

Kierkegaard and Contemporary America

Adaptation is the key to survival according to evolutionists. Entities that cannot adapt to changes in the environment will not survive those changes. Christianity is not an actual living entity, nor is it a vocal supporter of evolution. Nonetheless, Christianity cannot avoid the truth of the evolutionist's statement. Changing times produces a changing environment facing Christians. The new environment has new challenges and new needs. Christianity has to adapt to the new environment and answer the challenges and needs created by that environment. At the same time, Christianity has to remain fundamentally unchanged. The coming of Christ and Christ's time on Earth are not subject to revisal. The core tenants of Christianity must remain constant if Christianity is not to become a simple succor and crutch for the ailments of whatever society Christianity finds itself. The difficult of adapting and answering new challenges while retaining uniformity with itself is the challenge facing American Christianity. To succeed American Christians need to recognize the fundamental tenants of Christianity and what they mean for their changing society.

Few would argue that American society has been going through some changes. Identifying the exact changes, the causes of the change, and the repercussions of those changes is more difficult. The most obvious and significant change is the fall of Christendom. American Christianity has been struggling to reorient itself since Christendom has ended and this struggle is the major source of conflict. American

Christians are being forced to choose between an obsolete paradigm and an unknown and uncertain new paradigm.¹

Kierkegaard is a Danish theologian from the nineteenth century. While many great theologians came from the nineteenth century and have impacted the Christian religion, Kierkegaard brings a unique aspect to Christianity, which holds great value to contemporary Christians. Kierkegaard contribution comes in the form of existentialism. Existentialism, which Kierkegaard is considered to be the father of, searches to answer the question of the meaning of the *individual's* existence. Existentialists discard the Aristotle's' values of ordinary men: power, pleasure, fame, and fortune. For them, the universal truth is that everyone dies, and lives centered on the pursuit of these four goals will be futile and unsuccessful. The pursuit of happiness is not the purpose of human existence.

Addressing the challenges facing American Christianity through the writings of Kierkegaard will help identify the fundamental tenants of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, the purpose of human existence is to develop the eternal consciousness and a relationship with God. Expanding from this basis it will be possible to address the challenges posed by contemporary society and find potential answers.

Contemporary American Society

It is necessary to define Christendom and the underlying motivations that created and sustained it. The most basic definition of Christendom is that society where Christianity plays an integral and vital role. Loren Mead elaborates: "By law the church was identified with the Empire. ... The world that immediately surrounded the church—

¹ Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church*, (New York: The Alban Institute, 1993) p.22

was legally identified with the church.”² Mead identifies the beginning of Christendom with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 313 AD.³ In this society everyone in the community was Christian. Children born into the community would be raised Christian. The government, the schools, businesses, and other institutions all embraced Christianity.

Membership in the Christian community became a necessary requirement of social interaction. With the church and the state connected, it became Christian duty to support the state as well as the church. The mission of Christians changed from bearing witness to the words of Christ in the face of a hostile society to conducting oneself as an upstanding and loyal member of the state. Missionary work was done outside of the state and by the select missionaries⁴.

By the nineteenth century the Christendom paradigm had become firmly entrenched in Europe. State sponsored churches were the official religious centers of each nation. Christian duty coincided closely with patriotic duty. Being a good Christian was synonymous with being a good citizen. Imperialism and missionary work went hand in hand. The teachings of Christ and mercantilism of Europe were brought to the “savages” simultaneously.

In America, Christendom developed in a slightly different fashion. Because of the separation of the church and state in the US Constitution, there could not be a state-sponsored church. Despite this complication, American churches had a religious system very similar to the European Christendom. The separation of religion and government was spanned by the adoption of elements of a civic religion. Notions such as Manifest Destiny were extremely prevalent in the American society. Manifest Destiny was the

² *ibid* p.14

³ *ibid* pp.13-14

belief that the United States had a divine mandate to spread across North America and stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Many Americans saw America as the "New World" and as such was a chance for freedom, liberty, and righteousness to rule supreme and defeat the tyrannies that ruled the "Old World". Many of the immigrants came to America to gain the chance of creating this perfect nation. Many in the United States saw themselves as the champions of this cause. The Monroe Doctrine claimed this role of protector of the New World for the United States. So despite the official separation of church and state and the growth of numerous denominations within America the Christendom paradigm was the prevalent theology of the United States.

Contemporary society has changed since the nineteenth century and presented difficulties that the Christendom paradigm could not surmount. These changes are numerous and varied but can be fitted into four basic challenges: modernism, pluralism, secularism, and post-modernism. These challenges have eroded support for the Christendom paradigm and have left American Christians searching for a new system.

Modernism:

The first issue that needs to be discussed is modernism. The origins of modernism are found in the Scientific Enlightenment that began during the Renaissance. Modernism began in the eighteenth century and gained great momentum in the nineteenth century. A central theme of the Enlightenment was the great value placed on human rationalism and logic. The human mind was considered to be the most powerful and useful tool in the human arsenal. Armed with the rationalism and logic of the human mind, society was preparing to advance into the golden age of civilization. Christendom embraced the optimism of modernism, and much of Christendom's missionary work was

⁴ ibid. p. 14-15

undertaken in the spirit of modernism. Especially in America, pre-millennialism and millennialism were very popular notions. Pre-millennialist and millennialist believed that the thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth was soon to begin or had already begun. This optimism within Christendom that was a by-product of modernism would become a serious problem for the Christian church when postmodernism rises but that will be discussed later.

The true challenge presented by modernism is modernism devotion to science. Science and scientific knowledge are entirely based on rational and empirical conclusions. Science espoused careful and methodical study of a subject in order to produce the most logical conclusion that is consistent with the data. Modernists held the scientific method as the ultimate test of a theory's validity. Modernists attempted to apply the scientific method to all aspects of human life. Study of history and other cultures also became valid and respectable fields of scientific inquiry. Even religion has come under scrutiny of scientific examination. Any belief or theory that did not have its foundation in the scientific theory became suspect.

Because American society is so heavily dependent on science, the scientific method is a closely cherished standard in America. Science and the inventions and discoveries that came from science are playing an ever-increasing role in our lives. Since the beginning of the Scientific Revolution, Western civilization has been treated to one technological marvel after another. From railroads to a man on the moon, science has been turning fantasy into reality. What was impossible yesterday has today become the ordinary reality. The value and effectiveness of the scientific method is undeniable. For many American Christians it makes perfect sense to apply the scientific method to

Christianity. This desire to test Christianity under scientific standards has caused many American Christians many problems. Scientific discoveries have produced a continual stream of challenges to Christian doctrines.

One of the earliest examples of these challenges to Christian doctrine was the debate over the center of the universe. Christian doctrine had a geocentric stance that placed the Earth at the center of the universe and all other celestial bodies orbiting the Earth. Scientific studies indicated that a geocentric model was incorrect. Science proposed a heliocentric model. Eventually as scientific evidence increased, it became impossible for the Christian church to maintain its geocentric stance and it had to concede the argument. A contemporary example that is ongoing between science and Christianity is the age of the Earth. Many believe the Bible to indicate that the Earth is only several thousand years old. Science says the Earth is several billion years old. As with the debate of the center of the universe, science continues to churn out data and evidence supporting its position that Christianity is forced to try to account for or refute.

While none of these debates invalidate the core tenets of Christianity, they do create doubt and confusion among Christians that makes fertile soil for questioning the core tenets. Christians, accustomed to the mountains of evidence provided by the scientific method, are finding the Christian "proofs" lacking certitude.

Pluralism:

Modernism's love of accumulating knowledge of all forms leads to the rise of the next challenge facing contemporary Christian faith: pluralism. The study of history and other cultures eventually lead to the study of other religions. As American Christians become more aware of other religions, they have to confront the possibility their religion

is wrong. They need definitive answers on why Christianity is their path to salvation and not Buddhism or Islam. Further complicating the matter is America's growing religious diversity. Until relatively recently, religious diversity in America mainly meant denominational diversity within the Christian religion. Non-Christian religions were a very small minority or hidden from plain sight. Today, many religions are flourishing in America. Other religions are no longer foreign religions practiced by faceless foreigners a continent away but the religion of the next-door neighbor. Americans are confronted with the plurality of religion like never before. This plurality is something American Christianity has to cope with and adapt to. The US Constitution guarantees religious freedom. All religions and creeds must be respected and protected in America. Toleration and acceptance of differing views must be instituted into American culture in order to insure that all Americans have religious freedom. Maintaining this tolerance and the belief that Jesus Christ is your personal lord and savior and that only through Christ can we be redeemed is very difficult to do. It would seem quite obvious that if Christianity is correct and that only through Christ that we can be saved then the followers of other religions are not going to be saved. Doing nothing to help you fellows humans find redemption seems either very selfish or even evil.

During Christendom, this problem did not exist. The foreigners and their religion were wrong. It was the Christians duty to work towards the conversion of these misguided people. This was done by supporting the local missionary effort. The missionaries would go abroad and spread the word of Christ. The legitimacy of these efforts was never questioned. The typical American Christians had to give other religions no more thought.

Today, the American Christian faces the plurality of world religion and the authenticity of other religions. The Christian needs to come to terms with this plurality and the Christendom paradigm of old is completely incapable of doing this. The Christian community has been slow in adopting an effective and cohesive method of embracing this plurality. Most attempts by the Christian church to adopt this tolerance and maintain the importance of Christ result in a watering down of Christendom. It transforms into a form of humanism. Jesus wants us to be good citizens, the source that informs us of this desire is not as important as the behavior. If people live as good citizens then it is good enough for Jesus, after all Jesus loves everybody.

Secularism:

Pluralism and the protection of pluralism have given rise to the growth in secularism. The US Constitution has always separated church and state, but in Christendom this chiefly meant the government could not favor one denomination over another. Christianity was the undisputed religion of America and its presence was felt everywhere. As pluralism has grown in America the need to protect the other religions and viewpoints also grew. Many Christian practices that had been integrated into government-sponsored activities had to be separated. This separation is seen most clearly in public schools.

The school debate goes as follows. Because the US Constitution prohibits the establishment of religion within government structures anything that elevates a religious position or indicates a preference for a religious position within a government structure would be supporting an establishment of religion. It would imply to students that the beliefs endorsed by the school are the appropriate beliefs and those beliefs contrary to it

are incorrect and this would infringe upon the religious freedom of students. The only effective way to avoid any implication of preference is to completely remove religion from government structures. This effort to denude government structures of religion has begun in the American schools primarily because of the impressionability of children. Childhood indoctrination into a religion by the government would be the easiest method of establishing a national religion. Grown adults are more capable of making informed decision and so efforts to denude government structures other than public schools have not been as forcefully sought.

The school example is very important for two reasons. The first reason is that the participants are children. School is an important social aspect of children's lives and the lessons learned at school will go on to play a large role in their adult lives. The second reason is that schools are the primary source of education and world-perspective for many Americans. This second point ties in closely with the debate between science and religion. The material covered in school greatly effects an individual's education. Separating religion from a student's education places extra emphasis on the scientific method and perpetuates the belief that scientific evidence is necessary to validate a theory.

Another issue facing Christianity that is boosted by the growth of secularism is materialism. Secularism and materialism are not identical, but materialistic concerns such as career advancement and the gathering of wealth are being disassociated from the religious sphere. Business endeavors and career choices are increasingly seen as a secular issue. The difference between "business ethics" and ethics and the "business world" are clear indicators of this separation of work and religion. American society

places great value in establishing a solid career. Advancement up the social ladder is taken to be mark of good character. These secular "virtues" are running into conflict with virtues established by Christianity.

Perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche offers the best description of this conflict. Nietzsche was staunchly opposed to Christianity and his anti-Christian beliefs permeate his writings but he is able to put the two sides into stark contrast. Nietzsche divides morals into two categories: "master morality and slave morality".⁵ Master morality is developed by the ruling group and stresses reverence, self-preservation, and enhancement.⁶ Slave morality is developed by the oppressed and is a "pessimistic suspicion about the whole condition of man".⁷ Qualities that are useful to slaves are upheld, "[qualities] which server to ease the existence for those who suffer... pity, the complaisant and obliging hand, the warm heart, patience, industry, humility, and friendliness are honored".⁸ Nietzsche argues that Christianity has been used to promote these slave morals over master morals.⁹ The desire to excel and succeed that is fostered by the master's morals is subjugated by the slave's morals goal of being a good member of the herd.

While few Americans actively embrace Nietzsche's virulent anti-Christianity, the notion that Christian virtues are not compatible with today's business world is shared. The master's morals seem to be the obvious choice to embrace in a world that is described as cutthroat and dog eat dog. Christian virtues, such as humility and meekness, seem ill equipped to cope with the fast paced, aggressive business world.

Postmodernism:

⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) p.204

⁶ ibid. p.205

⁷ ibid. p.207

⁸ ibid. p.207

The final challenge facing American Christianity is postmodernism. As mentioned earlier postmodernism springs from the fall of modernism. Modernism was a philosophy of optimism. The nineteenth century seemed to support these beliefs. Human civilization was constantly improving. Humanity's future was bright and compelling. Working towards this future was an admirable goal. Humanity was unprepared for the twentieth century. Instead of continual progress, there was devastating war, weapons of mass destruction, economic collapse, and genocide. The optimism of the nineteenth century seemed to be absurdly misplaced. The immutable truths suddenly seemed mutable. Modernism gave way to postmodernism where the main concept is that everything is relative. Absolute truth and the progress of civilization were only in the eye of the beholder.

This new philosophy created its own unique challenges to Christian theology which theologians have been attempting to meet, but perhaps its greatest effect is on the rise of cynicism. The world had lost its clarity. Inviolable truths now had to be challenged. Unswerving belief now seemed naïve. Questioning ones old positions seemed necessary and new answers were needed. This cynical outlook fueled the debates that sprang up over science, secularism, and pluralism. Even though science must also be relative in a postmodernist's mind, it has all the inventions and discoveries to support it. Looking back at history, Americans saw how religion instigated great wars and atrocities, secularism and its tolerance of religion seems to be the only way to eliminate the conflicts caused by religion. If truth is dependent on the viewer, then why is it not possible for salvation to be achieved through different approaches for different people? The people are in different positions and therefore are faced with different truths.

⁹ *ibid.* pp.73-76

Theologian Douglas John Hall places our continuing use of Christendom doctrine in the face of postmodernism as the root of our religious problems¹⁰. Our doctrines that originated in Christendom now “appear contrived—a theoretical construct which can no longer stand the test of ordinary experience.”¹¹ Hall noted that while growing up he felt disillusioned by social moralism (which is integral to Christendom) being labeled the correct route to being a good Christian.¹² To Hall it seemed that the community leaders were “moralistic, self-righteous, unforgiving human being. ... They could always impress others with their stern morality because it seemed to pay off.”¹³ Hall was concerned about the difference between being good and “conforming to a social stereotype”.¹⁴ Hall was questioning the very definition of good. The Christendom paradigm was not providing Hall with answers. The old system based on a Christian society was not coping with postmodern questions.

All these questions converged during the last several decades and the need to be more cynical and less optimistic about humanity and its future forced Christian Americans to face difficult choices that American churches and their Christendom doctrines were unprepared to handle. Christian Americans are beginning to look for deeper goals of Christianity then: go to church, not take the lord's name in vain, and do not cheat on your taxes. They need assurances that Christianity is not a crutch of the past but a source of wisdom and salvation. With these burning questions unanswered by their churches, Americans have become dissatisfied with the established Christianity. They

¹⁰ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) p.158

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 159

¹² Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p.6

¹³ *ibid.* p.6

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 8

have been seeking out new methods of coping with the trials of life and in doing so have come in danger of losing some of the key tenants of the Christian faith.

Kierkegaard

From the beginning, Kierkegaard's existentialist perspective grants his studies an independence from doctrine or creed. Kierkegaard is not concerned with proving a set of writings or beliefs. Kierkegaard centers his attention around the individual and the individual's relationship with God.

Kierkegaard's method of study is through proposing a theory and then studying the consequences and results of that theory. Kierkegaard often begins with common theories that he wants to prove are seriously flawed. The flaws of the original theory will then be used to guide the creating of a new theory that accomplish the purpose of the first without falling victim to the previous flaws and inconsistencies.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Kierkegaard begins his reflections by embracing the pursuit of happiness as the ultimate goal of humans. In elevating happiness to the pinnacle of human existence it elevates happiness' natural rival, boredom, to a position of equal importance. To be happy one must not be bored; therefore escaping from boredom is a pre-requisite for happiness. Escaping from boredom is much easier said then done. The danger of boredom is ever present. An individual must actively strive to escape boredom, and this quest never ceases throughout life.

The key to this struggle for Kierkegaard is the skillful use of remembering and forgetting.¹⁵ Controlling ones' remembering and forgetting provides the groundwork for escaping boredom. To be happy in the present one must be able to forget the past. It is necessary to forget both the pleasant and the unpleasant. "A pleasant experience has as past something unpleasant about it, by which it stirs a sense of privation; this unpleasantness is taken away by an act of forgetfulness."¹⁶ Comparing the present to the past creates a sense of privation or repetition that erodes the present feeling of happiness and slips into boredom. To escape this trap it is necessary therefore to be able to forget. The key to forgetfulness lies in the method of remembrance.

Remembering must be done in such a way that measurements of enjoyment or sadness are stripped away or at least relegated to a footnote. Recollection of the event is not to be discarded, but attachment of strong emotion is to be avoided. To accomplish this system of remembering it is important to avoid present moments that create too strong of emotions. The strength of the emotion will burn itself into the memory and refuse to be expunged and become forgettable. Care must be taken to avoid enjoying the moment too thoroughly or the satiation of the moment will return to plague the individual. This requires the abandonment of hope because hope will imprint the memory too strongly to ever be forgotten.¹⁷

Through this method of remembering it is possible to forget the past in such a way that it will not intrude upon the present and ruin for it the possibility of happiness.

¹⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard Anthology*, comp. Robert Bretal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946) p.26

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.27

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.26

This provides a "realization of complete freedom"¹⁸ from which the individual is free to pursue happiness without constraints or baggage. Of course, this complete freedom also requires avoidance of friendship, marriage, or business, because any of these three curtail the present freedom with chains of the past. Social contact is desirable, but it must never infringe on the individual's freedom of the present. The individual must be able to cut away from the contact at a moment's notice.

The ability to remember and forget so as to provide freedom in the present is not a guarantee of present happiness. To find happiness in the present requires arbitrariness.¹⁹ In each moment, it is necessary to be able to arbitrarily choose the source of happiness. Allowing the situation to dictate the source of enjoyment will place severe limits on the enjoyment. Controlling the source of enjoyment by arbitrary choice will enable the individual to find enjoyment in any situation. This places happiness in the ability to derive enjoyment from an aspect of the situation in which the individual is placed.

The Aesthetic Life

As can be seen, following the pursuit of happiness to its conclusion provides a scenario, which few could label as "happy." It becomes an existence based entirely on the sensual world. It is a life that Kierkegaard labels an aesthetic life. The individual lives moment to moment and no value is placed in any particular moment and any choices are made only for the moment. Choices are "merely either—or."²⁰ This is a situation in which Kierkegaard finds much to fault. The aesthetic life for Kierkegaard is no life at all. Living moment to moment with no value placed on any moment means that any particular moment is reacted to as best fitting that moment with no regard for the next

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.28

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.31

moment or the previous moment. In any given situation the aesthetic behaves as that situation dictates in order to gain most benefit. Radically different situations will elicit radically different behavior. While this may seem like understanding the requirements of the social setting and following the rules of etiquette, Kierkegaard sees this as a grave danger. In each situation, the individual is donning a mask.²¹ This mask presents a respectable image to society but it hides the individual. An individual may use masks so often that none ever see the true self and the individual is lost.

The Ethical Life

Worse yet, the individual who hides behind masks never actually becomes a self. For Kierkegaard, the self is something that has to be willed and made manifest. It takes an act of will for a person to solidify one's character and become a self. They must choose themselves. This becoming a self is not the choice of "merely either—or", which is a momentary and irrelevant choosing which costs the individual little and can be easily altered, but a serious and momentous choice of either/or. In choosing either/or the individual makes manifest their will and consolidates their character. No longer is the individual a never-ending series of masks and facades, but a definite individual with definable characteristics. Becoming a self is not an easy task, for in choosing either/or the individual has declared who the individual is and therefore who individual is not. One has to risk oneself. The choice is not something that can be undone easily. Fear and indecision can hold many back from committing to choosing either/or.

This choosing either/or and willing to become a self will affect every facet of the individual's life, but it seems rather clear that it is not an aesthetic choice. There are

²⁰ ibid, p.99

²¹ ibid, p.99

more choices of ice cream than just chocolate and vanilla and choosing one over the other or choosing strawberry will not define the character of an individual. The character that defines the self is not aesthetic. Character is ethical. The individual has risen above the aesthetic “merely either—or” and chosen to live an ethical life.²² This is Kierkegaard’s second stage of life. The individual chooses to become an ethical individual and no longer an individual living only in the moment.

In labeling an individual as ethical it is necessary to differentiate the ethical individual from the individual who obeys the community mores. Few people are raised without being made aware what is considered moral and what is immoral. The individual that follows the strictures of society and always behaves in the moral manner is not therefore an ethical individual. The unreflective obedience to the social definitions of morality is an aesthetic choice made moment to moment. As Kierkegaard describes it, the true indication of an ethical individual is not “choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses.”²³

The emphasis on the choosing is of significance. The choosing is not a question of good or evil. It is the choice to rise above the aesthetic life and live ethically. It is “the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil/or excludes them.”²⁴ Aesthetic choice is choosing of a very different nature and so in a way not a choice at all. In this sense, living the aesthetic life is not choosing evil because the aesthetic life does not involve choice at all.

Kierkegaard believes that in the choosing of the ethical the individual will inherently choose the good. Kierkegaard believes that when “one can get a man to stand

²² *ibid.*, p.105

²³ *ibid.*, p.106

at the crossways in such a position that there is no recourse but to choose, he will choose the right.”²⁵ Kierkegaard proceeds to clarify that this does not mean that the individual will always choose the correct choice. The emphasis for Kierkegaard is on the willing of the individual. In willing the individual will distinguish between good and evil and choose to do the good, but the individual is not an infallible and can choose incorrectly. This method of choosing means that while humans do commit evil, humans are not by nature evil. They are inherently good. They commit acts of evil through ignorance.

The Religious Life

Up until now, the discussion has centered on the abandonment of a life of pure aesthetics and the forging of the self. As of yet there has been no mention of God. For Kierkegaard this lack of God presents a serious conflict for the individual. As stated in the introduction, Kierkegaard sees human existence as an attempt to establish the eternal consciousness and our relationship with God. Unless God is brought into the individual's existence the person is doomed to fail in reaching their true potential.

When bringing God into the equation, theologians often see it as necessary to attempt to support the existence of God. It would seem especially necessary to an existentialist, who is centered on the individual and the individual's reality, to provide grounds for the inclusion of God. In a manner of speaking Kierkegaard does address the issue of God's existence. He does it in such a way, however, that he does not specifically prove God's existence or prove the necessity of God. Kierkegaard defines God as the “unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides....”²⁶ The paradoxical passion of understanding is humanity's desire to “discover something that

²⁴ *ibid*, p.107

²⁵ *ibid*, p.106

thought itself cannot think.”²⁷ This definition of God simultaneously imparts great knowledge of God while actually saying nothing of God. Any description of God that can be presented by humanity is doomed to be incorrect, but Kierkegaard’s definition offers no hope of learning the correct features of God. For Kierkegaard God is beyond human comprehension. God is infinite become finite while remaining infinite. God is “p” and “not p.” Our striving to know God is futile but paradoxically our greatest desire. Kierkegaard is not claiming that humanity will never know God and should not bother to try. Instead he sees the individual’s search for understanding God as the driving force of our existence and the need for it is paramount. Kierkegaard’s definition of God does not claim to demonstrate the “real” existence of God. To Kierkegaard, this attempt is foolish. The demonstration is doomed to failure because “the very moment the demonstration commences, would presuppose it not as doubtful... but as decided, because otherwise I would not begin, easily perceiving that the whole thing would be impossible if he did not exist”.²⁸ For Kierkegaard, demonstration of existence or non-existence of anything is impossible. It is not possible to “demonstrate that a stone exist but that something which exists is a stone.”²⁹ One cannot prove God exists but can only prove if what exists is God or not.

That the unknown, which is God, plays a role in our lives seems fairly obvious. The individual’s willing of the self to existence will remain incomplete until this paradox is reconciled within the individual. This inability to reconcile the paradox leads the individual to despair. Kierkegaard addresses despair in a manner slightly different from

²⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) p. 39

²⁷ *ibid*, p.37

²⁸ *ibid*, p.39

²⁹ *ibid*, p.40

contemporary definition. For Kierkegaard despair stems from the inability to rid oneself of oneself. The individual is unable to will away the eternal self that is, and this failing is a source of bitter anguish. It is never ending since the source of the anguish is unable to be killed by the anguish but is always there to fuel the anguish to greater heights. This eternal self that is the source of despair is the self in connection with the paradoxical God. Kierkegaard goes on in his explanation of despair to list varying levels of despair and despair that is unconscious and conscious, but all despair is inextricably linked to the self and its relationship to God.

Returning to the ethical self, we now can see that making the choice to become an ethical person is not the highest goal of the individual. The individual's ultimate goal is to come into relationship with God and realize the eternal self. Failure to do so can only result in despair, which is anguish without succor. However, this appears a hopeless task. The inability of humanity to grasp God has been well established. A relationship is impossible. This is not a logic puzzle that requires careful examination and contemplation to derive the answer. There is no answer.

Faith

Finally Kierkegaard finds the role of faith. Kierkegaard defines faith as the happy passion in which "the paradox [God] and understanding meet in mutual understanding of their differences."³⁰ This happy passion enables the paradox and human understanding (or the lack thereof) to coexist in harmony. As will be shown later, this is not an easy coexistence. In a similar definition, Kierkegaard labels faith as "the objective uncertainty along with the repulsion of the absurd held fast in the passion of inwardness, which

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.49

precisely is inwardness potentiated to the highest degree.”³¹ Here “the absurd” is the paradoxical nature of God and “objective uncertainty” is human understanding. This is the embracing of the paradoxical God while simultaneously maintaining the objective reality of human comprehension and this must be done to such a degree that it surpasses any other consciousness. We are beginning to see just how hard it is to have faith according to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard’s faith derides any attempts to prove or approximate God. The accumulation of evidence is the abandonment of faith. Faith does not found its existence on empirical or rational evidence. Faith is in fact antithetical to proof. Faith is belief in the infinite becoming finite while remaining infinite. It is belief in that there exists something, which is “p” and “not p” simultaneously. The abandonment of proof and the scientific world it has founded is extremely difficult for an individual. Truly grasping the paradox and not paying lip service to the paradox is a very rare thing indeed.

These rare individuals who can make this “leap of faith” Kierkegaard labeled “Knights of Faith.” Knights of Faith display very unusual characteristics. What makes these characteristics so unusual is that they are indistinguishable from characteristics of the average humans. In embracing the paradox, the Knight of Faith has forsaken everything of the finite world but simultaneously received it all back. The knight behaves exactly like every other individual who is concerned only with the finite and temporal world but is simultaneously concerned only with the infinite. The knight has given up the concerns of the aesthetic world and in doing so is now free to enjoy the aesthetic world. This contradiction makes it impossible for others to distinguish a Knight of Faith from an ordinary individual. The inability to recognize Knights of Faith makes

³¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard Anthology* p.255

the leap of faith that much more difficult. It is easy to work towards a goal when an individual has examples of the rewards in front of them. The abandonment of logic necessary for the leap of faith seems too great a penalty for a goal that is unproven in the individual's mind. The leap of faith is an abandonment of the known and "proven" to embrace the unknown and un-provable.

It is therefore, often the case that the individual moves beyond the ethical life and searches for the religious life but is unable to abandon their logic and finite world and make the leap of faith. These individuals are left yearning for God but must resign themselves to never achieving a relationship with God. Kierkegaard labels these individuals "Knights of Infinite Resignation." Despite the gloom that seems inherent in their position Kierkegaard finds these individuals to be in a far better situation than individuals who choose to remain a purely ethical self. The feeling of resignation offers the individual a sense of tranquility that is denied the purely ethical individual. The knight has developed his/her self to the best of his/her ability and has come to an understanding of his/her situation. The knight also maintains the potential to make the leap of faith and become the Knight of Faith. This is a very significant advantage over the purely ethical individual

Kierkegaard's Christology

The preceding section described Kierkegaard's comprehensive review of human life and the goals and motivations that are inherent within. Kierkegaard has placed religion at the pinnacle of human existence and God as an absolute necessity. It would seem that Kierkegaard made no mention of Christ or how his system could be considered Christian. This is not true at all. Kierkegaard has a vibrant Christology that plays an

essential role that cannot be minimized. Christ's position has been alluded to in the description of God as the infinite become finite while remaining infinite. Christ's role is laid out most clearly in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*.

Kierkegaard's Response to Socratic Learning

As in his other writings, Kierkegaard does not start *Philosophical Fragments* with the assertion of Christ's existence or value. Instead he begins with a theory he wishes to disprove and in doing so develop a new, stronger theory. Kierkegaard starts with Socrates and Socrates' search for how humans learn. Socrates had discovered an apparent contradiction in human learning because "a person cannot possibly seek what he knows, and just as impossibly, he cannot seek what he does not know...."³² The apparent inability to seek and learn new material leads Socrates to conclude that humans know everything and learning is simply a process of remembering what was forgotten. While Kierkegaard greatly respects Socrates, Kierkegaard cannot embrace this stance. Kierkegaard seeks to find a new position that does not place "self-knowledge [as] God-knowledge." To claim that humans know all is akin to claiming that humans are gods.

If Socrates is incorrect, then humans must not be in possession of the truth. If the person does not possess the truth then the person possesses untruth. This is a bold statement. Kierkegaard uses this assertion of untruth as grounds for establishing the state of humanity as a state of sin. Kierkegaard's rationale is that since humanity is untruth but has the capability of being truth, it must be humanity's own fault that it is untruth. If humanity did not have the capability to possess the truth then they are merely animals. Since this is not the case, humans have the capability for truth. The only reason that

³² Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p.9

humanity does not possess the truth then is that they chose untruth over the truth. Kierkegaard labels this life of untruth through one's own choice as sin.

Humanity existing in a state of sin seems a momentous conclusion to make so quickly. The importance of humanity's state of sin is vital to Kierkegaard's role for Christ, but he spends little time developing this assertion. It would seem that Kierkegaard wants this assertion to go unchallenged and that readers would do so because it follows the traditional Christian doctrine of humanity's state of sin. If this were the case it would be a serious flaw in Kierkegaard's doctrine. It would in effect be a tautology. Kierkegaard would be establishing the necessity of Christ by establishing the state of sin that humanity is in. Kierkegaard would establish the state of sin by relying on Christian doctrine based on the existence of Christ. Therefore Christ is necessary because Christ's necessity shows it to be necessary. Fortunately, it is possible to back Kierkegaard's assertion of humanity's sinful state by referring to other writings by Kierkegaard. In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard has established the prevalence of despair among humanity. This despair, which stems from the inability to accept the eternal self, that is in connection with God, affects all of humanity. The only cure for this despair is embracing faith.³³ It will be shown later that faith is a key part of abandoning untruth and embracing truth. The connection between untruth and despair can easily be made. Despair is caused by being untruth. Since all humanity has this despair, all of humanity is therefore untruth.

The Introduction of Christ

Now that Kierkegaard's foundation has been re-affirmed, it is possible to consider the role of Christ in leading us to the truth. Humanity is in a state of untruth and does not

know the truth. If an individual is to learn the truth, then someone else must bring it to him. Kierkegaard calls this person a teacher. Before the teacher can impart the truth to the student, the student must have the condition for learning the truth. If the student has the condition within himself, then it would be possible for the student to recollect the truth without the aid of the teacher. This would then become the Socratic method of learning. Since this has been discarded, it is apparent that the student cannot have the condition for learning the truth within him. The lack of the condition requires the teacher to impart to the student both the condition and the truth. The truth without the condition would be useless.

This requirement that the teacher provide both the condition and the truth prohibits the teacher from being a human. The teacher can only be God. If the teacher can only be God, the question now becomes how God can interact with us. God is the absolute paradox. It cannot be easy to interact with humans and provide them with the condition and the truth. What would motivate God to engage in this activity? Kierkegaard gives God's reason as love. God loves each individual and desires a close relationship with that individual. God undertakes the effort to bring the condition and truth to the individual. This notion that God is motivated by love will be addressed a little later. For now the method will be examined. Kierkegaard notes several methods which God could use to bring the condition and the truth to humanity. Kierkegaard first examines the approach where God comes to the individual in all God's glory. Like a King courting a peasant girl, God would come to the individual. This meeting of such obvious unequals would taint the relationship. Humans would stand so firmly in debt to God that they would never be able to repay God, and this burden would wear on the

³³Soren Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard Anthology p.339

relationship so that in the end it would have preferable for the human never to have entered into the relationship at all. This result is not God's intention, and so God does not attempt this approach. God could raise up the individual in such away that the human would be awash in the glory of God and forget the distance between God and the individual, but God would not forget, and the individual would be deceived. This relationship would again be unsatisfactory to God, and so God will not do so. This leaves God with coming to humanity as an equal. God must become a human individual in order to reach humanity effectively. Any other way would lead to a flawed and uneven relationship that is not God's intent. It seems clear now what role Christ has in Kierkegaard's theology. Christ is the God/teacher. Christ is God in human form come to give humanity the condition and the truth.

Defense of the Paradox

This description of Christ treads a narrow line that is difficult to navigate. Christ is the infinite become finite while remaining infinite. There are several dangers that must be identified and avoided. The first danger is the abandonment of logic and reason in embracing the paradox. The existence of God as a paradox has been noted before. Now, however, the paradox comes at us in a far more direct manner. God has moved from the realm of the abstract and possible to the concrete and finite world. Furthermore, God has done so because God is motivated by a human emotion, love. Close examination must be given to this proposition before it can be accepted. Accepting this paradox requires the abandonment of logic and reason. This should not be undertaken lightly. Retreating from the paradox and hiding behind irrationalism is not an acceptable method of reconciliation.

The accusation that Kierkegaard hides behind irrationalism is a common critique of his writings. While these accusations deserve attention, they are not fully correct. Granted, one finds an element of irrationalism in Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's definition of faith requires that it not be based on logic. It is also incorrect; however, to imply that Kierkegaard has hidden behind irrationalism to avoid flaws in his theory. Kierkegaard does not resort to the use of irrationalism in his doctrine. Instead Kierkegaard brings the reader to the limits of logic and reason and asks the reader to move beyond. Human logic and reason are impressive tools. Their capabilities are great. It would be the greatest of hubris, however, to declare human logic and reason as the ultimate authority. To claim that human logic and reason can conquer all and that nothing is outside their scope is naïve and willfully stubborn. The only support for such a stance is that human logic and reason cannot produce an example of something outside their sphere of influence. This is a virtually impossible task. As Socrates has already shown, it is impossible to know what is unknown. If it is known then it cannot be considered unknown. If it is unknown then it cannot be known. Proving what is known does not prove or disprove the unknown. Kierkegaard has deduced this perfectly in his description of God. Kierkegaard has described God as the "unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides...."³⁴ The paradoxical passion of understanding is humanity's desire to "discover something that thought itself cannot think."³⁵ Kierkegaard has challenged the reader to confront the limits of human logic and rationalism and accept the possibility of something beyond them. Paul Sponheim succinctly sums up this train of thought: "It is far more to the point to speak of Kierkegaard's paradox as the reflection of his reason

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 39

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.37

than to suggest that Kierkegaard is somehow stuck with the paradox and then calls in an illicit irrationalism in its defense."³⁶ The danger of Sponheim's approach is that it can lead to the reduction of God to a logical hypothesis similar to Kant's proof of God. Kant showed that it was logically necessary to hypothesize the existence of God.³⁷ Following Sponheim's belief in Kierkegaard's rational grounds for belief in God, the reader is left using reason to abandon rationalism. This denies the purpose of faith for Kierkegaard. God for Kierkegaard is not based on rational irrationalism. Sponheim seems to leave Kierkegaard as an irrationalist, albeit a thorough irrationalist.

David Gouwens takes a different approach when defending Kierkegaard against accusations of irrationalism. Gouwens' solution is to claim that Kierkegaard's paradox does not represent a formal contradiction. For Gouwens, the absolute paradox is not a "logical offense of a formal contradiction involved in saying that a person is at once 'God' and 'a human being.'"³⁸ Gouwens sees no contradiction in "the speculative unity of God and man."³⁹ The complication lies within "any particular individual is God incarnate."⁴⁰ The claim that a particular human is God is an affront to our perception of God. The contradiction is between "the reader of the gospel and the figure presented."⁴¹ Gouwens sees the contradiction to be the reader's inability to reconcile the common perception of God (as glorious and omnipotent) with Christ. This is not a logical contradiction and therefore is not irrational. Gouwens is correct in asserting that the

³⁶ Paul Sponheim, *Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) p.176

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 1998)

³⁸ David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge England 1996) p.129

³⁹ *ibid.* p.130 citing Soren Kierkegaard *Practice in Christianity*, (Princeton University Press Princeton NJ 1991) p.125

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.130

paradox is not a formal contradiction of logic, but his placement of the contradiction within the human reader is a serious problem. Christ is no longer a paradox but an uncomfortable clashing of human conceptions of God. The contradiction must lie within the Christ figure for faith to function properly. The contradiction should be placed within God's love for humanity.

Acceptance that human logic has limits and that God exists outside those limits is not a contradiction of logic but instead an undeniable possibility. It is impossible to prove or disprove the possibility. This God is a complete unknown, and as such any limits or restraints placed on God find no grounding in logic. What logic can be used to define the indefinable? Therefore, there is no logical complaint against God existing in human form. The contradiction arises not from placing limits on God but from attaching attributes to God. It has been shown that God is a complete unknown on whom no defining characteristic can be attached. Despite this, it is imperative to attach the human characteristic of love to God. God must love the individual if God is to be willing to become a human. If God does not become human then the relationship with the individual cannot be established, and the individual cannot escape untruth. Attempts to define it as a divine love that has no equal among humanity (God's love being pure and unselfish) does no good. Divine love is simply ideal human love and of human origin. The contradiction is that humanity must believe in a loving God when it is impossible to envision a loving God. Humanity has no grounds to base this assumption; yet it must make this assumption. Here is where Kierkegaard's faith plays a definitive role. Faced with this paradox, humanity has no choice but to have faith that God's love exist. Humanity must place its faith in a loving God that is willing to debase himself and

⁴¹ *ibid.* p.130

become human so that humanity can receive the condition and the truth and enter into a relationship of equality with God. There is no logic or evidence that support this belief, and so the faith is pure.

The Duality of Christ

The first major difficulty of the Christ as the God/teacher has been dealt with. The second difficulty stems from attempting to define the God/man relationship of Christ. Kierkegaard is adamant that Christ is human, but simultaneously divine. This may seem like a re-hashing of the first difficulty, but the first attempted to determine the possibility or impossibility of a God/man. It has already been decided that it is not impossible; the focus is now on *how* it is possible. Does Christ have divine knowledge? Is Christ bound to the human form, or can he cast it off and reveal his divine nature? The chief danger here is that maintaining Christ's divinity will lead to Docetism. Docetism is the denial of Christ's human body in favor of an emphasis on his divinity. In other words, it is the assumption that Christ's human form is a cloak or a mask used to hide his divinity and not his true form. Kierkegaard decries this interpretation,⁴² and, referring to the king and maiden analogy, insists that "the form of the servant was not something put on like the king's plebian cloak, which just by flapping open would betray the king... but it is his true form."⁴³ It is necessary for Kierkegaard that Christ be wholly human, or else God would not truly be coming to humanity as an equal but as an impostor. The desired moment in which the condition and the truth are imparted would be impossibly flawed. Despite this requirement, Kierkegaard does not disrobe Christ of his divinity. Christ experiences all the turmoils of human existence but does so through his own choosing. It

⁴² Kierkegaard, , *Philosophical Fragments* p.62

⁴³ *ibid*, pp. 31-32

is a testament to God's love and resolve that God is willing to lower himself to become fully human. Kierkegaard is willing to leave the duality of Christ at the establishment of the minimal requirements of the duality. The physical reality of how Christ manages to be divine and human is left for God to know.

The Role of Faith

Kierkegaard has now established the importance of Christ in human existence. Christ is the God/teacher who provides humanity with the condition and the truth. Attention should be given to the condition and the truth. The condition has already been identified. The condition is faith. Faith has been defined as the happy passion in which "the paradox [God] and understanding meet in mutual understanding of their differences."⁴⁴ Since the condition is given by the teacher, Kierkegaard concludes that "the object of faith becomes not the *teaching* but the *teacher*... faith, then, must constantly cling firmly to the teacher."⁴⁵ This fits well with the assertion that the paradox is not irrational but the loving God. Followers must cling firmly to the belief that God loves them and has assumed the form of man to impart to them the condition and the truth. This is the paradoxical God and the purpose of faith. With faith the paradox can be embraced and the truth is given.

Since untruth is despair and despair is one's unwillingness to accept the eternal self that is in connection with God, then truth is the acceptance of the eternal self and the connection with God. This again fits nicely, since God's motivation for assuming human form is to establish a relationship with humans as equals. Humans needs to have faith that God loves them enough to descend into human form and provide them with the truth

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.49

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p.62

that God desires a relationship with them. Only through this faith, and due to the paradox that is God's nature, can this relationship be established. Therefore, Kierkegaard is correct in his belief that both the condition and the truth are given to us by Christ and only through Christ (God made man) can humanity fulfill its true purpose and live in relationship with God.

A final note on Kierkegaard's Christology: God's assuming of human form in reality and not just appearance means that Christ appears as a human. Christ's divinity is not something that the discerning eye can see through. A contemporary of Christ has no more evidence of Christ's divinity than the secondary follower. The contemporary follower's faith is therefore no different than the secondary follower's faith. This indicates that there is no advantage that is possessed by the contemporary follower. The contemporary follower and the secondary follower face exactly the same difficulties in coming to faith. Once faith has been found, the follower enters into a relationship with Christ that is identical in either time period. Therefore, while it is crucial that Christ's coming was historical, the timing of the event is not important. All that is important is that Christ humbled himself for us.

Kierkegaard and Contemporary Religion

It has been seen that the Christendom paradigm has fared poorly in dealing with contemporary society's problems and challenges. While the challenges facing contemporary Christianity have unique and individual aspects they all have one common factor. The common factor is that they are all questions facing the individual. Each individual is faced with questions that need to be answered for the individual.

Christendom with its emphasis on society and social order seems to lack the perspective

to deal with these individual questions. This is where Kierkegaard can be most valuable. As an existentialist, Kierkegaard focuses entirely on the individual and can provide insights that can help answer the questions are challenging contemporary Christians.

Modernism:

Modernism is the challenge that Kierkegaard answers mostly clearly. This chiefly stems from the fact that Kierkegaard wrote during the nineteenth century when modernism was at its height. In part, Kierkegaard's intention was to address the challenges posed to Christianity by modernism. Kierkegaard's approach is to place limits on the potential of modernist thinking and show how Christianity lies beyond those limits. Kierkegaard uses modernism to redefine Christianity to place it outside of human rationalism.

As shown in the section explaining Kierkegaard's writings, Kierkegaard has stripped the Christian religion down to its essential elements. The essential is faith in the God/teacher. Kierkegaard has presented the God/teacher in such a way that the scientific method is incapable of proving or disproving the God/teacher. God is the "unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides..."⁴⁶. The paradoxical passion of understanding is humanity's desire to "discover something that thought itself cannot think".⁴⁷ If humanity cannot think it, then humanity obviously cannot empirically test it. The logical possibility that there exists something beyond human comprehension can only be disproved by proving that nothing lies outside the bounds of human comprehension. Kierkegaard has shown that it is possible to embrace science and God without requiring God to be subjected to the scientific method.

⁴⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 39

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.37

The most problematic issue with Kierkegaard's merging of modernism and Christianity is Kierkegaard's role for the bible. In stripping Christianity down to faith in the God/teacher, Kierkegaard has also stripped down the importance of the bible. Kierkegaard went so far as to claim: "Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, 'We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died' – that is more than enough."⁴⁸ Kierkegaard has labeled anything more as superfluous.

Kierkegaard's approach has turned the bible into an unnecessarily long version of a single sentence. The extra verbosity adds nothing to the message for "the most prolix report can never in all eternity become more for the person..."⁴⁹. This does have the benefit of removing the conflict between the bible and science, but it does so by demoting the importance of the teachings of the bible. The bible remains vital to Christianity because it is the sentence, but individual passages lose much of their value. Biblical passages can have value as a guide in ethical choices but even here caution must be taken. The bible must not be seen as a manual to ethical living. Relegating ethics to a set of strictures one follows removes the importance of choice that Kierkegaard deems essential in developing oneself. One can choose to adopt the ethical teachings of Christ, but if one believes that the bible is the ultimate moral authority and strict obedience to the bible is the key to becoming a good Christian then the bible is a detriment.

Pluralism:

Kierkegaard does not directly engage the problem of pluralism, but Kierkegaard's writings can be utilized to help answer the questions caused by pluralism. Pluralism

⁴⁸ ibid. p.106

⁴⁹ ibid. p.106

offers two challenges to American Christians. The first is why an individual should choose Christianity. The second is how an individual should cope with living in a pluralistic society. In regards to the first question, Kierkegaard provides a straightforward answer. The second question is a bit more difficult to answer and the answer might not be entirely satisfactory to all people.

Kierkegaard's existentialist approach fits very well with answering the first question. By beginning with the study of the human existence and the requirements for altering our existence, Kierkegaard is able to come to Christianity not as a Christian but as a human. Kierkegaard develops a logic chain that points to Christianity as the only method of salvation. Kierkegaard's determination that the truth can be found only through faith in the God/teacher prohibits any other path towards salvation. Faith in the God/teacher is the only possible method of ridding oneself of untruth. Any other approach is doomed to failure. If Kierkegaard is correct then Christianity is the only viable option.

It is the clarity of Kierkegaard's answer to the first question that poses the difficulties in answering the second question. Kierkegaard's assertion that Christianity is the only correct approach to becoming truth brands all other religion as incorrect. It makes the need for conversion seem even more vital. A strong reason is needed to let others blindly follow the wrong path.

The initial response to this question is that religious faith is a purely personal engagement. Becoming a Knight of Faith is a monumental task. Individuals should focus on themselves and not distract themselves from their goal. While this claim is true, the task before each individual is a major challenge; willfully ignoring others is still self-

centered. The more correct answer to this question is found when the question is changed to: What can an individual do for another individual? Religious faith is something that each individual has to embrace on their own. Kierkegaard disdains the notion of "a follower who joins on the strength of the successful outcome".⁵⁰ An individual cannot come to faith through the witness of the attainment of faith by others. Adoption of the Christian religion because a great magnitude of humans promise it is the correct choice moves an individual no further towards truth than remaining where they originally were. The heart of the Christian faith "is and remains the paradox and does not permit attainment by speculation."⁵¹ If individuals allow themselves to be convinced of the validity of Christianity through the exhortation of Christianity by a missionary then their faith is placed in the sincerity of the missionary. Faith is something that each individual must come to by themselves and outside aid is not possible. While the desire to help others find faith in Christ is admirable, it is doomed to failure.

The harshness of this stance is somewhat unpalatable. It would seem at least minimally successful to challenge individual of other religions to refute Kierkegaard. The difficulty of this approach is that Kierkegaard's reliance on faith does not lend well to mass conversion. Kierkegaard requires the individual to place their faith in an unknowable God that loves us nonetheless and wants to form a relationship with us as equals. Because of its very nature the paradox does not lend itself to acceptance through persuasion. The most that can be done is to make available the knowledge of the God/teacher's existence and let the individual come to faith.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.96

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.96

Kierkegaard definitely does not make being Christian easy. He does offer a version of Christianity that is vibrant and unabashed in its goals. It is not a religion where once a week people go to church and be admonished to behave. It is also not an attempt to reconcile the various religions of the world. It is Christian and it makes no attempt to hide it.

Secularism:

When dealing with the issue of secularism, Kierkegaard again provides good insight in some areas and partial answers in other. Kierkegaard's greatest contribution and greatest danger is his bridging of the gap between religious values and business ethics. Kierkegaard contributes two elements: the behavior of Knights of Faith and the personal development of ethics.

The behavior of Knights of Faith is very peculiar when thought of in contemporary religious expectations. The peculiarity is that his or her behavior is completely indistinguishable from anybody else's. The Knight of Faith, the individual that makes the leap of faith, behaves like an ordinary citizen. There is no need to go into seclusion on a mountaintop or join a monastery. The Knight of Faith does not have to be a bishop or acclaimed theologian. The extreme behavior that is expected of elite Christians in most Christian doctrines is not present in Kierkegaard's writings. Individuals can continue to be an active participant in society. This removes what the choice between pursuing a religious path or a secular path. Both can be traveled simultaneously.

While the ability of the Knight of Faith to participate in secular interactions is an advantage, too much emphasis must not be placed on it. After all, Knights of Faith are

very rare indeed. The leap of faith is monumental undertaking. More consideration should be given to the individuals that are attempting to live ethical lives. It is here that Kierkegaard's second contribution comes into play. Kierkegaard leaves the determination of what is ethical to the individual. Each person has to develop an ethical code to live by. This is a two-edged sword that can be either very beneficial or very harmful.

The danger is in an individual developing an ethical code that permits them to act in any fashion they choose. Ethics would then act like a blank check and cover any action they choose. This might be an intentional behavior, but an unrecognized rationalization of behavior. The individual would have no standard for comparison. This danger is for the most part limited by the extreme importance the choice has for the individual. When individuals choose for themselves what is ethical, they must confront the question of ethics and choose an ethical code that defines them. The individual does not alter their ethical code at a whim. It is a choice that has great significance to them and it is their declaration of who they are. When this is coupled with Kierkegaard's notion that humans are inherently good, it becomes apparent that each individual will try to become a self that is an ethical good being.

They might fail. Either in making a decision that has negative consequences or know the ethical course and choosing the aesthetic instead. Following in the path of the second failure is the danger of indecision. Individuals cannot be forced to make a decision. The risks involved in choosing will deter people from making a choice. These people will not live "evil" lives though, merely aesthetic lives.

After all this attention has been giving to the development of individual ethical codes it would appear that the old code of Christian ethics has been discarded. This is not true. As mentioned earlier, the bible can be used a guide in determining an ethical code. Individuals can choose to embrace the historical Christian ethics. Even if an individual chooses to adopt traditional Christian ethics unchanged they have gained an important advantage over contemporary ethic codes. The advantage is from their choosing. Kierkegaard's willing to become a self shares some significant similarities with Nietzsche's will to power. Both involve the individual's attempt to define themselves as a human. The type of individual the person becomes might be significantly different, but develop a strong self-identity. The individual that chooses their own ethics and does not simply conform to social standards cherishes their ethical code more dearly. The risk in choosing it gives it much more value.

While Kierkegaard's individual ethics can be of great value to adults trying to cope with today's business world, it alters the growing separation between education and religion very little. Kierkegaard's unyielding dependence on the God/teacher prohibits him from the American classroom. The American educational system will continue to separate religious and secular issues. The only influence will be in limiting the blind adherence to the scientific method.

Postmodernism:

Kierkegaard's writings were in some ways seriously challenged by postmodernism and in others unaffected. Kierkegaard did not escape the cynicism and relativity of postmodernism and has struggled to prove its validity. On the other hand its focus on the individual let it escape unscathed the from the fall of modernism's optimism.

Postmodernism's cynicism challenges Kierkegaard to prove himself. If nothing can be taken for granted, what portions of Kierkegaard's theory finds itself unsupported? Kierkegaard's recognition of the limits of rationalism and defining of faith is the key to his success. Much of Kierkegaard's theory cannot be proven. Kierkegaard never denied or attempted to hide that. Kierkegaard's conception of faith is central to his theory. Kierkegaard's faith recognizes the uncertainties and unknowns in its concepts and embraces those concepts despite these doubts. The recognition of the limits of human comprehension is an essential element of Kierkegaard's faith. The challenge of questioning the validity of faith was something that Kierkegaard had always recognized as the principle challenge facing religion. The need for faith in religion was something that Kierkegaard had always stressed. The postmodernist's discovery that religion could not be absolutely proven but required some degree of faith would not be surprising to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard had always claimed that.

Religion's need for faith being established, it is necessary to establish the need for religion. Kierkegaard began his theory with the assertion that every individual is untruth. Kierkegaard continues with the assertion that every individual will suffer despair from being untruth. The only escape from despair is faith and religion. Therefore the need for religion is based on the universal suffering of humanity due to its existence as untruth. Postmodernism's scorn for universals makes any usage of them suspect. This refusal to easily accept universals causes significant problems for Kierkegaard. Ultimately it falls to faith to accept universal suffering and the need for the God/teacher.

In terms of having to cope with an uncertain future, Kierkegaard is neither injured nor particularly helpful. Kierkegaard's focus on the individual prevents the events of the

twentieth century from having little impact on Kierkegaard's theology. The existence of the individual as untruth is not altered by the great wars or any of the other upheavals. At the same time, Kierkegaard answers none of the societal questions that arose during the twentieth century. Answers to those questions must be found elsewhere.

Conclusion:

Kierkegaard does not meet with complete success when faced with the challenges of contemporary American Christianity, but Kierkegaard can make significant contributions to answering the challenges. The heart of the issue is that the challenges posed today are private challenges that each American Christian has to answer themselves. Kierkegaard can be instrumental in answering those challenges. Kierkegaard has laid out a straightforward approach to Christianity that has a clear understanding of the role of Christ and his relationship with an individual. Kierkegaard has a clear definition of faith and provides a definitive answer to what an individual must have faith in. Kierkegaard's Christianity is not overburdened with extraneous doctrine.

The principle drawback of Kierkegaard's theology is its inflexibility. Kierkegaard's theology is not easy and requires an extraordinary faith but does not allow for differing views. Tolerance can only come in through the belief that others are wrong, but there is nothing one can do to help them. This is an approach that has never gone over well and will lead either to erosion of faith or religious intolerance. A secondary issue is that Kierkegaard's theology provides little guidance in setting social standards. Individuals will choose ethical standards that they will cherish dearly, but this provides little help in establishing societal mores.

The inflexibility of Kierkegaard's theology stems from its derivation from existential foundations. Existentialism's focus on individuals quickly leads to universals which are difficult to prove. If it is existentially true for one individual then it should be for the next individual. If it is not then how is it true for the first individual? Despite existentialism's tendency towards universals it has great value in determining the fundamental tenants of a religion. Schleiermacher claims that "the distinctive essence of Christianity consists in the fact that in it all religious emotions are related to the redemption wrought by Jesus of Nazareth."⁵² This is exactly what Kierkegaard has focused his attentions on. The relationship between the individual and God as created through the life of Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard maybe wrong in his analysis but his questions are the correct questions. Existentialism proceeded to the heart of the Christian religion and the focus on these issues critical to the religion will allow any society to adapt to environment without losing sight of the true goals.

⁵² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, UK 1999) p.98

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