



MAKERS  
*of the* MODERN  
THEOLOGICAL  
MIND

SØREN  
KIERKEGAARD

Elmer H. Duncan

Edited by Bob E. Patterson



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 HENDRICKSON  
PUBLISHERS

**Makers of the Modern Theological Mind**  
**Søren Kierkegaard**

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For Rosemary and Beverly

—and Alyssa—

and Jason and Marc—and the girls of Sigma Tau Lambda

When I once quoted to him a remark of Kierkegaard to this effect:  
“How can it be that Christ does not exist, since I know that He has  
saved me?,” Wittgenstein exclaimed: “You see! It isn’t a question of  
*proving* anything!”

NORMAN MALCOLM  
IN HIS  
*LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN: A MEMOIR*

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## Publisher's Preface (2016)

The *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* series was first published in the early 1970s and comprises eighteen volumes, each looking at the life and work of a highly influential modern theologian. Today's reader may wonder why we are reprinting these books after so many years, especially since much has been written in the intervening decades on most of these theologians. The answer is that Hendrickson Publishers remains committed to serving the church in theological education, and we believe the original series editor's purpose still holds true: "*These books will give a new generation the opportunity to be exposed to significant minds.*"

While readers may notice that some word choices and writing styles are dated, we chose to leave the original text intact in order to preserve the historical integrity of the books. Additionally, although the series represents a specific perspective in modern Western thought, these theologians nevertheless serve as forerunners to the many outstanding theological voices we hear in today's much broader perspective. It is for their sake and the sake of new generations that we are reprinting this series, thereby ensuring continued accessibility to these formative and important modern theologians.

Another unique feature of this series is that many of the authors studied with the particular theologian about whom they wrote. And because some of these books were written almost half a century ago—published during the political and social turmoil of the latter decades of the twentieth century—they also serve as historical accounts of how these theologians impacted the authors at the time that they themselves were writing.

We are confident that readers will continue to find these books interesting and useful, which is why we are releasing them with a new look and in paperback and also as e-books. As these theologians continue to influence the global church, this series remains a helpful overview of their historical context and their life's work.

PATRICIA ANDERS, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR  
HENDRICKSON PUBLISHERS

## Editor's Preface (1972)

Who are the thinkers that have shaped Christian theology in our time? This series tries to answer that question by providing a reliable guide to the ideas of the men who have significantly charted the theological seas of our century. In the current revival of theology, these books will give a new generation the opportunity to be exposed to significant minds. They are not meant, however, to be a substitute for a careful study of the original works of these makers of the modern theological mind.

This series is not for the lazy. Each major theologian is examined carefully and critically—his life, his theological method, his most germinal ideas, his weaknesses as a thinker, his place in the theological spectrum, and his chief contribution to the climate of theology today. The books are written with the assumption that laymen will read them and enter into the theological dialogue that is so necessary to the church as a whole. At the same time they are carefully enough designed to give assurance to a Ph.D. student in theology preparing for his preliminary exams.

Each author in the series is a professional scholar and theologian in his own right. All are specialists on, and in some cases have studied with, the theologians about whom they write. Welcome to the series.

BOB E. PATTERSON, EDITOR  
*BAYLOR UNIVERSITY*



## Author's Preface

When Bob Patterson asked me to do a book on Kierkegaard, I was delighted. Since I had written my doctoral dissertation on Kierkegaard under the direction of two of America's finest philosophers, Professors Van Meter Ames and Joseph Margolis, I could foresee no problems in simply presenting the dissertation as a book.

But there *were* difficulties. For one thing, the dissertation was more than ten years old, and much has happened in those ten years. As the reader will see in the chapters that follow, much of what I wrote in my 1962 dissertation, and in published articles, still seems to me to be true, but strangely beside the point. So I had to take a fresh look from an entirely different perspective. Further, Kierkegaard was both a philosopher *and* a theologian; I am only a philosopher. Though I *am* a churchman, I am not a trained theologian. Kierkegaard can, I am convinced, best be understood as a philosopher who has had a terrific impact on contemporary theology. From the first I felt that I could set forth and evaluate his philosophical position in a clear way, but I came to feel that I could not fully appreciate his impact on current theology. So I persuaded Professor Patterson to permit me to use a coauthor. I asked Dan Walker to do a chapter on Kierkegaard's influence on contemporary theology. This chapter makes clear the sense in which Kierkegaard deserves to be numbered among the "Makers of the Modern Theological Mind."

Dan seems ideally suited for the task. He has a B.D. from Southwestern Seminary and is now a doctoral candidate in Religion at Baylor University. He has also taken a number of courses in philosophy, including a graduate seminar in existentialism which I

taught some years ago. While working on his doctorate here, Dan teaches philosophy at McLennan Community College.

A preface is perhaps the place for an author to express appreciation to those who have helped him. Unfortunately, I owe so much to so many people that I cannot do this in detail in the present book. I must, however, thank my chairman at Baylor, Prof. William J. Kilgore, who has always supported my work. Thanks are also due to Mr. and Mrs. J. Newton Rayzor, whose financial support of the Philosophy Department made possible the preparation of this manuscript. Of course, the manuscript would not have been as well prepared as it is had I not been fortunate enough to have the services of two of the world's finest secretaries, Beth Ingalls and Marilyn Ender.

I'm sure that my co-author, Dan Walker, would agree that our greatest debt is to our wives, Rosemary and Beverly. However unorthodox this may be, I also wish to express appreciation to some of the other women in my life. First, I want to thank my mother, who gave me religious values, even though she didn't make me a theologian. Then I must thank Miss Norene Newberry, who (back in the second grade!) first taught me the value of academic achievement and then spent several summers in a little Baptist church in South Shore, Kentucky, teaching me that the Bible deserved serious study, too. I was able to make it through college and graduate school primarily because—whatever faults I had—I could *read*; I owe this to Miss Newberry and to my high school English teacher, Mrs. Lena Nevison. Finally, if I ever lose sight of what Christianity really is, I can regain my vision by attending the weekly meetings of Sigma Tau Lambda, the social and service club of the School of Nursing here at Baylor, which my wife and I have had the high honor of sponsoring these past several years. These are the women in my life; I know that Kierkegaard would have loved them all . . . and so do I.

E. H. D.

# 1 Life

## THE SINS OF THE FATHER

Søren Kierkegaard's story begins with his father, and not simply in the trivial sense that we all have fathers, who are likely to influence our lives. This was a case of a father having a decisive hand in shaping the life of his son.

As a boy, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard was a shepherd in the parish of Saeding in Jutland. The town (if it could be called a town) had its Danish Lutheran Church, but it was too poor to have a regular pastor. So the little parsonage was rented and the family which occupied it took the churchyard (*Kirkegaard*) in which it stood as their family name. The letter *e* was later added to the name for social reasons.

The life of a shepherd on the frozen heaths of Jutland must have been cold and hard. One night, young Michael gave vent to his anger and frustration by cursing God. This event cannot be over-emphasized, for Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard was convinced that he had committed the unpardonable sin. A hard life often produces a hard and unyielding religion; the elder Kierkegaard thought of God as "by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Num. 14:18). Kierkegaard's father had a deep sense of guilt and sorrow, which never left him, though he lived to be eighty-two. This he passed on to his sons.

But strangely, after he had cursed God, things took a turn for the better for young Michael Kierkegaard. His family decided that they could no longer afford even to feed and clothe the boy, so he was sent to live with his uncle in Copenhagen. The uncle was in the clothing business—a hosier, actually. Michael did amazingly well in his new role, prospering beyond his wildest dreams. The business

was broadened from hosiery to clothing in general—all types—and greatly expanded. When the uncle died, the business passed on to young Michael, who continued to expand it, adding a chain of grocery stores. He got married, bought a fine large house, and amassed such a fortune that he was able to retire at the age of forty.

This incredible prosperity did not continue uninterrupted, however. The wife died, childless, after less than two years of marriage. Before the end of another year, Michael had remarried. The plain truth, crudely put, is that he seduced one of his servants, and had to marry her. She bore him a daughter in just over four months of marriage. The date was September 7, 1797. During the next few years, Ane Sørensdatter (Lund) Kierkegaard bore her husband seven children in all, three daughters and four sons. The last son, born May 5, 1813, was Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

Marriages of this type are rarely happy, and this one was not. Apparently Kierkegaard's father continued to think of his wife as a servant. (It may be worth noting that in all his voluminous writings, Kierkegaard had little or nothing to say about his mother.) For all that, things seemed to go well with the Kierkegaards for many years. They were respected and wealthy and must have been the envy of much of Copenhagen.

Søren Kierkegaard was, then, one of seven children, but before he had completed his twenty-first year, no less than five of the children, and their mother, were dead. The causes of their deaths ranged from playground accidents to childbirth, but one by one they died. None of them lived beyond the age of thirty-three. Only Søren and his older brother Peter (eight years his senior) were left with their aging father.

It is not clear whether the old man confessed to them, or they only guessed the truth, but somehow the sons came to know the sins of their father. Not surprisingly, they too believed that they would die young.

For much of his life, Søren Kierkegaard kept journals. They were not diaries; the entries were not often dated, and they were not

kept regularly. In these *Journals* Kierkegaard often expressed shock at being still alive. S.K. (if I may abbreviate, and this is the standard abbreviation) was never a well man. He was short of stature and had an abnormal curvature of the spine. Beyond this, but perhaps connected with it, S.K. often spoke of the “thorn in the flesh” which troubled him throughout his life. We do not know precisely what his illness was. He was always frail, yet he worked very hard. He collapsed several times in public in the years just before his death, and asked to be swept under the furniture until he recovered. In the end, an old man at forty-two, he was carried, paralyzed, to the Frederiks Hospital, where he died November 11, 1855.

No attempt is being made here to write a biography of Søren Kierkegaard. This has been done, and extremely well, by Walter Lowrie. Actually, Dr. Lowrie has done our work for us twice. He wrote a lengthy biography in 1938, incorporating a great deal of quoted material (which Lowrie translated himself) from Kierkegaard's writings. By 1942, Lowrie thought that enough of these writings were available in English that he could omit some of his quotations—and much detailed analysis, I might add—in his *Short Life of Søren Kierkegaard*. Now Ronald Grimsley has added his *Kierkegaard: A Biographical Introduction* (1973), so a lengthy biography is not needed. I shall, accordingly, restrict myself to a few aspects of Kierkegaard's life and personality which are indispensable for understanding his thought.

It was the wish of Kierkegaard's father that he be trained for the ministry. So he became, in 1830, a student at the University of Copenhagen, ostensibly with the purpose of becoming a minister. But though he studied theology, he seems to have enjoyed philosophy more. He also loved literature, the theater, and opera. S.K.'s personality was complex. Though melancholic, and burdened with his father's guilt, he was also a wit who loved the night life of his city. Though deeply religious—and he did finally pass his theological examination—he never felt called to preach. He never took a pastorate.

## THE PLAYBOY AUTHOR OF *EDIFYING DISCOURSES*

But Kierkegaard *did* think of himself as called, that is, he considered himself a man with a God-given mission. His mission was to help people to become Christians, but he was to do this through his writing, not through preaching. He thought it important to emphasize the fact that he was not asking anyone to follow him, or his example. In his writing, therefore, he never posed as a minister writing sermons and teaching by example. Instead, he wrote what he called *Edifying Discourses*, and he insisted these were, in a sense, without authority. In his greatest works—which I take to be his *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *The Philosophical Fragments*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—he hid his authorship behind pseudonyms. He did not, again, want to be in the position of teaching a *system* of thought, which he exemplified in his own life. He taught by the use of what he liked to call “indirect communication.” He thought of Christianity not as a doctrine to be learned but a life to be lived, a way of life to be chosen. So he told stories, and through his pseudonyms set forth various lifestyles, so that the reader would see that he had a choice to make.

Perhaps all of this would be clearer if it were contrasted with its opposite. Suppose for a moment that I were a learned professor of theology, and wanted you to become a Christian. To me this means accepting the Christian doctrine, so I run through various proofs that God exists, and that the Bible is his word. You, the reader, are expected to accept all of this on the basis of the rationale and intellectual rigor of my proofs *and* on the authority of my status as a scholar (with an impressive list of degrees) and as a churchman, witness to the truth, etc.

But, Kierkegaard thought, all of this is a mistake. Christianity is not a doctrine to be taught, but rather a life to be lived. “Proofs,” then, are not only unconvincing; they are irrelevant, completely beside the point. Finally, how can any mortal man dare to set himself up as the model for living such a life? As usual, S.K. said it

better than his interpreters, when he wrote in the preface to his *Philosophical Fragments*:

But if anyone were to be so polite as to assume that I have an opinion, and if he were to carry his gallantry to the extreme of adopting this opinion because he believed it to be mine, I should have to be sorry for his politeness, in that it was bestowed upon so unworthy an object, and for his opinion, if he has no other opinion than mine.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard worked very hard at *not* being taken as a model for the Christian life. In addition to using pseudonyms, he went to great lengths to pretend to be a playboy, or man about town, or ne'er-do-well. In his short lifetime, he wrote a whole shelf of books, so he obviously spent long hours in work, study, and writing. To keep up his public image, however, he made it a practice to put in an appearance at every party, opera, and play. He would “make the rounds,” so to speak, making sure that he was seen by everyone, and then return home to his work. At the conclusion of his *Postscript* he admitted authorship of the works cited above (plus others) but up to then, he must have been thought of as Copenhagen’s biggest loafer—though the truth is he may have worked himself to death, and died of sheer exhaustion.

## THE ENGAGEMENT

The vital statistics of a man’s life must include his marriage. S.K. never had one. The great love of his life was Regina Olsen (her name was really Regine, only S.K. called her Regina). Apparently S.K. loved her very deeply; certainly his *Journals* indicate that he did. They became engaged to be married, but S.K. broke the engagement. Regina wept bitterly, said that she would surely die, and she and her father pleaded with S.K. to go on with the wedding. He remained firm in his refusal. A few years later, she married another man, but S.K. never married. The *Journals* show that he never forgot her, nor did he cease to love her.

It is a favorite game among Kierkegaard scholars to try to discover why S.K. broke off the engagement. At the time of the engagement he was twenty-four, Regina only fourteen years of age. Perhaps he simply felt that the difference in age and the contrast between her youthful spirit and his melancholy would make for an unhappy marriage—and remember that he was convinced that he had not long to live. In the *Journals* there is an account of a young man who became drunk at a party and was then carried by his friends to a brothel, where he had intercourse with a prostitute. Thereafter, he was burdened with guilt, and with the fear that somewhere there was a child of this illicit union that should have borne his name. Some scholars assume that the story was autobiographical and that this was the reason S.K. could not marry Regina. Perhaps—but the *Journals* were not entirely autobiographical, and we need not assume that this story was true of S.K. himself.

In his biography Grimsley discusses the intriguing suggestion that the story may have been true of S.K.'s father. This would explain a great deal. Perhaps this sexual sin had led to a dread disease which had caused the death of the other children of the family. The young Søren could only wait, helplessly, to see its terrible effects begin to emerge in his own life. As Grimsley explains:

Needless to say, this supposition of a hereditary trait could have been without adequate foundation, for there is no surviving medical evidence to suggest that Kierkegaard or even his father suffered from any infection of this kind, but the mere belief in such a possibility would be enough to explain its enormous importance for both men. It would certainly account for Søren's refusal to marry Regine. How could he confide to her a secret of this kind, one that concerned not only himself but also his father and the whole family?<sup>2</sup>

My own view is that S.K. simply became convinced that marriage was not consistent with his divine mission. Kierkegaard often expressed admiration for Roman Catholic priests who renounced marriage for the sake of their calling. He probably would not have been sympathetic with the revolution in this area that is rocking the

Catholic Church today. And, as we shall see below, he was critical of his own Danish Lutheran Church because its ministers, rather than renouncing the pleasures of this world (a home, wife, respected public position, ample means, etc.), had, he thought, perverted the teachings of Christ by becoming state officials.

### *ATTACK UPON CHRISTENDOM*

The *Journals* indicate that Kierkegaard was convinced, for much of his life, that the state church, the Danish Lutheran Church, was in a sorry condition. The leader of this church was the Bishop Primate, the Most Reverend J. P. Mynster. S.K. grew up hearing his sermons. He revered Mynster as his father's pastor, and his own. Mynster died in January of 1854; five years earlier in 1849, S.K. wrote in his journals:

Sometimes I am almost afraid for the man when I think of Bishop Mynster. He is now 72 and soon he will go to his judgment. And what has he not done to harm Christianity by conjuring up a lying picture—so that he could sit back and rule. His sermons are quite good—but in eternity he will not have to preach—but be judged.<sup>3</sup>

Kierkegaard maintained a public silence, however. When Mynster died, Professor Hans L. Martensen, who had helped introduce the philosophy of Hegel into Denmark, became the new bishop. Martensen, in accepting his new position, spoke of his predecessor, Bishop Mynster, as a “witness to the truth.” This was too much. Kierkegaard could be silent no longer. He chose a popular political journal, *The Fatherland*, in which to launch an attack which shocked—and shook—the established Danish Church. The attack was continued in a series of papers called *The Instant*; the entire series of papers has been brought together in a book entitled *Attack Upon Christendom*.

Two things should be made clear at the outset. First, this attack was mounted from *within* the church. In this respect it is similar to

the recent “death of God” theology, which also was not just a case of a group of atheists attacking the church, but rather of a group of churchmen who felt that their church was in need of reform.

The second point is that Kierkegaard’s attack was upon “Christendom,” not Christianity. S.K. was not arguing against the teachings of Jesus Christ as they are found in the New Testament. Rather, he insisted that these teachings had been abandoned in Christendom as he saw it in the Danish Lutheran Church. As Kierkegaard read his New Testament, an individual may decide to become a Christian. The person must understand that he will have to suffer for his faith. He will be hated by the world; he will live in poverty, and so on. But in the Danish Church, everyone becomes a Christian as a matter of course, just by being born into the state of Denmark; it’s automatic. As for the preachers, they are state officials, and, far from being poverty-stricken, they live very well. They wear robes trimmed in velvet, live in fine homes, marry and have families, are paid (well paid) from state funds and enjoy steady promotions. Whatever else this may be, S.K. argued, it is most certainly *not* the Christianity of the New Testament.

Mynster was not, then, a “witness to the truth” of the New Testament. Neither, for that matter, was his successor, Professor Martensen. Kierkegaard also attacked N. F. S. Grundtvig. The reader may not recognize that last name; Grundtvig was a noted writer of hymns, including my favorite, “Built on the Rock.” The attack went beyond personalities, of course; it was directed against the church. The substance of the quarrel is summed up in the *Journals*, in a passage S.K. called “The Domestic Goose: a moral tale.” S.K. tells us of a group of geese who went to church to worship together each Sunday:

The sermon was essentially the same each time—it told of the glorious destiny of geese, of the noble end for which their maker had created them—and every time his name was mentioned all of the geese curtsied and all the ganders bowed their heads. They were to use their wings to fly away to the distant pastures to which they really belonged; for they were only pilgrims on this earth.<sup>4</sup>

None of the geese really took this talk about flying seriously, of course. They had long since ceased to be able to fly because they were so well fed by the farmer. They grew fat, too fat for flying. Indeed, the few who refused to eat so much and who worked at exercising their wings—in short, who took their divine mission of flying seriously—were looked upon as freaks, dangerous fanatics. We are not surprised when S.K. adds, “And the same is true of divine worship in Christianity.”<sup>5</sup>

The attack, as it appears in *Attack Upon Christendom*, is much more bitter in tone. I quote only one example:

This has to be said: by ceasing to take part in the official worship of God as it now is (if in fact thou dost take part in it) thou hast one guilt the less, and that a great one: thou dost not take part in treating God as a fool.<sup>6</sup>

The last paper in Kierkegaard’s *Attack* was found on his desk, complete and ready for publication, when he was taken to the hospital October 2, 1855. He died in the midst of the uproar, certainly a “witness to the truth” as he saw it.

The attack on Bishop Mynster and his church may sound familiar to the reader. Something very like it happened again in our century. When Pope Pius XII died in 1958, his fellow Roman Catholics praised him as a great pope. It almost appeared that the Church was ready to proclaim him a saint at once. One man cried out in protest—Rolf Hochhuth. He wrote a play, *The Deputy*, in which he pointed out that Pope Pius XII had been pope during World War II, and had not protested the murder of six million Jews in Hitler’s Nazi Germany. In one scene, a young priest has an audience with the pope and pleads that a letter be sent to Hitler, protesting the Jewish persecution. The pope refuses, insisting that the Church must remain neutral.

We cannot—will not—write to Hitler. He would—and in his accursed self the Germans in Corpore—only be antagonized and outraged. But we desire them, and Roosevelt, to see in us impartial go-betweens. Now that is enough. *Ad acta*.<sup>7</sup>

The text of *The Deputy* begins with a number of short epigraphs; one of them is from Kierkegaard's *Attack Upon Christendom*.

Hochhuth was not *quite* alone in his protest. Walter Kaufmann also remembered and wrote in his book *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*:

After the war, the Pope took a far stronger stand against Communism than he had ever taken against Nazism. In 1946, for example, he excommunicated Marshal Tito. . . . No such action had been taken against Hitler, Goebbels, and other leading Nazis who were nominal Catholics.<sup>8</sup>

He then added that before he became pope, as Cardinal Pacelli, papal Secretary of State, this man who was to become Pius XII, “. . . had negotiated a concordat with Hitler which required Catholic priests in Germany to swear loyalty to Hitler.”<sup>9</sup>

This reference to the pope's alleged support of Nazism parallels one of Kierkegaard's persistent complaints. Under the Danish law of his day, the state permitted houses of prostitution to continue to exist—provided only that these houses were operated by Christians!<sup>10</sup> Thus, he claimed, the Danish Lutheran Church supported prostitution; it simply made it *Christian* prostitution.

Kierkegaard having died in the midst of this attack upon “Christendom,” our biographical statement is completed. To know the man Kierkegaard, we need to study his work, and this will be done in subsequent chapters. But there is another way that we can gain insight into the character and personality of this interesting man. When I meet a man of letters and visit his home, I like to browse through his library to see what books he buys and reads. S.K. had, because of his father's success in business, ample means to buy books. He had a fine library of some 2197 books, and fortunately, we have information regarding that library.<sup>11</sup> Ronald Gregor Smith tells us there was little or nothing concerning natural science, comparative religion, or pure history in S.K.'s library. But the library was rich in religious and philosophical writings. He had many Bibles in several languages (including the originals, of course). He had a forty-volume set of the works of the church

fathers, and much church history. His philosophical works were primarily Greek and recent German. He seems to have been especially interested in Hegel, Socrates (as we know from S.K.'s own work), Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Trendelenberg. He also had copies of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Judgment*. He had *no* British philosophy at all.

He did have British literature in translation, and was particularly well read in the German translation of Shakespeare's plays. His collection of Danish and German literature was larger. He also enjoyed folk tales, legends, and fairy tales (as a child he had been a schoolmate of Hans Christian Andersen) and we find these imaginative writings frequently reflected in his work.

An examination of Kierkegaard's work reveals that he was not at all interested in setting forth a system. As we shall see, Hegel, the major philosopher of Kierkegaard's day, had a system, and S.K. certainly did not want to imitate him. He was concerned with helping people become Christians. Thus he tried to show that there are a limited number of ways a person can lead his life—and every existing individual must choose from among these.

Briefly, Kierkegaard thought there were three ways that a person could live his life. He spoke of these as the three spheres of existence. Unfortunately, he also sometimes (rarely) spoke of these as *stages*, as in the title of his book, *Stages on Life's Way*, and this can be misleading. *Stages* suggests a sort of inevitable progress, as in the stages of growth from childhood to maturity, and one *stage* is left behind as we move to the next. But neither of these things is true of S.K.'s spheres. And he *did* more often use the word *spheres*. So there are spheres of existence, which Kierkegaard designated, respectively, the *aesthetic* sphere, the *ethical* sphere, and the *religious* sphere. Since the three spheres of existence constitute the heart of Kierkegaard's thought, each in turn will be given rather detailed scrutiny in the chapters that follow.