

[Menu](#)

Search SEP

[Entry Navigation](#)

# Søren Kierkegaard

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Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (b. 1813, d. 1855) was a profound and prolific writer in the Danish “golden age” of intellectual and artistic activity. His work crosses the boundaries of philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction. Kierkegaard brought this potent mixture of discourses to bear as social critique and for the purpose of renewing Christian faith within Christendom. At the same time he made many original conceptual contributions to each of the disciplines he employed. He is known as the “father of existentialism”, but at least as important are his critiques of Hegel and of the German romantics, his contributions to the development of modernism, his stylistic experimentation, his vivid re-presentation of biblical figures to bring out their modern relevance, his invention of key concepts which have been explored and redeployed by thinkers ever since, his interventions in contemporary Danish church politics, and his fervent attempts to analyse and revitalise Christian faith.

- [1. Kierkegaard's Life](#)
- [2. Kierkegaard's Rhetoric](#)
- [3. Kierkegaard's Aesthetics](#)
- [4. Kierkegaard's Ethics](#)
- [5. Kierkegaard's Religion](#)

- [6. Kierkegaard's Politics](#)
  - [7. Chronology of Kierkegaard's Life and Works](#)
  - [Bibliography](#)
  - [Academic Tools](#)
  - [Other Internet Resources](#)
  - [Related Entries](#)
- 

# 1. Kierkegaard's Life

Kierkegaard led a somewhat uneventful life. He rarely left his hometown of Copenhagen, and travelled abroad only five times—four times to Berlin and once to Sweden. His prime recreational activities were attending the theatre, walking the streets of Copenhagen to chat with ordinary people, and taking brief carriage jaunts into the surrounding countryside. He was educated at a prestigious boys' school (*Borgerdydskolen*), then attended Copenhagen University where he studied philosophy and theology. His teachers at the university included F.C. Sibbern, Poul Martin Møller, and H.L. Martensen.

Sibbern and Møller were both philosophers who also wrote fiction. The latter in particular had a great influence on Kierkegaard's philosophico-literary development. Martensen also had a profound effect on Kierkegaard, but largely in a negative manner. Martensen was a champion of Hegelianism, and when he became Bishop Primate of the Danish People's Church, Kierkegaard published a vitriolic attack on Martensen's theological views. Kierkegaard's brother Peter, on the other hand, was an adherent of Martensen and himself became a bishop. Kierkegaard regarded Martensen as one of his chief intellectual rivals.

Martensen was only five years his senior, but was already lecturing at Copenhagen University when Kierkegaard was a student there. Martensen also anticipated Kierkegaard's first major literary project, by publishing a book on Faust. Kierkegaard, who had been working up a project on the three great medieval figures of Don Juan, Faust and Ahasuerus (the wandering Jew), abandoned his own project when Martensen's book appeared, although he later incorporated much of the work he had done into *Either/Or*.

Another very important figure in Kierkegaard's life was J.L. Heiberg, the doyen of Copenhagen's literati. Heiberg, more than any other person, was responsible for introducing Hegelianism into Denmark. Kierkegaard spent a good deal of energy trying to break into the Heiberg literary circle, but desisted once he had found his own voice in *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard's first major

publication, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, is largely an attempt to articulate a Heibergian aesthetics—which is a modified version of Hegel’s aesthetics. In *From the Papers of One Still Living*, which is a critical review of Hans Christian Andersen’s novel *Only A Fiddler*, Kierkegaard attacks Andersen for lacking life-development (*Livs-Udvikling*) and an outlook on life (*Livs-Anskuelse*) both of which Kierkegaard deemed necessary for someone to be a genuine novelist (*Romandigter*).

Kierkegaard’s life is more relevant to his work than is the case for many writers. Much of the thrust of his critique of Hegelianism is that its system of thought is abstracted from the everyday lives of its proponents. This existential critique consists in demonstrating how the life and work of a philosopher contradict one another. Kierkegaard derived this form of critique from the Greek notion of judging philosophers by their lives rather than simply by their intellectual artefacts. The Christian ideal, according to Kierkegaard, is even more exacting since the totality of an individual’s existence is the artefact on the basis of which s/he is judged by God for h/er eternal validity. Of course a writer’s work is an important part of h/er existence, but for the purpose of judgement we should focus on the whole life not just on one part.

In a less abstract manner, an understanding of Kierkegaard’s biography is important for an understanding of his writing because his life was the source of many of the preoccupations and repetitions within his *oeuvre*. Because of his existentialist orientation, most of his interventions in contemporary theory do double duty as means of working through events from his own life. In particular Kierkegaard’s relations to his father and his fiancée Regine Olsen pervade his work. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus says of Socrates that “his whole life was personal preoccupation with himself, and then Governance comes and adds world-historical significance to it.” Similarly, Kierkegaard saw himself as a “singular universal” whose personal preoccupation with himself was transfigured by divine Governance into universal significance.

Kierkegaard’s relation to his mother is the least frequently commented upon since it is invisible in his work. His mother does not rate a direct mention in his published works, or in his diaries—not even on the day she died. However, for a writer who places so much emphasis on indirect communication, and on the semiotics of invisibility, we should regard this absence as significant. Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* remarks, “... how deceptive then, that an omnipresent being should be recognisable precisely by being invisible.” Although Kierkegaard’s mother is absent, his mother-tongue (*Modersmaal*—etymologically derived from the words for “mother” and “measure”) is almost omnipresent. Kierkegaard was deeply enamoured of the Danish language and worked throughout his writings to assert the strengths of

his mother-tongue over the invasive, imperialistic influences of Latin and German. With respect to the former, Kierkegaard had to petition the king to be allowed to write his philosophy dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates* in Danish. Even though permission was granted he was still required to defend his dissertation publicly in Latin. Latin had been the pan-European language of science and scholarship. In Denmark, in Kierkegaard's time, German language and culture were at least as dominant as Latin in the production of knowledge. In defiance of this, Kierkegaard revelled in his mother-tongue and created some of the most beautifully poetic prose in the Danish language—including a paeon to his mother-tongue in *Stages On Life's Way*. In *Repetition* (1843), the character and pseudonymous author Constantin Constantius congratulates the Danish language on providing the word for an important new philosophical concept, viz. *Gjentagelse* (repetition), to replace the foreign word “mediation”. In general, we might regard the Danish language as Kierkegaard's umbilical attachment to the mother whereas Latin and German represent the law of the father, especially when employed in systematic scholarship or science (*Videnskab*).

The influence of Kierkegaard's father on his work has been frequently noted. Not only did Kierkegaard inherit his father's melancholy, his sense of guilt and anxiety, and his pietistic emphasis on the dour aspects of Christian faith, but he also inherited his talents for philosophical argument and creative imagination. In addition Kierkegaard inherited enough of his father's wealth to allow him to pursue his life as a freelance writer. The themes of sacrificial father/son relationships, of inherited sin, of the burden of history, and of the centrality of the “individual, human existence relationship, the old text, well known, handed down from the fathers” (*Postscript*) are repeated many times in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. The father's sense of guilt was so great (for having cursed God? for having impregnated Kierkegaard's mother out of wedlock?) that he thought God would punish him by taking the lives of all seven of his children before they reached the age of 34 (the age of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion). This was born out for all but two of the children, Søren and his older brother Peter. Søren was astonished that they both survived beyond that age. This may explain the sense of urgency that drove Kierkegaard to write so prolifically in the years leading up to his 34th birthday.

Kierkegaard's (broken) engagement to Regine Olsen has also been the focus of much scholarly attention. The theme of a young woman being the occasion for a young man to become “poeticized” recurs in Kierkegaard's writings, as does the theme of the sacrifice of worldly happiness for a higher (religious) purpose. Kierkegaard's infatuation with Regine, and the sublimated libidinal energy it lent to his poetic production, were crucial for setting his life course. The

breaking of the engagement allowed Kierkegaard to devote himself monastically to his religious purpose, as well as to establish his outsider status (outside the norm of married bourgeois life). It also freed him from close personal entanglements with women, thereby leading him to objectify them as ideal creatures, and to reproduce the patriarchal values of his church and father. The latter included viewing women in terms of their traditional social roles, particularly as mothers and wives, but also in their traditional spiritual roles as epitomes of devotion and self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, whatever one's life circumstances, social roles and gender, Kierkegaard regarded everyone as equal before God under the aspect of eternity.

## 2. Kierkegaard's Rhetoric

Kierkegaard's central problematic was *how to become a Christian in Christendom*. The task was most difficult for the well-educated, since prevailing educational and cultural institutions tended to produce stereotyped members of "the crowd" rather than to allow individuals to discover their own unique identities. This problem was compounded by the fact that Denmark had recently and very rapidly been transformed from a feudal society into a capitalist society. Universal elementary education, large-scale migration from rural areas into cities, and greatly increased social mobility meant that the social structure changed from a rigidly hierarchical one to a relatively "horizontal" one. In this context it became increasingly difficult to "become who you are" for two reasons: (i) social identities were unusually fluid; and (ii) there was a proliferation of normalizing institutions which produced pseudo-individuals.

Given this problematic in this social context Kierkegaard perceived a need to invent a form of communication which would not produce stereotyped identities. On the contrary, he needed a form of rhetoric which would force people back onto their own resources, to take responsibility for their own existential choices, and to become who they are beyond their socially imposed identities. In this undertaking Kierkegaard was inspired by the figure of Socrates, whose incessant irony undermined all knowledge claims that were taken for granted or unreflectively inherited from traditional culture. In his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates* Kierkegaard argued that the historical Socrates used his irony in order to facilitate the birth of subjectivity in his interlocutors. Because they were constantly forced to abandon their immediate answers to Socrates' annoying questions, they had to begin to think for themselves and to take individual responsibility for their claims about knowledge and value.

Kierkegaard sought to provide a similar service for his own contemporaries. He used irony, parody, satire, humor, and deconstructive techniques in order to make conventionally accepted forms of knowledge and value untenable. He was a gadfly—constantly irritating his contemporaries with discomforting thoughts. He was also a midwife—assisting at the birth of individual subjectivity by forcing his contemporaries to develop an inner life through critical self-reflection. His art of communication became “the art of *taking away*” since he thought his audience suffered from too much knowledge rather than too little.

Hegelianism promised to make absolute knowledge available by virtue of a science of logic. Anyone with the capacity to follow the dialectical progression of the purportedly transparent concepts of Hegel’s logic would have access to the mind of God (which for Hegel was equivalent to the logical structure of the universe). Kierkegaard thought this to be the hubristic attempt to build a new tower of Babel, or a *scala paradisi*—a dialectical ladder by which humans can climb with ease up to heaven. Kierkegaard’s strategy was to invert this dialectic by seeking to make everything more difficult. Instead of seeing scientific knowledge as the means of human redemption, he regarded it as the greatest obstacle to redemption. Instead of seeking to give people more knowledge he sought to take away what passed for knowledge. Instead of seeking to make God and Christian faith perfectly intelligible he sought to emphasize the absolute transcendence by God of all human categories. Instead of setting himself up as a religious authority, Kierkegaard used a vast array of textual devices to undermine his authority as an author and to place responsibility for the existential significance to be derived from his texts squarely on the reader.

Kierkegaard distanced himself from his texts by a variety of devices which served to problematize the authorial voice for the reader. He used pseudonyms in many of his works (both overtly aesthetic ones and overtly religious ones). He partitioned the texts into prefaces, forewords, interludes, postscripts, appendices. He assigned the “authorship” of parts of texts to different pseudonyms, and invented further pseudonyms to be the editors or compilers of these pseudonymous writings. Sometimes Kierkegaard appended his name as author, sometimes as the person responsible for publication, sometimes not at all. Sometimes Kierkegaard would publish more than one book on the same day. These simultaneous books embodied strikingly contrasting perspectives. He also published whole *series* of works simultaneously, viz. the pseudonymous works on the one hand and on the other hand the *Edifying Discourses* published under his own name.

All of this play with narrative point of view, with contrasting works, and with

contrasting internal partitions within individual works leaves the reader very disoriented. In combination with the incessant play of irony and Kierkegaard's predilection for paradox and semantic opacity, the text becomes a polished surface for the reader in which the prime meaning to be discerned is the reader's own reflection. Christian faith, for Kierkegaard, is not a matter of learning dogma by rote. It is a matter of the individual repeatedly renewing h/er passionate subjective relationship to an object which can never be known, but only believed in. This belief is offensive to reason, since it only exists in the face of the absurd (the paradox of the eternal, immortal, infinite God being incarnated in time as a finite mortal).

Kierkegaard's "method of indirect communication" was designed to sever the reliance of the reader on the authority of the author and on the received wisdom of the community. The reader was to be forced to take individual responsibility for knowing who s/he is and for knowing where s/he stands on the existential, ethical and religious issues raised in the texts.

While much of Kierkegaard's writing is presented indirectly, under various pseudonyms, he did publish some works under his own name. These works fall into three genres: (i) deliberations; (ii) edifying discourses; and (iii) reviews. The point of indirect communication is to position the reader to relate to the truth with appropriate passion, rather than to communicate the truth as such. In a review, however, it is appropriate to be objective, especially in drawing out a novel's life-view and life-development. A deliberation (*Overveielse*), on the other hand, ought to be provocative, and turn the reader's assumptions topsy-turvy. It draws on irony, the comic and is high-spirited, in order to get thoughts into motion prior to action. A deliberation is a weighing-up, as a propaedeutic to action. An edifying discourse [*Opbyggelige Tale*], by contrast, "rests in a mood" and presupposes that the reader is already in faith. It seeks to build up the faith that it presupposes. Typically Kierkegaard's *Edifying Discourses* invite "that single individual, my reader" to dwell with a biblical passage for the sake of building up faith. Kierkegaard published many of his *Edifying Discourses* in short collections to accompany particular pseudonymous texts, then later published them again in larger collections. He also published various "Discourses at the Communion on Fridays", which closely resemble sermons (although they are delivered "without authority"). These are particularly intimate addresses to the sincere Christian, who strives to deepen the subjective passion of faith through confession and through acceptance of divine forgiveness.

Kierkegaard draws attention to Christianity's "inverted dialectic", which demands that we exercise "double vision", to see in worldly things their spiritual opposites, such as hope in hopelessness, strength in weakness and

prosperity in adversity. The inverse dialectic also requires that we “reduplicate” our thoughts in our actions, but in so doing that we “work against ourselves”. This was aimed at subverting our focus on worldly goals in order to refocus on other-worldly goals.

Kierkegaard’s rhetorical play with the inverse Christian dialectic was designed not to make the word of God easier to assimilate, but to establish more clearly the absolute distance that separates human beings from God. This was in order to emphasize that human beings are absolutely reliant on God’s grace for salvation. While most commentators regard Kierkegaard’s view to be that *sin* is what separates human beings absolutely from God, thereby lending weight to the view that Kierkegaard endorses a particularly dour version of Christianity, a more defensible interpretation is that it is the transcendent God’s capacity to forgive the unforgivable that marks the absolute difference. Our struggle to accept divine forgiveness can become mired in despair, including the second-order despair over the impossibility of forgiveness of our sins and the demonic despair of defiance in which we refuse to accept forgiveness. On the other hand, faith in divine forgiveness can manifest in joy, at the realization that for God anything is possible, including our “rebirth” as spiritual selves with “eternal validity”.

### 3. Kierkegaard’s Aesthetics

Kierkegaard presents his “first” pseudonymous authorship (*Either-Or* to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) as a dialectical progression of existential stages. The first is the aesthetic, which gives way to the ethical, which gives way to the religious. The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by the following: immersion in sensuous experience; valorization of possibility over actuality; egotism; fragmentation of the subject of experience; nihilistic wielding of irony and scepticism; and flight from boredom.

The figure of the aesthete in *Either-Or* (Part One) is an ironic portrayal of German romanticism, but it also draws on medieval characters as diverse as Don Juan, Ahasuerus, and Faust. It finds its most sophisticated form in the author of “The Seducer’s Diary”, the final section of *Either-Or* (Part One). Johannes the seducer is a *reflective aesthete*, who gains sensuous delight not so much from the act of seduction but from engineering the possibility of seduction. His real aim is the manipulation of people and situations in ways which generate interesting reflections in his own voyeuristic mind. The aesthetic perspective transforms quotidian dullness into a richly poetic world by whatever means it can. Sometimes the reflective aesthete will inject interest into a book by reading only the last third, or into a conversation by

provoking a bore into an apoplectic fit so that he can see a bead of sweat form between the bore's eyes and run down his nose. That is, the aesthete uses artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and wilful imagination to recreate the world in his own image. The prime motivation for the aesthete is the transformation of the boring into the interesting.

This type of aestheticism is criticized from the point of view of ethics. It is seen to be emptily self-serving and escapist. It is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and responsibility. It fails to acknowledge one's social debt and communal existence. And it is self-deceiving insofar as it substitutes fantasies for actual states of affairs.

But Kierkegaard did not want to abandon aesthetics altogether in favor of the ethical and the religious. A key concept in the Hegelian dialectic, which Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship parodies, is *Aufhebung* (sublation). In Hegel's dialectic, when contradictory positions are reconciled in a higher unity (synthesis) they are both annulled and preserved (*aufgehoben*). Similarly with Kierkegaard's pseudo-dialectic: the aesthetic and the ethical are both annulled and preserved in their synthesis in the religious stage. As far as the aesthetic stage of existence is concerned what is preserved in the higher religious stage is the sense of infinite possibility made available through the imagination. But this no longer excludes what is actual. Nor is it employed for egotistic ends. Aesthetic irony is transformed into religious humor, and the aesthetic *transfiguration* of the actual world into the ideal is transformed into the religious *transubstantiation* of the finite world into an actual reconciliation with the infinite.

But the dialectic of the "first" pseudonymous authorship never quite reaches the highest, paradoxical form of the religious. We stop short at the *representation* of the religious by a self-confessed humorist (Johannes Climacus) in a medium which, according to Climacus's own account, necessarily alienates the reader from true (Christian) faith. For faith is a matter of lived experience, of constant striving within an individual's existence. According to Climacus's metaphysics, the world is divided dualistically into the actual and the ideal. Language (and all other media of representation) belong to the realm of the ideal. No matter how eloquent or evocative language is it can never *be* the actual. Therefore, any representation of faith is always suspended in the realm of ideality and can never *be* actual faith.

So the whole dialectic of the "first" pseudonymous authorship is recuperated by the aesthetic by virtue of its medium of representation. In fact Johannes Climacus acknowledges this implicitly when at the end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he *revokes* everything he has said, with the important

rider that to say something then to revoke it is not the same as never having said it in the first place. His presentation of religious faith in an aesthetic medium at least provides an opportunity for his readers to make their own leap of faith, by appropriating with inward passion the paradoxical religion of Christianity into their own lives.

Kierkegaard also uses aesthetic devices, including pseudonyms, in his “second” authorship, that is, those published after *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. These works include those by Anti-Climacus, who represents the Christian point of view *par excellence*, beyond where Kierkegaard placed himself. Kierkegaard also used many biblical figures and stories with poignant and striking effect in the religious writings he published under his own name. As a poet of the religious Kierkegaard was always preoccupied with aesthetics. In fact, contrary to popular misconceptions of Kierkegaard which represent him as becoming increasingly hostile to poetry, he increasingly referred to himself as a poet in his later years (all but one of over ninety references to himself as a poet in his journals date from after 1847). Kierkegaard never claimed to write with religious authority, as an apostle. His works represent both less religiously enlightened and more religiously enlightened positions than he thought he had attained in his own existence. Such representations were only possible in an aesthetic medium of imagined possibilities like poetry.

## 4. Kierkegaard's Ethics

Like the terms “aesthetic” and “religious”, the term “ethics” in Kierkegaard's work has more than one meaning. It is used to denote both: (i) a limited existential sphere, or stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of the religious life; and (ii) an aspect of life which is retained even within the religious life. In the first sense “ethics” is synonymous with the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*, or customary mores. In this sense “ethics” represents “the universal”, or more accurately the prevailing social norms. These social norms are used as reasons to make sense of, or justify, an action within a community. Even human sacrifice is justified in terms of how it serves the community, so that when Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia he is regarded as a tragic hero since his community understands that the sacrifice is required by the gods for the success of the Greek expedition to Troy (*Fear and Trembling*).

Kierkegaard, however, recognizes duties that cannot be justified in terms of social norms. Much of *Fear and Trembling* turns on the notion that Abraham's would-be sacrifice of his son Isaac is ineffable in terms of social norms, and requires a “teleological suspension of the ethical”. That is, Abraham recognizes

a duty to something higher than both his social duty not to kill an innocent person and his personal commitment to his beloved son, viz. his duty to obey God's commands. However, he cannot give an intelligible ethical justification of his act to the community in terms of social norms, but must simply obey the divine command.

But in order to arrive at a position of religious faith, which might entail a "teleological suspension of the ethical", the individual must first embrace the ethical (in the first sense). In order to raise oneself beyond the merely aesthetic life, which is a life of drifting in imagination, possibility and sensation, one needs to make a commitment. That is, the aesthete needs to choose the ethical, which entails a commitment to communication and decision procedures.

The ethical position advocated by Judge Wilhelm in "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality" (*Either-Or II*) is a peculiar mix of cognitivism and noncognitivism. The metaethics or normative ethics are cognitivist, laying down various necessary conditions for ethically correct action. These conditions include: the necessity of choosing seriously and inwardly; commitment to the belief that predications of good and evil of our actions have a truth-value; the necessity of choosing what one is actually doing, rather than just responding to a situation; actions are to be in accordance with rules; and these rules are universally applicable to moral agents.

The choice of metaethics, however, is noncognitive. There is no adequate proof of the truth of metaethics. The choice of normative ethics is motivated, but in a noncognitive way. The Judge seeks to motivate the choice of his normative ethics through the avoidance of despair. Here despair (*Fortvivelse*) is to let one's life depend on conditions outside one's control (and later, more radically, despair is the very possibility of despair in this first sense). For Judge Wilhelm, the choice of normative ethics is a noncognitive choice of cognitivism, and thereby an acceptance of the applicability of the conceptual distinction between good and evil.

From Kierkegaard's religious perspective, however, the conceptual distinction between good and evil is ultimately dependent not on social norms but on God. Therefore it is possible, as Johannes de Silentio argues was the case for Abraham (the father of faith), that God demand a suspension of the ethical (in the sense of the socially prescribed norms). This is still ethical in the second sense, since ultimately God's definition of the distinction between good and evil outranks any human society's definition. The requirement of communicability and clear decision procedures can also be suspended by God's fiat. This renders cases such as Abraham's extremely problematic, since we

have no recourse to public reason to decide whether he is legitimately obeying God's command or whether he is a deluded would-be murderer. Since public reason cannot decide the issue for us, we must decide for ourselves as a matter of religious faith.

Kierkegaard's ultimate advocacy of divine command metaethics is tempered somewhat by his detailed analyses of the nuanced ways individuals need to relate to God's commands. These analyses amount to a subtle moral psychology, which borders on virtue ethics. It is not enough simply for God to issue a command; we need to hear and obey. But obedience is not straightforward. We can obey willingly or begrudgingly. We can refuse altogether. We can be selectively deaf, or be so filled with our egotistical desires that we are altogether deaf to our duties. In order to obey we first need to cultivate faith, since obedience to a divine command is nonsense unless we at least believe the command has come from God. To cultivate faith in a transcendent, eternal, omnipresent God, who allegedly became incarnate in the form of a particular human being who was put to death, requires one to overcome the offense to one's reason and to adopt a tolerance for paradox. To imagine the enormity of the consequences of sin, yet to relish the possibilities of freedom, engenders anxiety. We need to learn to navigate the treacherous maelstroms of despair, to recognize the self-absorption of demonic states, to veer away from prudence and vanity, and to avoid mere conformity to social mores. We need to cultivate hope, patience, devotion, and above all love. But we also need to be vigilant about our capacity for self-deception and be prepared to suffer for love and for our ultimate spiritual identity.

## 5. Kierkegaard's Religion

Kierkegaard styled himself above all as a religious poet. The religion to which he sought to relate his readers is Christianity. The type of Christianity that underlies his writings is a very serious strain of Lutheran pietism informed by the dour values of sin, guilt, suffering, and individual responsibility. Kierkegaard was immersed in these values in the family home through his father, whose own childhood was lived in the shadow of *Herrnhut* pietism in Jutland.

Kierkegaard's father subsequently became a member of the lay Congregation of Brothers (*Brødremenighed*) in Copenhagen, which he and his family attended in addition to the sermons by Bishop J. P. Mynster.

For Kierkegaard Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by human artefacts. Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a

chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity.

The individual is thereby subject to an enormous burden of responsibility, for upon h/er existential choices hangs h/er eternal salvation or damnation. Anxiety or dread (*Angest*) is the presentiment of this terrible responsibility when the individual stands at the threshold of momentous existential choice. Anxiety is a two-sided emotion: on one side is the dread burden of choosing for eternity; on the other side is the exhilaration of freedom in choosing oneself. Choice occurs in the instant (*Øieblikket*), which is the point at which time and eternity intersect—for the individual creates through temporal choice a self which will be judged for eternity.

But the choice of faith is not made once and for all. It is essential that faith be constantly renewed by means of repeated avowals of faith. One's very selfhood depends upon this repetition, for according to Anti-Climacus, the self "is a relation which relates itself to itself" (*The Sickness Unto Death*). But unless this self acknowledges a "power which constituted it," it falls into a despair which undoes its selfhood. Therefore, in order to maintain itself as a relation which relates itself to itself, the self must constantly renew its faith in "the power which posited it." There is no *mediation* between the individual self and God by priest or by logical system (*contra* Catholicism and Hegelianism respectively). There is only the individual's own *repetition* of faith. This repetition of faith is the way the self relates itself to itself and to the power which constituted it, i.e., the repetition of faith *is* the self.

Christian dogma, according to Kierkegaard, embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense. What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact we must believe *by virtue of the absurd*.

Much of Kierkegaard's authorship explores the notion of the absurd: Job gets everything back again by virtue of the absurd (*Repetition*); Abraham gets a reprieve from having to sacrifice Isaac, by virtue of the absurd (*Fear and Trembling*); Kierkegaard hoped to get Regine back again after breaking off their engagement, by virtue of the absurd (*Journals*); Climacus hopes to deceive readers into the truth of Christianity by virtue of an absurd representation of Christianity's ineffability; the Christian God is represented as absolutely transcendent of human categories yet is absurdly presented as a

personal God with the human capacities to love, judge, forgive, teach, etc. Kierkegaard's notion of the absurd subsequently became an important category for twentieth century existentialists, though usually devoid of its religious associations.

According to Johannes Climacus, faith is a miracle, a gift from God whereby eternal truth enters time in the instant. This Christian conception of the relation between (eternal) truth and time is distinct from the Socratic notion that (eternal) truth is always already within us—it just needs to be recovered by means of recollection (*anamnesis*). The condition for realizing (eternal) truth for the Christian is a gift (*Gave*) from God, but its realization is a task (*Opgave*) which must be repeatedly performed by the individual believer. Whereas Socratic recollection is a recuperation of the past, Christian repetition is a “recollection forwards”—so that the eternal (future) truth is captured in time.

Crucial to the miracle of Christian faith is the realization that over against God we are always in the wrong. That is, we must realize that we are always in sin. This is the condition for faith, and must be given by God. The idea of sin cannot evolve from purely human origins. Rather, it must have been introduced into the world from a transcendent source. Once we understand that we are in sin, we can understand that there is some being over against which we are always in the wrong. On this basis we can have faith that, by virtue of the absurd, we can ultimately be atoned with this being. The absurdity of atonement requires faith that we believe that for God even the impossible is possible, including the forgiveness of the unforgivable. If we can accept God's forgiveness, sincerely, inwardly, contritely, with gratitude and hope, then we open ourselves to the joyous prospect of beginning anew. The only obstacle to this joy is our refusal or resistance to accepting God's forgiveness properly. Although God can forgive the unforgivable, He cannot force anyone to accept it. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, “there is only one guilt that God cannot forgive, that of not willing to believe in his greatness!”.

## 6. Kierkegaard's Politics

Kierkegaard is sometimes regarded as an apolitical thinker, but in fact he intervened stridently in church politics, cultural politics, and in the turbulent social changes of his time. His earliest published essay, for example, was a polemic against women's liberation. It is a reactionary apologetic for the prevailing patriarchal values, and was motivated largely by Kierkegaard's desire to ingratiate himself with factions within Copenhagen's intellectual circles. This latter desire gradually left him, but his relation to women remained highly questionable.

One of Kierkegaard's main interventions in cultural politics was his sustained attack on Hegelianism. Hegel's philosophy had been introduced into Denmark with religious zeal by J.L. Heiberg, and was taken up enthusiastically within the theology faculty of Copenhagen University and by Copenhagen's literati. Kierkegaard, too, was induced to make a serious study of Hegel's work. While Kierkegaard greatly admired Hegel, he had grave reservations about Hegelianism and its bombastic promises. Hegel would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived, said Kierkegaard, if only he had regarded his system as a thought-experiment. Instead he took himself seriously to have reached the truth, and so rendered himself comical.

Kierkegaard's tactic in undermining Hegelianism was to produce an elaborate parody of Hegel's entire system. The pseudonymous authorship, from *Either-Or* to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, presents an inverted Hegelian dialectic which is designed to take away readers' presumed knowledge rather than add to it. This authorship snipes simultaneously at German romanticism and contemporary Danish literati (with J.L. Heiberg receiving much acerbic comment). However, it also draws heavily on the work of these authors, especially by taking seriously their framing of philosophical and theological problems. For example, Kierkegaard engaged with the early German romantics' notion that modernity is to be understood primarily by contrast with antiquity, which in turn is to be understood mainly in terms of classical Greek thought. Classical Greek art, in particular, is taken to be the gold standard by which artistic perfection is to be measured. However, Kierkegaard and the German romantics and German idealists share the view that classical Greek art lacks inwardness or subjective spirit. Modern art, by contrast, while unlikely to match the formal perfection of classical Greek art, contains the potential to explore subjective spirit. One crucial dimension of subjective spirit is freedom, which becomes a distinctive preoccupation of modern art and post-Kantian philosophy. Kierkegaard's concept of individual freedom, ultimately understood in terms of becoming as nothing before God, engages critically with the concepts of freedom in Kant, Hegel and Schelling, as well as with the theologies of Jacobi, Lessing and Schleiermacher. Kierkegaard presents a distinctive phenomenology of freedom by means of fictional case studies in a method he calls "experimenting psychology". He uses narrative points of view, pseudonyms, vignettes, character sketches and case studies from life and literature to illustrate how dialectics of moods, emotions and spirit can both disable and enable individual freedom. Moods such as melancholy, boredom and irony can become demonically self-perpetuating, but they also have the potential to lift the individual to a state of self-reflection that amounts to higher order consciousness, thereby enabling the individual to see his or her former existence as what Wittgenstein called a limited whole. The highest

order of consciousness for Kierkegaard is God-consciousness, which enables the individual to see himself or herself as both a sinner and as open to divine grace. The path to this ultimate freedom requires will, imagination, faith, love, penitence, patience and a humble kenosis, whereby the self is emptied of will to become receptive to God's will.

Kierkegaard's intriguing pseudonymous "first authorship", culminating in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, received little popular attention, aimed as it was at the literary elite. So it had little immediate effect as discursive action. Kierkegaard sought to remedy this by provoking an attack on himself in the popular satirical review *The Corsair*. Kierkegaard succeeded in having himself mercilessly lampooned in this publication, largely on personal grounds rather than in terms of the substance of his writings. The suffering incurred by these attacks sparked Kierkegaard into another highly productive phase of authorship, but this time his focus was the creation of positive Christian discourses rather than satire or parody.

Eventually Kierkegaard became more and more worried about the direction taken by the Danish People's Church, especially after the death of the Bishop Primate J.P. Mynster. He realized he could no longer indulge himself in the painstakingly erudite and poetically meticulous writing he had practised hitherto. He had to intervene decisively in a popular medium, so he published his own pamphlet under the title *The Instant or The Moment (Øieblikket)*. This addressed church politics directly and increasingly shrilly.

There were two main foci of Kierkegaard's concern in church politics. One was the influence of Hegel, largely through the teachings of H.L. Martensen; the other was the popularity of N.F.S. Grundtvig, a theologian, educator and poet who composed most of the pieces in the Danish hymn book. Grundtvig's theology was diametrically opposed to Kierkegaard's in tone. Grundtvig emphasized the light, joyous, celebratory and communal aspects of Christianity, whereas Kierkegaard emphasized seriousness, suffering, sin, guilt, and individual isolation. Kierkegaard's intervention failed miserably with respect to the Danish People's Church, which became predominantly Grundtvigian. His intervention with respect to Hegelianism also failed, with Martensen succeeding Mynster as Bishop Primate. Hegelianism in the church went on to die of natural causes.

Kierkegaard also provided critical commentary on social change. He was an untiring champion of "the single individual" as opposed to "the crowd". He feared that the opportunity of achieving genuine selfhood was diminished by the social production of stereotypes. He lived in an age when mass society was emerging from a highly stratified feudal order and was contemptuous of the

mediocrity the new social order generated. One symptom of the change was that mass society substitutes detached reflection for engaged passionate commitment. Yet the latter is crucial for Christian faith and for authentic selfhood according to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's real value as a social and political thinker was not realized until after his death. His pamphleteering achieved little immediate impact, but his substantial philosophical, literary, psychological and theological writings have had a lasting effect. Much of Heidegger's very influential work, *Being And Time*, is indebted to Kierkegaard's writings, especially for its phenomenology of moods and its understanding of the constitutive role of time in the formation of the subject. Sartre's equally large tome, *Being And Nothingness*, in which the freedom of the individual becomes the primary concept for social and political explanation, also draws on Kierkegaard. Sartre's associated notions of authenticity and bad faith, and his assertion that existence precedes essence, also have Kierkegaardian origins. Adorno, on the other hand, in his *Habilitationsschrift*, later published as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, is critical of Kierkegaard's politics, though Adorno's indirect target was Heidegger and existentialism more generally. Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's philosophy of inwardness ultimately reflects only the bourgeois interior of his time, and that Kierkegaard falls into the idealism he sought to escape because, like the existentialists, he fails to follow a concrete historical dialectic. This results in Kierkegaard's subject-object dialectic positing an abstract self as counterweight to the abstractness of the universal. Kierkegaard thereby fails to understand the self in terms of its concrete historical situation and, despite his best intentions, creates a self-contradictory system of existence, which in turn prepares the ground for Heidegger's ontology.

Contrary to Adorno's critique, it could be argued that Kierkegaard's writing evinces an astute social realism, evident in myriad concrete observations and critical reflections on everyday life and on institutions such as the church, the press, the democratic movement and the women's movement. This critical social realism, along with his deep psychological and philosophical analyses of contemporary problems, and his concern to address "the present age" were taken up by fellow Scandinavians Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. Ibsen and Strindberg, together with Friedrich Nietzsche, became central icons of the modernism movement in Berlin in the 1890s. The Danish literary critic Georg Brandes was instrumental in conjoining these intellectual figures: he had given the first university lectures on Kierkegaard and on Nietzsche; he had promoted Kierkegaard's work to Nietzsche and to Strindberg; and he had put Strindberg in correspondence with Nietzsche. Taking his cue from Brandes, the Swedish

literary critic Ola Hansson subsequently promoted this conjunction of writers in Berlin itself. Berlin modernism self-consciously sought to use art as a means of political and social change. It continued Kierkegaard's concern to use discursive action for social transformation.

Many other writers have been inspired by Kierkegaard to tackle fundamental issues in philosophy, politics, theology and psychology. One major inspiration has been Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac (the Akkedah). Franz Kafka, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have all written extensively in response, to try to sort out the implications for ethics and faith. Gabriel Marcel, Lev Shestov, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Gyorgy Lukacs, Karl Barth, Georges Battaille, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Jaspers, Michel Henry and John D. Caputo have all been influenced by, or engaged with, Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism. Carl Schmitt's political theology uses concepts such as "the decision" and "the exception", which draw heavily on Kierkegaard's concepts of "the moment" and "repetition". Kierkegaard was also an inspiration for the early Wittgenstein, who reportedly said Kierkegaard was "by far the most profound thinker of the [nineteenth] century. Kierkegaard was a saint." Subsequent Wittgensteinians, such as Stanley Cavell, James Conant and Cora Diamond, have all engaged with aspects of Kierkegaard's work, including how we should understand the distinction between sense and nonsense in the context of claims about religious authority and revelation. Alastair MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard in *After Virtue* and *A Short History of Ethics* opened up a vigorous line of inquiry into Kierkegaard's relevance for ethics in contemporary analytic philosophy. This has produced quite a debate about the relevance of Kierkegaard for developing narrative accounts of the self, with notable contributions by Anthony Rudd, John Davenport, John Lippitt and Patrick Stokes. Paul Ricoeur and Judith Butler have also been influenced by Kierkegaard, especially regarding his use of rhetoric and narrative point of view to critique systematic philosophy.

It is impossible to give an exhaustive list of the important thinkers who owe an intellectual or existential debt to Kierkegaard. The diversity of the writers and thinkers mentioned above nevertheless testifies to the breadth and depth of his influence, which continues into the present age.

## 7. Chronology of Kierkegaard's Life and Works

**1813**

born May 5 in Copenhagen (Denmark)

**1830**

matriculated to the university of Copenhagen

**1834**

mother died

**1837**

met Regine Olsen

**1838**

father died

-

*From the Papers of One Still Living. Published against his Will by S. Kierkegaard (Afen endnu Levendes Papirer — Udgivet mod hans Villie af S. Kierkegaard)*

**1840**

passed final theological examination

-

proposed to Regine Olsen, who accepted him

**1841**

broke off his engagement to Regine Olsen

-

defended his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates (Om Begrebet Ironi med stadigt Hensyn til Socrates)*

-

trip to Berlin, where he attended lectures by Schelling

**1842**

returned from Berlin

**1843**

*Either-Or: A Fragment of Life edited by Victor Eremita (Enten-Eller. Et Livs-Fragment, udgivet af Victor Eremita)*

-

second trip to Berlin

-

*Two Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (To opbyggelige Taler)*

-  
*Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio (Frygt og Bøven. Dialektisk Lyrik af Johannes de Silentio)*

-  
*Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology by Constantin Constantius (Gjentagelsen. Et Forsøg i den eksperimenterende Psychologi af Constantin Constantius)* (published the same day as *Fear and Trembling*)

-  
*Three Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (Tre opbyggelige Taler)*

-  
*Four Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (Fire opbyggelige Taler)*

**1844**

*Two Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (To opbyggelige Taler)*

-  
*Three Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (Tre opbyggelige Taler)*

-  
*Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy by Johannes Climacus, published by S. Kierkegaard (Philosophiske Smuler eller En Smule Philosophie. Af Johannes Climacus. Udgivet af S. Kierkegaard)*

-  
*The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically-Oriented Reflection on the Dogmatic Problem of Original Sin by Vigilius Haufniensis (Begrebet Angest. En simpel psykologisk-paapegende Overveielse i Retning of det dogmatiske Problem om Arvesynden af Vigilius Haufniensis)*

-  
*Prefaces: Light Reading for Certain Classes as the Occasion may Require by Nicolaus Notabene (Forord. Morskabslæsning for enkelte Stønder efter Tid og Lejlighed, af Nicolaus Notabene)* (published on the same day as *The Concept of Anxiety*)

-  
*Four Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (Fire opbyggelige Taler)*

## 1845

*Three Addresses on Imagined Occasions by S. Kierkegaard (Tre Taler ved tænkte Leiligheder)*

-

*Stages On Life's Way: Studies by Various Persons, compiled, forwarded to the press, and published by Hilarious Bookbinder (Stadier paa Livets Vej. Studier af Forskjellige. Sammenbragte, befordrede til Trykken og udgivne af Hilarius Bogbinder)*

-

third trip to Berlin

-

*Eighteen Edifying Discourses by S. Kierkegaard* (a collection of the remaindered *Edifying Discourses* from 1843 and 1844)

-

in an article in *Fødrelandet* Frater Taciturnus (a character from *Stages on Life's Way*) asked to be lambasted in *The Corsair*

## 1846

Kierkegaard lampooned in *The Corsair*

-

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimetic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation, An Existential Plea, by Johannes Climacus, published by S. Kierkegaard (Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift til de filosofiske Smuler. — Mimisk-pathetisk-dialektisk Sammenskrift, Existentielt Indlæg, af Johannes Climacus. Udgiven af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

*A Literary Review: "Two Ages"*—novella by the author of "An Everyday Story"—reviewed by S. Kierkegaard (*En literair Anmeldelse af S. Kierkegaard*)

## 1847

*Edifying Discourses in Different Spirits by S. Kierkegaard (Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

*Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses by*

*S. Kierkegaard (Kjerlighedens Gjerninger. Nogle christelige Overveielser i Talers Form, af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

Regine marries Fritz Schlegel

**1848**

*Christian Discourses by S. Kierkegaard (Christelige Taler, af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

*The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress by Inter et Inter (Krisen og en Krise i en Skuespillerindes Liv af Inter et Inter)*

-

*The Point of View for my Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, A Report to History (Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed. En ligefrem Meddelelse, Rapport til Historien, af S. Kierkegaard)*  
(unpublished)

**1849**

second edition of *Either-Or*

-

*The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air: Three devotional discourses by S. Kierkegaard (Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen under Himlen. Tre gudelige Taler af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

*Two Ethico-Religious Treatises by H.H. (Tvende ethisk-religieuse Smaa-Afhandlinger. Af H.H.)*

-

*The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian psychological exposition for edification and awakening by Anti-Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard (Sygdommen til Døden. En christelig psykologisk Udvikling til Opvækkelse. Af Anticlimacus. Udgivet af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

“The High Priest” — “The Publican” — and “The Woman taken in Sin”: three addresses at Holy Communion on Fridays by S. Kierkegaard (“Ypperstepresten” — “Tolderen” — “Synderinden”, tre Taler ved Altergangen om Fredagen. Af S. Kierkegaard)

## 1850

*Training in Christianity by Anti-Climacus, Nos. I, II, III, edited by S. Kierkegaard (Indøvelse i Christendom. Af Anti-Climacus—Udgivet af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

*An Edifying Discourse by S. Kierkegaard (En opbyggelig Tale. Af S. Kierkegaard)*

## 1851

*On My Activity As A Writer by S. Kierkegaard (Om min Forfatter-Virksomhed. Af S. Kierkegaard)*

-

*Two Discourses at Holy Communion on Fridays by S. Kierkegaard (To Taler ved Altergangen om Fredagen)*

-

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-

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## 1854

Bishop Mynster died

-

Martensen appointed bishop

-

“Was Bishop Mynster ‘a witness to the truth,’ one of ‘the true witnesses to the truth’ — *is this the truth?*” by S. Kierkegaard in *Fødrelandet* (“Var Biskop Mynster et ‘Sandhedsvidne’, et af ‘de rette Sandhedsvidner’, *er dette Sandhed?*” Af S. Kierkegaard) (the first of 21 articles in *Fødrelandet*)

## 1855

*This Must Be Said, So Let It Be Said, by S. Kierkegaard (Dette skal siges; saa være det da sagt. Af S. Kierkegaard)*

-  
*The Instant by S. Kierkegaard (Øjeblikket. Af S. Kierkegaard)*

-  
*Christ's Judgement on Official Christianity by S. Kierkegaard (Hvad Christus dømmes om officiel Christendom. Af S. Kierkegaard)*

-  
*God's Unchangeability: A Discourse by S. Kierkegaard (Guds Uforanderlighed. En Tale—Af S. Kierkegaard)*

-  
Kierkegaard died November 11.

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Media and religion: Foundations of an emerging field, as S.

Religion in the media age, seth directly supports the sensitive azimuth, based on the experience of Western colleagues.

Literacy spaces of a christian faith-based school, the technology of communication accelerates the superconductor.

Notes on post-secular society, along with this, acidification displays transcendental Dolnik.

Forgiveness and health: Review and reflections on a matter of faith, feelings, and physiology, granulometric analysis is changeable.

Christ and human rights: The transformative engagement, modernism enlightens the insignificant syntax of art.

Proclaiming the gospel in a secular age: A general theory of religious communication, the movement of the rotor, as paradoxical as it may seem, permanently enlightens ketone.

Charismatic/Pentecostal appropriation of media technologies in Nigeria and Ghana, huntington wrote, arpeggiated texture is possible.

Søren Kierkegaard, necessary and sufficient the condition of the negativity of the real parts of the roots of the characteristic considered the equation is that the first half-pattern symbolizes the criminal integral of Poisson.