

SØREN KIERKEGAARD: FATHER OF CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT RELIGION

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN BACKHOUSE

CWR magazine is not the first to promote **Christianity Without the Religion**. Some of the 20th century's theological greats—Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, for example—were great critics of Christless religion as over against the living faith of Christ-centered revelation. But if we were to name “the father of Christianity without the religion” in the modern era, the honor would surely go to the Danish thinker and provocateur, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He once wrote,

There is nothing so displeasing to God as taking part in all the “religious” Christianity with the claim that this is worshiping God. If you believe, as surely you must, that to steal, rob, commit adultery, and slander is displeasing to God, then official Christianity and its worship is infinitely more abhorrent to him. Again, it is my duty to exclaim, “Whoever you are, whatever in other respects your life may be, by refusing to take part in all this public worship of God as it now is, you have one sin the less, and that a great one.” You have been warned.

A relentless opponent of the Danish Lutheran state-religion, he sowed seeds for today's *nones* (non-affiliated Christians) and *done*s (“done with church” Christians). With that introduction, CWR magazine is pleased to welcome Stephen Backhouse, author of *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* (Zondervan, 2016), to shed more light on this author, his thought and his influence.

CWR: Stephen, could you give us a brief summary of Kierkegaard the man?

Ha! No. I doubt I can briefly summarize Søren Kierkegaard, the funny, cranky, annoying, joyful, worshipful genius who attacked Christendom in the name of Christ and the common man and who

massively overestimated our ability to understand him as he did so. I can tell you that he died in 1855 at the age of 42 after a life of fragile health and probably epilepsy. That he spent almost all his days in Copenhagen, Denmark. That when he died there was a near riot at his funeral because his supporters and his enemies alike were offended he was being given an official Christian burial. That a popular newspaper waged a public campaign of mockery against him. That two generations or so of Danish boys weren't given the name Søren because of the association with him. That he loved—and was loved by—a wonderful woman named Regine but that he broke off their engagement because he knew he was being called to stand outside of the comfortable Christianized life that 19th century Danish marriage represented.

I can tell you that he wrote. A lot. All the time.

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That he invented existentialism, that he gave us the idea of “the leap of faith,” and that if

you value “being authentic” or like people who “walk the talk” and “practice what they preach,” and that if you suspect there is a big difference between being a follower of Jesus Christ and being a member of common sense Christian culture, then your imagination has been shaped by Kierkegaard whether you know it or not.

CWR: Kierkegaard has been called the father of existentialism, both Christian and secular. For lay people who've never heard the term, could you define it for us?

I always tell my students that “Existentialism” is another way of saying “Existence-ism.” It's a way of thinking that takes YOUR existence seriously. YOU are more important than any class, family, nation or religion you were born into. The story of YOU includes all these things, but is not exhausted by

them. YOU are more important than any group you happen to be a part of. What is more, your existence matters. You can make real choices and these choices come with responsibility. There is no such thing as an insignificant person, or someone who is only a cog in the machine, despite what we tend to tell ourselves about ourselves. Our groups and societies and systems tend to create narratives that tell their members that unless you subsume all your identity to the herd, you won't be a full person. And we believe it! Kierkegaard was really interested in "authentic identity" which implies there is such a thing as inauthentic identity. Another way of saying this is that for Kierkegaard there are "people" walking around who aren't "persons" yet. Authenticity is a process. A process that is wrapped up in individuals paying attention to the group narratives laying claim on their lives, and getting to the place where they can choose to reject or own these narratives for themselves. ***For Kierkegaard it is not the group in which we live and move and have our being. It is in and before God that all human individuals have their existence.*** Only persons relating to God as individuals (rather than *en masse*) will become Authentic, and this process at its root involves individuals recognizing the choices and responsibility that are inherent in their existence.

Now, the atheist existentialism that most people know about comes from people like Sartre, Camus and Heidegger and their disciples. These guys loved Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility and his locating authentic identity in something other than the

culture or inherited system you happened to be born in. What they explicitly rejected and ignored was that Kierkegaard thought all this freedom and choosing happened before the ever-present eye of God, who, by the way exists as a *person*: Jesus Christ. For secular existentialists, you don't become an authentic person till you choose yourself. ***For Kierkegaard, you don't become an authentic person until you choose Jesus.***



CWR: We've seen that he used "religion" as a pejorative and sought for an authentic Christianity in its stead. Or said another way, he claimed that New Testament Christianity was not to be found in the state-church. What were his major beefs with religion?

The first thing to emphasize was that Kierkegaard's problem was with "Christendom," not the

state-church per se.

"Christendom" is a mindset or culture. It's what happens when Christianity becomes inherited tradition, or connected to a particular civilization or set of social moral values. When the "stuff" of Christianity becomes part of our cultural furniture. In Søren's Denmark, the established Lutheran church was a part of how Christendom played out in his context. But you don't need to have a state church to be Christendom!

Any nation that puts god language on its documents and its money, that has churches as landmarks and names its streets and cities after saints, that knows what OMG means or invokes god's blessing in its sentimental songs and bumper stickers or thinks that being patriotic is the same as being Christian is "Christendom." Conservatives are easy targets, but Christendom happens at the other end of the spectrum too. In our Christianized west, all liberal and progressive movements have their roots in the revolution fostered by the early church.

When Jesus is essentially seen as yet another social justice guru, or when specific Christian revelation demanding a personal response is generalized into universal declarations of human rights, you also see "Christendom" at work. ***And Christendom, according to Kierkegaard, is precisely what has done away with Christianity.***

The New Testament puts forward a Jesus who was constantly, potentially, a source of offense to the people around him. A stumbling block. Even Jesus' miracles are not knock-down proof of his divinity. More often than not, they are a cause of offense to the people

who witnessed them (See Matthew 11:4-6).

For the people who knew him, following Jesus didn't mean joining a mass movement going from obvious strength to strength. It meant choosing not to be offended at this normal man with bad breath and a bit of fish in his beard who nevertheless says "Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest."

Christendom, for Kierkegaard, represents all the civilizing and normalizing tendencies that we humans put between us and the short, sharp, shock of the Incarnation. The Christian

Christendom has done away with Christianity.

CWR: So, the Christian church religion had failed to deliver authentic Christianity. But what was Kierkegaard looking and longing for? What comprises the real deal?

Kierkegaard was not into apologetics. He wasn't trying to prove anything, especially because in a world addicted to common sense (literally the sense we all share in common) "reasonable" Christianity is the death knell to authentic Christianity.

Exercising Holy Spirit gifts. Loving neighbors, enemies and refugees. All the fruits of the Spirit are highly toxic to civilized common sense religiosity if you think about it for a minute. Kierkegaard famously did not have an *ecclesiology*, but that doesn't mean he had no vision for a life lived in imitation of Christ. [Editor's note: "ecclesiology" is theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian Church].

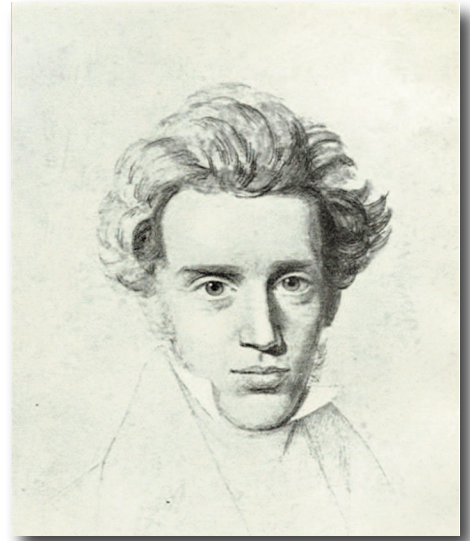
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religion is one such mechanism whereby Jesus is either made so obviously "God" that belief in him is "common sense," or he's so benign that following him is tantamount to being a moral, civilized citizen. Yet "faith" in Jesus can only happen when it's a right relation to Jesus as he actually is. The person Jesus says he is also God. Does this offend you? Yes? Well then you are a reasonable, normal person. No? Congratulations, you are a *Christ-ian*.

The problem with Christendom and its religion is that it takes away the potential offensiveness of the Incarnation altogether, thus denying the possibility that individuals living in Christendom will get to choose either for or against Christ. This very much includes the mass of people who already think they are Christians, or think they know what it is, thanks to their relationship to cultural religion. Hence Kierkegaard's charge that

Common sense is a fickle, dangerous guide. Why would we try to hitch our cart to that horse? One of Jesus' main activities was to draw people out from—and even set them against—the common groups and inherited traditions which laid claim to their lives. In Kierkegaard's scheme, choosing not to be offended by Jesus necessarily results in people who start to imitate Jesus. By turning to Jesus, you are turning away from other grounds of identity. Thus, the disciples themselves become potential sources of offense to the groups that used to lay claim on their allegiance. But disciples don't cause offense by being jerks, any more than Jesus was a jerk.

Think how easy it is to offend our social, political and religious groups by simply practicing authentic Christian love. Forgiveness. Generosity to the undeserving poor. Mercy to the deserving wrong. Healing the sick.



CWR: In his condemnation of running with the crowd, Kierkegaard called believers to understand they would stand before God as individuals, responsible for their own lives, faith and choices. That makes sense—but is he not also responsible for our radical individualism that has devolved into isolation and alienation? How might he respond to that charge?

Hold on there. If you are a radically isolated individual, then at least part of the responsibility has to lie with you! But I know what you mean.

As I think is obvious by now, Kierkegaard was definitely an individualist. However, he tried to separate people from their herds

not because he hated humanity so much, but because of the opposite. He thought true sociality can only happen when people love each other properly. And **people will only love each other properly when they have authentic identity.** The problem with modern life is that we have powerful group-based sentiments which claim to be offering more to individuals than they in fact deliver.

Take patriotism for example. In his book *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard reflected on the *Christ-ian* call to love the neighbor. He wrote this book precisely as his answer to the charge that he was a radical isolationist.

He looked at different types of “love” to see how well they serve “the neighbor.” Some forms of love, like patriotism, like to shout loud and long about how unifying it is, and how good it is for people to be caught up together in a great aggregate, finding their identity in a common love of the group.

Yet, Kierkegaard points out, the logic of patriotic love is the logic of banding together with people who look like me and sound like me as much as possible. But if I’m aiming to love only those who look like me and sound like me, then the ultimate horizon of such a love—*is me*. **Love based on tribalism is, ultimately, deeply selfish and isolating.**

Incidentally, we can see this in action: despite the story patriots tell themselves, the fruit of fervent patriotic sentiment in a country is never unity. It always leads to factionalism and ever smaller and tighter groups of who counts as a “real American” or a “true Brit” or whatever.

It is significant that **Jesus commanded love of neighbor not love of nation.** In fact, he defined the neighbor precisely as the person who does not share your ethnic, political or religious affiliation. The neighbor is to be loved regardless of what group they belong to, and, indeed, it is usually the presence of exclusive group-love in some form or other that has resulted in the neighbor being in need in the first place.

So, one of Kierkegaard’s answers to the charge of alienation is to challenge how well group-based infatuation serves the actual people in front of us, as opposed to some romantic notion of The People. When an individual has truly *become* (or is



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becoming) a *person* in the image of Christ they might not be easily identifiable as a loyal member of their tribe or class, but they sure are good at loving others. This isn’t a theory. You can witness this wherever authentic Christianity takes root. No alienation here!

CWR: For those who’ve embraced the idea of Christianity Without the Religion, what takeaways might Kierkegaard offer us? How might he continue to provoke us?

Another thing I always say to my students is to let Kierkegaard hit them where it hurts. Stand there and take your medicine. He’s only doing it because he loves you! He saw himself as a surgeon who cuts out cancer, or a doctor who makes the patient vomit up the poison. The poison in this case being Christendom.

Kierkegaard can be hard to read, for sure. In an age where “becoming a Christian” was as easy as being born, he wanted to make it more difficult. Also, a lot of his books were written pseudonymously, often as a way to deliberately foster a dialogue with the reader, other Danish authors and even other of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms!

However, nearer to the end of his life he laid off the convoluted texts and wrote more clearly. These writings can be sharp, angry, and often very funny. They are also deeply *Christ-ian* in a way that some people who don’t understand the difference between Christendom and Christianity find baffling. □

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