KIERKEGAARD THE CELIBATE

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IN 1995 LARS VON TRIER, the gifted and controversial Danish film director, drew up a series of 'ten commandments'. Along with his colleague Thomas Vinterberg, von Trier proposed to make a new kind of film. He entitled his ten commandments 'the vow of chastity' because he wanted to return to purity in film-making. He sought to get away from reliance on high-tech gadgets; and by stripping away all the layers of ornamentation that had become the norm in cinema, he hoped to arrive at the unadorned truth. In hindsight, von Trier's famous vow looks more like a clever publicity stunt than a serious commitment, especially since he has long since relaxed it.

Over 150 years before von Trier's vow of chastity, another brilliant and infuriating Dane, also from Copenhagen, opted for a life of celibacy. This was just a year after his high-profile engagement to a woman whose beauty would not have looked out of place in the greatest of Hollywood movies. The Dane in question was Søren Kierkegaard; Regine Olsen was his fiancée. I want to ask four main questions here: why did Kierkegaard choose celibacy? How did he cope with it? What did he get out of it? And what can we learn from his story?

To an external observer, Kierkegaard's choice of celibacy must have seemed more than perplexing. After all, the match in the making appeared ideal: it was a case of the Beauty meets the Brain. Both came from the upper middle class, Regine's family being more solidly established in Copenhagen than that of Kierkegaard. His father had been born in extremely poor circumstances on the barren heaths of Jutland, but had speedily gone from rags to riches in the years after he moved to the capital as a boy. The moment of their engagement billowed with drama, though it was soon deflated by the events that followed. Kierkegaard met Regine in front of her house. She let it drop that there was no one at home, which he boldly (for 1840) took as an invitation to go inside. For a few moments they stood uneasily in the

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living room. She became fidgety and restless, at which point he invited her to play the piano for him, as she often did. She sat at the piano and played, but his mind seemed elsewhere. Suddenly he picked up a music book, closed it forcefully, and flung it on the piano, exclaiming, 'O, what do I care about music; it is you I seek, for two years I have been seeking you'.[1]

For all his assiduous seeking of Regine, Kierkegaard became convinced he had made a dreadful error the day after the engagement. In order to extricate himself, he concealed the intensity of his love under a surface veneer of flippancy and even cruelty. But her keen intuition enabled Regine to see through the deceptive façade. She may not have been his intellectual match, but she was more perceptive than Kierkegaard or posterity gave her credit for being. He encouraged her to give him up, and she refused. More than half a century later, Regine shared these memories with her good friend Hanne Mourier. These conversations were written up and the text was approved by Regine before being deposited in the Søren Kierkegaard Archives. Regine's reflections display a deep affection for Kierkegaard. She claims that she did not want the engagement to end because she was concerned that this might reinforce his strong strain of melancholia. She also, surprisingly, remarks that, despite her love for Kierkegaard, she did not actually envisage him as a husband:

> That you one day should marry Kierkegaard was actually quite foreign to your thoughts; the thought occurred to you quite briefly and only once; but you loved him and were captivated by his spirit.[2]

Too often, commentators overlook Regine's own pain, treating her as little more than a foil for Kierkegaard's towering genius. She suffered in this painful relationship at least as much as Kierkegaard did. Her heroine, the famous fifteenth-century martyr Joan of Arc, had to hold her own not only against the military onslaught of the English but also

[1] *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, second edition, edited by Peter Andreas Heiberg, Victor Kuhr and Einer Torsting, revised by Niels Thulstrup, 13 volumes (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1970), X[5] A149 (hereafter *Papirer*); *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1967-1978), 6472 (hereafter *JP*).

[2] Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse and Virginia R. Laursen (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 36.

against the more insidious attack of learned theologians. Regine, for her part, had to endure activities of dubious theological value during her engagement to Kierkegaard. Each week, for instance, she patiently listened to her fiancé reading aloud to her a sermon from Bishop Mynster of Copenhagen, the primate of the Danish Church.

Regine Olsen at 17

Kierkegaard suffered too. In his journals he describes the torment of having to treat her cruelly in order to shake her off, all the while hiding his deep love for her. The unhappy outcome was poignantly summed up by his sending her a withered rose, which was soon followed by his returning her engagement ring. But Regine refused to budge—'she fought like a lioness'.[3] Eventually he had to call it off himself.

Søren Kierkegaard's engagement to Regine Olsen lasted little more than a year (September 1840 to October 1841), yet its after-effects lingered for a lifetime. The emotional upheaval took its toll on Regine. She became ill for a long period afterwards. Being a woman in nineteenth-century Denmark, her whole status was inextricably linked to marriage. Luckily, she did get well again: as Friedrich Nietzsche, another prophetic nineteenth-century thinker, realised, that which does not kill us makes us stronger.

Regine survived, and in 1847 went on to marry Frederik Johan Schlegel, her first love, a gentleman who had patiently and devotedly waited for her to get over her broken engagement with Kierkegaard. The Schlegels even kept up with Kierkegaard's writings, and often read aloud to each other from his books in the evenings. In March 1855,

[3] *Papirer*, X^5 A149; *JP*, 6472.

Frederik Schlegel was appointed Governor of the Danish West Indies. On the day of their departure, Regine made sure to greet Kierkegaard briefly on the street, bid him farewell and wish him God's blessing. Regine was never to see Kierkegaard again. Nevertheless, she never forgot him. Regine died, a widow, in 1904 at the age of 82, and her contemporary and friend Raphael Meyer[4] said of the final years of her life:

> She had a simple youthful longing to see her Fritz again, and yet she repeated with sincere conviction Kierkegaard's words to her: 'You see, Regine, in eternity there is no marriage; there, both Schlegel and I will happily be together with you'.[5]

After the breakup, Kierkegaard spent his nights crying in bed but tried to appear light-hearted and nonchalant during the day. He left for a semester of study in Berlin, where he attended the lectures of the German Idealist philosopher Schelling, unknowingly sitting in the same lecture hall as the young Karl Marx. He arrived back in Copenhagen in the spring of 1842 and a year later his book *Either-Or* was published. This became his most well-known contribution to the Danish Golden Age, as the rich cultural and artistic period in which Kierkegaard lived was christened.

The book contained a long and infamous section entitled 'The Seducer's Diary', which was intended to confirm to the Danish public that he had been, and still was, a reprobate for walking out on Regine. It demonstrated the lengths to which Kierkegaard was prepared to go in order to sacrifice himself for her sake. The 'Diary' is suggestive, heartless and cold: it tells how the seducer clinically deploys his intellectual powers to attract young women, only to abandon them once they are ready to offer him everything.

> For him, individuals were merely for stimulation; he discarded them as trees shake off their leaves—he was rejuvenated, the foliage withered.[6]

[4] Raphael Meyer was a librarian and man of letters. He had known Regine since she was a child, and decided to write down her reminiscences after Regine, two years widowed, asked him to do so in 1898.
[5] Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 42.
[6] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either-Or*, part 1, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 308.

But despite such elaborate fabrications, Kierkegaard never stopped thinking of Regine. She was never mentioned in his books, yet much of what he wrote had hidden meaning especially intended for her. He made the unconditional resolve to pray for her every day of his life. Despite the heartbreak, his failed engagement was the making of Kierkegaard as a writer in the service of God and Christianity.

Why Kierkegaard Chose Celibacy

Kierkegaard did not choose celibacy for the sake of austerity or abstemiousness. There is no moral value in remaining unmarried for those reasons alone; in fact, to refuse to marry on such grounds is highly questionable. Kierkegaard himself made this point in a passage which also generalises somewhat unfairly about the Middle Ages:

> The error of the Middle Ages was to regard poverty, the unmarried state, etc. as something which in and for itself could please God. This has never been Christianity's understanding. Christianity has recommended poverty, the unmarried state, etc. so that by being occupied with finite things as little as possible, men could all the better serve the truth.[7]

Commentators are agreed that there was certainly a judgment about moral value involved in Kierkegaard's refusal to marry. In his magisterial *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*,[8] Joakim Garff argues that Kierkegaard's writing counts among the main reasons for the break-up. 'He wanted to be an author, not a husband.'[9] Alastair Hannay likewise highlights the seminal importance of Kierkegaard's authorship,[10] although he also recognises an underlying religious motivation.[11]

To sacrifice marriage for the sake of one's vocation as a writer can be a good thing. But Garff tends to overemphasize the importance of writing in Kierkegaard's life. Certainly Kierkegaard loved writing and was an incredibly productive author, expending a great deal of ink in a short period of time. Most of his books were written in the seven years between

[7] *Papirer*, X² A 181; *JP*, 2608.
[8] Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2005).
[9] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, 204.
[10] Hannay uses a phrase that echoes Kierkegaard's own words, calling it 'the collision that had made him a writer': Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 389.
[11] See Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 157.

1843 and 1850. Writing was a passion for Kierkegaard; but it was not the whole story. There was more to him than just a writer, gifted and brilliant though he was. Kierkegaard's celibacy was animated by his faith commitment. This religious motivation was above all incarnated in his writing, although he also seriously considered be-coming a pastor in the Danish Lutheran Church on several occasions.

The hypothesis that Kierkegaard's celibacy may have been inspired by his faith generally gets short shrift from scholars. When they do entertain the possibility, they generally relegate it to the status of a sub-plot. Most of them attribute Kierkegaard's celibacy not only to his writing, but also to a deep sense of unease about sexuality,[12] and/or to the domineering influence of an authoritarian father.

Søren Kierkegaard, *by Peter Klæstrup*

There is no doubt that his father had an enormous influence upon him. However, the constant recourse to Kierkegaard's sexual hang-ups, and the appeal to Freudian and similar categories to explain them, have become a tired cliché in Kierkegaardian studies. Kierkegaard's sexuality has been the object of the most complex and far-fetched conject-ures. His intense emotional life is more transparent and more reve-latory despite his own elaborate attempts to cultivate an air of secrecy around it. He focused on his inner world of feelings because he found it difficult to get involved in the give-and-take of

[12] For instance, Garff also attributes the renunciation of Regine to the repressive shadow of Kierkegaard's dead father. In the context of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *Fear and Trembling*, published two years after the break-up with Regine, Garff focuses on the knife that Abraham planned to use to sacrifice Isaac, linking it forcefully with Kierkegaard's own father: 'he [Kierkegaard] was painfully reminded of his father, because it was he who had cut him off from natural immediacy' (Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, 260).

real relationships. He delighted in drawing attention to himself, and sought to intrigue people but defied them to understand him. He wanted people to know about him, but was not sure he really wanted them to know *him*. He drew energy from being misunderstood. When it came to marriage, he concluded that to initiate Regine into his tortuous inner life would be more than she could bear. He had become so habituated to his own labyrinthine self that he could endure life without her, keeping her present in his thoughts and imagination.

> But being the person I unfortunately am, I must say that I could become happier in my unhappiness without her than with her ….[13]

Even though he always looked back on the break-up with Regine as the loss of his perfect love, he also knew that God's call to celibacy was the path that actually led him to a deeper love. Through this call he transcended his self-absorption. He came to see that the realisation of his calling was a direct result of the demise of his engagement with Regine:

> A young girl, my beloved—her name will go down in history with mine—in a way was squandered on me so that in new pain and suffering (alas, it was a religious conflict of an unusual kind) I might become what I became.[14]

Regine too knew the true motivation for the end of their engagement, as her later conversations with Hanne Mourier clearly confirm:

> Kierkegaard's motivation for the break was his conception of his religious task; he dared not bind himself to anyone on earth in order not to be obstructed from his calling. He had to sacrifice the very best thing he owned in order to work as God demanded of him: therefore he sacrificed love … for the sake of his writing.[15]

Although these conversations took place forty years after Kierkegaard's death, the opinion Regine expressed in them is not the result of idealizing the past. In a letter addressed to Kierkegaard's nephew

[13] *Papirer*, X^5 A 149; *JP*, 6472.
[14] *Papirer*, X^3 A 168; *JP*, 6642.
[15] Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 36-37.

Henrik Lund from the Danish West Indies in September 1856, less than a year after the philosopher's death, Regine wrote of,

> … God, to whom he sacrificed me—whether it was due to an innate tendency toward self-torture (a doubt that he himself had) or whether it was an inner call from God (which I believe has been demonstrated by time and by the results of his actions).[16]

Kierkegaard did not choose celibacy because he lacked love for Regine. Along with his father, she was the most significant person on earth in his eyes. Neither did he do so as a way of dismissing the value of marriage. Like any sane Christian, Kierkegaard was aware that marriage is one of the highest of human values, blessed in a special way by God. While he allowed his aesthetical alter ego to rail against it in the first volume of *Either-Or*, this was in order to confirm the emotional immaturity of a fictitious character. In *Either-Or*, part 2, Judge William, a man of proven ethical worth, praises marriage as 'the most intimate, the most beautiful association that life on this earth provides'.[17] To despise marriage in order to embrace celibacy would be unchristian, since marriage is a normal way of seeking God. Towards the end of his life Kierkegaard condemned marriage with a puzzling bitterness, but these vitriolic remarks do not represent his overall view. In general he endorsed marriage, although he did not accept that it was the only way to serve God:

Marriage is one of the highest of human values

> Christendom is in dire need of an unmarried person to take up Christianity again—not as if there was something objectionable in marriage, but it certainly has come to be highly overrated. Getting married has finally become the highest and truest earnestness. But this is not Christian. You are permitted to marry; Christianity blesses it; but never forget the place for the more decisively religious persons. Otherwise, to be consistent, one would have to object to Paul on the grounds that he was not married.[18]

[16] Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 51.
[17] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either-Or*, part 2, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with introduction and notes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 62.
[18] *Papirer* IX A 237; *JP* 2600.

How Did Kierkegaard Cope with Celibacy?

Religious celibacy entails a total, direct and exclusive self-giving to God. It means giving oneself fully, body and soul, to the Lord. Kierkegaard managed to cope with celibacy because he wanted to live with this undivided dedication, even though he was never able to forget Regine and never wanted to do so.

Despite the fact that Kierkegaard himself took the initiative in breaking off their engagement, he could never quite come to terms with the fact that Regine got married to someone else. In breaking up with Regine, Kierkegaard begged her to forget him; but from then on he spent the rest of his life indirectly reminding her through his writing that she remained the only woman he had ever truly loved. The fact that Kierkegaard never fully got over this broken engagement is not in itself a sign of imbalance. It may even be a sign of mental health not to be totally at ease with the choice of celibacy. Kierkegaard directed that when he died all his earthly belongings should be handed over to Regine.

> To: Reverend Dr [Peter Christian] Kierkegaard
>
> To be opened after my death.
>
> Dear Brother:
>
> It is naturally my will that my former fiancée, Mrs Regine Schlegel, should inherit unconditionally what little I leave behind. If she herself refuses to accept it, it is to be offered to her on the condition that she act as a trustee for its distribution to the poor.
>
> What I wish to express is that for me an engagement was and is just as binding as a marriage, and that therefore my estate is to revert to her in exactly the same manner as if I had been married to her.[19]

Regine and her husband Frederik (Fritz) declined this offer when Kierkegaard died, in November 1855, at the relatively young age of 42. It was not simply on account of their geographical distance from Denmark (they had recently established themselves in St Croix in the Danish West Indies); they were also far from accepting Kierkegaard's equation of engagement and marriage.

[19] Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 47-48.

Regine Olsen in 1870

Essentially Kierkegaard found the resources to cope with celibacy through his love of God. God was not just a passion alongside others for Kierkegaard, but the absolute passion of his life, a passion that transcended any human one. How did Kierkegaard's passion for God arise? The origins of any such feeling are mysterious, but we can surmise that Kierkegaard's religious upbringing and his relationship with his father played decisive roles. He also underwent a profound conversion experience in May of 1838. These elements seemed to crystallize in his relationship with Regine. The 'erotic collision' with Regine was also a robust encounter with God: 'in every one of my collisions there is a collision with God or a struggle with God'.[20] This crystallization, happening both through the engagement itself and through its unravelling, led Kierkegaard to discern the depth and direction of his passion for God. The power of this passion was such

[20] *Papirer* X[1] A 260; *JP* 6385.

that its claim upon him surpassed even the insistent and pleading claim of Regine.

Kierkegaard did not experience this passion as cerebral or disembodied, although he often came across to others as someone who was too intellectually ponderous to partake of the simple joys of life. Despite appearing publicly cold and formal, he occasionally described the relation between the person of faith and God in erotic terms. For instance:

> The dialectical contradiction must be maintained in such a way that it is uncertain whether he is closed up solely because of an erotic love affair with God, or out of pride toward men.[21]

Kierkegaard seemed to realise that his celibacy was also a way of living his sexuality. He believed he could express his sexuality in his relationship to God. By using the phrase 'an erotic love affair with God', Kierkegaard manifested an understanding of eroticism in the spiritual context that was much more expansive than a purely biological or physical understanding: an eroticism that was neither genital nor generative in nature. This wider conception of the category of the erotic is confirmed by Kierkegaard's use of it in referring to the mystery of the Incarnation:

> The Incarnation is very difficult to understand because it is so very difficult for the absolutely Exalted One to make himself comprehensible to the one of low position in the equality of love (not in the condescension of love)—in this lies the erotic profundity, which through an earthly misunderstanding has been conceived as if it had occurred unto offence and degradation.[22]

Although Kierkegaard was certainly not without hang-ups in the area of sexuality, his reflections upon it display at times a more holistic understanding than one might expect from a man of his epoch. As we have just seen, he found a place for sexuality in the personal relationship of the human being with God and in the Incarnation. Moreover his view of sexuality was not always as restrictive and stereotyped as some commentators contend. This more generous view

[21] *Papirer* VI A 47; *JP* 5810.
[22] *Papirer* IV A 183; *JP* 2402.

of sexuality is reflected in the fact that he ascribed an intellectual as well as a physical component to it. Concerning men and women in antiquity, he wrote:

> In the relation between man and woman, the sexual, there was no place at all for the intellectual; the woman was too inferior for that, too inferior in man's opinion, at any rate, as is the case throughout the Orient.[23]

Not all of Kierkegaard's accounts of eroticism were positive, however. Its portrayal in 'The Diary of the Seducer' is cold and chilling. Although the seduction recorded in the diary is abandoned before it reaches a physical conclusion, it shows that eroticism, even without a coercive sexual act, can be calculating and cruel, manipulative and misogynistic.

Kierkegaard's celibacy was nourished by love, above all the love of God. The security of God's love for him was reinforced in prayer. We know something about Kierkegaard's prayer-life since many of his prayers appear in his diaries and religious works.

> Father in heaven! You loved us first. Help us never to forget that you are love, so that this full conviction might be victorious in our hearts over the world's allurement, the mind's unrest, the anxieties over the future, the horrors of the past, the needs of the moment. O grant also that this conviction might form our minds so that our hearts become constant and true in love to them whom you bid us to love as ourselves.[24]

Love of Neighbour

Kierkegaard's celibacy was undertaken for the sake of his vocation as a writer and thinker in the service of God and of Christianity. Thus, it was not the expression of a privatised faith, one pursued solely to realise his personal sanctification. Through writing for a universal audience, his love took on vast horizons and became large enough to be all-embracing, but without ever losing sight of 'the single one', the ideal individual reader to whom all his writings were addressed. Always

[23] *Papirer* X[2] A 536; *JP* 3965.
[24] *Papirer* IV B 171; *JP* 3394.

implicit in this idea was the woman who had been the single one for him personally.

Of course, there was always the danger that Kierkegaard's celibacy could have degenerated into a cocooned and isolated bachelorhood. But there is documentary evidence to show that this did not occur. On the contrary, because of his celibacy Kierkegaard remained open to a world much larger than himself. And this was not simply by virtue of the Christian purpose that informed his writing. In his day-to-day existence, Kierkegaard also placed himself at the service of others.

In his 2004 study *Kierkegaards København*, Peter Tudvad gives a stirring example of Kierkegaard's loving availability to others, and in so doing he corrects a widespread and erroneous perception. Frederik Christian Strube was an Icelandic-born carpenter who moved to Denmark and married a native of Copenhagen called Elisabeth, with whom he had two daughters. Accorded to the prevalent opinion among scholars, Frederik Strube was understood to be Kierkegaard's carpenter, and Elisabeth his cook.[25] But Tudvad has shown that the couple were not in fact servants of Kierkegaard; rather he was their benefactor, housing the entire Strube family with him for a period of four years from 1848 until 1852. During that time Strube had to be hospitalised because of mental illness, and it was probably owing to Kierkegaard's intervention that the senior consultant at the Royal Frederik's Hospital received Strube there. Otherwise he would have had to go to Sankt Hans Hospital in Roskilde, where it would have been more difficult for his wife and children to visit him.[26] It is not easy to play host to an entire family for any length of time, never mind for four years. Had Kierkegaard been a married man, it would have been even more complicated. He would have needed to negotiate with his wife, perhaps to take his own children's feelings into account, and also to consider such practical matters as the amount of space required. And had Kierkegaard been a self-centred bachelor, he would not even have considered taking in the Strube family.

Through celibacy, Kierkegaard was open to a world larger than himself

[25] See Peter Tudvad, *Kierkegaards København* (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 2004), 47.
[26] See Tudvad, *Kierkegaards København*, 348-353.

The Reward

By choosing celibacy a person voluntarily renounces the opportunity to flourish through and with a partner in marriage. But at the same time they expect fulfilment to come from God, hoping that undivided love for God will be enriching in an unexpectedly generous way.

The pain of sacrifice and the hope for reward are splendidly articulated in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *Fear and Trembling*. In this work of lyrical genius the reader is invited to accompany Abraham and his son on the harrowing three-day journey that led to Mount Moriah, where Isaac was to be sacrificed. *Fear and Trembling* is also about Kierkegaard's journey with Regine, not to the marriage altar, but to the altar of renunciation, at which he was asked by God to offer the one he loved more than anything else in this world.

Like Abraham, Kierkegaard did not fight against human opponents; instead, he wrestled with the living God. When a human being struggles with God, a moment comes when that person is invited to say yes to God and no to self. This is an exceptional situation because the individual is not rejecting something that is bad; on the contrary, they are saying no to something so full of life that sacrificing it seems like certain death. The greatness of Abraham was to believe that his sacrifice would not end in death. This was not a matter of comforting himself with the thought that he might rejoin Isaac in a better afterlife. Abraham's impossible hope was for this life. He believed he would have his son back on this earth, in his own arms and at his own side.

A person is invited to say yes to God and no to self

Kierkegaard did not hope to receive Regine back in this life, though he knew they would be together in eternity. But he did hope for something extraordinary from God. He hoped that by dedicating his life to the gospel he would receive back a hundredfold. And, as his life unfolded, his faith and hope were answered. The reward was not without suffering but, despite his troubles, he could still marvel with gratitude at what God was accomplishing in his life. In a journal entry of 1850 he wrote:

> In a certain sense I, again, was squandered in the cause of Christianity; in a certain sense, for, humanly speaking, I indeed have not been happy—O, but still I can never adequately thank

> God for the indescribable good he has done me, so infinitely more than I expected.[27]

Even on his death-bed Kierkegaard was fundamentally at peace. His closest friend, the pastor Emil Boesen, who visited him faithfully as he lay dying in the Royal Frederik's Hospital, wrote down what Kierkegaard said to him:

> Suddenly, I understood it. What matters is to get as close to God as possible … greet everyone for me, I have liked them all very much, and tell them that my life is a great suffering, unknown and inexplicable to other people. Everything looked like pride and vanity, but it wasn't. I am absolutely no better than other people, and I have said so and have never said anything else. I have had my thorn in the flesh, and therefore I did not marry and could not accept an official [ecclesiastical] position …. I became the exception instead.[28]

Can We Learn from Kierkegaard's Call?

Kierkegaard experienced a divine call with a specific purpose. His God-given vocation was to cajole and provoke a nominally Christian nation, nineteenth-century Denmark, towards true Christianity. First he had to explode the myth that the bland way of life embraced by his contemporaries was the same as Christianity. He portrayed their world-view from within, showing how it consistently led to dead ends and disappointment. And he presented people with the true Christian message in all its purity and integrity.

Kierkegaard was abundantly endowed with the means he needed to realise this end; and he was aware that he had the gifts of great intelligence and outstanding literary skill. The fact that he carried out his calling with so much passion shows that he was convinced of its value and urgency. He came to see relatively quickly that living this call meant making significant and costly sacrifices in his life—most of all giving up the possibility of a married relationship with Regine Olsen.

[27] *Papirer* X³ A 168; *JP* 6642.
[28] Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 123-124.

Kierkegaard was conscious that he was an exception in many respects, including that of his celibacy. He did not seek celibate followers. However he did feel that in the Denmark of his day marriage had become overrated. And so he felt that his contemporaries should reconsider the merits of a celibate way of life. Kierkegaard's example shows us that, although it is not always possible to plan a celibate life in advance or to work it all out beforehand in our heads, we can nevertheless live it. He himself famously noted that life is lived forwards and understood backwards. Important decisions often only make sense after the fact.

Kierkegaard's celibacy was neither understood nor appreciated by the Danish people. He did not live in a country that valued religious celibacy, and so there was no possibility of his being carried along and supported by any significant cultural current. And since he had not taken public vows, the commitment required of him was all the greater. In the present era, when the value and relevance of celibacy are seriously questioned and it is often presented as a poisoned chalice rather than a healing gift, Kierkegaard's example can be inspiring. Despite all the difficulties, he did not give up.

At a personal level, we have seen that Kierkegaard's celibacy for the kingdom did not come without struggle and resolve—although it was also accompanied by grace. Yet Kierkegaard was not perturbed by the pain and anxiety that celibacy entailed. He was convinced that human existence necessarily involved tension and *Angst*. We can learn from Kierkegaard that it is not always possible to resolve our problems into a happy-ever-after synthesis, and that this fact is not threatening. We may not be perfectly personally integrated, but we can nevertheless live healthy and celibate lives.

We live in a world where sex is often idealized, and idolized, as the ultimate mystery, both daunting and fascinating: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, in the phrase that Rudolf Otto used to describe the experience of the holy. Although not many people declare sex to be holy, they still feel that, if they cannot have sex, they are not fully human. This is a big lie that is uncritically accepted by many as an important truth. They are convinced that without sex they will be condemned to impoverishment emotionally and in their relationships. Unfortunately the stereotypical view of Kierkegaard has been that he led a humanly diminished life because of his renunciation of married love.

Søren Kierkegaard, *by Niels Christian Kierkegaard*

I hope to have shown that Kierkegaard's life was not so hopelessly problematic. He expressed his love through the labour of writing in the service of Christianity, as well as through other acts of Christian love carried out in daily life. He found fulfilment in his calling; he believed in the value of his writing; and he was convinced that posterity would acknowledge and vindicate him. Kierkegaard's example, in which celibacy was lived as part of a life that included suffering but also provided lasting satisfaction, invites us to recognise that the denial of some of our deeply felt desires can allow even more profound longings to bloom and flourish.

I began by referring to the contemporary Danish film director Lars von Trier. And I finish by invoking another Danish director, one of the greatest film directors of all time, Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968). In 1927 Dreyer completed a sublime film in France about Joan of Arc—who happens also to have been Regine Olsen's heroine. *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* is one of the purest cinematic experiences that exists. Uncompromising and beautiful, it unfolds in complete silence, yet it speaks more eloquently than most talking movies. This film,

whose actors are free of make-up, unpeels the layers of superficiality that occlude the soul.

Kierkegaard, the author of *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, was aiming for the same single-minded and unvarnished purity so lucidly incarnated in Dreyer's Joan of Arc. His choice of celibacy helped him in this quest. It unearthed something fundamental for him, something too rich to understand fully, yet fulfilling to live. What was initially a burden became an invitation.

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