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Kierkegaard

I did not write this note because I love Soren Kierkegaard. I do like Kierkegaard and I have little against him but he is not a central figure in my thought. I wrote this note because I referred to him in another note and doing so brought up a point that I want to clarify.

Kierkegaard wants people to stop being wishy-washy and instead to commit, and to commit to Jesus as Kierkegaard saw Jesus. Kierkegaard saw Jesus much like the traditional orthodox view of Jesus of old line Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Lutheran. Kierkegaard wanted people to face Jesus and to decide about him “whole hog” one way or the other, be honest about their commitment, and to live accordingly. What people really commit to is visible in their lives more than in their words, and that is what Kierkegaard wanted people to see and to face. You can only see it and face it if you confront Jesus and his teachings as Kierkegaard understood Jesus and his teachings. I want the same commitment but to the teachings of Jesus rather than to the person of Jesus. Kierkegaard and I differ on what we want people to commit to.

Existentialism took much from the form of Kierkegaard’s thinking but took nothing about Jesus. Existentialism betrayed Kierkegaard somewhat but Existentialism shows what happens if we extend Kierkegaard’s logical framework without coming to grips with what to commit to. Existentialism took up the general form of Kierkegaard by saying commitment was the important thing, not specifically what you commit to. Whatever you commit to, you thereby make a world, and you are responsible for that world. You are responsible for acting consistently and genuinely in that world. Even people who don’t think they commit do commit and do thereby make worlds. You can commit to almost anything as long as it can be the basis for your world. You should see what you really commit to (your real values), accept, be consistent in your commitment, and be consistent in your show of yourself as committed to those values. Your values do not have to be absolutely consistent but they do have to be consistent enough so that they can form the basis for a world and for your identity and life in the world. You can be a spy and so lie to one set of people but you cannot lie to yourself and you cannot lie to all others. People who don’t accept true commitments and don’t live consistently with their true commitments usually live horrible lives in horrible worlds.

Unlike Existentialism, I think it is important what we commit to. Commitment, consistency, and not being phony are not enough. Building a consistent world out of commitment alone is not enough.

It helps to know why Kierkegaard wanted people to commit and to be consistent. He reacted against features of modern life that still annoy us. First, people claimed to be Christians but did little that Jesus would recognize as his teachings. Christians did not help other people directly. They did not even give alms much. Once a week they went to church where they sang a few songs and sat through a non-

threatening sermon that mostly made them feel good about their lives. They supposedly worshipped but in fact they reinforced their social and business connections, and they reinforced the general socio-economic-political-power order. Even though this kind of activity is common in religions it should not be the main focus of Christianity. Second, at the time (about 1820), relativism had begun to run rampant. I don't go into details. Relativism said right and wrong are fuzzy, so you can do what you wish, and that will be moral enough. It was, and still is, an excuse. Relativism allowed inconsistency, bad commitment, and hypocrisy. It allowed people to say they commit to one thing but to really commit to another and to run their lives on the basis of their secret commitment rather than their public commitment. The form for relativism at that time was Romanticism and Hegelianism. That likely is still the dominant ideological form today even when people have never heard of Romanticism or Hegel. Kierkegaard wanted to shock people out of complacency and to make them commit either to accepting genuine traditional Jesus or to rejecting him.

People who claim to be Christians but actually put other goals ahead, such as success, do choose and do make lives based on their true choices - but they do not choose Jesus and they do not make Christian lives. I said elsewhere that the people who stress power, art, wealth, success, family, honor, Church, the nation, or even ideas in science, actually raise those ideas-worlds-and-ways-of-life to the supernatural and worship them. People who claim to be Christians but use other beliefs as the real basis for their lives worship those other beliefs but claim to worship God, and so must be fragmented, suffer decay in their souls, and must hurt other people and hurt nature.

Existentialists say people who claim to live on one basis but really live on another basis have "false consciousness". They are poseurs, phonies. They feel bad about themselves and spread bad feelings to other people. People who feel bad about themselves often abuse nature too. Existentialists learned about consistent, good feelings, and bad feelings from Kierkegaard and from deep psychologists such as Sigmund Freud. Kierkegaard was amazingly perceptive about false consciousness and what happens when a person says he-she lives on one basis but really lives on another. It makes you "sick unto death". It condemns you not to have a really human life. Existentialists used Kierkegaard to show the sickness and the effects of the sickness. A famous study is Jean-Paul Sartre's "Anti-Semite and Jew".

So far, so good. I agree with Kierkegaard and even with Existentialists to a large extent.

I think Kierkegaard would see what Existentialists seek but disagree by saying commitment and living your life according to your commitment, alone, even if you are genuine and consistent, are not enough. He would see that life as another evasion, as another path to relativism, self-indulgence, and to self-contradiction and a bad mind. He is right. What matters to Kierkegaard is not commitment as such alone but deciding and committing about the orthodox view of Jesus and about the life that implies. Only if you come to grips with Jesus as Kierkegaard saw Jesus can you say you have made a real choice and real commitment. Only then can you build a real life.

In the Existentialist view, if a person is genuine and reasonably consistent, then it does not matter what the person commits to, and a person can even commit to what we think of as bad lifestyles and bad

ideologies. Sartre wrote a book called "Saint Genet" that extolled the life of Jean Genet, a petty thief and petty homosexual (at the time, (passive) homosexuality was disgusting), because Genet accepted who he was and was supposedly consistent. Existentialists tended to commend Marxism because it was committed and consistent. Yet Existentialists condemned some lifestyles as false even though those lifestyles seem as committed and consistent as petty thievery and Marxism. They condemned fascism, middle class bourgeoisie, and traditional religious lives. Existentialists were right about fascism but not about decent middle class people and religious people. Today, people still mindlessly condemn simple decent people while extolling the rebel Lefty or rebel Righty with all their contradictions and pettiness. There is no reason within Existentialism for this distinction. Existentialists necessarily imported, usually secretly and so falsely, dogmas, so as to condemn what they didn't like and extol what they did like. They did not go by commitment and consistency alone. If you use values, you might as well be honest about what you use and reject, and why.

I think Kierkegaard foresaw the Existentialist error and wished to forestall it by being clear about what we have to decide and commit to. Kierkegaard wanted people to commit to his view of Christianity, or more exactly, to the view of Christianity long upheld by the Church, the Bible, and Tradition. Decide if Jesus is God or not. Decide if God became human or not. Decide why Jesus was murdered. Decide what his death means. Decide if Jesus was Resurrected. Decide what his Resurrection means. Decide what values he taught and lived by. Decide how his life, death, and Resurrection save you and save other people. Decide who those other saved people are and-or might be. Decide if your church follows Jesus. Decide if your church helps people who want to follow Jesus or enables people who want merely comforting reassurance, relativism, and means to worldly success. Decide what kind of church best goes along with Jesus. Decide not only for your church but for other churches, especially those churches that prevail in your society.

I don't care about Christian orthodoxy anymore than I care about orthodoxy in any other religion or than I care about fads in academia, politics, art, or pop culture. I don't think people need to decide about Jesus as God and about how his Life, Death, and Resurrection Save in order to follow his teachings and be good people in the eyes of God. I care that people really do act on Jesus' teachings. So I care that people face the teachings and face what they require us to do. I care that people examine their own religions to find if their religions can lead them to live up to the teachings of Jesus. I care about simple decency. I care about Western political values, ideas such as of persons, freedom, responsibility, the rule of law, "applies equally", and justice. I care about science. I care that atheists face the metaphysics in their moral commitment. I want people to face all this and decide. Is all this right or not? What should you do? What can you do? What will you do?

Once you know these issues, if you don't face these issues, decide these issues, and commit, then you will lead a poor life. Likely you will end up a burden on people who have confronted and decided, and you will hurt the world more than help.

It helps to think about Jesus as God, and how his life, death, and Resurrection save people, but it is not necessary to decide those issues to follow the teachings of Jesus and good Western values.

I think Kierkegaard would sympathize with my view but he would see it as too close to relativism, as too much of an excuse not to confront the divine in Jesus. If we don't decide about Jesus as God, his Life, Death, and Resurrection, and our Salvation, in traditional Christian terms, then we evade exactly what needs deciding. We cannot be authentic followers of Jesus without deciding those issues on the basis given by the traditional Church. If we don't decide those issues on that basis first, then likely we can't decide the issues that I want people to decide. If you do not decide about Jesus as God then you cannot follow his teachings and you cannot follow Western values. If I do not force people to decide about the core Christian message, I am wishy-washy and merely relativistic. If I do not force other religions to decide, I am wishy-washy and merely relativistic.

Of course, I disagree with Kierkegaard.

I disagree with Existentialists because I think we can't make up whatever values we wish, no matter how consistent and no matter how effective. All Existentialists that I have read actually have some version of dominant Western values, including the ideals of Jesus, although their use of those values in particular situations sometimes varies from me. That is part of the secret appeal of Existentialism. It lets people secretly believe in the long-standing widely-accepted true values of Christianity and the West while they reject social hypocrisy and church hypocrisy. That is quite an appeal. Consistency alone does not make a set of values livable, able to create a good defensible world. Existentialists are like modern people who have been shaken awake by science, atheism, pop philosophy, superficial study of religion, religious fanaticism, or pop culture. They see that their own values don't go along with the superficial versions of traditional values and the dominant values of society, and they think they can make up their own values. Existentialists and modern people who make up values don't see that values imply the supernatural. They don't see how much their values depend on the traditional values of Jesus and the West. They don't see implications of the facts that their values rely on Jesus and the West and their values imply the supernatural.

You decide between me, Kierkegaard, and Existentialism. You figure out what you have to decide about Jesus and the West, and then decide.

(Irrelevant notes primarily to show off: Kierkegaard would have disliked Existentialism and would have seen it as another devious way to bring in modern relativism, which, of course, it is. Existentialism sounds like it is highly committed and logically rigorous but it is not. Existentialism raises the ideas of genuine and phony to archetypes but avoids the issues of genuine about what, phony about what, and phony in what ways. By not raising those issues, Existentialism invites bad relativism, and that is how it often was used. Existentialism makes heroes of people that we should not admire. That too invites bad relativism. Existentialism did help us see the humanity of formerly marginalized people such as gays, Blacks, women, nerds, and refugees; and, for that, I thank it. When we do see their humanity, we see it in terms that Jesus and the West gave us. I hope we would have gotten to that appreciation any way sooner or later. Existentialism does allow us good ways to critique social hypocrisy and phony values, but, so what else is new? We can scorn the hypocrites who condemn the hero of Albert Camus' "The

Stranger” but that does not mean we should see the Stranger as a deep hero. We have to come to grips with what is good and bad about the Stranger as much as we have to come to grips with what is good and bad about the phony society that condemns him. For that, we need standards beyond Existential consistency. I think Kierkegaard would have seen all this.

Some streams of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism took forms of thought from Kierkegaard also without quite getting the full message. The ideas of “me and Jesus”, “being saved in one big realization of God and Jesus”, and “committing to Jesus”, all have some roots in Kierkegaard. Again, it seems to me what is most important about those movements is the ardor rather than the content, and that stress definitely is not what Kierkegaard would want. Just because you can tell stories, in a loud voice, about meeting Jesus does not mean you met the god-man that Kierkegaard had in mind. Kierkegaard likely would be surprised at the Roman Catholics who took up attitudes similar to his.)