

THE PLACE OF RISK  
IN  
KIERKEGAARD'S UNDERSTANDING  
OF  
COMMITMENT

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Scope and Contents: This thesis is an attempt to analyze the relationship that exists between the concepts of risk and commitment in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Against the background of the "stages of existence", it seeks to illuminate Kierkegaard's understanding of the risks involved in moving from one stage of existence to another, and to show that risk is a necessary element in commitment as the latter concept is understood by Kierkegaard. The author after introducing Kierkegaard's thought concerning the stages of existence, proceeds to examine in detail the specific risks involved in moving by means of commitment to the ethical, religious and Christian stages of existence. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the relevance for today's world of Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment.

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## THE STAGES OF EXISTENCE

In his book entitled Methods and Results of Kierkegaard Studies in Scandinavia, Aage Henriksen, elucidating that interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings which sees as the foundation of his thought the inescapability of man's relation to God, remarks that according to this view, "every human being, believer or non-believer, has a relation to God."<sup>1</sup> Henriksen continues:

By the creation he is bound to Him and belongs so completely to Him in thought and feeling that He cannot be conceived as a phenomenon outside consciousness; God is the subject not the object of human thought. Man is created in God's image and, therefore, in contrast with all other creatures, has been endowed with an eternal self, an absolute spirit. This special position entails both duties and dangers; the fact that man has been given a spirit again obliges him to recognize God as the creator of himself and all things, and to obey his will, but on the other hand, gives him the possibility of denying and defying God.

As Henriksen goes on to point out, Kierkegaard believes that man has taken advantage of this possibility, and through sin has become separated from God.

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<sup>1</sup>Aage Henriksen, Methods and Results of Kierkegaard Studies in Scandinavia: A Historical and Critical Survey, trans. A.I. Fausbøll (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1951), p.149.

The correctness of the above analysis of Kierkegaard's thought is substantiated by a careful reading of such works as The Concept of Dread and The Sickness Unto Death. In the latter work, for instance, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus declares that "Man is spirit" and has been "constituted [as such] by another [i.e., by God.]"<sup>1</sup> However, instead of relating himself humbly to the Power that constituted him as "spirit" and "a human self", man freely chose to oppose God by "detaching the self from every relation to the Power which posited it, or detaching it from the conception that there is such a Power in existence."<sup>2</sup> Thus, man by defying and denying God separates himself from Him.

Although it is Kierkegaard's view that all men have sinned and thereby have become separated from God, he believes nonetheless that some individuals are less distant from God than are others. He contends that although all men are sinners, not all men need live their lives at the same "plane of existence".<sup>3</sup> There are various levels

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "The Sickness Unto Death", trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p.146.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 201. See The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 19, 35, 73.

<sup>3</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p.258.

of existence to which individuals can ascend or descend depending on their own free choice. The specific "existence spheres" or "stages of existence"<sup>1</sup> of which Kierkegaard speaks are "the aesthetic", "the ethical", "the religious" (also called "the ethico-religious" or "religiousness A"), and "the Christian" (also called "the Christian-religious" or "religiousness B", and "the paradoxical religiousness").<sup>2</sup> Each of the above stages of existence are characterized in a specific way. Hence Kierkegaard writes concerning the first three of the stages: "While aesthetic existence is essentially enjoyment, and ethical existence, essentially struggle and victory, religious existence is essentially suffering, and that not as a transitional moment but as persisting."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Stages On Life's Way, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p.430; and Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.256.

<sup>2</sup>cf. Stages On Life's Way, p.430; and Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 229, 231, 241, 259, 389, 493-500, 505-507.

<sup>3</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.256. Kierkegaard is here describing the three stages of existence examined in Stages On Life's Way. As I have indirectly indicated above, however, and as James Collins points out in The Mind of Kierkegaard (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), the distinctive nature of Christianity finally became so prominent in Kierkegaard's thinking "that he ceased to speak of the religious sphere in an unqualified way, and thereafter distinguished sharply



The stages of existence are characterized not only in the specific ways mentioned above, however; each is also distinguished by a particular relationship to God experienced by the individuals who are at that particular stage of existence. As we read in Methods and Results of Kierkegaard Studies in Scandinavia, "The task Kierkegaard wanted to solve by his exposition of the stages of human life was to describe how the individual traverses the distance, which by his sin he has interposed between himself and God - the distance from the state of natural man, characterized by more or less disguised attempts to rid himself of God, to that of the true believer which can be described as community of will with the creator."<sup>1</sup>

We have seen thus far that according to Kierkegaard every individual has been constituted as a free spirit by

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between all natural modes of the religious and the unique Christian religious spirit. This distinction between "religiousness A" and "religiousness B" is equivalent to designating four stages in the dialectic of life. The immanent modes of religious existence do not exhaust or naturally blend with the transcendent kind of religiousness" (p.45). It might be added here that for Kierkegaard Christian existence is essentially suffering intensified to the greatest possible degree, and joy in the midst of such suffering. cf. Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.384, 493ff.; The Last Years Journals 1853-1855, trans. R.G. Smith (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1965); pp.258-259, 279, 339-340; Christian Discourses, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: A Galaxy Book, Oxford University Press, 1961), pp.97, 99ff.

<sup>1</sup>Methods and Results of Kierkegaard Studies in Scandinavia, pp.149-150.

God, and as such is confronted with the choice of relating himself humbly to God in obedience, or of denying and defying Him. By choosing the latter possibility, men have become separated from their creator. We saw, however, that in spite of the fact that all men have sinned and thereby have become separated from God, Kierkegaard believes that not all men live their lives at the same plane of existence. Some are less distant from God than are others, depending on the stage of existence to which they ascend or descend. We noted that the lowest stage is "the aesthetic", and that this stage is characterized by enjoyment, and by the attempt to rid oneself of God; the highest stage was said to be "the Christian", which is characterized by joy in the midst of intense suffering, and by community of will with God. It was pointed out that Kierkegaard in his exposition of the stages of existence, was attempting to describe how human beings traverse the distance which their sin has interposed between themselves and God.<sup>1</sup> It is my view that an examination of this attempt to describe how an individual moves from one stage of existence to another, discloses the meaning of commitment

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<sup>1</sup>This is not to say that Kierkegaard's exposition of the stages of existence served one purpose alone. Although it constituted a means of clarifying the various types of relationship men have with God, it also served as a means of clarifying the rival views of life held by human beings, the various modes of living encountered among them, and the different values that they hold dear.

as it is set forth in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. I believe that the movement in question includes elements of belief, action, and risk. I would say, moreover, that for Kierkegaard commitment involves the risks of belief and action present in the move from one stage of existence to another.

The thesis I propose to advance in the following pages is as follows: in the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, implicit in Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment is the risk of believing there is "a norm" outside oneself which prescribes what one must do<sup>1</sup>, and the risk of humbling oneself under "the ethical task"<sup>2</sup>; in the move to the religious stage, implicit in Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment is the risk of believing "with the passion of the infinite" that there is a God<sup>3</sup>, and the risk of fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God"<sup>4</sup>; in the move to the Christian stage, implicit in Kierke-

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. Walter Lowrie, David Swenson and Lillian Swenson (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), Vol.II, p.298. This is the risk of belief referred to above.

<sup>2</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.230. This is the risk of action referred to above.

<sup>3</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.182, 188. The risk of belief.

<sup>4</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.80. The risk of action.

gaard's understanding of commitment is the risk of believing that "God has existed in human form"<sup>1</sup>, and the risk of "following Christ" as "Pattern".<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter Two, section one, I will discuss the risk of believing there is a norm outside oneself which prescribes what one must do, and will show that to believe this is a risk because to do so is (A) to believe on the basis of a "beautiful notion"<sup>3</sup> and (B) to venture one's view that "life is . . . meaningless"<sup>4</sup>. In section two I will discuss the risk of humbling oneself under the ethical task, and will show that to do this is a risk because to do so is (A) to will "despair"<sup>5</sup> and (B) to experience the "consciousness" of "duty"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.194. The risk of belief.

<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, The Gospel of Our Sufferings: Christian Discourses, trans. A.S. Aidworth and W.S. Ferrie (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp.14, 23; and For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!, "Judge For Yourself!", trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p.159ff. The risk of action.

<sup>3</sup>Either/Or, II, 296.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., I, 28, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., II, 225.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., II, 149.

In section one of Chapter Three, I will examine the risk of believing with the passion of the infinite that there is a God, and will demonstrate that to believe this is a risk because to do so is (A) to believe on the basis of "objective uncertainty"<sup>1</sup> and (B) to "venture everything"<sup>2</sup>. In section two I will examine the risk of fulfilling an absolute duty toward God, and will demonstrate that to do this is a risk because to do so is (A) "to will suffering"<sup>3</sup> and (B) to experience "the consciousness of guilt"<sup>4</sup>.

In Chapter Four, section one, I will concern myself with the risk of believing that God has existed in human form, and will show that to believe this is a risk because to do so is (A) to believe on the basis of "testimony"<sup>5</sup> and (B) to venture one's "thought"<sup>6</sup>. In section two

<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.182ff., 540.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.380.

<sup>3</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing, trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, 1948), p.171.

<sup>4</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.468, 470-478.

<sup>5</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy, trans. David Swenson and Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 105-106, 125-126, 133.

<sup>6</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.384.

I will concern myself with the risk of following Christ as Pattern, and will show that to do this is a risk because to do so is (A) to will "to suffer in His likeness"<sup>1</sup> and (B) to experience "the consciousness of sin"<sup>2</sup>.

The concluding chapter of my thesis will sum up the foregoing chapters, and will discuss the relevance for today's world of Kierkegaard's understanding of the concept of commitment.

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Training In Christianity, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), pp.172-173.

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.518; Philosophical Fragments, p.58; Attack Upon Christendom, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1944), p.213.

## II

### TO THE ETHICAL STAGE

#### 1

#### A NORM OUTSIDE ONESELF

It is my contention that according to Søren Kierkegaard, in the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, commitment involves the risk of believing there is "a norm" outside oneself which prescribes what one must do.<sup>1</sup> Before discussing why it is a risk to believe this, I will first examine what Judge William the ethicist means in Either/Or when he speaks of a norm outside a man which prescribes what that man must do.

In the passage under consideration, Judge William is discussing "the ethical thesis that every man has a calling."<sup>2</sup> It is the judge's opinion that every man should have to work in order to live, and that the higher the scale of human life, the more evident is the necessity of working. Man's life does not lose its beauty when he must work, but gains in perfection because in work is his human

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 298.

<sup>2</sup>Either/Or, II, 297

dignity.<sup>1</sup> The ethicist regards his work not as a hard necessity, but as something beautiful, pleasurable, and important. He sees it not simply as that which earns him a living, but as "a calling". Even the most insignificant human being has a calling, comments Judge William. What that calling is the individual must discover for himself, but when he has discovered it, though it be an insignificant one, he can nonetheless be faithful to it.<sup>2</sup>

The ethical thesis that everyone has a particular calling which he must discover for himself, expresses the conviction that "there is a rational order of things"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 285-287. Judge William goes on to say that if a man not only has to work for a living but also has to put up with great hardships in his struggle for daily bread, then his life is ennobled still more, and made more beautiful because of this conflict. It is true, remarks Judge William, that many people disagree with this view; even some persons who believe their work has significance, and take joy in it, would cringe from the thought of having to endure real cares about daily bread. But, says the judge, the harder the conflict, the more beautiful is the victory.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 297. This thought is found also in Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing where Kierkegaard writes: "I do believe . . . that at each man's birth there comes into being an eternal vocation for him, expressly for him. To be true to himself in relation to this eternal vocation is the highest thing a man can practice" (p.140).

<sup>3</sup>Either/Or, II, 297.



in which man can fill his place if he so chooses - a conviction instrumental in giving rise to the belief that there is "a norm" outside oneself which prescribes what one must do. In speaking of this "norm" we should note here that although Judge William talks in terms of the norm telling a man what he must do, he acknowledges that the actual decision as to whether an individual will or will not do what the norm prescribes, is a choice the individual himself makes. In other words, man is not a slave to the norm. Nevertheless, the norm in question does prescribe such things as a man's calling, i.e., his work, and his marital status. With regard to the latter, for example, the norm tells him he ought to marry so as to bring about the transfiguration of romantic love<sup>1</sup> - although failure to marry is not wrong "except in so far as he himself is to blame for it."<sup>2</sup>

The "norm" about which I have been speaking is referred to by Judge William as "the universal" and as "the ethical"<sup>3</sup>. Johannes De Silentio, in Fear and

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 31-32, 306, 309.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 306.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., II, 260, 306-307.

Trembling, uses the same terminology.<sup>1</sup> Both the judge and Johannes are speaking of that norm which "applies to everyone"<sup>2</sup> as something with which one's actions should comport at every moment. Thus far we have referred to this norm as being "outside" a person. Although we have been following what Judge William himself says of the norm, it should be mentioned that he declares also: "personality has not the ethical outside it but in it."<sup>3</sup> What he means by this is that the ethicist is an individual who stands not in an outward relation to "the ethical" but in an inward relation to it. The "norm" does in fact prescribe what he should do; however, he regards it not so much as that which imposes something on him from without, but rather as that which seeks expression from deep within his soul.<sup>4</sup> In speaking of the norm as being outside a person, I believe Judge William is contending that it is experienced by the individual as something which simply confronts him and demands to be realized. In this sense it is outside oneself and prescribes what one must do.

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", pp.64ff., 73ff.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.64.

<sup>3</sup>Either/Or, II, 261. .

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., II, 259-261.

(A) A Beautiful Notion

I have stated that to believe there exists "a norm" as outlined above, is one of the risks involved in the commitment of moving from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage. To believe in the norm in question is a risk, first of all because to so believe is to believe on the basis of a "beautiful notion"<sup>1</sup>. In the following pages I will elucidate this point.

The "beautiful notion" of which Judge William writes in Either/Or, is the notion referred to earlier that there is a rational order of things in which man can fill his place by discovering and remaining faithful to his calling, and by bringing about the transfiguration of romantic love through marriage. Concerning faithfulness to one's calling, we saw that Judge William believes work is not simply a means of earning a living but is an ennobling and significant thing. The judge declares that whenever a man regards his work in this way, i.e., as a calling, that man generally believes there is a norm outside himself directing him in what he must do. He believes this because his sense of having a calling, in conjunction with his sense of the rationality of the universe, gives rise to his belief that there exists a norm which is the ground of his calling, and in obedience to which he can find his

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 296.

rightful place in the rational scheme of things.

The above is the view of Judge William, the ethicist in Either/Or. It should be pointed out, however, that Kierkegaard wishes us to know that this view is unacceptable to the person who is an aesthete. The aesthete is more likely to look upon work as "the seamy side of existence"<sup>1</sup>, than he is to regard it as something ennobling. Judge William may regard work as meaningful but the aesthete who composed the "Diapsalmata" can see nothing significant in working for a living. "Working for a living cannot be the meaning of life," he writes, "since it would be a contradiction to say that the perpetual production of the conditions for subsistence is an answer to the question about its significance which, by the help of this, must be conditioned."<sup>2</sup>

Not only does the aesthete dispute the possibility that working for a living could be the meaning of life, but he actually disparages work as a ridiculous way to pass one's life - "Of all ridiculous things, it seems to me the most ridiculous is to be a busy man of affairs, prompt to meals, and prompt to work."<sup>3</sup> From the viewpoint of the

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 295.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., I, 30.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 24.

aesthete, the notion of work as something ennobling is more "ridiculous" than "beautiful", and to believe in a determinative norm outside oneself on the basis of such a notion is a definite risk.

Thus far in my discussion of the risk of belief based on a "beautiful notion", I have concerned myself with what the ethicist says about man's work. I will now turn to a discussion of what he says about marriage, for with regard to this also there is a basic disagreement between ethicist and aesthete as to its value.

I pointed out earlier that Judge William is of the opinion that a man ought to marry so as to bring about the transfiguration of romantic love. To be of this opinion is not to disparage romantic or first love - the judge actually extols it as "one of the most beautiful things in the world."<sup>1</sup> He acknowledges that "first love has in it the factor of beauty, and the joy and fulness which is found in the sensuous when it is innocent."<sup>2</sup> But though he acknowledges its worth, he believes nonetheless that it is

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 50.

ennobled by marriage.<sup>1</sup> So then, just as Judge William regarded work as an ennobling thing, he regards marriage also as something ennobling. "Marriage" he says, "is the transfiguration of first love, not its annihilation . . . its friend, not its enemy."<sup>2</sup>

The above conception of marriage, like the conception of work described earlier, is a constituent part of that "beautiful notion" on which the ethicist bases his belief that there is a norm outside himself which prescribes what he must do. That this is the case, can be seen in the ethical portion of Stages On Life's Way - "Various Observations About Marriage In Reply To Objections". Commenting that he regards marriage as "the highest τέλος of the individual human existence"<sup>3</sup>, the Married Man claims

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<sup>1</sup> Either/Or, II, 61-62. The judge remarks that first love and marriage both are "sensuous and yet spiritual." However, he says, the word "spiritual" in reference to first love refers to the fact that first love "is soulish . . . is sensuousness permeated by spirit". Hence, "the spiritual factor in marriage is higher than in first love." This does not mean, however, that sensuousness is renounced in marriage. "So beautiful is marriage," concludes the judge, "and the sensuous is by no means renounced but is ennobled."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., II, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Stages On Life's Way, p.107.

that "being in love is something that looks forward to being absorbed in matrimony." According to the Married Man, in other words, the ennobling function of marriage (in relation to romantic love) is determined by the very nature of things, just as is the ennobling function of work. This view of marriage as a *τέλος* of human existence, written as it were into the fabric of the world, is basic to the ethicist's belief that there is a norm in obedience to which man can take his rightful place in the universe.

Once again, this time in relation to marriage, I have first of all discussed the ethical point of view. As stated earlier, however, there is a basic disagreement between ethicist and aesthete as to the value of marriage, just as there is a basic disagreement between the two concerning the value of work. We have seen that Judge William believes marriage is "the transfiguration of first love, not its annihilation. . . its friend, not its enemy." This is exactly the opposite of what the aesthete believes. He regards marriage as the annihilation of first love, and its enemy; he thinks it is not possible for love to be united with or persist in marriage. It is the aesthete's view that love cannot be preserved in the midst of the "terrible monotony, the perpetual sameness in the appalling still-life of the domestic regime of married

people."<sup>1</sup> The judge may speak of conjugal love, and describe it as contented, patient, constant and faithful<sup>2</sup>, but to the aesthete such talk does not mean very much. "How does a marriage usually work out?" asks the aesthete in "The Rotation Method", and responds to his own question:

In a little while one party begins to perceive that there is something wrong, then the other party complains, and cries to heaven: faithless! faithless! A little later the second party reaches the same standpoint, and a neutrality is established in which the mutual faithlessness is mutually canceled, to the satisfaction and contentment of both parties. But it is now too late [to discover that love cannot be preserved in marriage], for there are great difficulties connected with divorce.<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious from the above that the ethicist and the aesthete are at loggerheads on this question of the value of marriage and the relationship between love and marriage. The one sees marriage as something ennobling, the other as something appalling; the one regards it as characterized by faithfulness, the other as characterized by faithlessness; the one is certain that love can be preserved in marriage, the other that it cannot be. In

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 128.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 142.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 292-293.



whatever they say of love and marriage, it seems that the ethicist and the aesthete disagree. The ethicist in Stages On Life's Way, for instance, believes that the bliss of marriage is no less than love's first bliss, and experiences happiness in his conviction that in the breast of his wife "there beats a heart, quiet and lowly, but steady and even"<sup>1</sup>, and that it beats for him and his welfare. The aesthete in Either/Or, however, believes that the bliss of first love cannot persist within marriage, and experiences concern over his conviction that "woman is and ever will be the ruin of a man, as soon as he contracts a permanent relation with her."<sup>2</sup>

In view of what I have written thus far about the difference of opinion between ethicist and aesthete concerning love and marriage, one can see that the aesthete's reaction to the view that marriage is an ennobling thing, is similar to his reaction to the view that work is an ennobling thing. Not only does he dispute the possibility that marriage could be the transfiguration of romantic love, but he also disparages marriage as a very foolish enterprise - "The man who once has perpetrated a folly

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.132.

<sup>2</sup>Either/Or, I, 293.

is pursued by the consequences. The folly is to have got into all this, the revenge is that now when it is too late he perceives what he has done."<sup>1</sup> From the viewpoint of the aesthete, the notion of marriage as something ennobling is more "foolish" than beautiful, just as from his viewpoint the notion of work as something ennobling is more "ridiculous" than beautiful.

In the preceding pages I have attempted to show that what the ethicist regards as a "beautiful notion", upon which he sees fit to base his belief in a norm outside himself prescribing what he must do, the aesthete regards as a ridiculous and foolish notion. From the aesthete's viewpoint, to believe in a determinative norm outside oneself on the basis of such a notion as this, is a definite risk. The reader should note here that it is the aesthete's viewpoint Kierkegaard has in mind, in his consideration of the risk involved in moving from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage. This is so because it is the aesthete who must make the move of commitment, and to him the move appears to be a risk, however ennobling it may appear to someone else.

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.75.

### (B) Venturing Meaninglessness

I have said above that for Kierkegaard, in the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, commitment involves the risk of believing there is a norm outside oneself which prescribes what one must do, and that to believe this is a risk because to do so is to believe on the basis of a "beautiful notion". To believe this is a risk for the following reason also: to believe it is to venture one's view that "life is . . . meaningless."<sup>1</sup>

The view that life is meaningless is expressed again and again by the aesthete who, according to Victor Eremita<sup>2</sup>, authored the aesthetic essays of Either/Or. This

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, I, 28, 35.

<sup>2</sup>Victor Eremita is the pseudonymous editor of Either/Or. At this point it would be appropriate to say a few words concerning Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, and I would begin by referring the reader to James Collin's The Mind of Kierkegaard, pages 34-42, and to Walter Lowrie's Kierkegaard (New York: Harper Torchbook, Harper and Brothers, 1962), pages 286-290. Both of these books discuss the various motives present in Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, and give the reader some idea of the important place pseudonyms occupy in his writings. For the purpose of this thesis it is sufficient to say that one reason Kierkegaard's literature is "pseudonymous and polynonymous" [to quote David Swenson in Something About Kierkegaard (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1945), p. 82] is that he wished to present with full force the attitudes of mind and the convictions of persons representing all the stages of existence. To do this he created authors, editors and personages, and with marvelous skill imbued them with the ability to present their own particular view of life to the reader. An excellent example of this is found in the passage from Either/Or, which I quote on page 24 where a member of the Symparankromenoi is portrayed as aflame with enthusiasm for his view of life.

view is found particularly in the "Diapsalmata", and one of the passages most expressive of the view is the following:

Life is so empty and meaningless. - We bury a man; we follow him to the grave, we throw three spadefuls of earth over him; we ride out to the cemetery in a carriage, we ride home in a carriage; we take comfort in thinking that a long life lies before us. How long is seven times ten years? Why do we not finish it at once, why do we not stay and step down into the grave with him, and draw lots to see who shall happen to be the last unhappy living being to throw the last three spadefuls of earth over the last of the dead?<sup>1</sup>

The above view of life is prominent also in those sections of Either/Or having to do with the Symparanekekromenoi - "the fellowship of buried lives."<sup>2</sup> Here, as in the "Diapsalmata", it is suggested that life is so meaningless that death is to be preferred. In a lecture entitled "Shadowgraphs", purportedly delivered before the Symparanekekromenoi on a wild stormy night, the author prefaces his remarks with words to the effect that the storm outside is an appropriate background to the meeting of a society which emphasizes the confusing nature of existence. Then in a moment of passion his speech builds up like the fury of the storm itself: "Aye," he exclaims,

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, I, 28-29.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., I, 450.

let the storm break forth in still greater violence, making an end of life, and of the world, and of this brief speech, which has at least the advantage over all things else, that it is soon ended! Let that wild vortex, which is the inmost principle of the world<sup>1</sup>, although this escapes the attention of men, who eat and drink and marry and increase in heedless preoccupation - let it break forth, I say, and in pent-up resentment sweep away the mountains and the nations and the achievements of culture and the cunning inventions of mankind, let it break forth with that last terrible shriek which more surely than the trump of dawn proclaims the destruction of everything.<sup>2</sup>

Confronted as he is by a meaningless existence, the aesthete whose words are quoted in the above passages reacts in different ways according to his various moods. At times his natural reaction is to clench his fists and cry out against such an existence - "This life is topsy-turvy and terrible, not to be endured."<sup>3</sup> At other times

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<sup>1</sup>"Certain Greek philosophers, called the Atomists," we are told in a footnote on page 452 of Volume I of Either/Or, "assumed a constant whirling motion in the atoms of the universe."

<sup>2</sup>Either/Or, I, 166.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 24.

his reaction is to grit his teeth and meet head-on the emptiness confronting him - "Arise, dear Symparanekromenoi. The night is spent, and the day begins its unwearied activities, never weary, it seems, of everlastingly repeating itself."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes he tries to reach out and grasp whatever consolation can be had in the midst of life's meaninglessness - "I am like a young girl in love with Mozart . . . to whom I owe it that I did not pass through life without having been stirred by something."<sup>2</sup> At still other times his outstretched arms are lowered as his whole being seems to droop in agonizing hopelessness - "My soul is like the Dead Sea, over which no bird can fly; when it has flown midway, then it sinks down to death and destruction."<sup>3</sup>

In outlining various ways in which the aesthete reacts to his view that life is meaningless, I have not referred to the aesthetic pursuit of pleasure. The "Diary of the Seducer" in Either/Or is a good example of this type of reaction. Speaking of the seducer, the aesthete

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, I, 228.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., I, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 36.

who discovered his diary says of him, "his whole life was motivated by enjoyment."<sup>1</sup> The seducer was one of whom it could be said that having found no inherent meaning in life, he created his own meaning, i.e., enjoyment. In this way he escaped the acute sense of meaninglessness which hung over the aesthete who found the diary. However, as the latter aesthete realized, aesthetic enjoyment is not an ultimate solution to the problem of life and its meaning:

As he [the seducer] has led others astray, so he ends, I think, by going astray himself. The others he perverted not outwardly, but in their inward natures . . . He who goes astray inwardly . . . soon discovers that he is going about in a circle from which he cannot escape. I think it will be this way with him later, to a still more terrible extent.<sup>2</sup>

Having examined the aesthete's contention that life is meaningless, and having seen how he reacts to a meaningless existence, let us now consider the ethicist's viewpoint as set forth by Judge William.

The judge's viewpoint regarding this matter, and its contrast with the aesthete's, can best be shown by

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, I, 301.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., I 304.

placing together two comments from Either/Or - one from "Diapsalmata" and the other from "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality". The first is from the pen of the aesthete and the second from the pen of the judge:

My life is absolutely meaningless.<sup>1</sup>

My life has significance for me.<sup>2</sup>

In these two comments a world of difference lies!

The first symbolizes not only meaninglessness, but also emptiness and hopelessness; the second symbolizes meaningfulness, fulfillment and hope. One is the comment of a man who dwells in the depths of existence and expects to remain there - "Life has become a bitter drink to me, and yet I must take it like medicine, slowly, drop by drop"<sup>3</sup>; the other is the cry of a man who dwells in the heights and expects to rise still higher - "I feel joyful and content with it [my life] . . . I count myself blessed . . . Thus I love existence because it is beautiful and hope for an existence still more

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, I, 35.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 329.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, 25.



beautiful."<sup>1</sup>

From the above we see that Judge William does not share the aesthete's view that life is meaningless. He contends that existence is beautiful, and suggests that the aesthete would like to believe this but is hampered by pride in his own wisdom which tells him it is not so. He suggests also that the aesthete would like to feel it is important how a person employs his life, and encourages him to resist the urge to throw his life away: "Stop this wild flight, this passion of annihilation which rages in you."<sup>2</sup> Finally he exhorts him to cease struggling against all those better inmost feelings which would propel him into the ethical sphere of existence.

Judge William is holding before the aesthete a view of life that includes in its composition the belief in a norm outside oneself which prescribes what one must do. This norm, we have said, is experienced by the individual as something that simply confronts him and demands to be realized. Thus it confronts the aesthete. But it confronts him also as that which is in opposition to the whole tenor of his feelings about life. He is convinced

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 329.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 164.

life is topsy-turvey and purposeless, whereas the norm in question signifies order and meaning. This being the case, the aesthete must regard it as a risk to believe in such a norm, because if he were to believe in it he would have to venture his own strongly held view that life is meaningless.

## THE ETHICAL TASK

In section one it was my contention that according to Kierkegaard, in the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, commitment involves the risk of believing there is "a norm" outside oneself which prescribes what one must do. I will now attempt to show that in the afore-mentioned movement, commitment involves also the risk of humbling oneself under "the ethical task."<sup>1</sup> Before discussing why it is a risk to do this, however, I will examine what it means to so humble oneself.

Concerning the norm which prescribes what one must do, I said earlier that it is spoken of by Judge William and Johannes De Silentia as "the universal" and "the ethical". On occasion Johannes refers to it as "the moral"<sup>2</sup>, and Judge William sometimes speaks of "the universal-human."<sup>3</sup> All of these terms, we noted, are indicative of that which applies to everyone as something with which one's actions must comport at every moment.

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, P.230

<sup>2</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.65.

<sup>3</sup>Either/Or, II, 286, 306.

Speaking of an individual whom he describes as being basically "like most people are"<sup>1</sup>, Judge William remarks that "the universal-human . . . is set before him too as a task which must be realized."<sup>2</sup> In this particular case it is marriage that is regarded as the fulfillment of the task - "He who marries realizes the universal"<sup>3</sup>, writes the judge.

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 281.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 306.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., II, 306-307. Again it should be pointed out that according to Judge William, the person who fails to marry through no fault of his or her own, does not offend against the universal-human. Also, at this time I would refer the reader to Stages On Life's Way where the Married Man discusses possible exceptions to the ethical rule concerning marriage. Although he confesses he does not know "whether there is or ever has been a justified exception" (p.171), he outlines what he believes might constitute such an exception, and sums up his comments as follows: "[A justified exception] must not feel himself higher than the universal, but more lowly, he must à tout prix want to remain within the universal, because he is really in love, and what is more he is married [i.e., he is confronted with the agony of hearing the cry of the fatherless child and the deserted mother]; he must want to remain within the universal for his own sake, and for her sake for whom he is willing to sacrifice his life, whereas now he beholds her wretchedness . . . without the slightest means of communicating his feelings [i.e., no one can understand his action]. Accordingly he must feel himself the most miserable of men, an offscouring of mankind, and must feel it doubly because he knows, not in abstracto but in concreto, what the beautiful is. So down he sinks, desperate in all his misery. . . This is the beginning of becoming an exception, if there be such a thing; if this is not given, then he is without justification" (p.175).

In Stages On Life's Way, we again meet with the view that marriage is a means of realizing "the ethical task". The suitor in "'Guilty?'/ 'Not Guilty?'" has come to the conclusion that he and his fiancée do not really understand one another, and that if he were to marry the girl he would cause her to have an unhappy life. The suitor has certain religious feelings which are unshared by his fiancée and he is beginning to believe that he has received "a divine counter order"<sup>1</sup> prohibiting his marriage. However, before this belief has become strong enough to dominate his life and to make him break the engagement, he does what he feels he must with regard to his fiancée - he admits that he regards her engagement to him as a sacrifice on her part, and he beseeches her to forgive him for initiating this relationship in which she must play a sacrificial part. Later, in reflecting upon his admission and plea for forgiveness, he is amazed that he ever could have come to the point of humbling himself before another human being. But the very moment this thought is expressed, he realizes that he was not humbling himself before his fiancée; he sees that he was humbling himself before the relationship he had with her. It was his wish that the

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.245.

relationship would result in marriage (if the young lady would not be made unhappy) , but also he believed this was how it should end, i.e., in conformity with the "universal-human" which teaches that every man ought to marry. Later the "divine counter order" would cause him to break his engagement, but until that order became definite, he humbled himself under the relationship he had with his fiancée. In his own words - "Verily I never dreamed that ever I might humble myself before a human being. Well, of course, it is not precisely under her I humble myself, it is under the relationship and the ethical task."<sup>1</sup>

Thus far we have spoken of marriage alone as the fulfillment of the ethical task. "The universal" has reference also to one's work, as we saw in section one, and to one's relation with others. In Fear and Trembling, for example, the relation between father and son is examined. From the ethical standpoint - and it is this standpoint we are concerned with right now - a father has "the highest and most sacred obligation"<sup>2</sup> to his son. This ethical obligation cannot be ignored without trans-

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.230.

<sup>2</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.39.

gressing the universal, and according to Johannes De Silentio, the transgression occurs "as soon as an individual would assert himself in his particularity over against the universal."<sup>1</sup> Self-assertion such as this constitutes insubordination, and is the opposite of that submissiveness required of the person who would move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical, by humbling himself under "the ethical task".

#### (A) Willing Despair

I stated earlier that to humble oneself under "the ethical task", is, according to Kierkegaard, one of the risks involved in the commitment of moving to the ethical stage of existence. It is a risk to so humble oneself for the following reason - to do so is to will "despair".<sup>2</sup>

In order to show why it is a risk to will "despair", we must know something of the aesthete's philosophy of life. I noted in the first chapter of my thesis that Kierkegaard categorizes aesthetic existence as enjoyment. It can be pointed out now that for the aesthete there is a categorical

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death,  
"Fear and Trembling", p.65.

<sup>2</sup>Either/Or, II, 225.

imperative - "Enjoy thyself".<sup>1</sup> In Either/Or Judge William describes various aesthetic views of life which are centred around the principle "that one must enjoy life."<sup>2</sup> One such view teaches that health and beauty are the most precious goods in life that one can pursue; another view teaches that wealth and honour are the highest goods; a third view claims that the development of one's talent is the good a person should pursue in order to enjoy life; a fourth view contends that to enjoy life a person should satisfy his taste for pleasure; a fifth view teaches that to enjoy life one must enjoy oneself in the enjoyment; and yet another view claims that one must enjoy oneself while constantly casting aside the conditions for enjoyment.<sup>3</sup> Judge William declares that as long as that in which the aesthete finds enjoyment continues to give him enjoyment, it will appear to other people that he is happy - although the judge himself doubts that such a person really is happy. On the other hand, if that in which the aesthete finds enjoyment comes to an end or ceases to give enjoyment, he will despair. Why is it that men despair in such

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.81.

<sup>2</sup>Either/Or, II, 186-187.

<sup>3</sup>David Swenson, in his book Something About Kierkegaard, describes the proponents of this latter view as "those cynics who seek to enjoy the power to dispense with enjoyment" (pp.168-169).



circumstances, asks Judge William, and proceeds to answer his own question:

Is it because they discovered that what they built their life upon was transient? But is that, then, a reason for despairing? Has any essential change occurred in that upon which they built their life? Is it an essential change in the transitory that it shows itself to be transitory? Or is it not rather something accidental and unessential in the case of what is transitory that it does not show itself to be such? Nothing has happened which could occasion a change. So if they despair, it must be because they were in despair beforehand. The only difference is that they did not know it. But this an entirely fortuitous difference. So it appears that every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not.<sup>1</sup>

At this point in his remarks on the aesthetic philosophy of life, Judge William turns his attention to the specific case of the aesthete to whom he is writing. The aesthete in question has not encountered any major external misfortune; he still has in his power all the elements required to find enjoyment in an aesthetic way of life. However, his thought has comprehended the vanity of life's pleasures and his melancholy becomes greater day by day.

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 196-197.

He is in despair, and he cannot hide the fact from himself - which may be to his advantage, says the judge, for when one knows that one is in despair this opens up the way for that person to attain a higher mode of existence. In fact, writes the judge, "when one knows it (and you indeed know it), a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement."<sup>1</sup> The aesthete who has reached this point in life must either divert himself, in an attempt to forget there is an immortal spirit within him demanding a higher form of expression, or he must move on to the ethical stage of existence.

There are those, comments the judge, who would advise such a person to choose the first alternative outlined above. They would advise him to get married or to look for a job in order to have something new to think about, and in this way forget his melancholy. But Judge William has other advice<sup>2</sup> -

What then must you do? I have only one answer: despair . . . I shout it to you, not as a comfort, not as a condition in which you are

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 197.

<sup>2</sup>Judge William is an ethicist, so marriage and vocation are important in his sight, but he realizes that these are not to be entered into for the wrong reason. If they are undertaken simply as a means of diverting one's attention from the spiritual sickness that pervades one's life, then they will cause that sickness to break out in an even more dreadful manner than before.

to remain, but as a deed which requires all the power and seriousness and concentration of the soul . . . So, then, despair with all your soul and with all your mind; the longer you put it off, the harder the conditions become, and the demand remains the same . . . So then choose despair.<sup>1</sup>

The judge is saying here that to try and ignore one's despair is not the way to deal with it. It must be acknowledged as existent, and faced up to, if it is to be overcome. As Eduard Geismar comments in his Lectures On the Religious Thought of Søren Kierkegaard:

There is but one way out, says Judge Wilhelm. This is to take despair up into one's consciousness, to face it with a clear mind, and to will to despair as an act of repentance and transition to another mode of life. In this voluntary and conscious despair the individual is afforded the opportunity to affirm himself in his eternal validity as a moral personality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 212-213, 215.

<sup>2</sup>Eduard Geismar, Lectures On the Religious Thought of Søren Kierkegaard (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), p.33. In his discussion of choosing or willing "despair", Judge William speaks also of choosing "oneself". When a person chooses despair, he says, that person chooses himself: "And when a man despairs he chooses again - and what is it he chooses? He chooses himself, not in his immediacy, not as this fortuitous individual, but he chooses himself in his eternal validity" (Either/Or, II, 215). In other words, the person who chooses despair becomes

In the above paragraphs I have been examining the aesthetic philosophy of life from the standpoint of Judge William the ethicist. I have referred to his view that "every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not." I have stated his belief that the aesthete who knows he is in despair has the way opened up for him to attain to a higher mode of existence. According to the judge, he can pass to this higher stage of existence by willing his despair, or (as the judge expresses it elsewhere) by bowing "with genuine humility before the eternal Power"<sup>1</sup>, which is tantamount to humbling oneself under the ethical task. With this we return to my original point that to humble oneself under "the ethical task" is a risk because to do so is to will "despair". Now, however, we are in a better position to see why it is a risk to will despair. It is a risk because from the aesthete's point of

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aware of himself as the person he really is, i.e., a free self, and gives birth to that self. Unlike the aesthete whose development is similar to that of a plant and who "becomes what he immediately is", the individual who develops ethically "becomes that which he becomes [i.e., becomes what he chooses to become]; for even when he allows the aesthetical within him to possess validity (which for him has not at all the same meaning as for the man who lives aesthetically) it is nevertheless dethroned" (p.230). This is what Eduard Geismar means by saying that the despairing individual has the opportunity of affirming himself in his eternal validity as a moral personality.

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 194.

view the ethicist's exhortation - "choose despair", is in extreme opposition to the categorical imperative governing aesthetic existence - "Enjoy thyself". To despair, would seem to be a rejection of the rule governing the aesthete's life. If things are going well for him why should he seek a change in his mode of existence? If, on the other hand, despair is beginning to haunt his life more and more, why should he not attempt to forget it by following his inclination to "travel abroad, go to Paris . . . sue for the smile of effete women"?<sup>1</sup> To do otherwise would be to risk being engulfed by the despair which (governed as he is by the aesthetic categorical imperative) he so greatly seeks to avoid. The ethicist claims that at the moment when the aesthete chooses despair and thereby humbles himself before the eternal Power, "melancholy is essentially done away with"<sup>2</sup>. From the aesthete's viewpoint, however, it would be a risk to do what the ethicist advises, without any guarantee that his despair will in fact be brought to an end rather than augmented.

To will "despair" is a risk for another reason also - the aesthete stands to lose that which he holds

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 210

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 194.

dear. That this is the case can be seen from an examination of the life of the Emperor Nero, says Judge William. Nero lived in order to satisfy his taste for pleasure, and he lacked none of the conditions requisite for fulfilling his desires. The whole world made obeisance before him so that he constantly was surrounded by a great throng of ministers ready to oblige his every whim. But in spite of all this Nero was dominated by melancholy, claims the judge, who describes his life in the following manner:

he grasps after pleasure; all the world's cleverness must devise for him new pleasures, for only in the instant of pleasure does he find repose, and when that is past he gasps with faintness. The spirit constantly desires to break through, but it cannot attain the metamorphosis, it is constantly disappointed, and he would offer it the satiety of pleasure. Then the spirit within him gathers like a dark cloud, its wrath broods over his soul, and it becomes an anguishing dread which ceases not even in the moment of pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

So it is with the Emperor Nero, writes Judge William. His inner nature is tormented with anguished dread, but he will not "choose despair"; the spirit demands a metamorphosis, i.e., a higher form of existence, but he will not accede

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 190.

to its demand. Why will he not choose despair, thereby humbling himself before the eternal Power and rising to the ethical sphere of existence? Because "if this is to come about, an instant will arrive when the splendor of the throne, his might and power, will pale, and for this he has not the courage."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the aesthete fears that by willing "despair" he will lose that which he holds dear. The ethicist may believe this fear is ill-founded and attempt to enlighten the aesthete as to the good effects of despair<sup>2</sup>, but from the aesthete's viewpoint it still remains a risk to humble oneself under "the ethical task" by willing "despair".

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 190.

<sup>2</sup>"I bid you despair," writes the judge, "and never more will frivolity cause you to wander like an unquiet spirit, like a ghost, amid the ruins of a world which to you is lost. Despair, and never more will your spirit sigh in melancholy, for again the world will become beautiful to you and joyful, although you see it with different eyes than before, and your liberated spirit will soar up into the world of freedom . . . By despair nothing is destroyed, all of the aesthetical remains in a man, only it is reduced to a ministering role and thereby precisely is preserved. Yes, it is true that one does not live in it as before, but from this it by no means follows that it has been lost; it may perhaps be employed in a different way, but from this it by no means follows that it is gone" (Either/Or, II, 223, 233).

### (B) The Consciousness of Duty

We have seen thus far in this section that for Kierkegaard, in the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, commitment involves the risk of numbing oneself under "the ethical task", and that to so humble oneself is a risk because to do so is to will "despair". It is also a risk because it entails experiencing the "consciousness" of "duty",<sup>1</sup> to which I now will turn my attention.

In his Introduction to Kierkegaard, Regis Jolivet characterizes the aesthetic stage of existence as that stage which manifests "The Primacy of Pleasure"<sup>2</sup>, and the ethical stage as that stage which manifests "The Primacy of Duty"<sup>3</sup>. With regard to the aesthetic stage of existence it would be more correct to speak of the primacy of enjoyment<sup>4</sup>; with regard to the ethical

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 149.

<sup>2</sup>Regis Jolivet, Introduction to Kierkegaard, trans. W.H. Barber (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1952), p.124.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.134.

<sup>4</sup>That this is the case, is seen in the description of the various aesthetic views of life in Either/Or (II, 185-196) where Judge William makes a distinction between enjoyment and pleasure. In the paragraphs in question he considers "enjoyment" to be the chief end



stage, however, the phrase "The Primacy of Duty" is perfectly descriptive, as is evidenced by Judge William's declaration in Either/Or that "the ethical is defined as duty"<sup>1</sup>.

In writing about duty, Judge William indicates that duty creates a sense of responsibility in the ethicist. It is something "required" of the ethicist, and "though it is impossible for another to say what my duty is, it will always be possible for him to say what is his duty."<sup>2</sup> However, in spite of the fact that duty implies responsibility and obligation, the ethicist does not regard it as a cruel taskmaster. The judge has only praise for it. "I have not been afraid of duty" he writes; "it has not appeared before me as an enemy

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pursued by those persons who live aesthetically, and "pleasure" to be one of several means to this end. Some of these means are the following: health, beauty, wealth, honour, talent, pleasure, one's self, etc. Not only do Eduard Geismar (op. cit., p.29), Gregor Malantschuk [Kierkegaard's Way to the Truth, trans. Mary Michelson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), p.35)], and David Swenson (op. cit., pp.166-169) prefer the term "enjoyment" to the term "pleasure" in their description of the aesthetic stage of existence, but so does Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus when he is speaking of the aesthetic stage in the Postscript, p.261. For the above reasons I believe it is more correct to speak of the primacy of enjoyment with regard to the aesthetic stage of existence, than it is to speak of the primacy of pleasure.

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 258.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 263.

which would disturb the bit of happiness and joy I had hoped to preserve through life, rather it has appeared before me as a friend."<sup>1</sup>

Turning now to the aesthetic point of view about duty, we find that the aesthete regards duty as an undesirable limitation of his freedom. In "The Rotation Method", an essay in the theory of social prudence, the author at one point discusses marriage and fatherhood. As an aesthete, he believes one should never enter into the marriage relationship where duty rules. He contends that although it is said that in this relationship husband and wife become one, this is rather doubtful. The spiritual aspect of the oneness in question is a secure love for and joy in one another, but the aesthete intentionally disregards this aspect of the oneness. He suggests that even if it were the case that husband and wife become one in marriage, the one would soon become two by virtue of the birth of a child. But in fact, he says, it is not the case that husband and wife become one; the fact is that they remain two persons, the difference now being that they have both lost their freedom. One should not enter into any relationship involving the possibility of several members, he remarks,

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 155.

and this applies especially to marriage where duty is even more in evidence than it is in a dangerous relationship such as friendship. The author, being a man, is of course more concerned about the restrictions duty imposes on men, than he is about the restrictions it imposes on women. Hence his comments about duty and marriage are meant primarily for the benefit of other men. "When you are one of several," he writes, "then you have lost your freedom; you cannot send for your traveling boots whenever you wish, you cannot move aimlessly about in the world. If you have a wife it is difficult; if you have a wife and perhaps a child, it is troublesome; if you have a wife and children, it is impossible."<sup>1</sup>

From the above we can see that the aesthete looks with disfavour upon the limitation of his freedom which accompanies duty. The aesthete is self-indulgent; he wants to have his own way in life; he does not want to have his wings clipped, and his soul's flight checked.<sup>2</sup> Duty to him is something abhorrent like a rod poised above him ready to deliver a blow. The latter metaphor is especially appropriate with regard to marriage, he

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, I, 293.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., I, 30; II, 26; II, 285; II, 293.

believes:

Conjugal love. . . seems so mild and heartfelt and tender, but as soon as the door is closed behind the married pair, then before you can say Jack Robinson out comes the rod called duty . . . To express it quite crudely - in place of the baton with which the director of the orchestra indicates the tempo for the graceful attitudes assumed in the dance of first love . . . [is] the unpleasant stick of the policeman.<sup>1</sup>

The major difference between the ethicist's view of duty and the aesthete's, has already been mentioned. According to the ethicist, duty is a friend, but according to the aesthete, it is an enemy. Just how great an enemy it is to the aesthete can be seen from the fact that he feels compelled to begin "a campaign"<sup>2</sup> against it, plotting its "assasination".<sup>3</sup>

It is not difficult to see now why the aesthete regards it as a risk to humble himself under "the ethical task". To so humble oneself entails experiencing the

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 147-148.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 150.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., II, 153.

"consciousness" of "duty". To the ethicist duty is a friend, and he is not fearful of losing his happiness or joy because of it. To the aesthete, however, duty is an enemy which would limit his freedom. In other words, to the aesthete, the "consciousness" of "duty" is the consciousness of a threat to his welfare. For this reason the aesthete regards it as a risk to humble himself under "the ethical task", and thereby experience the "consciousness of "duty".

### III

#### TO THE RELIGIOUS STAGE

##### 1

##### GOD

Having examined the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, we will now examine the move to the religious stage of existence. It is my contention that according to Kierkegaard, commitment here involves the risk of believing "with the passion of the infinite" that there is a God<sup>1</sup>. Before examining why it is a risk to believe this, however, I will first of all briefly introduce the concept of believing in God "with the passion of the infinite".

In Chapter Two of my thesis, while examining the move to the ethical stage of existence, I attempted to elucidate the philosophies of life of the aesthete and the ethicist. It was evident that the aesthete's life is ruled by the desire for enjoyment, and not by any such norm as "the universal" or "the ethical task". The ethicist, on the other hand, acknowledges that there is a norm outside himself and humbles himself under it. This is tantamount to bowing "with genuine humility before the eternal Power",

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 182, 188.

we said. We saw also that by willing "despair", the person who develops ethically chooses himself in his eternal validity as a moral personality. To do this, according to Judge William, is to choose "his self . . . out of the hand of the eternal God."<sup>1</sup>

It would appear from what I have said thus far that the ethicist believes in God. That he does believe in God is substantiated by what the Married Man says in "Various Observations About Marriage in Reply to Objections". Representing the ethical stage of existence, he is attempting to defend marriage against those who oppose the joining together of love and marriage. In his defence he claims not only that marriage "is holy and blessed by God", but also that love itself "is the gift of the Deity" and that the lover who resolves to marry puts himself "in relationship with God through the universal."<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be no doubt that the ethicist, as Kierkegaard conceives him, believes in God. He seems also to believe that he is put in relationship with God through the universal. In Fear and Trembling, however, Johannes De Silentio argues against this belief. "Duty becomes

<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, II, 221.

<sup>2</sup>Stages On Life's Way, pp.121, 147, 161.

duty by being referred to God," he writes, "but in duty itself I do not come into relation with God."<sup>1</sup> Johannes Climacus, in Concluding Unscientific Postscript, agrees basically with Johannes De Silentio, as against the ethicist. He contends that the highest task proposed to a human being is "the task of becoming subjective"<sup>2</sup>. To become subjective is of the utmost importance because "God is a subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness."<sup>3</sup> If the individual is to come into relationship with God, this must occur not through "the universal" but rather through "the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.78. Johannes De Silentio claims, for example, that in performing the duty of loving one's neighbour, a person comes into relation not with God but with the neighbour.

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.146.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.178.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.182. In their book Kierkegaard's Authorship (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968), George B. Arbaugh and George E. Arbaugh, point out that "The kind of subjectivity [inwardness] intended is that kind of passion which is aroused when a man encounters the passion of God and finds himself responsible to it. If one truly encounters God, one cannot view him from the standpoint of a spectator. . . . [Religious] responsiveness is thus not speculative or contemplative but impassioned and dutiful" (pp.224-225).



From the above it can be seen that the religious individual believes not only that there is a God, but he believes this "with the passion of the infinite". Therein lies one of the major differences between such an individual and the ethicist. Therein lies also a major difference between the ethical and the religious stages of existence. In the ethical stage God has a place, but his importance tends to lie in his being the giver of the moral law, rather than in his being "a subject" with whom individuals can come into relationship through the infinite passion of their inwardness. In his book Something About Kierkegaard, David Swenson comments upon this difference between the two stages of existence under discussion, in the following way:

There are many who would call Kierkegaard's ethical sphere religion, since it everywhere presupposes in the background the existence of a divine being. The ethicist receives an ideal self, embedded in concrete historical situations, from the hand of God, the human self is always recognized as a derivative self, and the obligation of realizing in the concrete this true or ideal self is recognized as an obligation which places a man in contact with the divine. But for Kierkegaard the subjective mode of constituting the relation-

ship to God is decisive for the religious sphere, and he does not recognize the attitude described above as religious. The ethicist has no other relation to God than that which comes through accepting his duty as from Him, he has no other relation to God than that which is universal to all men, and universal as a common public tie which binds them together. His relation to God is never private; it is not really to be distinguished from his relation to other men; the ethical life is an overt life, without secrets, without mysteries, and without privacies. God is the universal background for the ethical life, but He does not in any special sense break into it; His position is the position of the point which determines the perspective of the picture, but which does not form a part of the picture itself.<sup>1</sup>

As opposed to this, God is all-important for the religious man, who comes into relationship with Him through the infinite passion of inwardness.

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<sup>1</sup>Something About Kierkegaard, p.171.

### (A) Objective Uncertainty

Turning now to an examination of why it is a risk to believe "with the passion of the infinite" that there is a God, we find that it is a risk because to so believe is to believe on the basis of "objective uncertainty"<sup>1</sup>. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus states emphatically his view that there can be no objective certitude upon which to base one's belief in God. The traditional arguments for the existence of God prove nothing, he claims, and when they are finished God's existence is as hypothetical as it was when they began. "Whoever therefore attempts to demonstrate the existence of God", comments Climacus in the Philosophical Fragments, "( . . . without the reservatio finalis . . . that the existence emerges from the demonstration by a leap) proves in lieu thereof something else [i.e., that he is a fool]"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.182ff.,540.

<sup>2</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.54. Climacus is of the opinion that when one demonstrates the existence of God, God's existence does not emerge straightway from the demonstration "without any breach of continuity" (p.53). A gulf exists between the demonstration and the incontestable certainty one would like, and this gulf can be traversed only by "a leap". As James Collins points out in The Mind of Kierkegaard: "It is Kierkegaard's contention that God's existence can be grasped only by being believed. His existence is assured to us, only when we 'let the proof go' and execute the leap of belief" (p.147).

In the Postscript also, Climacus writes that the attempt to arrive at certitude about God's existence via the traditional arguments is futile, since "the sum of all this [activity] is an objective uncertainty."<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the ontological argument for the existence of God, Climacus points out that in this argument the attempt is made "to introduce God's ideal essence dialectically into the sphere of factual being."<sup>2</sup> But when one argues that God or the highest being must possess all perfections, and that existence is a perfection; therefore God exists: this is a deceptive movement of thought -

For if God is not really conceived as existing in the first part of the argument, the argument cannot even get started. It would then read about as follows: 'A supreme being who does not exist must possess all perfections, including that of existence; ergo, a supreme being who does not exist does exist.' This would be a strange conclusion. Either the supreme being was non-existent in the premises, and came into existence in the conclusion, which is quite impossible; or he was existent in the premises, in which case he cannot come into existence in the conclusion. For in the latter case we have

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.132.

<sup>2</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.52.

in the conclusion merely a deceptive form for the logical development of a concept, a deceptive circumlocution for a presupposition. Otherwise the argument must remain purely hypothetical. If a supreme being is assumed to exist, he must also be assumed in possession of all perfections; ergo, a supreme being must exist - if he exists. By drawing a conclusion within an hypothesis we can surely never make the conclusion independent of the hypothesis.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God, Climacus holds that in these arguments the attempt is made to show that when one considers the works of nature one must conclude they are such that only an omnipotent and wise God can be responsible for them. But, he asks, is it really the case that the works of nature unmistakably manifest wisdom and omnipotence? Or do they leave room for doubt? "I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God," he writes, "and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety."<sup>2</sup> If then it is the case that wisdom and omnipotence are not unmistakably manifested in the works of nature, how

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.298.

<sup>2</sup>ibid., p.182.

can one derive proof of God from them? One cannot, Climacus contends. From what works then does one propose to derive proof? "From the works [of nature] as apprehended through an ideal interpretation, i.e., such as they do not immediately reveal themselves", answers Climacus, and continues:

But in that case it is not from the works that I make the proof; I merely develop the ideality I have presupposed, and because of my confidence in this I make so bold as to defy all objections, even those that have not yet been made. In beginning my proof I presuppose the ideal interpretation, and also that I will be successful in carrying it through; but what else is this but to presuppose that the God exists, so that I really begin by virtue of confidence in him."<sup>1</sup>

For Johannes Climacus, the so-called "proofs" for the existence of God do not prove that there is a God. Neither the existence of God nor his attributes can be grasped by man's reason because God is the designation for "the Unknown"<sup>2</sup> with which "Reason" repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, pp.52-53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.55.

comes into collision. Even if God were present with an individual, that person could not prove his existence by means of "Reason". Moreover, to attempt it would be preposterous. "Rather let us mock God, out and out, as has been done before in the world", writes Climacus, " - this is always preferable to the disparaging air of importance with which one would prove God's existence. For to prove the existence of one who is present is the most shameless affront, since it is an attempt to make him ridiculous."<sup>1</sup>

Climacus remarks, however, that there is a proper way to go about showing that God exists. In the case of an earthly king, he writes, the correct way to acknowledge his existence, or his presence, is to offer an appropriate expression of submission - "and thus it is also one proves God's existence by worship . . . not by proofs."<sup>2</sup> This same idea is expressed by Kierkegaard in "What It Means To Seek After God" - the first part of a discourse written for the occasion of Confession. In that discourse Kierkegaard claims that God's presence is with the person who

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.485.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.485.

truly seeks after Him: "God is right beside him, very near, near on every hand, omnipresently near."<sup>1</sup> Also in that discourse, as in the Postscript, the appropriate manner of demonstrating God's presence is said to be "worship". Hence in speaking of the Unknown which he equates with God, Kierkegaard writes: "where the Unknown seems to show itself, there is wonder, and wonder is the sense immediacy has of God and . . . the expression of wonder is worship."<sup>2</sup>

We see then that for Kierkegaard and his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, the only way to prove the existence of God is through "submission" and "worship". Of the person who acknowledges God by an appropriate expression of submission, it can be said, "his life is the proof"<sup>3</sup>. How-

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.461. In another of his discourses - "Remember Now Thy Creator In The Days Of Thy Youth" [Edifying Discourses, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1945), vol. III ], Kierkegaard comments wryly that "To youth God dwells close at hand; in the midst of sorrow and joy he hears God's voice calling"(p.83), but "When one grows older, then everything becomes so wretched. God in heaven must sit and wait for the fates to decide whether He exists, and finally He comes into being by means of some proofs; men must put up with waiting until the matter is decided" (pp.82-83).

<sup>2</sup>Stages On Life's Way, pp.457-458.

<sup>3</sup>The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard, edited and translated by Alexander Dru (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.367. Kierkegaard uses this particular expression when he is talking about proofs for the immortality of the soul, but what he says here concerning belief in immortality applies just as readily to belief



ever, the person who seeks to prove God's existence objectively, will find no proof but only "objective uncertainty". Socrates looked out upon the world, writes Climacus, but found no objective proof for the existence of God. Although it is said of him that he "put forth the physico-teleological proof for God's existence,"<sup>1</sup> actually he presupposed the existence of God and under that presupposition sought "to interpenetrate nature with the idea of purpose." The point is that although Socrates realized the result of his attempts to know God objectively was "objective uncertainty", he nonetheless held fast to a belief in God. He acknowledged his ignorance of God, but bowed humbly before Him. To respond to the Unknown in such a manner as this is to come into relationship with God through "the infinite passion of

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in God. He remarks that "Socrates did not first of all get together some proofs of the immortality of the soul in order then to live in that belief, on the strength of the proofs. The very reverse is the case; he said, the possibility of there being an immortality occupies me to such a degree that I unquestionably stake my whole life upon it as though it were the most certain of all things. And so he lived - and his life is a proof of the immortality of the soul. He did not believe merely on the strength of the proofs and then live: no, his life is the proof, and only with his martyr's death is the proof complete."

<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.54.

the individual's inwardness" of which we spoke earlier; it is to believe in God "with the passion of the infinite", and thereby move to the religious stage of existence.

It remains to be said, that from the viewpoint of the person who has not yet made the move to the religious stage of existence, to believe in God "with the passion of the infinite" is a risk, because of the element of "objective uncertainty" that is involved. Such a person would like to have certainty before committing himself to God; he wants to have the truth about God in his hand. But to make this a condition of commitment is to lack the religious faith necessary for living in the religious stage of existence. "When Socrates believed there was a God," writes Climacus, "he held fast to the objective uncertainty with the whole passion of his inwardness, and it is precisely in this contradiction and in this risk, that faith is rooted."<sup>1</sup> However, when the person who is without faith considers committing himself to God as Socrates did, he is confronted with a situation in which the

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.188. Although Climacus uses the term "faith" in reference to Socrates' belief in God in the face of "objective uncertainty", he qualifies this by saying that "the Socratic form of faith" (p.188) is only "a kind of analogy to faith" (p.502), since "faith belongs essentially in the sphere of the paradox-religious" (p.505). Climacus holds that the term "faith" actually refers not to the passion of belief without certainty but to the passion of belief against the understanding. This latter concept I will examine in detail in Chapter Four, section 1, of my thesis. See also footnote number 2 page 72.

truth about God seems to have become "objectively a paradox"<sup>1</sup> - its paradoxical character lying not in itself but in the fact that a person must passionately commit himself to it even though he lacks certainty concerning its veracity. In such a situation as this "The paradox repels in the inwardness of the existing individual, through the objective uncertainty and the corresponding Socratic ignorance."<sup>2</sup> Hence, the person who has not yet moved to the religious stage of existence, considers it a risk to do so when in order to make the move he must believe in God "with the passion of the infinite", which means that he must in the face of "objective uncertainty" commit himself to God decisively "as if all the evidence were in and reason could demonstrate the justifiability of the decision."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.183.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.187-188.

<sup>3</sup>Kierkegaard's Authorship, p.154.

(B) Venturing Everything

Thus far in this chapter we have seen that according to Kierkegaard, in the move to the religious stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of believing "with the passion of the infinite" that there is a God, and we have seen that to so believe is a risk because it entails believing on the basis of "objective uncertainty". To believe in God "with the passion of the infinite" is a risk for the following reason also: to do so is to "venture everything."<sup>1</sup>

In a discourse entitled "The Righteous Man Strives In Prayer With God And Conquers - In That God Conquers", Kierkegaard declares that "there has never lived a person who has not assumed the existence of God, but not a few who have not wished to let this thought influence them"<sup>2</sup>. Kierkegaard is suggesting that mere acknowledgement of God's existence does not raise a person to the religious stage of existence, but that to be religious in the true sense of the word is to let one's belief deeply affect one's life.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.380.

<sup>2</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, Edifying Discourses, trans. David Swenson and Lillian Swenson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1945), vol. IV, p.125.

<sup>3</sup>In the Postscript this point is made also with reference to belief in the immortality of the soul. It is said that the attempt made by speculative philosophy to prove immortality is wasted effort. The real question at stake is not whether a person can prove immortality but rather "how [his belief in] immortality practically transforms his life" (p.156).

person who "with the passion of the infinite" believes there is a God will allow his entire existence to be transformed. According to Johannes Climacus, he will "submit his entire immediacy with all its yearnings and desires to the inspection of resignation."<sup>1</sup> In other words, he will examine his life, along with the goals he has set for himself in life, and ask himself if in all of this there is anything antithetical to his relationship with God that he is unwilling to give up for the sake of that relationship. If there is, then he does not believe in God "with the passion of the infinite".

The religious individual realizes that "God may require everything of every human being, everything and for nothing"<sup>2</sup>, but he is willing nonetheless to renounce all relative ends in order to maintain an absolute relationship to God. He volitionally relegates "all finite satisfactions . . . to the status of what may have to be renounced"<sup>3</sup> for the sake of God and eternal happiness.

<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.353.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.122:

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.350. "But why all?" asks L.L. Miller in his book In Search of the Self (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962): "Surely the infinite does not require him to commit suicide? No, it is just that because he cannot tell in advance which particular one of the many 'finite satisfactions' he may be required to give up in a future

This is taking the Eternal à tout prix writes Climacus, but to do anything less is to escape the risk involved in the God-relationship. Nothing less than total renunciation is required, and nothing less is accepted. There are those, of course, who will "venture everything" for the Eternal only if they are able "to obtain certainty with respect to such a good, so as to know that it is really there"<sup>1</sup>. These persons may be willing to venture all if they can have certainty with respect to God and eternal life, but what in fact is a venture, asks Climacus, and responds thus:

A venture is the precise correlative of an uncertainty; when the certainty is there the venture becomes impossible. If our serious man acquires the definite certainty that he seeks, he will be unable to venture all; for even if he gives up everything, he will under such circumstances venture nothing - and if he does not get certainty, our serious man says in all earnest that he refuses to risk anything, since that would be madness. In this way the venture of our serious man becomes merely a

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decision that he must keep himself in readiness to renounce any or all of them. All are candidates for renunciation, and it is by his willingness to place them in candidacy for renunciation that he finds out if he actually is in an absolute relationship to the Absolute" (p.198).

<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.380.

false alarm. If what I hope to gain by venturing is itself certain, I do not risk or venture, but make an exchange. Thus in giving an apple for a pear, I run no risk if I hold the pear in my hand while making the exchange . . . When I give all that I have for a pearl, it is not a venture if I hold the pearl in my hand at the moment of making the exchange. If it is a false pearl, and I have been cheated, it is a poor exchange; but I cannot be said to have risked anything to get possession of the pearl. But if the pearl is in a far country, in Africa for example, in a secret place difficult of access, if I have never had the pearl in my hand, and I leave home and kindred, give everything up, and undertake the long and toilsome journey without knowing for a certainty whether my enterprise will succeed: then I venture.<sup>1</sup>

In the above quotation from the Postscript, an important point to note is Climacus' remark that the individual who is thinking of venturing everything, will not do it unless he has certainty with respect to the Eternal, because to do so "would be madness." In other words, from

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.380. In reading this passage one cannot help but think that Kierkegaard is referring to the "pearl of great value" (Matthew 13:46 R.S.V.) equated by Jesus with "the kingdom of heaven" for which a man is called to leave "house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children" (Mark 10:29 R.S.V.) ,i.e., home and kindred.

the standpoint of the person who has not yet made the move to the religious stage of existence, it is folly "to venture everything" when the outcome of the venture is uncertain. But it is folly not just because of the uncertainty: it is foolish also because of what is being ventured, namely "everything", i.e. all finite satisfactions and relative ends. Ordinarily, says Climacus, people do not want to deny the Eternal outrightly, but neither do they want to venture all for it; as a compromise they include it among various other goods in life, all of which they hang onto zealously. "I do not know whether to laugh or to weep over the customary rigmarole" Climacus remarks, ":a good living, a pretty wife, health, a social position on a level with an alderman - and then, too, an eternal happiness; which is as if one were to suppose the kingdom of heaven to be one among the kingdoms of this earth"<sup>1</sup>. Climacus is

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.350. Climacus makes this same point a little further on when he declares: "It may be very praiseworthy of the particular individual to have attained to the dignity of an aldermanic title, to be known as a clever worker at the office, to be first ranking lover in the dramatic club, almost an expert on the violin, a champion rifle-shot, a member of the Hospital Board, a noble father carrying himself with dignity; in short, to be a devil of a fellow who can attend to both-and, and has time for everything. But let him beware of becoming altogether too much of a devil of a fellow, so that he can both do all this and at the same time find leisure to direct his life toward the absolute telos. For this both-and means that the absolute telos is on the same plane with all the rest" (p.359).



saying that the person outside the religious stage of existence may want to have a relationship with God, but not at the price of venturing everything else for the sake of that relationship. The religious person may claim that when you venture all finite satisfactions and relative ends, you will have gained "that God cannot in all eternity get rid of you"<sup>1</sup>, but from the viewpoint of the person considering the venture, it is a risk to "venture everything", since "In the finite sense there is nothing whatever to gain, and everything to lose."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.133.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.360.

## AN ABSOLUTE DUTY

We have seen thus far in Chapter Three of my thesis that for Kierkegaard, in the move to the religious stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of believing "with the passion of the infinite" that there is a God. It is my contention that in the above-mentioned movement, commitment involves also the risk of fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God."<sup>1</sup> Before examining why it is a risk to do this, however, I will discuss what Johannes De Silentio means when he speaks of "an absolute duty toward God."

In Fear and Trembling Johannes De Silentio poses the problem, "Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?"<sup>2</sup> In approaching this problem he points out that "The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone . . . Conceived immediately as physical and psychical, the particular individual is the individual who has his telos in the universal, and his ethical task is to express himself

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "The Sickness Unto Death", p.80.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.64.

constantly in it, to abolish his particularity in order to become the universal."<sup>1</sup> This means that whenever the individual feels the impulse to oppose the universal by asserting himself in his particularity, "he is in temptation"<sup>2</sup>. And yet, the story of Abraham recounts a situation in which this great Biblical personage felt the impulse to transgress the universal and take his own son's life. From the viewpoint of the moral law, Abraham was being tempted to suspend the ethical obligation he had toward his son, and there was no justification for doing this; if he were to do it he would be a murderer. On the other hand, Abraham believed he was justified in suspending the ethical. He believed moreover, says Johannes, that in his case temptation did not reside in the impulse to transgress the universal, but resided rather in the universal itself "which would keep him from doing God's will."<sup>3</sup> In preparing to sacrifice his son "he overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher telos outside

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death  
 "Fear and Trembling", pp.64-65.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.65.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.70.

of it, in relation to which he suspended the former."<sup>1</sup>

According to Johannes, then, there is such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical.<sup>2</sup> But to answer yes to the question posed earlier concerning the possibility of such a suspension, is not to solve the problem created by the suspension in question, for as Johannes points out, when Abraham teleologically suspended the ethical he was not justified in this "by virtue of anything universal"<sup>3</sup>. He did it as one who possessed faith, and to faith alone could the suspension of the ethical be regarded as justifiable. From the viewpoint of the universal-human, it is paradoxical "that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior . . . it is and remains to

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.59.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Lowrie, speaking of the teleological suspension of the ethical, writes: "What he [Kierkegaard] means may be illustrated by the modern proposal to enact a law to sanction the occasional necessity of putting a beloved person to death to save him from the anguish of a hopeless disease. This proposal is perverse, because, though the individual may be justified before God in killing out of mercy, the 'universal human' is expressed in the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', and the law is the expression of the universal human. 'Merciful killing' must be regarded as a teleological suspension of the ethical, and hence of the legal" (Kierkegaard, pp.329-330). Lowrie goes on to point out that "The problem arises in a more general form when a definite religious belief emerges to trouble an ethical norm which exemplifies 'the universal human'."

<sup>3</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.72.

all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought."<sup>1</sup> And yet, adds Johannes, "faith is this paradox . . . [and] Abraham is the representative of faith."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.66.

<sup>2</sup>ibid., pp.66-67. Once again we come across the use of the word "faith", this time in reference to Abraham, and once again an explanatory note is in order. I said earlier that in the Postscript Climacus qualified his use of the term faith in reference to Socrates by saying that the Socratic form of faith is only a kind of analogy to faith, since faith belongs essentially in the sphere of the paradox-religious. This is why Johannes De Silentio says in Fear and Trembling that Abraham "is the representative of faith" (p.67), whereas Socrates "never reached it" (p.79). It should be noted, however, that although Abraham and Socrates are contrasted in this manner, both belong essentially to the religious stage of existence. We have seen that in the Postscript there is a distinction made between "religiousness A" (what I call "the religious"), and "religiousness B" (which is also called "the Christian religiousness", "the Christian" and "the paradoxical religiousness"). It is apparent in the Postscript, that although Abraham as described in Fear and Trembling qualifies for existence in "the paradoxical religious", he cannot be subsumed under "the Christian" stage of existence. Walter Sikes in his book On Becoming The Truth (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1968), remarks: "It is very interesting and significant for the understanding of Kierkegaard's more mature thought that he subsequently concluded that he had failed to make a necessary distinction between the faith of Abraham and Christian faith. He . . . goes to some lengths to make this point - that Abrahamic faith is formally properly called faith by virtue of the absurd [the paradox] that it embraces, but materially it is not Christian faith. Reflecting upon the knight of faith depicted in Fear and Trembling, he subsequently concluded that he 'was only a daring and somewhat reckless anticipation' [Postscript, p. 447]. . . . From the context of this statement, it is clear that S. K. regards Abraham as having reached existence in faith but not faith in its highest form" (pp.150,152). Hence, Abraham like Socrates belongs to "the religious" rather than to "the Christian" stage of existence.

We have said that the paradox of faith as manifested in the story of Abraham is that the individual is higher than the universal. "The paradox can also be expressed by saying that there is an absolute duty toward God" remarks Caimacus, "for in this relationship of duty the individual as an individual stands related absolutely to the absolute . . . [and] the ethical is reduced to a position of relativity."<sup>1</sup> To say that there is "an absolute duty toward God" and that "the ethical is reduced to a position of relativity", is not to say that the ethical is abolished. The absolute duty to God may lead an individual to do what ethics forbids, but in doing this the individual is simply giving the ethical a paradoxical expression. Moreover, as L.L. Miller points out in In Search of the Self,

this interruption [of the usual expression of the ethical] is a suspension, not an abrogation, of the ethical and . . . the suspension is teleological, purposeful, not arbitrary or whimsical. It is precisely because the ethical is not abolished, not strictly even superceded but only suspended while still pressing its

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "Fear and Trembling", p.80.

claims, that the religious individual is thrown into a state of fear and trembling by the awesomeness of the decision he has to make.<sup>1</sup>

The view that in the religious stage of existence "an absolut duty toward God" takes priority over "the universal", is expressed not only in Fear and Trembling but also in Stages On Life's Way. The author of "Quidam's Diary", according to Kierkegaard's pseudonym Frater Taciturnus, is a man whose life-view at one point was "an aesthetic-ethical one in illusion"<sup>2</sup> - which is to say that although for a period his existence could be classified under aesthetic and ethical categories, the religious possibility was "constantly the deepest thing in his soul. . . without his knowing it."<sup>3</sup> In time, the God-relationship took precedence over both his relationship to his fiancée and his relationship to the universal-human. As was pointed out in an earlier chapter, he desired to marry the girl because of his love for her and because of "the universal-human" under which he had humbled himself, but he received "a divine counter order" prohibiting the marriage. In his own words, "My idea was to construct my life ethically in

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<sup>1</sup>In Search of the Self, p.185.

<sup>2</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.394.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.394.

my inmost being . . . Now I have been forced farther back within myself, my life is constructed for me religiously . . . Who would ever think of assuming an air of importance directly before the face of God? But my situation is as if God had chosen me, not I God."<sup>1</sup>

Finding himself in this situation the lover was confronted with the choice of continuing to humble himself under "the universal-human", or of giving priority to "the God-relationship". Although his choice would appear paradoxical from the standpoint of the universal-human, nevertheless he decided to teleologically suspend the ethical and fulfill "an absolute duty toward God". His decision is summed up by Frater Taciturnus, who says of him: "in his passion he holds fast by faith to the Deity".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.323.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.407.



### (A) Willing Suffering

I have stated that according to Kierkegaard, in the move to the religious stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God". Turning now to an examination of why it is a risk to do this, we find it is a risk because to fulfill "an absolute duty toward God" is to "will suffering".<sup>1</sup>

In the Postscript Johannes Climacus summarizes what was said in Stages On Life's Way concerning the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages of existence. Speaking of the religious stage, he points out that "[in the Stages ] suffering is posited as something decisive for a religious existence, and precisely as a characteristic of the religious inwardness: the more the suffering, the more the religious existence . . . Religious existence is essentially suffering, and that not as a transitional movement, but as persisting."<sup>2</sup>

What Climacus says about the Stages' interpretation of religious existence is verified by a perusal of "'Guilty?'/ 'Not Guilty?'". In that "Passion Narrative", as it is called, the suitor experiences the pain of loving a girl immensely, and desiring with all his heart that he

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<sup>1</sup>Purity Of Heart Is To Will One Thing, p.171.

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.256.

might marry her, but relinquishing her out of deference to his relationship with God - "Oh, if it were possible, if it were possible! . . . To gratify her every wish, to employ the days in giving her joy, that indeed is a pleasure, had I been permitted to do it"<sup>1</sup>. The suffering of this lover is not due simply to the fact that he loved the young woman and felt constrained to give her up, however. It is magnified by the fact that in giving her up he must do something else he does not wish to do, namely, transgress "the universal-human" which has directed his life thus far and which requires him to do what he actually wants to do, i.e., marry his true love - "I love her more deeply than ever, and yet I dare not, I (nota bene) who as her fiancé am bound [by the universal] to love her . . . It was my wish that she might become mine, it is my pain to relinquish it; it was my duty to remain in the relationship, it is enough to consume one's strength that I have broken a relationship of duty"<sup>2</sup>.

In commenting on the situation of the suitor who has given up his fiancée, and marriage to her, Frater Taciturnus remarks that the religious person suffers as

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, pp. 215, 282.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 291, 339.

greatly as does the person one ordinarily thinks of as being a sufferer - the poor man, for example. "Let the poor feel the hard pressure of poverty and anxiety about a livelihood," he writes, "he who elects a spiritual existence by virtue of the religious will have the comfort, which I well understand he needs, of knowing that he too suffers in life and that before God there is no respect of persons."<sup>1</sup> The individual who has moved to the religious stage of existence, suffers because he has died away from immediacy through the annihilation of himself before God. His suffering is unlike that of the poor person, and unlike the suffering of anyone else who is afflicted by external circumstances such as poverty, parental opposition to one's marriage, competition for the hand of one's love, etc. His suffering is unlike that suffering involved in the afore-mentioned cases, because it does not come from without and is not expressed outwardly; it has both "its origin and expression in the individual himself."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this inward suffering persists throughout one's lifetime. The religious man "lies constantly out upon the deep and with seventy

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.402.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.413.

thousand fathoms of water under him", points out Frater Taciturnus, and adds: "However long he may lie out there, there is no assurance that little by little he will find himself lying upon land, stretched out at his ease. He may become calmer, more accustomed to his position . . . but up to the last minute he lies above a depth of seventy thousand fathoms."<sup>1</sup>

A final point that should be noted with regard to religious suffering as elucidated in Stages On Life's Way, is that the religious man's suffering is to a great extent due to the fact that he knows he will be misunderstood by other people. Such misunderstanding is so inevitable that he cannot even confide to others his belief that "the ethical" becomes the temptation when a person seeks to fulfill "an absolute duty toward God". "In relation to men misunderstanding is the foreign language I speak" writes the author of "Quidam's Diary", and continues:

Ah, blessed is an understanding with God, but the fact that by providence or by my own act I am so surrounded by misunderstanding that I am constantly forced back to the lonely understanding with God has also its peculiar pain. Who would hesitate to choose a confidential relationship? But my choice is not free. I am

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.402.

aware of freedom in my choice only when I surrender myself to necessity, and in surrendering to it forget it. I cannot say, 'To whom should I go but unto Thee,' for I cannot go to any man, since one cannot confide oneself to the intimacy of misunderstanding; I cannot go to any man, for I am a prisoner, and misunderstanding, and misunderstanding, and misunderstanding again, are the iron bars before my window".<sup>1</sup>

From the above it can be seen that Climacus' summary in the Postscript (see my thesis page 76) of what the Stages says about religious suffering, is verified by our examination of "'Guilty'/'Not Guilty?'". And when Climacus himself describes the religious stage of existence he speaks in the same manner as do Frater Taciturnus and the author of "Quidam's Diary". He too claims that suffering is decisive for a religious existence and is characteristic of the religious inwardness: "Suffering is the highest action in inwardness . . . [and] to be without suffering means to be without religion"<sup>2</sup>; Climacus too claims that the person who has moved to the religious stage of existence suffers because he has died away from immediacy through the annihilation of himself

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<sup>1</sup>Stages On Life's Way, pp. 322-323.

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 388, 406.

before God -

suffering has its ground in the fact that the individual is in his immediacy absolutely committed to relative ends; its significance lies in the transposition of the relationship, the dying away from immediacy, or in the expression existentially of the principle that the individual . . . is as nothing before God . . . and self-annihilation is the essential form for the God-relationship<sup>1</sup> ;

Climacus too claims that religious suffering does not come from without and is not expressed outwardly -

when the individual . . . suffers only outwardly, then this is not religious suffering . . . [since] inward suffering, [is] the suffering attached to the God-relationship<sup>2</sup> ;

Climacus too claims that religious suffering persists throughout one's lifetime -

religious suffering. . . persists even in the most highly developed religious personality, and even though the religious individual may have succeeded in fighting his way through the suffering which is involved in the dying away from immediacy. The suffering persists as long as the individual is alive.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.412.

<sup>2</sup>ibid., pp. 405, 411.

<sup>3</sup>ibid., p.412.

We have seen thus far that according to the Stages and the Postscript, suffering is the essential expression for the God-relationship, and that cessation of suffering means the cessation of religious existence. To live in the religious sphere of existence is to suffer as outlined in the preceding paragraphs, and the task of the religious individual is "to comprehend the suffering and to remain in it, so that reflection is directed upon the suffering and not away from it."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the person who moves to the religious stage of existence from a lower stage, does so by fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God" in the God-relationship, which necessarily involves him in suffering - suffering that he must not seek to avoid. This is what Kierkegaard means in Purity of Heart when he speaks of willing "suffering".<sup>2</sup> Writing about the individual who has not contrived to escape suffering, but who instead has united his will with the Good, Kierke-

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.397.

<sup>2</sup>"Can one be said to will suffering? Is not suffering something that one must be forced into against his will?" (p.171) he asks, anticipating the reaction of the individual who has not yet made the move to the religious stage of existence. Kierkegaard himself believes that the religious individual must come to the point of willing "suffering", but he realizes others may believe that "if one can be free of suffering it is either fanaticism or insanity to will it" (p.172).

gaard says that such a person "is committed, not in that commitment by which he is exempted from suffering, but in that by which he remains intimately bound to God, in which he wills only one thing: namely, to suffer all, to be and to remain loyally committed to the Good".<sup>1</sup>

At this point it must be noted that what has been said about suffering in the above pages, conveys only the viewpoint of the religious individual who sees suffering as something essential to religious existence and therefore as something desirable. From the viewpoint of the person who has not yet moved to the religious stage of existence, however, to "will suffering" is to incur one's own annihilation before God, and misunderstanding on the part of other people; it is to deliver the death blow to immediacy, and to invite not simply this or that particular suffering but persistent suffering. In the face of all this, the person outside the religious stage of existence must regard it as a risk to fulfill "an absolute duty toward God" and thereby "will suffering". He must regard it as a risk to welcome an existence in which "there is not only no reward to expect [in time] but suffering to bear."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Purity Of Heart Is To Will One Thing, pp.158-159.

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.360.



According to his way of thinking, as pointed out in an earlier footnote, "if one can be free of suffering it is either fanaticism or insanity to will it."<sup>1</sup> And yet from the religious viewpoint, it is necessary for a person to risk everything, suffering included, if he is to move to the religious stage of existence. Hence the author of "Quidam's Diary" write in Stages On Life's Way: "Although I have the most enthusiastic apprehension of God's love, I have also an apprehension that He is not a dear old grandpapa who sits in heaven and indulges people, but that in time and in temporal existence one must be prepared to suffer everything."<sup>2</sup>

#### (B) The Consciousness of Guilt

We have seen above that according to Kierkegaard, in the move to the religious stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God". We have said that he regards this as a risk because in fulfilling such a duty one must "will suffering". He regards this as a risk for another reason also, the reason being that to fulfill "an absolute duty toward God" is to experience "the consciousness of guilt"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Purity Of Heart Is To Will One Thing, p.172.

<sup>2</sup>Stages On Life's Way, p.342.

<sup>3</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.468, 470- 473.

In the Postscript, "the consciousness of guilt" is declared to be "the decisive expression for the pathetic relationship of an exister to an eternal happiness"<sup>1</sup>, i.e., to the Eternal. Climacus holds that when an individual attempts to cast guilt aside, this very act proves that he is not without guilt since "To him who is essentially innocent it can never occur to cast guilt away from him, for the innocent man has nothing to do with the determinant we call guilt."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, when an individual concedes he is essentially guilty because of the totality of guilt that clings to him at every moment, this opens up the possibility of his entering into relationship with God. Why? Because guilt is guilt to God, regardless of its magnitude, and must be acknowledged. As L.L. Miller points out,

the religious individual will never arrive at the correct or truthful consciousness of guilt as a total qualification of existence if he should avail himself of several easy 'outs' lying ready to hand. The most obvious of these is [as Climacus says] to lay the blame for the guilt on existence itself, or on the one who placed him in the embarrassment of existence,

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.470.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.470-471.

the earthly or the heavenly father - it does not much matter which. We may note, for example, that this is what is done in some Oriental religions, as well as in Manichaeian heresies, where the 'blame' is in effect removed from the individual and placed upon the evilness of 'matter,' or upon the involvement of the individual in an impersonal, fateful changeability, such as the Wheel of Karma. Much of modern literature reflects the diffuse sense of guilt that affects all the more sensitive elements in our society, along with varying degrees of the tendency to blame this fact on existence itself, on the very fact of being born, which (as in Kafka) resembles waking up in the middle of a trial to find oneself the accused . . . [or] to shake it [guilt] off by attributing it to a plethora of antecedent childhood and family conditions.<sup>1</sup>

There are those who have a consciousness of guilt and who do not try to cast it away, but who attempt to minimize the seriousness of their guilt. Such persons are accused by Climacus of having a childish and/or comparative consciousness of guilt. Childishness with regard to "the consciousness of guilt", is the attitude that assumes one is guilty today because of some particular wrong thing one has done, innocent for a week in which one behaves,

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<sup>1</sup>In Search of the Self, p.207.

and then guilty again due to a new wrong one has committed. Comparativeness with regard to the consciousness of guilt, is the employing of a standard outside oneself by which to decide one's guilt, rather than listening to the judgement of Eternity.<sup>1</sup> But though people may attempt to minimize the seriousness of their guilt in the above ways, it cannot be done, claims Climacus:

there can be no question of the childish thing of making a fresh start, of being a good child again, but neither is there any question of the universal indulgence that all men are like that. One guilt is enough, as I said, and with that the exister who along with this is related to an eternal happiness, is forever caught. For human justice pronounces a life sentence only for the third offense, but eternity pronounces sentence the first time forever. He is

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<sup>1</sup>In Purity Of Heart Is To Will One Thing, Kierkegaard again points out that we are to concern ourselves with Eternity's judgement of us rather than with the judgement of other men or with the standards of other men. God does not ask us how we have done in comparison with others, says Kierkegaard. He asks only whether we have lived in accordance with our individual eternal responsibility before God. "Eternity seizes each one by the strong arm of conscience, holding him as an individual. Eternity sets him apart with his conscience . . . eternity places him where to be under pressure is to be alone, stripped of every excuse; to be alone and to be lost . . . For where there are many, there is externality, and comparison, and indulgence, and excuse and evasion" (pp.192, 211).

caught forever, harnessed with the yoke of guilt, and never gets out of the harness.<sup>1</sup>

In face of the above, one might ask if there is any possible way of escaping the hold guilt has upon one. Can one, for instance, "make up for the guilt"?<sup>2</sup> Climacus replies that various low conceptions of guilt offer various low conceptions of satisfaction for guilt. The civil conception of guilt, believing as it does that the individual is at fault only because of this or that particular guilt and not because he is totally guilty, holds that punishment by the law for the offences in question is the satisfaction for guilt. The aesthetic-metaphysical conception of guilt, believing that the guilty person must experience nemesis as the consequence of "the righteousness of nature"<sup>3</sup>, holds that the satisfaction for guilt is "the suffering of temporal punishment" and "death". Another conception of guilt, the medieval conception, believing that punishment can be self-inflicted and thereby be made commensurable with the guilt involved, holds that satisfaction must take the form of self-inflicted

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.475.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.479.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.482.

penance. Climacus himself believes that all of the above conceptions of guilt, and their corresponding views of satisfaction for it, are at a lower level than that conception which defines guilt as a totality and emphasizes "the eternal conservation of the recollection of guilt . . . which accepts therefore no satisfaction".<sup>1</sup>

In answer then to the question posed earlier, "Can one make up for the guilt one has incurred?", the religious individual must reply "No". Climacus remarks, however, that of all the attempts to "make up for the guilt", self-inflicted penance is superior because it has itself sincerely sought to discover guilt rather than waiting for the police or nemesis to make the discovery. It may be childlike to believe that one's self-inflicted penance can be made commensurable with one's guilt, but at least "it is a childlike and hearty endeavor on a grand scale; and . . . to himself the individual applies the absolute standard."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, God is not left out of the picture in the medieval-type conception of guilt, but "is included absolutely."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, although all attempts

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.479, 481.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.482, 486.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.483.

to make up for one's guilt fail, self-inflicted penance comes closest to the true religious realization that in face of the total guilt of the individual and the fact that it is before God that he stands accused, there is no satisfaction for guilt. The religious individual will repent of his guilt<sup>1</sup>, but the consciousness of guilt will remain with him.

We have seen above that "the consciousness of guilt" is the decisive expression for the pathetic relationship of an individual to the Eternal, and that any attempt to minimize the seriousness of one's guilt must fail, in face of the totality of an individual's guilt and in face of the fact that it is before God that he stands accused. However, although no one can ultimately evade God and the eternal responsibility that is his before God, the person who has not yet passed to the

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard emphasizes this point in Purity Of Heart Is To Will One Thing. "There must be repentance and remorse" he writes; "... But repentance shall not have its time in a temporal sense. It will not belong to a certain section of life as fun and play belong to childhood, or as the excitement of love belongs to youth ... For in the temporal, and sensual, and social sense, repentance is in fact something that comes and goes during the years. But in the eternal sense, it is a silent daily anxiety. It is eternally false, that guilt is changed by the passage of a century. To assert anything of this sort is to confuse the Eternal with what the Eternal is least like - with human forgetfulness ... So, then, repentance should not merely have its time, but ... it should be a silent daily concern" (pp.38, 42, 45, 47).

religious stage of existence tries to do this very thing by his refusal to fulfill "an absolute duty toward God". Instead of conceding that he is essentially guilty, repenting of his guilt, and fulfilling his duty toward God, he chooses to give his allegiance to the standards of mankind. This appears to him to be less of a risk than fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God" because men are less exacting than God, and men do not expect him to be forever "harnessed with the yoke of guilt" as does God.

To fulfill "an absolute duty toward God", which entails experiencing "the consciousness of guilt" as the decisive expression of this God-relationship, is a risk from the viewpoint of the person who has not yet moved to the religious stage of existence, for the following reason also, namely that finite common sense "is inclined to say that no man can endure such an eternal recollection of guilt, that it must lead to madness or to death".<sup>1</sup> Climacus attempts to meet this argument by pointing out that "finite common sense often talks this way so as to prate indulgence"; he caustically remarks that

such talk seldom fails of its effect when men are gathered in three and fours, for I doubt if any one in solitude has been able to deceive himself with this talk, but when

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.477.



there are a number together and they hear that the others comport themselves thus, one is less troubled. Besides, how inhuman it is to want to be better than others! . . . So then it is possible that this eternal recollection of guilt may lead to madness or death. Oh, well then, you know that a man cannot endure bread and water for a very long time; but then it is for a physician to estimate how things may be arranged for the particular individual, in such a way, be it noted, that he does not come to the pass of living with the rich, but that the fasting régime is so precisely reckoned for him that he can just keep alive.<sup>1</sup>

Climacus is saying here that just as a physician makes sure that the patient under his care will not die from undernourishment on the meagre diet he has prescribed for him, so God ensures that the eternal recollection of guilt which is the decisive expression of the God-relationship, will not be too great a burden on an individual so as to lead to madness or death. Climacus believes that "the consciousness of guilt" experienced by a person who fulfills "an absolute duty toward God" is a small price to pay for the religious mode of existence. To the person who has not yet experienced this

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.477.

mode of existence, however, it appears to be a grave risk to enter into a relationship with God which will elevate the individual to a stage of existence wherein "the eternal recollection of guilt is ... preserved, in case the exister should be about to forget it."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.497.

#### IV

#### TO THE CHRISTIAN STAGE

##### 1

#### THE GOD-MAN

Turning now to an examination of how one moves to the Christian stage of existence, it is my contention that according to Kierkegaard, commitment here involves the risk of believing that "God has existed in human form"<sup>1</sup>. Before discussing why it is a risk to believe this, however, let us consider in some detail what Climacus means by the above statement concerning God's existence in human form.

The first references made by Climacus to God's human existence, are found in the Philosophical Fragments. He begins that work with the question, "How far does the Truth admit of being learned?"<sup>2</sup> This question is acknowledged as a Socratic one, and the Socratic answer

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.194.

<sup>2</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.11. It should be noted here, as Niels Thustrup points out in his "Commentary" on the Fragments, that "The phrase the Truth does not mean the same in Platonic (Socratic) thought on the one hand and in the New Testament and for Kierkegaard on the other . . . In this work Kierkegaard takes as his point of departure the Platonic understanding of truth as ontological and immanent and then proceeds to give the term its New Testament content and to draw the consequences of this" (pp.163-164).

to it is given. For Socrates, says Climacus, every human being possesses the Truth; it is within each individual in the sense that it was known by the soul in the latter's preexistent state and simply needs to be remembered, to be recalled. Since the learner is "in his own person the condition for understanding the Truth"<sup>1</sup>, the teacher is merely an occasion whereby the learner is assisted in remembering it. The teacher is a midwife who helps the learner recall the Truth.

Having outlined the Socratic answer to the question posed at the beginning of the Fragments, Climacus outlines another possible answer - one which he later calls the Christian answer. According to this answer, the learner is "destitute of the Truth up to the very moment of his learning it".<sup>2</sup> This does not mean simply that he is ignorant of it, but it means that he is actually in "a state of Error" - a state characterized by the fact that instead of approaching the Truth he is "departing from it".<sup>3</sup> Since this is the case, says Climacus, the learner is not in his own person the condition for understanding the Truth.

<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp.16-17. Once again, Niels Thuistrup's remarks in his "Commentary" are noteworthy. "It is of great importance to Kierkegaard" writes Thuistrup, "to affirm man's originally right relationship to the Truth

If he is to acquire it, he must receive from the teacher both the condition for understanding the Truth and the Truth itself. The teacher who gives him these is not a midwife but a begetter. Also, such a teacher is not merely an occasion whereby the learner is helped to remember the Truth, says Climacus:

one who gives the learner not only the Truth, but also the condition for understanding it, is more than teacher. All instruction depends upon the presence, in the last analysis, of the requisite condition; if this is lacking, no teacher can do anything. For otherwise he would find it necessary not only to transform the learner, but to recreate him before beginning to teach him. But this is something that no human being can do; if it is to be done, it must be done by the God himself.<sup>1</sup>

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and his own responsibility for his current condition" (p. 190). Climacus himself states with regard to this: "In so far as the learner exists he is already created, and hence God must have endowed him with the condition for understanding the Truth. For otherwise his earlier existence must have been merely brutish . . . But . . . the learner is destitute of this condition, and must therefore have been deprived of it. This deprivation cannot have been due to an act of the God (which would be a contradiction), nor to an accident (for it would be a contradiction to assume that the lower could overcome the higher); it must therefore be due to himself. . . Error is then not only outside the Truth, but polemic in its attitude toward it; which is expressed by saying that the learner himself forfeited the condition[for understanding the Truth] and is engaged in forfeiting it (pp.18-19).

<sup>1</sup> Philosophical Fragments, p.18.

In summary - to the question "How far does the Truth admit of being learned?", Caelimacus discusses two possible answers. The first is that Truth is within the individual (i.e., it was known by the soul in a preexistent state and simply needs to be recalled), that every individual is in his own person the condition necessary for understanding it, that as a learner he needs only to recall it, and the teacher serves as a midwife who assists him in recalling it. The second answer is that the individual is destitute of the Truth (i.e. up to the very moment of learning it), that he is in a state of Error and as such is not in his own person the condition for understanding the Truth, and that if he is to acquire the Truth it must be brought to him (along with the condition necessary for understanding it) by the teacher (God). According to the first viewpoint, man can learn the Truth on his own<sup>1</sup>. According to the second viewpoint Truth is not something that can be attained by the powers of human understanding and reason alone; God must be included in the picture as the One through whose intervention the Truth is acquired.

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<sup>1</sup> When I say that according to the Platonic viewpoint man can learn the Truth on his own, I am not being unmindful of the fact that for Plato a teacher serves as an occasion by means of which the learner recalls the Truth; I am simply pointing out that according to this viewpoint, divine revelation in the Judaic-Christian sense does not play an important part in man's apprehension of the Truth.

And, says Climacus, according to this viewpoint God is included in the picture in the form of the God-man who is the teacher of the Truth. Otherwise expressed, God made himself "into the likeness of man"<sup>1</sup> to bring the Truth to man. With this in mind, Climacus in the Post-Script emphasizes the fact that although God is the Teacher who brings the Truth to man, the object of faith for the Christian is not "a doctrine" or "a teacher with a doctrine" but "the reality of the teacher, that the teacher really exists [i.e., existed]."<sup>2</sup> He continues:

The object of faith is hence the reality of the God-man . . . God's reality in existence as a particular individual, the fact that God has existed as an individual human being.

Christianity is no doctrine concerning the unity of the divine and the human<sup>3</sup> . . . nor is it any other of the logical transcriptions of Christianity . . . but the fact that God

<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.44.

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.290.

<sup>3</sup>In Training In Christianity, Anti-Climacus reiterates this same point. "The God-Man is not the unity of God and mankind" he writes; " . . . The God-Man is the unity of God and an individual man" (p.84).

has existed.

The historical assertion is that the Deity, the Eternal, came into being at a definite moment in time as an individual man.<sup>1</sup>

#### (A) Testimony

Having examined what Climacus says about the reality of the God-Man ( about God's having come into existence as a particular man ), it remains for us to discuss why it is a risk to believe that "God has existed in human form". It is a risk first of all because to believe this is to believe on the basis of "testimony"<sup>2</sup>.

When God became a man in order to bring mankind the Truth, says Climacus in the Fragments, it could not have been his intention to live his life in such a way that no one would become aware of his presence in the world; to have done that would have been to mock the men he came to save. Therefore, says Climacus, he gave a sign to attract the attention of mankind. Although he took upon himself the form of a commoner, his concerns differed from those of common men, just as they differed from the concerns of men of distinction, and it was this difference

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.290-291,512.

<sup>2</sup>Philosophical Fragments, pp.105-106,125-126,133.



that caught the attention of his contemporaries. "His thoughts and cares are not like those which fill the minds of men in general" writes Climacus;

He goes his way indifferent to the distribution and division of earthly goods, as one who has no possessions and desires none; he is not concerned for his daily bread, like the birds of the air; he does not trouble himself about house and home, as one who neither has nor seeks a shelter or a resting place; he is not concerned to follow the dead to the grave; he does not turn his head to look at the things that usually claim the attention of men; he is not bound to any woman, so as to be charmed by her and desirous of pleasing her. He seeks one thing only, the love of the disciple . . . This lofty absorption in his mission will of itself suffice to attract the attention of the multitude.<sup>1</sup>

So it was, says Climacus, that God in human form lived a life in which his meat and drink was to make known his teaching. Wherever he went crowds gathered to see and hear him, after which they enthusiastically told others that they had seen and heard him. As a result, his appearance became "the news of the day, in the marketplace, in the homes of the people, in the council chamber,

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, pp.69-70.

in the ruler's palace."<sup>1</sup> However, in spite of the fact that everyone knew of him, that everyone knew of his claim to be the Messiah, only a few individuals became believers. Why? Because, says Climacus, Jesus "was not immediately knowable [as God]".<sup>2</sup> We should note here that Anti-Climacus makes this same point in Training In Christianity: "because of the contradiction involved in His appearance it was not . . . the case . . . that it was directly obvious to the eye that Christ was indeed what He said He was"<sup>3</sup>. Even John the Baptist who stood in the great tradition of the prophets had to ask him if he were the Expected One, because there was "nothing directly to be

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.71.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.85. Climacus points out also that the sign the God-Man gave mankind so that he would not pass through the world without anyone becoming aware of his presence, was capable not only of drawing men nearer but also of repelling them. Men in general have a tendency to ask suspiciously, "Is it right for a man to be as care-free as a bird . . . Ought he not rather to take thought for the morrow . . . Is it permissible thus to become a foot-loose wanderer, stopping whenever evening overtakes him?" (p.70). It is only the individual who can "lose himself in the service of the spirit" says Climacus, who can be unconcerned about meat and drink, etc. To others, such unconcern tends to be repulsive.

<sup>3</sup>Training In Christianity, p.97.

seen"<sup>1</sup> in Jesus that would prove his Messiahship to the beholder. He performed miracles, and said that it was miracles he performed, says Anti-Climacus, but this was not a direct proof of his Messiahship. It signified only that he made himself out to be "more than a man", that he made himself out to be "something pretty near to being God"<sup>2</sup>. Also, it caused people to take offence at him, and those who did not believe that he was what he said he was, denied the miracles.<sup>3</sup>

We see then that for both Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus, there was nothing about Jesus that directly proved to his contemporaries that he was God in human form. His "thoughts and cares" so different from those of men in general, his "lofty absorption in his mission",

<sup>1</sup>Training In Christianity, p.99.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.99.

<sup>3</sup>In the Fragments, Climacus also emphasizes this point when he says that "a miracle does not exist for immediate apprehension, but only for faith," and that "whoever does not believe does not see the miracle" (p. 116). What Kierkegaard says through his pseudonyms is substantiated by events both in Jesus' day and our own. In his day, for instance, there were those who saw Jesus heal a blind and dumb man, but saw no miracle - "It is only by Be-elzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" they said (Matthew 12:24 R.S.V.). So it is in our day also. There are many instances of "faith healing", for example, in which some persons see a miracle whereas others see only coincidence, or psychosomatic healing, etc.

and his "miracles", served only to focus the attention of mankind upon him. These things did not compel belief in him; rather, they created within the individual a state of tension characterized by the realization that the choice must be made between taking offence at him or believing in him. Jesus made it evident, writes Anti-Climacus,

that in relation to Him there can be no question of any proofs, that a man does not come to Him by the help of proofs, that there is no direct transition to this thing of becoming a Christian, that at the most the proofs might serve to make a man attentive, so that once he has become attentive he may arrive at the point of deciding whether he will believe or be offended . . . . It is only by a choice that the heart is revealed . . . . by the choice whether to believe or to be offended . . . . Christ Himself says nothing more than that the proofs might lead a man - not to faith . . . . but up to the point where faith may come into existence, that they might help him to become attentive, and thereby to come into the dialectical tension out of which faith issues - the tension of, Wilt thou believe, or wilt thou be offended?<sup>1</sup>

Johannes Climacus especially, spends a great deal of time in attempting to show that for the contem-

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<sup>1</sup>Training In Christianity, p.98.

poraries of Jesus, Jesus "was not immediately knowable [as God]." He does this in order to emphasize the fact that the person who has not had the opportunity to see Jesus in person, is not thereby any further from faith than the person who did see him. Both the contemporary, and the person furthest removed in time from the point in history when God "existed in human form", are equally near the point where "faith may come into existence". This is so because although both lack direct proof that Jesus is the Messiah, neither lacks the occasion whereby faith in his claim may become an actuality. "Just as the historical gives occasion for the contemporary to become a disciple," says Climacus, ". . . so the testimony of contemporaries gives occasion for each successor to become a disciple".<sup>1</sup>

This brings us back full circle to my earlier contention that it is a risk to believe "God has existed in human form", because to so believe is to believe on the basis of "testimony". In other words, the person who has not seen the God-Man but who nonetheless desires to move to the Christian stage of existence, must believe on the basis of "testimony" that God did come into being at a definite moment of time as an individual human being;

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, pp.125-126.

however, "testimony" cannot provide proof that God existed in time as a man, but can only provide an occasion for believing that he did. All a contemporary can do for a successor, says Climacus, is to inform him that he the contemporary has himself believed that God took the form of a particular man (Jesus). But this is all the contemporary need do since every individual must make up his own mind as to whether he will believe or be offended. "If", declares Climacus,

the contemporary generation had left nothing behind them but these words: 'We have believed that in such and such a year the God appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died, it would be more than enough. The contemporary generation would have done all that was necessary; for this little advertisement, this nota bene on a page of universal history, would be sufficient to afford an occasion [to become a believer], and the most voluminous account can in all eternity do nothing more.<sup>1</sup>

I have said that it is a risk to believe on the basis of "testimony" that "God has existed in human form" because testimony cannot provide proof of this, but can provide only an occasion for believing it. The Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Philosophical Fragments, pp.130-131.

may feel it is advisable to choose belief rather than offence so that "faith may come into existence". However, to the person who has not yet moved to the Christian stage of existence, it seems too great a risk to take to base one's eternal happiness on the belief that God became a man, when there is no direct proof that this really did occur.<sup>1</sup> The non-believer would like certainty rather than uncertainty in this matter, but there is no certainty. "One who is not contemporary with the historical," writes

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard discusses this at some length in one of his journal entries for 1850. As translated by Alexander Dru in The Journals of Kierkegaard, it reads in part: "here is something historical, the story of Jesus Christ.

But now is the historical fact quite certain? . . .

How then do we proceed? Thus. A man says to himself. . . . here is an historical fact which teaches me that in regard to my eternal happiness I must have recourse to Jesus Christ. Now I must certainly preserve myself from taking the wrong turning into scientific enquiry and research, as to whether it is quite certainly historical; for it is historical right enough [the testimony is a fact of history]: if it were ten times as certain in all its details it would still be no help: for directly I cannot be helped.

And so I say to myself: I choose; that historical fact means so much to me that I decide to stake my whole life upon that if. Then he lives; lives entirely full of the idea, risking his life for it: and his life is the proof that he believes. He did not have a few proofs, and so believed and then began to live. No, the very reverse.

That is called risking; and without risk faith is an impossibility . . .

But all unspiritual natures turn the question round. They say: to stake everything upon an if, that is a sort of scepticism, it is quite fantastic, not positive. That is because they will not take the 'risk'" (pp.367-368).

Climacus,

has, instead of the immediacy of sense and cognition, . . . the testimony of contemporaries, to which he stands related in the same manner as the contemporaries stand related to the said immediacy . . . The immediacy of the testimony, i.e., the fact that the testimony is there, is what is given as immediately present to him; but . . . uncertainty . . . will exist for him as well as for a contemporary; his mind will be in a state of suspense exactly as was the mind of a contemporary.

It is this unavoidable uncertainty and state of suspense concerning testimony about the God-Man, that constitutes for the non-Christian one of the seemingly foolish risks an individual must take if he is to move to the Christian stage of existence.

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, pp.105-106.



### (B) Venturing One's Thought

A second reason, according to Kierkegaard, why in the move to the Christian stage of existence it is a risk to believe "God has existed in human form", is that to believe this is to venture one's "thought"<sup>1</sup>.

Earlier in my thesis, while discussing the move to "the religious" stage of existence, I said that Climacus regards it as a risk to believe "with the passion of the infinite" that there is a God, because to so believe is to venture "everything". "Everything" in the above context refers primarily to all relative ends and finite satisfactions. When discussing the move to the Christian stage of existence, however, Climacus adds something else to his list of what must be ventured if this move is to be made. "Christianity" he writes, ". . . requires that the individual should existentially venture all . . . This is something that a pagan can also do; he may for example, venture everything on an immortality's perhaps. But Christianity also requires that the individual risk his thought, venturing to believe against the understanding".<sup>2</sup> To this distinction I will now turn my attention.

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.384.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.384.

To speak of venturing one's thought by believing "against the understanding", as Climacus does numerous times in the Postscript, is not to imply that the believer is or must be devoid of understanding. He who believes "against the understanding" says Climacus

may very well have understanding, (indeed he must have it in order to believe against the understanding), he can use it in all other connections, use it in intercourse with other men . . . he will be well able to see the point of every objection, indeed to present it himself as well as the best of them . . . So the believing Christian not only possesses but uses his understanding . . . he makes so much use of the understanding that he becomes aware of the incomprehensible, and then he holds to this, believing against the understanding.<sup>1</sup>

What is the incomprehensible to which the believer holds, believing "against the understanding"? Climacus sometimes calls it the absurd<sup>2</sup>, and "the absurd is" he writes, "- that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other

<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp.503-504.

<sup>2</sup>To speak of believing the absurd is not to speak of believing unintelligently. This will become clear shortly in my discussion of what Kierkegaard means by "the absurd".

individuals."<sup>1</sup>

That to which Climacus refers as "the incomprehensible" and "the absurd", he also calls "the paradox" or "the absolute paradox": "that God has existed in human form, has been born, grown up, and so forth, is . . . the absolute paradox."<sup>2</sup>

It should be pointed out at this time that when Climacus speaks of "the incomprehensible", "the absolute paradox" and "the absurd", he is not referring just to the Incarnation. The doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine of the Atonement, and the other doctrines of Christianity are all paradoxical he claims, but "the paradox" in a generalized sense is Christianity-itself - "Christianity, which is once for all the paradox, and paradoxical at every point . . . it is . . . the absurd. . . It is the absolute paradox."<sup>3</sup> And Christianity "is not a doctrine but an existential communication expressing an existential contradiction"<sup>4</sup>, the contradiction being its

<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.188.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.194-195.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp.194, 388.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.339.

affirmation that "the eternal happiness of the individual is decided in time through the relationship to something historical, which is furthermore of such a character as to include in its composition that which by virtue of its essence cannot become historical, and must therefore become such by virtue of an absurdity."<sup>1</sup>

We have seen thus far that for Climacus, that to which the believer holds (believing against the understanding) is "the incomprehensible", "the absurd", "the absolute paradox", and that these terms refer not to a particular doctrine but to Christianity conceived as "an existential communication expressing an existential contradiction". The contradiction in question is the affirmation that the eternal happiness of an individual is decided in time through his relationship to Christianity as something historical, and that the latter includes in its composition "the Deity, the Eternal" which because of its essence cannot become historical except by virtue of an absurdity - but which according to "the historical assertion" did come into being "at a definite moment in time as an individual man."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.345.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.512.

A question arising naturally at this point in our discussion, concerns the sense in which Climacus uses the terms "absurd" and "absolute paradox" in his consideration of what it means to venture one's "thought" by believing "against the understanding". Hermann Diem in Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence, equates Kierkegaard's use of "the absurd" and "the paradox" with self-contradiction:

Inasmuch as it [the Christian revelation] states that God has entered into the process of becoming, it contains a self-contradiction, for it predicates historical becoming of God although the very nature of God is that He is eternal and is not subject to becoming. By this self-contradiction, the Christian, absolute paradox . . . repels us not merely by dint of its objective uncertainty but also because of its sheer absurdity.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, N. H. Sørensen in his article entitled "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox",

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<sup>1</sup>Hermann Diem, Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence, trans. Harold Knight (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), p.64.

contends that those persons are mistaken who maintain "that [ for Kierkegaard ] the paradox represents 'a theoretically contradictory conception'"<sup>1</sup>. Sørensen goes on to say that in Kierkegaard's use of "the absurd" and "the paradox", these terms are equated neither with "the absurd in the vulgar sense of the word", nor with "nonsense", but only with "the incomprehensible".<sup>2</sup> He is of the opinion that "for Kierkegaard the 'paradox' is an expression for what is supra rationem rather than for what is contra rationem."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N. H. Sørensen, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox", A Kierkegaard Critique, ed. H. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1962), p.219.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.209.

Recognizing there is no easy answer to the problem at hand, I believe nonetheless that one solution which fits the facts as well as any other and perhaps better than the others, is that which holds that for Kierkegaard "the paradox" is both contra rationem and supra rationem. This view is expounded by Herbert M. Garelick. Garelick writes:

The Paradox violates the laws of reason. Reason therefore can never accept the Paradox as rational . . . Reason, however, can be made aware of its own limits. In the Postscript this is indicated by the cryptic but highly significant criticisms of reason offered by Climacus . . . Since reason is limited to the logical sphere only, it cannot make judgments about the reality or existence of the Paradox but only about its rationality. Faith, therefore, is above reason in the sense that the Paradox may exist even when found to be irrational. The Paradox is for reason the symbol of its limits. In confronting the Paradox reason knows it to be irrational but not therefore impossible. It is the Paradox that reveals that irrationality is not equivalent to existential impossibility and rationality is not equivalent to reality or existence.

When reason examines the paradox, it has extended itself to its very limits, that is, to the recognition of the arbitrariness of its presuppositions and the realization that something may be beyond it. It must find the Para-

dox to be against reason since the Paradox is self-contradictory [cf. Fragments, pp.107-110]. However, having discovered its limits we must admit that, since reason cannot determine existential facts, it cannot say that the Paradox cannot be. Reason must, when confronted with the Paradox, understand that it cannot understand. In this sense the existence of the Paradox may be marked by terms of possibility, probability, improbability, etc., all indicating the disparity between reason's certainty of the irrationality of the Paradox and its mere suspicions about the existence of the Paradox . . . When reason realizes its limits we can say that reason is 'against' faith and yet that faith is 'above' reason . . . The two notions are not contrary; they refer to different aspects of reason, faith against reason, indicating reason's right to judge rationality or irrationality, faith above reason, indicating reason's recognition of the impossibility of judging the reality of that which denies reason.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Herbert M. Garelick, The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard: A Study of Concluding Unscientific Postscript (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), pp.44-45. The title of this book - The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard - is misleading in that Garelick's thesis concerns what he believes to be the anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard's pseudonym Climacus. "It is my thesis" he writes, "that there is an important difference in the values assigned to subjectivity and Christianity, that Climacus is primarily a subjectivist, and that, therefore, his position in the Postscript is anti-Christian, for one cannot be both a subjectivist . . . and a Christian" (p.59).



As indicated earlier, I believe that the above interpretation of "the paradox" fits the facts not only as well as other interpretations but perhaps better. It cannot be denied - and even Sørensen admits this - that there are passages in Kierkegaard's writings which definitely state that "the paradox" of the God-Man's existence conflicts with reason in the strictest sense of the word "conflict". At one point in the Postscript, for example, Climacus is contrasting the Socratic belief that there is a God with the Christian belief that "God has existed in human form". He remarks first of all that

When Socrates believed that there was a God, he held fast to the objective uncertainty with the whole passion of his inwardness, and it is precisely in this contradiction and in this risk, that faith is rooted.<sup>1</sup>

The contradiction of which Climacus here speaks is not a logical contradiction; it is a contradiction based on the disproportion between the lack of proof Socrates had for his belief, and the magnitude of the passion with which he believed. With regard to Christian belief,

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.188.

however, Climacus implies that a logical contradiction is involved. He writes:

Now it is otherwise [with Christianity's belief that "God has existed in human form"] . Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty, namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Socrates, it was an objective uncertainty which was held fast in the passion of inwardness, but in the case of the Christian believer, it is an absurdity which is held fast in the passion of inwardness.

In the first case there is belief in spite of ignorance as to the truth or falsity of what is believed; in the second case there is belief in spite of the logical contradiction involved in what one accepts as true.

Hence Climacus goes on to say:

The Socratic ignorance is as a witty jest in comparison with the earnestness of facing the absurd; and the Socratic existential inwardness is as Greek light-mindedness in comparison with the grave strenuousness of faith.<sup>2</sup>

The whole point of Climacus' contrast between Socratic

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.188.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.188.

belief and Christian belief is to show the immense difference there is between Socratic belief in an objective uncertainty, and Christian belief in that which objectively is absurd. Reason can believe that which it cannot prove to be true, but only faith can believe that which appears to be a logical contradiction.

The above interpretation of Climacus' remarks in the Postscript finds support both in the Philosophical Fragments and in Training In Christianity.

In the Fragments, Climacus declares that the "historical fact [of God's coming into existence] which is the content of our hypothesis has a peculiar character, since it is not an ordinary historical fact, but a fact based on a self-contradiction."<sup>1</sup> Anti-Climacus, speaking in Training In Christianity of the paradox of the God-Man and of "the offence" related to the Christian affirmation that God became a man, refers to "the infinite self-contradiction" involved in the claim that God has shown Himself to be "the poor and suffering and at last the impotent man."<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted here that Anti-Climacus

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<sup>1</sup>Philosophical Fragments, p.108.

<sup>2</sup>Training In Christianity, p.105.

- unlike Climacus - is not looking at Christianity as an outsider. He is writing as a Christian, and he himself states that Christianity is based on "an infinite self-contradiction."

Other passages from Kierkegaard's writings which lend support to the view that "the paradox" of the God-Man's existence conflicts with reason in the strictest sense of the word "conflict", are as follows:

Christianity . . . has proclaimed itself as the Paradox, and it has required of the individual the inwardness of faith in relation to that which stamps itself as . . . an absurdity to the understanding.<sup>1</sup>

that that which in accordance with its nature is eternal comes into existence in time, is born, grows up, and dies - this is a breach with all thinking.<sup>2</sup>

that an individual man is God is Christianity, and this individual man is the God-Man. There is neither in heaven, nor on earth, nor in the depths, nor in the aberrations of the most fantastic thinking, the possibility of a (humanly speaking) more insane combination.<sup>3</sup>

The person who like N. H. Sørensen believes that in the above

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.191.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.513.

<sup>3</sup>Training In Christianity, p.84.

passages Kierkegaard's pseudonyms presuppose not that the Christian "paradox" is a "self-contradiction", but only that it is "incomprehensible", must reconcile his belief with the earlier-quoted statements by Climacus and Anti-Climacus. Also, he should consider seriously the likelihood that what makes Kierkegaard describe the Christian "paradox" as incomprehensible and absurd is his belief that it is a self-contradiction. If it is not a logical contradiction to say that "God has existed in human form", what then is so incomprehensible and absurd about the statement in question? For Kierkegaard "the absolute paradox", "the incomprehensible", and "the absurd" all refer to the "self-contradiction" that the Eternal did in fact become historical although "by virtue of its essence it cannot become historical".<sup>1</sup>

If in fact it is the case that for Kierkegaard the belief that "God has existed in human form" is contra rationem, it is no less the case that he regards this belief as supra rationem, as can be seen by numerous entries in his Journal:

A true sentence of Hugo de St. Victor (Helfferrich: *Mystik*, Vol I, 368).

'In things which are above reason faith is not really supported by reason, because reason can-

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.345.

not grasp what faith believes; but there is also a something here as a result of which reason is determined, or which determines reason to honour faith which it cannot perfectly understand.<sup>1</sup>

The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Human reason has boundaries; that is where the negative concepts are to be found. Boundary disputes are negative, constraining. But people have a rattle-brained, conceited notion about human reason, especially in our age, when one never thinks of a thinker, a reasonable man, but thinks of pure reason and the like, which simply does not exist, since no one, be he professor or what he will, is pure reason.<sup>3</sup>

πίστις as it is used in good Greek (Plato, Aristotle, et al.) is regarded as signifying something far lower than ἐπιστήμη. πίστις is related to probability. Therefore πίστις, to produce faith, according to the classics, is the task of orators.

Now comes Christianity and uses the concept of faith in an entirely different sense

<sup>1</sup>The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard, p.362.

<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, edited by Peter Rohde and translated by Gerda Anderson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), Vol. I, p.8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.5.

as related to the paradox (consequently improbability), but also as signifying the highest certainty (see the definition in Hebrews 11:1), the consciousness of the eternal, the most passionate certainty which causes a person to sacrifice everything and life itself for this faith.

But what happens? In the course of time the pace of Christianity is moderated, and then the same old paganism returns, and now we prattle Christianity into the idea that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is higher than faith (πίστις) . . .

No, from a Christian point of view, faith is the highest. The paradoxical character of Christianity very consistently is identified by the fact that it turns the purely human topsy-turvy. For, humanly speaking, ἐπιστήμη is higher than πίστις, as paganism assumed it to be, but it pleased God to make foolishness of human wisdom, to turn the relationship around . . . and to place faith highest of all.<sup>1</sup>

The paradox in Christian truth is invariably due to the fact that it is truth as it exists for God. The standard of measure and the end is superhuman; and there is only one relationship possible: faith.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, II, 23.

<sup>2</sup>The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard, p.376.

In summing up our discussion of what it means to venture one's "thought" by believing "against the understanding", I would point out that for the person who has not made the move to the Christian stage of existence, the belief that "God has existed in human form" is contra rationem, but to the Christian it is supra rationem. This does not mean that the Christian has a higher rational understanding of the absolute paradox than does the non-believer. Rather it means that the Christian recognizes the inability of reason to grasp the paradox by means of "thought". To the non-believer and to reason, the absolute paradox is irrational; to the Christian and to faith, it is above reason. To the non-believer and to reason, the absolute paradox is an "absurdity"; to the Christian and to faith it is "truth as it exists for God". From this it can be seen why, according to Kierkegaard, it is a risk to believe that "God has existed in human form". The Christian, believing as he does that the paradox in question is "truth as it exists for God", may be quite willing continuously to venture his "thought" in face of the paradox. For the person who has not moved to the Christian stage of existence, however, the paradox is something that must be understood if it is to be believed, and to this person it is a grave risk "to relinquish his under-



standing and his thinking".<sup>1</sup> Expressed otherwise - the faith of a Christian "breathes healthfully and blessedly in the absurd"<sup>2</sup>, but for the non-believer to venture his thought in face of an absurdity, is to risk "martyrdom within himself"<sup>3</sup>, i.e., the crucifixion of the understanding.

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.495.

<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, I, 7.

<sup>3</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.503. See also pp.209, 496.

## 2

## CHRIST AS PATTERN

In the preceding pages of Chapter Four of my thesis I have contended that according to Kierkegaard, in the move to the Christian stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of believing that "God has existed in human form". It is also my contention that in the move under consideration, commitment involves the further risk of "following Christ" as Pattern".<sup>1</sup> Before turning my attention to the question of why it is a risk to do this, however, I will first discuss what Kierkegaard means when he speaks of "following Christ" as "Pattern".

In attempting to determine "what is involved in the concept of following Christ"<sup>2</sup>, Kierkegaard in The Gospel of Our Sufferings declares that to follow a person means to go the way that person went whom you are following, and to walk alone along the same way. Since Christ humbled himself, going the way of the cross, to follow Christ means to take up the cross and to bear it as he did "in an obedience unto death"<sup>3</sup>. To do this is to obey

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<sup>1</sup>The Gospel of Our Sufferings, pp.14, 21, 23; and For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!, p.159ff.

<sup>2</sup>The Gospel of Our Sufferings, p.14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.17.

Christ's commandments about denying oneself and coming after him, and it is something that must be done every day rather than once for all. To follow Christ, says Kierkegaard in summary, is "to deny oneself . . . to go by the same way as Christ went, in the humble form of a servant, in want and scorn and mockery, not loving the world, and not beloved by it . . . to walk alone, for one who in self-denial forsakes the world and all that is of the world renounces everything that might allure and might distract him".<sup>1</sup>

The ideas expressed in The Gospel of Our Sufferings concerning the following of Christ, are prominent in several of Kierkegaard's other writings as well. Following Christ through obedience to his commandments is a prominent theme in Works of Love where Kierkegaard claims that obedience rather than achievement is the important thing in living the Christian life: "What a man achieves or does not achieve is not within his power. He is not the One who shall steer the world; he has one and only one thing to do - to obey."<sup>2</sup> In Training In Christianity Anti-Climacus emphasises self-denial when he declares

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<sup>1</sup>The Gospel of Our Sufferings, p.19.

<sup>2</sup>Works of Love, p.93.

that "being a Christian is to deny oneself."<sup>1</sup> That the follower of Christ must walk alone, forsaking the world and everything that might distract him, is reiterated in Judge For Yourself! where Kierkegaard writes that Christian piety involves renouncing everything to serve God alone, and being "absolutely an alien in the world, without the least connexion with anything or with any single person in the world".<sup>2</sup> That to follow Christ is

<sup>1</sup>Training In Christianity, p.217.

<sup>2</sup>For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!, "Judge For Yourself!", p.180. This statement of Kierkegaard's, along with many other similar ones, seems very harsh. Kierkegaard himself anticipates the reader's objection, "But then after all He [Christ] has disciples?", and replies, "Disciples, yes; but if they are true disciples, there is no bond in the connexion, for in relating Himself to His disciples, He relates Himself at every instant first to God, serving Him alone" ("Judge For Yourself!", p.181). His point here is that Jesus says no one can serve two masters (as will be mentioned later), and yet many people believe they can serve both God and worldly attachments such as a business or a wife, etc. Kierkegaard claims, however, that to follow Christ is to forsake the world so that one "does not go to his field, nor strike a bargain, nor take to himself a wife" (The Gospel of Our Sufferings, p.19). This seems harsh as I pointed out, yet to try and minimize the strictness of what Kierkegaard said is to betray the very spirit of his writings on Christianity, for it was his belief that all too often the demands of Christ have been minimized unwarrantedly or set aside by those who call themselves Christian. On the other hand it must be pointed out that although Kierkegaard seems to suggest, for example, that one cannot at the same time be both married and a follower of Christ, he clarifies his position in the August 30, 1855 issue of "The Instant" where he writes: "I am unable to comprehend how it can occur to any man to unite being a Christian with being married. Note that with this I am

to go the same way as he did, is emphasized both in Training In Christianity and in For Self-Examination, in those passages which refer to Christ as "the way"<sup>1</sup>.

In speaking of following Christ, Kierkegaard indicates that we are to follow Him as "Pattern". Although this is the basic meaning of the passages we have already considered, Kierkegaard is even more specific about this elsewhere, as when his pseudonym Anti-Climacus declares that when Jesus ascended to the Father; His intention was that our race should begin to face the test before it "By living in conformity with the Pattern".<sup>2</sup> It is in Judge For Yourself!, however, that Kierkegaard deals

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not thinking of the case of a man who was already married and had a family, and then at that age became a Christian; no, I mean to say, how one who is unmarried and says he has become a Christian, how it could occur to him to marry" (Kierkegaard's Attack Upon Christendom 1854-1855, p.213). It is unfortunate that following this statement Kierkegaard says he believes the Christian should refrain from marriage so that he will not produce "more lost souls, for of them there are really enough" (p.214). It seems to me he would have been closer to the truth of Christianity if he had said that a person who is unmarried and who becomes a Christian should consider remaining single so that he can devote all his time and energy to the service of God, and thereby avoid the danger of attempting to serve two masters.

<sup>1</sup> Training In Christianity, p.204ff.; and For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!, "For Self-Examination", p.78ff.

<sup>2</sup> Training In Christianity, p.198.

at greatest length with this theme, and part two of Judge For Yourself! is actually entitled "Christ As The Pattern". Here we are encouraged to heed Christ's words about serving only one master. In case we tend to feel that this is an impossible thing to do, Kierkegaard reminds us that we are not to heed common sense which thinks that God's absolute requirements must be changed to suit men.<sup>1</sup> Also, he sets Christ before us as an example of one who did in fact serve only one master. Hence he writes:

Christianity takes the absolute requirement seriously, and though it may be that not a single person has been able to fulfil the requirement - yet One has fulfilled it, fulfilled it absolutely . . .

It is about Him we will speak, about the Pattern. He has said, 'No man can serve two masters' - and His life gave expression to the fact that He served only one master. . .

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<sup>1</sup>In relation to this point, Kierkegaard's prayer at the beginning of his meditation on "Christ As The Pattern" is worth noting. He prays: "O Lord Jesus Christ, it was not to plague us men but to save us that Thou didst say, 'No man can serve two masters' - oh, that we might be willing to accept it, by doing it, that is, by following Thee! Help us all and everyone, Thou who art both willing and able to help, Thou who art both the Redeemer and the Pattern, so that when the striver sinks under the Pattern, then the Redeemer raises him up again, but at the same instant Thou art the Pattern, to keep him continually striving" ( "Judge For Yourself!", p. 161).

'Imitation', 'the following of Christ', this precisely is the point where the human race winces, here it is principally that the difficulty lies, here is where the question really is decided whether one will accept Christianity or not . . .

'Imitation', which answers to 'Christ as the Pattern', must be brought to the fore, applied, recalled to remembrance . . . the Pattern must be brought to the fore, for the sake at least of creating some respect for Christianity, to get it made a little bit evident what it is to be a Christian, to get Christianity transferred from learned discussion and doubt and twaddle (the objective) into the subjective sphere, where it belongs, as surely as the Saviour of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, brought no doctrine into the world and never lectured but as the 'Pattern' required imitation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourselves!, "Judge For Yourselves!", pp.170-171, 197, 200, 216-217.

(A) Willing Suffering In His Likeness

We have seen that for Kierkegaard, in the move to the Christian stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of "following Christ" as "Pattern". Turning now to a discussion of why it is a risk to do this, we find that to follow Christ as Pattern is to will "to suffer in His likeness."<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in my thesis, while discussing the move to the religious stage of existence, I said that commitment with regard to that movement involves the risk of fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God", and that to fulfill an absolute duty toward God is a risk because to do so is "to will suffering". Also, I said that the suffering in question is not the suffering caused by everyday external circumstances such as poverty, parental opposition to one's marriage, competition for the hand of one's love, etc., but rather it is an inward suffering which has both "its origin and expression in the individual himself." It is the kind of suffering which results when a person has died away from immediacy through the annihilation of himself before God, and it is a kind of suffering that persists

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<sup>1</sup>Training In Christianity, pp.172-173.



throughout one's lifetime; it is the essential expression of the God-relationship, and its cessation means the cessation of religious existence.

In considering the suffering involved in the move to the Christian stage of existence, we find that all of what has been said above applies in this case as well. Kierkegaard speaks of the many "frightful inward conflicts and sufferings"<sup>1</sup> experienced by a Christian, and of the fact that such suffering occurs because "to be a Christian means to be in a state of dying (you must die to the world, hate yourself) - and then to live perhaps forty years in this state! [i.e., a lifetime]"<sup>2</sup> Moreover, remarks Kierkegaard, suffering does not stand "in an accidental relationship with being a Christian. No, it is inseparable from it."<sup>3</sup>

If the suffering involved in being a Christian so closely resembles the suffering involved in living at the religious stage of existence, what then is it that distinguishes the two types of suffering? Kierkegaard

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<sup>1</sup>For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourselves!, "Judge For Yourselves!", p.209. The italic is my own.

<sup>2</sup>The Last Years. Journals 1853-1855, pp.347-348. Italics my own.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.255. Italic my own.

deals with this question in several places in his writings, but one of the most direct statements of his view on this matter is found in his Journal under the heading, "Encounter (conflict) with others - the specifically Christian suffering".<sup>1</sup> Here he writes:

The suffering which New Testament Christianity aims at specifically is suffering at the hands of men.

God wishes to be loved - but on the other hand to love God must come to mean that you thereby enter into conflict with men.

The whole suffering of the middle ages is therefore not Christian suffering at all. All the fasting and the like, as something in and for itself, is neither here nor there . . .

No, the conflict man is most reluctant of all to enter into, the conflict with others - not being like the others, having to suffer because by loving God one is not like the others. . . - this conflict, which is the greatest suffering for our animal creation, is the very suffering which Christianity aims at.<sup>2</sup>

And, says Kierkegaard through his pseudonym Anti-Climacus,

<sup>1</sup>The Last Years. Journals 1853-1855, p.339.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.339-340. Elsewhere in his Journal we find Kierkegaard making the same point in very similar words: "Christianity continually aims at . . . suffering at the hands of men. If fasting and so on is the general practice (and therefore honoured by the judgement of men), it is simply not Christian in the stricter sense. No, the

to suffer in this way is to follow Christ as Pattern to the point of being willing "to suffer in His likeness". It is to station oneself or stand beside the cross of Christ, not as an onlooker but rather "in the situation of contemporaneousness, where it will mean actually to incur suffering with Him . . . perhaps to be nailed oneself to a cross alongside of Him".<sup>1</sup>

From the above we can see that for the person who is considering making the move to the Christian stage of existence, risk is involved in "following Christ" as "Pattern", because to do so is to will "to suffer in His likeness", which is to leave oneself open to conflict with others, to suffering at the hands of others, and to martyrdom. As Kierkegaard remarks: "What a risk this is. . . is seen in the life of the God-Man. For it was a life of sheer misery and distress".<sup>2</sup> It may be true that in God's

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characteristic Christian suffering is to suffer at the hands of men. This is connected with the fact that as a consequence of Christianity to love God means to hate the world, or with the fact that in consequence of Christianity there is enmity between God and men" (The Last Years, p.130).

<sup>1</sup> Training In Christianity, p.171.

<sup>2</sup> The Last Years. Journals 1853-1855, p.259.

view the suffering involved in following Christ is the negative sign of that grace which saves one from eternal perdition, but for man in his weak moments<sup>1</sup> "the whole thing is turned round about, and grace becomes that which brings suffering and torment . . . and Christianity . . . is a torture, the greatest possible torture, since being a Christian is the most intense suffering of this life."<sup>2</sup> The Christian may believe that "suffering for a few years in this life is infinite, infinite grace", but the non-Christian believes it is ludicrous to willingly endure "suffering one could be free of if one were not a Christian"<sup>3</sup>. From the viewpoint of the Christian, "following Christ" as "Pattern" by being willing "to suffer in his likeness" is a necessary and therefore acceptable means of moving to the Christian stage of existence, but from the viewpoint of the non-believer such following of Christ is madness and therefore a fearful risk which can result only in catastrophe.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard defines "a weak moment" as "a moment when the eternal is not present to him [i.e., to man]". And, he adds, "when the eternal is not present to him, the temporal becomes important to him" (The Last Years, p.279).

<sup>2</sup>The Last Years. Journals 1853-1855, p.279.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.279.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 258ff.; and For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourselves!, "Judge For Yourselves!", p.198ff.

### (B) The Consciousness of Sin

We have seen thus far in this section that for Kierkegaard, in the move to the Christian stage of existence, commitment involves the risk of "following Christ" as "Pattern", and that this is a risk because to follow Christ as Pattern is to will "to suffer in his likeness". To do this is also a risk because to do so is to experience "the consciousness of sin"<sup>1</sup>. This does not imply that Jesus experienced the consciousness of sin and that those who follow him as Pattern must experience it because he did; rather, it implies that whenever an individual does follow Christ, he will of necessity know himself to be a sinner.<sup>2</sup> As Kierkegaard remarks in his Journal: "The consciousness of sin is and continues to be the conditio sine qua non for all Christianity, and if one could somehow be released from this, he could not be a Christian."<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter three, section two, of my thesis, in discussing the move to the religious stage of existence, I

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<sup>1</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.518; Philosophical Fragments, p.58; Attack Against Christendom, p.58.

<sup>2</sup>This point is elucidated, beginning on page 139.

<sup>3</sup>Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, I, 179.

pointed out that the religious individual experiences "the consciousness of guilt" as the decisive expression for "the pathetic relationship" of a human being to the Eternal. I said that when an individual concedes he is essentially guilty because of the totality of guilt that clings to him at every moment, this opens up the possibility of his entering into relationship with God. Such an individual does not try to minimize the seriousness of his guilt, and he does not try to cast it away by blaming existence for it or by blaming the one who placed him in existence. Instead he recognizes that he is "harnessed with the yoke of guilt" forever - not because of the magnitude of his guilt, but because "one guilt" is enough of a basis on which eternity can pronounce sentence. The individual cannot "make up" for his guilt, and there "is no satisfaction" for it. He may repent of it, but the consciousness of guilt will remain with him, in the form of an "eternal recollection".

Turning now to an examination of "the consciousness of sin", we find that whereas guilt-consciousness is the decisive expression for an individual's pathetic relationship to God, sin-consciousness is for Kierkegaard the expression of an individual's alienation from God. In other words - through guilt-consciousness an individual

may come to the point of realizing he is not living up to the eternal responsibility that is his before God, of repenting of his guilt, and of seeking to fulfill "an absolute duty toward God"; through sin-consciousness, however, an individual recognizes that his shortcoming consists not in failing to live up to his responsibility before God but rather in continually and willfully disobeying God, and that because of this chronic willful disobedience he remains at enmity with God whether or not he seeks to fulfill an absolute duty toward Him. "What we need to emphasize is that the self has the conception of God, and that then it does not will as He wills, and so is disobedient . . . for the Scripture always defines sin as disobedience"<sup>1</sup>, writes Anti-Climacus. He continues:

What determinant is it then that Socrates [representing the religious stage of existence] lacks in determining what sin is? It is will, defiant will. The Greek intellectualism was too happy, too naïve, too aesthetic, too ironical, too witty . . . too sinful to be able to get it into its head that a person knowingly could fail to do the good, or knowingly, with knowledge of what was right, do what was wrong . . . Christianity . . . describing what properly is defiance . . . teaches that a man does wrong

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<sup>1</sup> Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "The Sickness Unto Death", pp.211-212.

although he understands what is right, or forbears to do right although he understands what is right [because he does not will the right]; in short, the Christian doctrine of sin is pure impertinence against man, accusation upon accusation; it is the charge which the Deity as prosecutor takes the liberty of lodging against man.<sup>1</sup>

Having seen that in Kierkegaard's view the recognition of oneself as a willfully disobedient individual, alienated from God because of this disobedience, constitutes sin-consciousness (whereas guilt-consciousness is basically the recognition that one has failed to live up to one's responsibility before God), it has yet to be asked how an individual acquires sin-consciousness. The consciousness of guilt he can acquire by himself. As Louis Dupré points out in his book Kierkegaard As Theologian,

Man discovers a disproportion between his own existence and its transcendent origin. He finds himself guilty before God. In spite of its transcendent term, however, this relation remains essentially immanent. Indeed, man of himself is aware of his negative relationship to transcendence. He feels guilty - before the transcendent, it is true - but still in such a

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "The Sickness Unto Death", pp.220-221, 226.



way that the feeling of guilt arises only from himself.<sup>1</sup>

However, says Climacus in the Postscript, "the individual is unable to acquire Sin-Consciousness by himself, as he can guilt-consciousness"<sup>2</sup>; the consciousness of sin must be revealed to him by "the Deity in time". Writes Kierkegaard: "Luther teaches so correctly that man must be told by a revelation of the full depth of sin in which he lies, and that the anguished conscience is not something that comes naturally, like hunger".<sup>3</sup>

There is one more point that remains to be made concerning "the consciousness of sin" and the way it differs from "the consciousness of guilt". We said earlier that according to Kierkegaard there is "no satisfaction" for guilt and that guilt-consciousness must forever remain with the religious individual in the form of an "eternal recollection". In the case of sin-consciousness, however, although the Christian remains aware of the

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Dupré, Kierkegaard As Theologian: The Dialectic of Christian Existence

<sup>2</sup>Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p.517.

<sup>3</sup>As translated from the Journal (VII A 192), by Louis Dupré in Kierkegaard As Theologian, pp.78-79. Kierkegaard makes this same point in The Sickness Unto Death where Anti-Climacus claims that "there has to be a revelation from God to enlighten man as to what sin is and how deep it lies" (p.226).

presence of sin in his life, he is also aware of the forgiveness of his sin through the atonement of Christ. "And" comments L. L. Miller in In Search of the Self, "a forgiven sinner is something different from a guilt-conscious idealist."<sup>1</sup> According to Kierkegaard, in other words, the religious individual cannot get rid of "the consciousness of guilt", but of the Christian it can be said that Christ "takes away the consciousness of sin and gives instead a consciousness of pardon"<sup>2</sup>.

If it is the case that sin-consciousness can be taken away by Christ, and replaced with "a consciousness of pardon", why then is it a risk to experience "the consciousness of sin" by "following Christ" as "Pattern"? In answer to this question it must be pointed out that the "consciousness of pardon" of which Kierkegaard speaks, is in his view the result of faith alone. He contends that both the consciousness of oneself as a willfully

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<sup>1</sup>In Search of the Self, p.215.

<sup>2</sup>The Gospel Of Our Sufferings, p.44. Kierkegaard goes on to say that although the Christian's sins are forgiven so that "a consciousness of pardon" replaces "the consciousness of sin", he does not thereby forget that he has been forgiven his sins. "The light-hearted would allow all to be forgotten - he believes in vain. The mournful heart would allow nothing to be forgotten - he believes in vain. . . But Faith says: All is forgotten; remember that it has been forgiven . . . And so the believer himself must not forget, but on the contrary must constantly remind himself that all has been forgiven him" (p.45).

disobedient sinner alienated from God, and the consciousness of oneself as a forgiven sinner, are experienced only by the person who in faith believes God's revelation. "The whole of Christianity hinges upon this," writes Anti-Climacus, "that it must be believed, not comprehended, that it either must be believed or one must be offended at it".<sup>1</sup> The unbeliever is offended, first of all because he does not see himself as a sinner in need of forgiveness, and secondly because he does not comprehend how he could be forgiven if he were in fact the defiant sinner revelation makes him out to be. He considers it a risk to follow Christ as Pattern and thereby experience the heaviest of all burdens<sup>2</sup> (i.e., the consciousness of sin), when to do this is to act on the basis of belief in a paradox; for as Anti-Climacus points out,

First Christianity goes ahead and establishes sin so securely as a position that the human understanding never can comprehend it; and then it . . . in turn undertakes to do away

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, "The Sickness Unto Death", p.229.

<sup>2</sup>The Gospel Of Our Sufferings, p.44.

with this position so completely that the human understanding never can comprehend it . . . Christianity . . . is in this case . . . as paradoxical as possible; it works directly against itself when it establishes sin so securely as a position that it seems a perfect impossibility to do away with it again - and then it is precisely Christianity which, by the atonement, would do away with it so completely that it is as though drowned in the sea.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death,  
"The Sickness Unto Death", p.231.

## CONCLUSION

It has been my contention in the preceding pages, that an examination of the attempt to describe how an individual moves to the various stages of existence in life, discloses the meaning of commitment as it is set forth in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. We have seen that for Kierkegaard commitment involves the risks of belief and action present in the move from one stage of existence to another. Specifically my thesis has been: that in the move from the aesthetic stage of existence to the ethical stage, implicit in Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment is the risk of believing there is "a norm" outside oneself which prescribes what one must do, and the risk of humbling oneself under "the ethical task"; that in the move to the religious stage of existence, implicit in Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment is the risk of believing with "the passion of the infinite" that there is a God, and the risk of fulfilling "an absolute duty toward God"; that in the move to the Christian stage of existence, implicit in Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment is the risk of believing that "God has existed in human form", and the risk of "following Christ" as "Pattern".

In explicating the above thesis, I have shown: that to believe there is a norm outside oneself which

prescribes what one must do is a risk, because to believe this is to believe on the basis of "a beautiful notion", and to venture one's view that "life is...meaningless"; that to humble oneself under the ethical task is a risk, because to do so is to will "despair", and to experience the "consciousness" of "duty"; that to believe with the passion of the infinite that there is a God is a risk, because to believe this is to believe on the basis of "objective uncertainty", and to "venture everything"; that to fulfill an absolute duty toward God is a risk, because to do so is to "will suffering", and to experience "the consciousness of guilt"; that to believe God has existed in human form is a risk, because to believe this is to believe on the basis of "testimony", and to venture one's "thought"; that to follow Christ as Pattern is a risk, because to do so is to "suffer in His likeness", and to experience "the consciousness of sin".

In concluding my thesis, I propose to discuss the relevance for today's world of Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment. With regard to this, I would suggest that never before in the world's history has the search for a purpose for living so characterized the strivings of mankind. Men have always sought to find a purpose for living, but in times past the opportunities afforded them whereby

they themselves might choose their own purpose were severely limited by the particular cultures in which they lived. Because of the prevalence of social sanctions imposed by established cultural traditions, it really cannot be said of the majority of human beings who have inhabited this planet that they actually have engaged in a search for a purpose for living; it is more correct to say that they have tended to accept the purpose handed down to them by others. Today, however, this is no longer the case. The situation has changed because of vastly improved means of transportation and communication, and because of a weakening of traditional forms of authority, eg., family, religion, etc. Today people are not only less bound by the tradition in which they have been raised, but they are also more conscious of the fact that there are many other traditions which present themselves as sources of purposeful living. In a situation such as this, people are less likely to accept passively a purpose for living chosen for them by others, and more likely to seek consciously a purpose satisfactory to themselves. This being the case, modern man has concerned himself with the notion of commitment. Even when he does not employ

the word "commitment", his language nonetheless implies that he is conscious of having committed himself to a life-style which for him is purposeful.

It must be pointed out, however, that just because people today are relatively free with respect to the choice they make concerning what their life-style will be, this does not automatically ensure that they will be happier people. Disillusionment with one's life-style often occurs when one finds that it has not provided a satisfactory sense of purpose for one's life. Hence the individual again begins his search for a purpose for living, and makes a new commitment when he believes he finally has been successful in his quest. From this it can be seen that the pursuit of a purpose for living, and the emphasis on commitment which is so prevalent today, can easily create an atmosphere of unrest and confusion in the world. This atmosphere of unrest is accentuated by the fact that even the established cultural traditions, in which men formerly sought purpose through commitment, partake in the confusion of our day. Numerous people in the highest echelons of church and state, for example, are themselves unconvinced that traditional institutions can serve any longer as objects



of loyalty capable of providing individuals with a sense of purpose for their lives.

The tragic result of the situation we have been describing is that many individuals wander here and there in today's world, seeking a satisfactory purpose for living but never finding one in spite of their endless migration from one commitment to another. Herein we see the relevance for today of Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment. Kierkegaard would oppose any suggestion that what has been said above about modern man's hectic movement from one commitment to another invalidates the notion of commitment; the fact that today there are so many people who constantly transfer their allegiance from one set of loyalties to another without ever finding a real sense of purpose in life, simply brings to light the importance of a person's making the right commitment. And what is the right commitment? According to Kierkegaard it is that commitment which ties the individual not to a tradition but to Jesus Christ, and thereby lifts the individual above unrest, confusion and purposelessness, to "joy unspeakable".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A precursory reading of Kierkegaard could give one the impression that for him Christianity is a joyless thing. To correct this possible misinterpretation of his writings, one need only examine works like The Gospel Of Our Sufferings, Christian Discourses (especially the section on "Joyful Notes In The Strife Of Suffering"), and numerous journal entries such as the following: "Christian-

Pursuing Kierkegaard's line of thought, I would suggest that much of the psychological turmoil, the uneasiness, and the tension which afflicts men today, is the result of man's refusal to move to the higher levels of existence in life. Modern man, in general, lives for enjoyment and without God. Through defying and denying God he has become separated from his creator, and is inwardly tormented because of this. Although he may seek to lift himself out of his unsatisfactory predicament by means of commitment to this or that cultural tradition, or to more individualistic modes of life, he finds that he is unable to overcome his bad conscience and inner turmoil. The solution to his problem lies not in migrating haphazardly from one commitment to another, however; the answer lies in rising by means of commitment to higher

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ity has a bigger fight than every conflict fought in the world, but if you have seen the army enthused at the moment of attack by the Field-Marshal's words, how shall not the Christian be influenced by his Field-Marshal's cry, 'If God be for us, who shall be against us?' Ought not the Christian to rejoice under a Commander who himself has conquered the enemy; to fight where the victory is sure and the reward eternity? Christianity has its peace, a peace which has overcome the world. And Christianity has its joy; not a joy which is concealed at the bottom of the cup of intoxication, but which smilingly advances to meet us from the bottom of the cup of bitterness, and which shines more clear as the cup becomes more bitter" [translated from the Papirer, IIA, 365, by T. H. Croxall in his Kierkegaard Commentary (London: James Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1956), p.214].

levels of existence, arriving finally at that state of reconciliation with God which characterizes Christian existence.

In our discussion of the relevance for today of Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment, we have seen that for Kierkegaard commitment is the means whereby man can find purpose in life and freedom from the unrest and confusion around him. The answer to man's psychological turmoil, uneasiness, and bad conscience, is not to be found in commitments made at the lower stages of existence, but is to be found in ascending by means of commitment to that stage where one finds reconciliation with God and unspeakable joy. To ascend to the Christian stage of existence involves a great deal of risk, as we have seen, and it is possible that modern man may not be willing to take the risks involved in commitment to Jesus Christ. Living as he so often does, for enjoyment and without God, modern man tends to regard Christian existence with its cross of suffering and absolute dependence on God, as madness. On the other hand, he who through commitment has moved to the Christian stage of existence, knows through faith that "In life there is one blessed joy: to follow Christ; and in death there is one final blessed joy: to follow Christ into Life!"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Gospel Of Our Sufferings, p.26.

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