK uses this comparison of faith to love, and of the lover to the believer.³⁶

The act of faith is a "miracle" and, to make it possible, a "condition" must be given. Since God is the source of this "condition" and all, even those who actually lived contemporaneously with Christ upon earth, have equal need of it, faith is equally difficult to all.³⁷ SK does, however, make an exception against those who have lost or weakened their inwardness because of culture and speculative thought—for them faith is more difficult or impossible.³⁸

If faith is such a venture over seventy thousand fathoms, a venture that cannot be supported by probability or human reason, why do men believe rather than take offence? Only because of a consciousness of sin—i.e. of

32. Cf. *ibid.*

33. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 188–90, 194–95, 512–15.

34. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 31.

35. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 31.

36. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, pp. 28–35; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 27–47.

37. Cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 126–31.

38. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 30, 259–61.

the unlikeness between man and God, which is revealed—and because of the support of grace.³⁹

Psychologically, then, faith would seem to follow upon the realization of one's inability to keep the moral law, along with the recognition, gained through revelation, of the sinlessness and hence of the qualitative otherness of God. The act of faith is directed to the God-Man, who offers himself both as the redeemer from our sinfulness, the granter of eternal blessedness, and as the model of human life. But this Jesus who claims to be God is despised by the powers of this world and promises similar treatment to those who will follow him. It is only if the passion of inwardness is sufficient in the one who approaches, and if the "condition" and the aid of grace are given, that the commitment, the venturing over the seventy thousand fathoms, will be made. This is the leap of faith.⁴⁰

III. THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST IN SOCIETY

The mere acceptance of the paradox of the God-Man, and even admiration for Christ, does not, however, make a man a Christian, for a Christian is essentially a follower of Christ. Christianity is not a doctrine; it is an existence, an imitation of the truth which is the life of Christ. This we can see from the very way in which Christ our Lord won men to himself. He did not preach sermons or deliver long theological lectures. Rather, he asked those who would follow him to venture some action. And it was in the venturing of this action, which in some way consisted in the imitation of Christ, that the individual began to feel more fully his need for Christ and his grace.⁴¹

Not only does the imitation of Christ lead to a man's feeling a need for Christianity, but it is the only way of answering the doubts that arise against the faith. The original act of faith was a grasp, by virtue of inwardness and of the "condition," of the eternal relevance of the probable; the living and venture of Christian imitation gives the only kind of answer there is to subsequent doubts. It is in the contemporary atmosphere of lack of imitation, SK notes, that so many consequently unanswerable doubts arise.⁴²

One of the incentives to imitation is clearly love for the suffering Christ. SK calls attention to this fact in several emphatic passages. For instance, he writes:

39. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 153–56, 163–65; *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 58, 79–81; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 474, 516–18; *Training in Christianity*, pp. 71–72; cf. also the excellent study of Kenneth Hamilton, "Kierkegaard on Sin," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 17 (1962), 289–302.

40. For a recent study of the Kierkegaardian notion of faith and also of the reactions of subsequent existentialist thinkers to the theism of SK, cf. David Tracy, "Kierkegaard's Concept of the Act of Faith: Its Structure and Its Significance," *The Dunwoodie Review*, 3 (1963), 194–215; 4 (1964), 133–76.

41. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, pp. 231, 247.

42. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 88; *Judge for Yourself!*, 197–200.

And He, the humbled One, was love; He desired but one thing, to save men; He desired this at any price, relinquishing for it the glory of heaven; He desired this at any price, sacrificing for it His own life. Thus—one cannot indeed say that thus He started out in the world, but thus, with this resolution, He descended to earth, and then started out in the world. One might suppose that He would have moved all, but He moved none—and yet in a way He did move, and moved all, that is, He roused them all against Him. What suffering! What suffering of love!

. . . Cannot now this sight move thee?—I do not say to tears, which here are out of place and superfluous, if it is not over thine own self thou weepest—but in all seriousness, with a view to action, with a view perhaps to suffering somehow in His likeness. . . . Thou art not compelled against thy will. Ah, do not misunderstand me; it is a point of honour which is raised here. . . . Think of two lovers. . . . So she is entirely without fault for the fact that she has not shared his suffering with him, she did not even know him in the days of his sufferings; but in case she is a true lover, would she not then (here is an exaggeration, I admit, but an exaggeration of true love)—would she not then almost reproach herself as for a sort of unfaithfulness, or feel at least that her love was imperfect, because she did not know him in the days of his sufferings, would she not feel ashamed that she should share with him only his glory?⁴³

SK presents a similar appeal in the story of the child who is shown a picture of the suffering Christ. The child's first reaction is a desire to avenge this one who was given such a return for his love. But as he grows more mature, he begins to see that the most fitting return he could make would be to suffer in some measure as Christ himself has suffered in the world.⁴⁴

Must being a Christian make such a painful chaos out of a man's life? In his earlier writings, such as *Fear and Trembling* and *Postscript*, SK seemed interested chiefly in viewing faith as the supreme example of inwardness. At this early period, SK apparently did not see any difference between the external life of the Christian and that of any other man. The "knight of faith," for instance, whom he discusses in *Fear and Trembling*, appears to all men to be exactly like his neighbours.⁴⁵ Similarly, in at least two places in the *Postscript*, SK emphasizes the *how* of a man's life over the *what*.⁴⁶

In the later works—specifically after 1847—there can be found a shift in emphasis from the internal to the external aspects of Christian living. To what can we contribute this greater awareness of the external dimensions of Christianity? Possibly this new emphasis is the result of internal development in SK's thought itself. For along with the ever deepening inwardness that marks the way from pure immediacy in the aesthetic stage to passionate inwardness and suffering in the Christian religious stage, there is a parallel trend towards "revealing oneself." Thus, for instance, SK writes:

. . . The ethicist has *despaired* (the first part *was* despair); in this despair he has *chosen himself*; in and by this choice he *reveals himself* ("the expression which sharply differentiates between the ethical and the aesthetic is this: it is

43. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 172; *Sickness unto Death*, p. 148.

44. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 178.

45. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 52–57.

46. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 440–42, 540.

every man's duty to reveal himself"—the first part was concealment); he is a husband ("A" [the aesthetic man] was familiar with every possibility within the erotic sphere, and yet not actually in love, for then he would instantly, in a way, have been in course of consolidating himself), and concentrates himself, precisely in opposition to the concealment of the aesthetic, upon marriage as the deepest form of life's revelation, by which *time* is taken into the service of the ethically existing individual, and the possibility of *gaining a history* becomes the ethical victory of continuity over concealment, melancholy, illusory passion, and despair.⁴⁷

This "revelation" is founded upon inwardness, but seems essentially to look to external behaviour so that in one place, as we have seen, SK describes the man in the ethical stage as one who "has had inwardness enough to lay hold of the ethical with infinite passion and to understand the eternal validity of duty and the universal."⁴⁸

Likewise, the act of faith or "leap" into the religious stage, of which we have spoken, would seem to be initially interior, and therefore, strictly speaking, not to demand external manifestation. But already in the *Post-script* SK admits that

. . . all analogies will tend to confirm the principle that the less outwardness, the more inwardness—provided the inwardness is really there. But it is also true that as the outwardness diminishes, the danger that the inwardness will fail altogether becomes greater.⁴⁹

If religious inwardness were to find some reason for external manifestation, then, we are led even on theoretical grounds to expect that SK would approve such an external manifestation.

We have already seen that SK does find reason for some external manifestation in the "imitation of Christ." In his later works, especially after *Sickness* (1849), we find more emphasis upon this imitation and more explanation of its precise meaning. SK found another impetus towards externalization in the command that we love others since God takes as done to himself what we do to others.⁵⁰ In the final chapter of *Works of Love*, SK paraphrases St. John to conclude: ". . . And the fact of loving men affords the only true knowledge of whether you are a Christian"—truly a confession of faith is not enough.⁵¹ In short, the ultimate development of SK's thought seems to indicate his conviction that inwardness makes demands for, and at the same time gives meaning to, certain external actions.

Possibly this development of theory was given an external impetus. Dupré notes that, about 1847, SK's friends called to his attention the apparent lack of a place in his vision of Christianity for the virtue of charity. According to Dupré, SK tried to answer this objection in his *Works of Love*, written that same year, by showing that his ethics of interiority did not lead to

47. *Ibid.*, p. 227; cf. also p. 230.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 341.

50. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 87, 99, 111.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

indifference towards others.⁵² In any case, it certainly is clear that, from then on, SK's work showed an even greater emphasis on the external realization of the Christian ethic. By the time of *Judge for Yourselves!*, written in 1851, he went so far as to say that it is precisely because of inwardness that external action follows upon Christian faith.⁵³

To throw further light upon this development of the dialectic of inwardness and external action in SK's thought, it is interesting to consider the criticisms of monasticism that occur from time to time throughout his works. In the *Postscript*, along with criticism of meritoriousness,⁵⁴ which is a continual refrain, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon monasticism's betrayal of inwardness for outwardness, as evidenced by the adoption of a special monastic dress and mode of life.⁵⁵ From other passages in the same book, however, it becomes clear that SK's ideal is not a completely invisible Christianity, but rather one that maintains inwardness along with outwardness—"thinking God and the finite together," simultaneously sustaining "an absolute relationship to the absolute end, and a relative relationship to relative ends." Monasticism's fault was its conclusion that this could not be done, and the expression for this conclusion is the cloister.⁵⁶

By the time of his later works, it is clear that SK's criticism of monasticism is not its practice of outwardness, but rather the sort of outwardness that it chose. For SK, it is not the highest thing to seek a remote hiding place where it might be possible to serve God alone. This fact we can see in the Pattern who, remaining absolutely heterogeneous with the world by serving God alone, remained in the world and in the midst of reality, before the eyes of all, directing upon himself the whole attention of all, in which situation persecution was inevitable.⁵⁷ The valuable aspect of the Middle Ages is its conception of Christianity with a view to action, life, and the transformation of personal existence. Its weakness is apparent in its conviction that

fasting for its own sake was Christianity, and so too going into a monastery, bestowing everything upon the poor, not to speak of what we can hardly refer to without smiling, such as flagellation, crawling on the knees, standing upon one leg, etc., as if this were the true imitation of Christ.

From these errors others developed, such as meritoriousness—the notion that one could acquire merit before God by good works. On this supposition, the Middle Ages reached the point of selling merits to others, so that this became a regular business.⁵⁸ But however much the age of monasticism may have erred in other lines, compared with our own age it was generally in the right when it at once translated Christian thought into action.⁵⁹

52. Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), pp. 160–64.

53. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourselves!*, p. 134.

54. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 362.

55. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 363, 365–67, 370.

56. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 423, 371.

57. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourselves!*, p. 179.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

59. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 131.

A concrete illustration of the relationship of Christian inwardness to Christian action is found, as we have already noted, in SK's treatment of Christian love in *Works of Love*. Because God has made it a law that we love our neighbour, Christianity has transformed every relation between men into a conscience-relationship and thus also into a love-relationship, in terms of love of man for God. In this sense it is clear that Christianity is inwardness⁶⁰ and that Christianity has ultimately and essentially to do only with God.⁶¹ For God now has become the third party in every love relationship, the sole object of affection, so that it is not the husband who is the wife's beloved, but rather God himself.⁶²

The fact that Christian love is based on command and not on attraction for a few men, and hence is directed to all men, distinguishes it from earthly love. Earthly love or friendship is partiality, another form of selfishness. Christian love, on the contrary, is self-denying love, self-sacrifice, since it does not exclude a single object. In this sense, Christian love is not loving another "I," but rather loving the first "you" who appears, despite his disagreeable characteristics, since what the Christian is concerned with is the essential in man and not individual differences.⁶³

Does SK mean to imply that the love of another person merely because of his qualities or because of one's affection for him or her is unworthy of the Christian? I suggest that he would simply reply to this question that such love is to be expected, but that it is not Christian love. Should man avoid it? He should try to do so because his Pattern did, serving one Master alone and separating himself from earthly bonds in order to make the lesson clearer.⁶⁴ Can the Christian avoid purely natural love? Certainly not without the grace of God. The best attitude would be to admit one's failings in this regard but not to deny what is the ideal—and then peacefully to follow the Pattern in all else as one can. Perhaps this reply will be understood in a broader context when we consider the role SK visualized for the ideal in Christianity.

SK does not give evidence of having seen the remedying of social injustice as in any manner associated with Christian charity or life, except negatively. Thus he notes that, in being a Christian, one is not exempt from the differences in human life; rather, it is by triumphing over the temptation of the differences that one becomes a Christian.⁶⁵ The world's notion of equality is to have the same condition for all, while Christian equality is to lift oneself above the differences.⁶⁶ Christianity wishes these differences to hang loosely about the individual like a cloak; it is the essential in others which is always to be considered. It is on seeing and accepting this and disregarding the individual differences that Christian love concentrates.⁶⁷

60. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 111.

61. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 303.

62. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 87, 99.

63. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 36, 41, 43, 48.

64. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourselves!*, pp. 180–81, 171–72, 174, 178.

65. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 58.

66. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 60.

67. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 72.

Christianity, therefore, as SK conceives it, presents a very rigorous ideal. Christian faith occurs only at the summit of the development of human inwardness, and then as the result not of studying a doctrine but of venturing, with the help of grace, on a decisive action. This decisive action is the acceptance of the God-Man, the reliance upon him as one's redeemer from sin and as one's Pattern of life. But decisive action does not end here, for the Christian is not a mere admirer of Christ, but is also an imitator of him. And the imitation of Christ in this world cannot but lead to the same sort of misunderstanding and persecution to which Christ was subject. Moreover, such a contemporaneous imitation of the suffering Christ must continue if the Christian is to realize his need of grace, indeed his need of Christianity itself.

As we look at these requirements, we begin to wonder whether SK thought that Christianity is existentially possible. I conclude that, if SK had been asked this question, his reply would have proceeded somewhat along these lines: The essence of Christianity is the imitation of Christ. Fundamental to this is the recognition of Christ as the Pattern. Given the human condition, it is impossible that anyone will ever copy this Pattern exactly. What is necessary, however, if one is to be a Christian in any sense, is that he recognize Christ as the Pattern, try to imitate him, and then recognize his inadequacy. Admittedly, this is not true Christianity, but rather an approximation to it; yet by admission of one's failures in following the Pattern one is at least in some relation to Christianity.⁶⁸ SK admitted that his own Christianity was of this sort, merely an approximation.⁶⁹

He would be quick to add, however, that an approximation to Christianity is not a departure from it—whereas Christendom is. There are few terms, except possibly those connected with Hegel and his philosophy, that draw as much fire from SK as this term "Christendom." "Christendom" connotes all or several of the following: established church; perfunctory sacral service by civil servants who earn a comfortable and secure living by preaching "dying to oneself"; lack of interest in the truth or falsity of the doctrine that is preached, and concern only for earning a living by preaching it; solemn assent to the doctrines being taught on Sunday morning during the "quiet hour," but a lack of real assent to the relevance of these doctrines during the week that follows; conceiving of Christianity as a doctrine, rather than as the imitation of Christ, a dying to self, a voluntary acceptance of the suffering involved in freely following Christ; making self the norm of one's action; leading a "decent" human life—not sinning too frequently or seriously, thinking occasionally of God—and calling this being a Christian; the gradual evolution of official Christian teaching into an easier form because of the mutual realization by parson and congregation of the hypocrisy involved in teaching what the parson himself is not living and the congregation is not interested in hearing.⁷⁰

68. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, pp. 215–17, 197–99.

69. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 216.

70. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 126–28, 146–57, 211. The subject is treated at greater length and with a good deal more verve in *Attack on Christendom*.

SK does seem to admit, therefore, that the Christianity which he teaches is more of an ideal in whose direction one should strive than a goal that is realistically attainable. In his own words:

And what does all this mean? It means that everyone for himself, in quiet inwardness before God, shall humble himself before what it means in the strictest sense to be a Christian, admit candidly before God how it stands with him, so that he might yet accept the grace which is offered to everyone who is imperfect, that is, to everyone. And then no further; then for the rest let him attend to his work, be glad in it, love his wife, be glad in her, bring up his children with joyfulness, love his fellow men, rejoice in life. If anything further is required of him, God will surely let him understand, and in such case will also help him further; for the terrible language of the Law is so terrifying because it seems as if it were left to man to hold fast to Christ by his own power, whereas in the language of love it is Christ that holds him fast. So if anything further is required of him, God will surely let him understand; but this is required of everyone, that before God he shall candidly humble himself in view of the requirements of ideality. And therefore these should be heard again and again in their infinite significance.⁷¹

71. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 71.