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Kierkegaard as Spiritual Writer

Books about Kierkegaard frequently open with a survey of his life. A number of reasons might account for this development, not least the fact that Kierkegaard's biography contains drama worthy of Shakespeare. There are family secrets, unhappy love affairs, and public scandals, just to mention a few elements of his story. Moreover, Kierkegaard himself writes pointedly of these events, pouring over them in his journals and papers, but also alluding to them in his published writings. In this way, he not only leaves a great deal of material for his biographers, but also helps determine how they arrange and interpret his story.

To be sure, it is no accident that most versions of Kierkegaard's life focus on four issues: his complicated relationship with his father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard (1756–1838); his love for—and breakup with—his fiancée, Regine Olsen; his public dispute with *The Corsair*, a satirical Copenhagen paper; and his infamous “attack” on Denmark's state church. These are what might be termed the “crescendos” of Kierkegaard's life, and he himself certainly calls attention to them. And yet, even as musical crescendos are but conspicuous points within a larger and more varied composition, so are the crescendos of Kierkegaard's life prominent outgrowths of a

larger and more subtle story. That is not to deny, of course, the importance of these biographical highpoints. Rather, it is to recall that they belong to a broader context, which deserves to be studied in its own right.

Such is the case with Kierkegaard's spiritual background. As will be seen, Kierkegaard came from a pious home, where devotion to God was encouraged as much as sin was discouraged, and this rearing influenced him throughout his life. As he puts it in an 1848 journal entry: "What I know [of Christianity] is not to my credit but is actually due to my father's upbringing."⁹ M. P. Kierkegaard had a background in and an affinity for the spirituality associated with Pietism, and this connection—in addition to its impact on his youngest son—will be considered below. Strangely, however, biographies of Kierkegaard tend to neglect this aspect of his story. For example, the Pietist movement receives limited attention in Alastair Hannay's *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, so much so that "Pietism" is not even listed in the index.¹⁰ Nor does the term figure into Joakim Garff's *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*.¹¹ To be fair, both works do mention the Moravian Congregation of Brothers, a Pietist group with which the Kierkegaard family was affiliated. But Garff only devotes two paragraphs to the subject¹²—a small number for a book that runs more than eight hundred pages—and Hannay's treatment is similarly brief.¹³ Shorter "sketches" of Kierkegaard's life are not much different. In his recent *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, C. Stephen Evans touches on Kierkegaard's familiarity with "evangelical pietism,"¹⁴ but

9. SKS 21, NB 6:89 / JP 6, 6243.

10. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

11. Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

12. *Ibid.*, 11.

13. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 37.

14. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

embeds this reference in a larger discussion about M. P. Kierkegaard's personal failings. The topic does not turn up again.

One could speculate about why Kierkegaard's Pietist background seems to be of marginal interest to biographers, but such a discussion exceeds the scope and interest of this work. What *is* needed, however, is an exploration of Kierkegaard's links to the Christian spiritual tradition. This will not be an exhaustive discussion,¹⁵ but, at its conclusion, Kierkegaard's emergence as a spiritual writer in his own right should no longer seem accidental.

Kierkegaard's Spiritual Background

As alluded to above, Kierkegaard's particular spiritual vision grew out of contact with Pietist—and, by association, Catholic¹⁶—sources. "Pietism" can be defined as a devotional movement that developed within Lutheranism toward the end of the sixteenth century and spread to other Protestant denominations throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Given its breadth, it is unsuitable to talk of Pietism as if it were a unified development. However, in all of its manifestations, Pietism sought to promote holiness—the fulfillment of Christian life and activity—in the church as well as in the world. This purpose was thought urgent on account of the various troubles

15. However, as noted in the Preface, I have dealt with this issue in depth elsewhere. See, for example, Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

16. At the same time, Kierkegaard's connection to Catholicism cannot be *reduced* to the influence of Pietism. On the contrary, Kierkegaard had a multifaceted interest in Catholic authors and ideas, from Augustine's stress on resting in God (as will be discussed in Chapter Two) to the spiritual insights of Alphonsus de Liguori. On the latter point, see Cornelio Fabro, "Influssi Cattolici Sulla Spiritualità Kierkegaardiana," *Humanitas* 17 (1962): 501-07. For broader considerations of Kierkegaard's connection to Catholicism, see Jack Mulder, Jr., *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition: Conflict and Dialogue* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), as well as my "Catholicism," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Absolute to Church*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

afflicting post-Reformation Europe, from theological division to political strife to plague.

Wherever they were found, Pietists were recognized for their emphasis on devout habits and practices. Among other things, they wrote hymns, founded schools, formed charitable organizations, coordinated Bible studies and prayer groups, sought ecumenical dialogue, encouraged moral renewal, and popularized numerous edificatory writings. John Wesley (1703–1791)—the founder of Methodism, an English incarnation of the Pietist movement—once recounted a “common way of living” among Methodist missionaries:

From four in the morning till five each of us used private prayer. From five to seven we read the Bible together. At seven we breakfasted. At eight was the public service. From nine to twelve I learned German, Mr. Delamotte, Greek; my brother wrote sermons, and Mr. Ingham instructed the children. At twelve we met together. About one we dined. The time from dinner to four we spent in reading. . . . At four were the Evening Prayers, when either the Second Lesson was explained (as it always was in the morning), or the children were catechized and instructed before the congregation. From five to six we again used private prayer.¹⁷

Such piety attracted praise, but more than a little disparagement also followed. One critic snickered that the name of Wesley’s group “was first given to a few persons who were so uncommonly *methodical* as to keep a diary of the most trivial actions of their lives, as how many slices of bread and butter they ate . . .”¹⁸ Similarly, the general label “Pietism” first achieved currency in the 1680s, serving largely as a term of abuse until the German Pietist, Philipp Jakob Spener

17. John Wesley, “A Short History of the People Called Methodists,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 9:428.

18. Quoted in John Wesley, “A Second Letter to the Rev. Dr. Free,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 9:324.

(1635–1705), embraced it as denoting one “who studies God’s Word/ And also leads a holy life according to it.”¹⁹

Though its practical emphases could (and did) slip into mere social activism, Pietism originated first and foremost as a spiritual movement—that is to say, as a movement of *inner* renewal, which took its direction from some of Catholicism’s great mystics.²⁰ This,

19. Quoted in Carter Lindberg, introduction to *The Pietist Theologians*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 3.

20. Here, and elsewhere in this text, words such as “mystic” and “mystical” are used in general fashion, indicating, for example, persons who seek to relate to divine mystery or treatises that strive to facilitate such a relationship. Understood in these terms, the difference between a spiritual work and a mystical one is negligible. Still, it must be said that the mystical has often been associated with unusual and privileged experiences of the divine, despite the fact that a number of so-called “mystics” have questioned the nature of such experiences or, at least, the ability of human words to articulate them. For that reason, I prefer the broader and more contemporary language of “spirituality,” though, at times, I draw on the vocabulary of mysticism, particularly where it is historically appropriate to do so. This usage, however, should neither be confused with a systematic appraisal of the questions surrounding “mysticism,” nor with an assumption that such questions have been settled. For a précis of this complicated issue, see Alistair McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 5–7.

Incidentally, the extent to which Kierkegaard might be considered a “mystic” (in the strong, experiential sense mentioned above) is an interesting problem. In a well-known journal entry—dated May 19, 1838 and timed precisely as 10.30 a.m.—Kierkegaard writes of “an indescribable joy,” “a heavenly refrain,” that “glows all through” the believer (SKS 17, DD:113 / JP 5, 5324). Some commentators have associated this passage with a proper mystical experience (see, for example, Jean Wahl, “Kierkegaard et le Mysticisme,” *Hermès* 1 [1930]: 16–23), while Joakim Garff has wondered if the whole thing was made up, a poetic musing and nothing more (Garff, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, 128). Lending credence to the latter standpoint is the fact that Kierkegaard, writing as Assessor Wilhelm in *Either/Or*, is actually critical of “mysticism” (SKS 3, 237 / EO2, 248). On the other hand, as this study will make clear, and as I (and others) have noted elsewhere, Kierkegaard had a great affinity for spiritual literature, much of which could be deemed “mystical” on some level. What can be deduced from this incongruity? Putting off to the side the status of Kierkegaard’s *own* religious experiences, which obviously remain unknowable to others, it seems safe to say that he *cautiously* appropriates mystical concepts and themes. That is to say, though he does not place great emphasis on mystical experience per se—and, via the Assessor, indicates the trouble with the single-minded pursuit of such experiences—he borrows notions such as “detachment” from mystical writers and incorporates them into his spirituality, which, at any rate, is not meant to appeal to isolated hermits but, rather, to those seeking faith amid the ambiguity of modern life. As Peter Šajda writes, “[T]he medieval mystics are part of a broader paradigm of practical Christian spirituality, which served Kierkegaard as a counterpoint to contemporary Christendom, which rid itself of essential emphases common in older traditions” (“Kierkegaard’s Encounter with Rhineland-Flemish Mystics: A Case Study,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2009: Kierkegaard’s Concept of Irony*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and K. Brian Söderquist [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009], 584). This is the sort of spirituality that will be investigated in what follows.

indeed, was the main intention of the so-called “father of Pietism,” Johann Arndt (1555–1621). A Lutheran pastor, Arndt concluded that the greatest problem facing the still new Protestant impulse was a disregard for the individual’s vocation to holiness. Persons *are* saved by faith, he acknowledged, but faith is supposed to issue in a converted heart and in a consecrated life. Claiming the former in the absence of the latter is, to borrow a phrase used by Dietrich Bonhoeffer centuries later, a cheapening of grace.

In order to get this message across, Arndt boldly began to publish the writings of Catholic mystics—particularly those of Johannes Tauler (1300–1361) and Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471). He also composed his own spiritual treatise, *True Christianity*, which explicitly drew on the mystical tradition. Unsurprisingly, this approach garnered a great deal of criticism from certain Protestant quarters. However, Arndt maintained that these Catholic authors offered insights crucial to the full flowering of faith. Why? First and foremost, Arndt lauded their Christ-centered spirituality. For him, they did not understand faith as a mere cognitive assent to Christian teaching but, rather, stressed that true faith also sees Christ as the “example, mirror and rule for life.”²¹ Second, and following on from the previous point, Arndt called attention to the mystics’ identification of Christlikeness with a detachment from, or a denial of, inordinate worldly pleasures and things. This emphasis led to a third point, also endorsed by Arndt: the person of faith neither can nor should try to achieve a likeness to Christ through self-will or through self-mastery. On the contrary, faith’s most basic detachment is from the person’s false belief in his own power. When, through faith, one comes to see that one is “nothing,”²² the internal activity of God will bring one to holiness and, with it, to Christlikeness.

21. Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter C. Erb (New York: Paulist, 1979), 39.

22. *Ibid.*, 208.

These mystical principles—which by no means can be limited to Tauler and Thomas à Kempis, but, in one form or another, traverse Catholic spirituality—were bequeathed by Arndt to his Pietist heirs. That, in fact, is how Kierkegaard came into contact with them. M. P. Kierkegaard grew up on Denmark’s windswept Jutland peninsula—a rustic area, which had seen an influx of Pietist clergy and groups during the first half of the eighteenth century. There, far from the increasingly secular capital city of Copenhagen, M. P. Kierkegaard was schooled in Pietist spirituality, with its emphases on self-denial and the imitation of Christ. As a youth, financial circumstances forced him to leave home in search of a better life in Copenhagen. He took up with his uncle and, through a combination of hard work and good fortune, eventually became one of the wealthiest businessmen in Copenhagen. Yet, he never separated from his Pietist connections and, as a result, his humble beginnings.

During the latter years of the eighteenth century and the first few decades of the nineteenth, Pietism emerged as a bastion for an “authentic” form of Christianity, which held fast to traditional Christian doctrines over against the rationalistic modifications of the Enlightenment. In Copenhagen, a small but vocal collection of state church priests embraced the Pietist cause. However, it was the local Moravian society that most prominently advanced this effort. M. P. Kierkegaard, for his part, immersed himself in both of these Pietist channels, attending churches with Pietist-minded clergy, while also participating in the Moravian community. Not only did he frequent its Sunday evening worship services, but he even served on the society’s governing board. These close ties were maintained until his death. Copenhagen’s Moravian leader, Johann Matthiesen, later remembered him as a “faithful brother in the true sense of the word,” who approached the society’s affairs “with particular love.”²³

Not surprisingly, M. P. Kierkegaard's children were also a part of the Moravian community. They attended the Moravian meetings with their father, and they were introduced to Pietist ideas and literature. To be sure, a number of Søren Kierkegaard's habits and interests can be traced back to his relationship with Pietism. In a narrow sense, for example, there is Kierkegaard's fondness for many of the classic writings of the Pietist tradition—a tradition that, as mentioned, stretches back to medieval Catholicism. A survey of Kierkegaard's library holdings reveals this affinity. Works by Tauler, Thomas à Kempis, Arndt, and even Wesley appear. But those are just the more prominent names. Numerous other authors with connections to Pietism also turn up, from Catholics such as Henry Suso and François Fénelon to Protestants such as Gerhard Tersteegen and Hans Adolph Brorson. This wide selection of spiritual literature is one of the distinguishing aspects of Kierkegaard's library.

Equally noteworthy, however, are Kierkegaard's frequent references and allusions to these writings, particularly in his journals and papers. Time and again he invokes the above writers as spiritual masters, whose insight and wisdom are steady guides amid the tumult of life. They belong, he notes, to an "older"²⁴ time, when the true exigencies of Christian existence—namely, constant growth in the spiritual life, with an eye to Christ as one's pattern—prevailed over the self-serving interests of careerist churchmen and professional thinkers. For him, to turn to the Pietist literary tradition is to be encouraged and strengthened, rather than dispirited and enervated. Kierkegaard's preferred word for this process is "upbuilt." Thus he writes in 1848, "I am currently reading [Tauler] for upbuilding

23. Quoted in Kaj Baagø, *Vækkelse og Kirkeliv i København og Omegn* (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1960), 21. All translations from foreign-language titles are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

24. See, for instance, SKS 8, 206 / UDVS, 102 and SKS 23, NB 18:39 / JP 4, 4926.

[*Opbyggelse*],”²⁵ and he refers to Arndt’s *True Christianity* as an “upbuilding writing [*Opbyggelsesskrift*].”²⁶

Indeed, the second, broader influence that Pietism had on Kierkegaard was the concept of “upbuilding” itself. It is a notion whose spiritual implications go back to the Bible, as when Paul tells the Corinthians that his apostolic mission is “for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Cor. 13:10).²⁷ This sort of usage, of course, is borrowed from the word’s literal sense, which has to do with the practice of putting something together for the sake of a desired end. As a building is “built up” from a variety of pieces into a cohesive structure, so, Paul implies, can a person (or group) be “built up” from a state of fragmentation to one of unity. Thus the term not only bears connotations of improvement, but also of completion, fulfillment.

As has been seen, Kierkegaard recognized that the upshot of the Pietist literary tradition was spiritual upbuilding. Yet, from an early age, he also would have encountered the idea of “upbuilding” at Copenhagen’s Moravian society. The society attributed its significant popularity during the first few decades of the nineteenth century to the city’s need for, and the Moravians’ provision of, spiritual edification. As Johannes Christian Reuss—Copenhagen’s Moravian leader from 1815 to 1835—once put it, “[T]he greatest number come Sunday after Sunday, so there is surely no doubting that they seek and find upbuilding [*opbyggelse*], which one then also hears many remarks about.”²⁸ The lone extant fragment of Reuss’s Sunday evening talks reveals that, for him, spiritual upbuilding results from a humble openness to Christ’s mercy and grace. Sin may impede the person’s growth in holiness, but it does not have the last word. As Reuss explains, “Our Savior takes pity on us, he knows our hearts, knows

25. SKS 20, NB 4:102 / JP 2, 1844, my translation.

26. SKS 8, 206 / UDVS, 102. Also see SKS 23, NB 18:39 / JP 4, 4926.

27. All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

28. Quoted in Baagø, *Vækkelse og Kirkeliv*, 23.

our sinfulness, knows how we need help, comfort, strength and encouragement in order to live for him and proclaim his death by living in humility, love and according to his mind and heart.”²⁹ Other aspects of the community’s life—from its liturgical celebrations to its circulation of Arndt’s *True Christianity*—only reinforced this emphasis.

That Kierkegaard, then, would later devote a notable portion of his authorship to “upbuilding discourses” can hardly be taken as an accident. The Pietist influence here is unmistakable. But how, exactly, did he understand the concept? This question will be dealt with below, not only for its own sake, but also in preparation for a larger consideration of Kierkegaard’s spirituality—a consideration that constitutes that principal business of this book.

The Upbuilding in Kierkegaard

On May 16, 1843, Kierkegaard published a short collection entitled *Two Upbuilding Discourses*. It came on the heels of his breakthrough work, *Either/Or*, which had shaken Copenhagen literary circles just three months earlier. The difference between these two efforts is pronounced. Issued pseudonymously, *Either/Or* is a sprawling juxtaposition of an aesthetic worldview—punctuated by musings on suicide, boredom, and seduction—and an ethical one that eulogizes middle-class satisfaction and civic industriousness. In contrast, *Two Upbuilding Discourses* bears Kierkegaard’s own name, and it contains a pair of quiet reflections on passages from the Bible. Taken by itself, this literary concurrence might be written off as a fluke. Yet, on October 16, 1843, Kierkegaard published three new works—the pseudonymous treatises, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, as well as

29. Quoted in *ibid.*, 23–24.

the signed *Three Upbuilding Discourses*. Thus a pattern emerged, and it would come to characterize Kierkegaard's authorship.

Indeed, over the course of his career, Kierkegaard issued a number of signed upbuilding writings, frequently in conjunction with pseudonymous philosophical works. Kierkegaard himself describes this arrangement as an instantiation of his theory of communication. As with all communicators, his efforts begin with a particular goal in mind—in his case, to make people aware of the religious and, more specifically, of the Christian.³⁰ What is unique is that he does not presume that persons are ready to encounter this objective. Thus two sorts of writings are needed. The first type adopts nonreligious points of view. For Kierkegaard, this is a matter of meeting people halfway, so to speak, since most persons either misunderstand or distort the nature of the religious. Thus religious truth becomes clear only after the limitations of other worldviews (Kierkegaard tends to describe these standpoints as either “aesthetic” or “ethical”) have been explored from the inside out. This is the aim of the pseudonymous writings. In contrast, the signed upbuilding writings are “directly religious.”³¹ They communicate a religious message openly and, in turn, ensure that his ultimate goal is present at every stage of his authorship.

More than a little ink has been spilled over this authorial strategy. Yet, as far as this work is concerned, the relevant point has to do with Kierkegaard's equation of the upbuilding and the religious. For him, one is built up toward the religious, even as the religious is upbuilding. The two go hand in hand.

But this point is not as straightforward as it may seem. For one thing, Kierkegaard is clear that the sheer fact that something is religious—or has religious significance—does not mean that it is upbuilding. An 1849 journal entry, for instance, distinguishes

30. SKS 13, 19 / PV, 12.

31. SKS 13, 14 / PV, 7–8.

between a system of Christian doctrine and the upbuilding. The former seeks “to comprehend faith” and, for that reason, can dangerously treat faith as a mere intellectual exercise.³² The latter, on the other hand, concerns the development of an individual human life. As Sylvia Walsh explains, “Claiming the upbuilding as ‘his’ category as a poetic writer, Kierkegaard cast his...upbuilding discourses...to ‘that single individual’, which every human being ‘is, can be, yes, should be’ before God.”³³ Thus the upbuilding is not an academic subject or a scholarly pastime but, rather, a means toward human fulfillment, valid both in “calm weather” and “when it storms.”³⁴ It neither beguiles nor diverts, but *strengthens*.

Similarly, Kierkegaard also makes clear that the upbuilding should not be conflated with authoritative Christian communication. That is not to say, of course, that such communication necessarily fails to edify. But the upbuilding, as Kierkegaard sees it, ranges beyond magisterial teaching and sermonic injunction.³⁵ This conclusion is partly grounded in Kierkegaard’s analysis of the human self—an analysis that, as will be discussed in the next chapter, obtains for all human beings, regardless of their religious background. It is also grounded in Kierkegaard’s own literary mission and status. Though he had formal academic training in theology, he was never ordained into priestly ministry. As a result, many of his upbuilding writings contain a disclaimer about his lack of ecclesiastical authority, as well as an admission of his personal need for edification. The strengthening of the upbuilding, then, cannot be reduced to a particular time or place, to a particular office or institution. It involves the religious life at its most basic level, with the self’s inbuilt yet

32. SKS 22, NB 12:21 / JP 3, 3564.

33. Sylvia Walsh, “Kierkegaard’s Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 294.

34. SKS 22, NB 12:21 / JP 3, 3564.

35. See, for example, SKS 7, 247–48 / CUP1, 256.

often frustrated desire for that which is everlasting and harmonious, as opposed to that which fades and tears apart.

This is one reason why Kierkegaard often writes of love in connection with upbuilding. Drawing on the words of Paul—who famously told the church in Corinth that “love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1)—Kierkegaard asserts that the upbuilding “is exclusively characteristic of love.”³⁶ Here he does not mean that all forms or manifestations of love are upbuilding. An erotic relationship can become twisted by greed and selfishness; a friendship can become warped by elitism and pride. Nor does Kierkegaard mean that love upbuilds at the *exclusion* of other activities. Indeed, he quotes Paul to the contrary: “[Love] does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor. 13:5).³⁷ What this statement means, for Kierkegaard, is that love has a noncompetitive relationship with the world. It does not have to get out of the way in order for another activity to take place. Rather, it is capable of “being able to give itself in everything, be present in everything.”³⁸ In this sense, love is identical to upbuilding: “[E]verything can be upbuilding in the same sense as love can be everywhere present.”³⁹ Kierkegaard illustrates this point with an example:

We would not think that the sight of a person sleeping could be upbuilding. Yet if you see a baby sleeping on its mother’s breast—and you see the mother’s love, see that she has, so to speak, waited for and now makes use of the moment while the baby is sleeping really to rejoice in it because she hardly dares let the baby notice how inexpressibly she loves it—then this is an upbuilding sight. . . . Just to see the baby sleeping is a friendly, benevolent, soothing sight, but it is not upbuilding. If you still want to call it upbuilding, it is because you see love present, it is because you see God’s love encompass the baby.⁴⁰

36. SKS 9, 215 / WL, 212.

37. SKS 9, 215 / WL, 212.

38. SKS 9, 215 / WL, 212.

39. SKS 9, 216 / WL, 213.

Here Kierkegaard does not bother to account for the shift from “the mother’s love” to “God’s love.” Elsewhere, however, he is clear that human love is but a sharing in the love of God, the “Eternal Love,” who is the “source of all love in heaven and on earth,” “so that the one who loves is what he is only by being in you.”⁴¹

Hence, for Kierkegaard, there is an intrinsic bond between the upbuilding, love, and God. They comprise a type of trinity. Wherever love is present, so is the upbuilding. Yet, since God is love, it is also true that the presence of the upbuilding signifies the presence of God. Thus Kierkegaard’s task as an upbuilding author is to manifest these connections, not in dogmatic fashion,⁴² but in such a way that they come to develop the reader’s spiritual life:

To build up is to erect something from the ground up. In ordinary talk about a house, a building, everyone knows what is meant by the ground and the foundation. But what, in the spiritual sense, is the ground and foundation of the spiritual life that is to bear the building? It is love. Love is the source of everything and, in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground of the spiritual life. In every human being in whom there is love, the foundation, in the spiritual sense, is laid. And the building that, in the spiritual sense, is to be erected is again love, and it is love that builds up. Love builds up, and this means it builds up love.⁴³

One might object that other facets of life are upbuilding—for instance, political competence, artistic skill, and scholarly erudition. But these talents, *sensu stricto*, do not concern themselves with love, and so Kierkegaard maintains that their upbuilding “is still not upbuilding in the deepest sense.”⁴⁴ “This is because, spiritually, love is the *ground*, and to build up means to erect from *the ground up*.”⁴⁵

40. SKS 9, 217 / WL, 214.

41. SKS 9, 12 / WL, 4.

42. As Paul Müller puts it, “Kierkegaard proves himself a...*theologian*, — for the sake of upbuilding” (“Begybet ‘det Opbyggelige’ hos Søren Kierkegaard,” *Fønix* 7 (1983): 15.

43. SKS 9, 218 / WL, 215.

44. SKS 9, 219 / WL, 216.

To this point, then, it has been shown that Kierkegaard came out of a background (Pietism) that emphasized the importance of spiritual upbuilding. It also has been seen that he made this concern characteristic of his own authorship, especially in his composition of various upbuilding writings. These writings are broadly religious in both aim and content. More specifically, however, they involve the development of love in the reader—a love that, for Kierkegaard, originates from God and always registers the presence of the divine.

With these points established, Kierkegaard's status as a spiritual writer should already be coming into focus. The last section of this chapter, however, will attempt to make this link even clearer. It will do so by way of a general consideration of the nature of spiritual writing, in addition to a brief comparison of Kierkegaard's efforts with those of others in the genre.

Kierkegaard as Spiritual Writer

It has become a shibboleth to call the Western world “secular”—that is to say, preoccupied with the affairs and things of the present world, rather than with a sacred dimension within or beyond it. As is usual with such platitudes, this one contains an element of truth: the contemporary world has detached itself from the direct influence of religion, now treating science and technology—in a variety of manifestations, whether biological, physical, or social—as the determining factors in day-to-day life. But this development, despite its seeming ubiquity, has hardly erased religion from human consciousness. The declining influence of institutional religion is notable, but, on the other hand, there is a renewed, perhaps even unprecedented thirst for “spirituality.”

But what, exactly, is “spirituality”? The word itself is derived from the Latin term *spiritus*, rendered in English as “spirit.” Although less than precise, this connection nevertheless indicates that “spirituality” concerns the immaterial aspect of human nature—that internal ground of the person, where the vicissitudes of life are contemplated and met. But this definition is still inadequate, for “spirituality” connotes more than a bare, computer-like processing of human experience. It also involves the quest to draw *meaning* from experience. Of course, the content of this meaning varies in accordance with an individual’s background and inclinations. The spirituality of, say, a Muslim from Chicago differs from that of a Christian from rural Mexico. There is, however, a decisive similarity. In both cases—and in all examples of spirituality—the endeavor to locate meaning in experience looks beyond that which is simply historical or physical and instead seeks that which is ultimate. This is the *raison d’être* of spirituality. For its practitioner understands that only what is fundamentally and finally real can bring harmony out of the diverse and often contradictory notes of life.⁴⁶ To develop one’s spiritual life is to journey, however slowly, from a state of disintegration and unrest to one of unity and calm.

This common purpose is one reason why “spirituality” is frequently seen as a field where interreligious dialogue is not only possible but fruitful. All human beings have a spiritual core and so are in search of ultimate meaning, whether consciously or

46. Kierkegaard himself alludes to this point, though he tends to speak in terms of “inwardness” [*Underlighed*] rather than “spirituality” [*Aandelighed*]. The difference, however, is largely accidental, as “spirituality” had neither the currency nor the import that it does today. In an 1844 passage, Kierkegaard notes that “[i]nwardness is the eternal,” which kindles in the person a “need” for God and, with it, the habit of prayer (*Pap.* V B 227 / JP 2, 2114). Elsewhere he adds that, when one neglects inwardness, “the spirit is finitized;” consequently, the cultivation of inwardness is a matter of “earnestness,” whereby the person strives for that which is truly enduring (*Pap.* V B 65 / JP 2, 2112). These insights, which turn up throughout Kierkegaard’s writings (albeit in varying guises), will be examined further in the next chapter.

unconsciously.⁴⁷ As has been mentioned, Kierkegaard's understanding and treatment of the upbuilding rests upon this presupposition. Many of his upbuilding writings operate on a humanistic level, focusing on the person's innate desire for love and, with it, happiness. Of course, in doing so, Kierkegaard does not exclude God as the spiritual life's origin and end. He assumes the biblical claim that God is love, and thus the task of building up love in the human being is, in the end, a movement toward the divine. But this objective is frequently more implicit than explicit in Kierkegaard's upbuilding writings, particularly in the ones dating from 1843–1844. For that reason, it is possible to view him as a spiritual writer in the broad sense indicated above. His spirituality not only *makes* a catholic appeal but *has* a catholic appeal, too.

At the same time, however, Kierkegaard was very much a *Christian* thinker, who penned a number of works that plainly involve Christian doctrines and themes. Signed efforts such as “What Meaning and What Joy There are in the Thought of Following Christ” and “It is the Spirit Who Gives Life,” as well as pseudonymous writings such as *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*, mark his later authorship. Already in these titles is adumbrated a more pronounced stress on the nature of God, on the problem of human sin, and, above all, on the imitation of Christ—subjects that disclose Kierkegaard's background in and development of Christian spirituality.

Just how these later spiritual writings relate to his earlier ones is a matter of debate. Do they represent a rupture in Kierkegaard's spiritual vision, so that it is more accurate to speak of Kierkegaard's

47. This claim is increasingly contested by materialist philosophy. Nevertheless, even Daniel Dennett—a so-called “Darwinian fundamentalist”—has acknowledged the universal benefits and relevance of spirituality. See Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 303.

“spiritualities” rather than his “spirituality”? Or do they ultimately serve to complement his prior works, functioning, so to speak, as two sides of the same coin? The present work assumes the latter view, which has been summed up nicely by George Pattison: “Although there is an undeniable shift in emphasis, vocabulary, style and thematisation between Kierkegaard’s earliest and last religious writings . . . it is [not] possible to sustain an absolute distinction here.”⁴⁸ As Pattison writes, and as has already been alluded to in this work, the question of the human condition in general, and of love in particular, erects an “interpretive bridge”⁴⁹ spanning Kierkegaard’s various spiritual writings. To the extent that questions about existential meaning and destiny arise throughout Kierkegaard’s corpus, points of overlap can be found between “the humanistic Kierkegaard” and “the Christian Kierkegaard.” Theirs is a relationship of completion, not fragmentation.

Given the interests and scope of this work, it would be distracting, not to mention tedious, to expand on this point at length. Suffice it to say that it remains a “live” issue in the secondary literature,

48. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature and Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 31. Thomas C. Anderson complements Pattison’s position, though he is more interested in the Christian tendencies of Kierkegaard’s humanistic discourses, rather than the humanistic tendencies of Kierkegaard’s Christian output. See his “Is the Religion of Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses Religiousness A?,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 51–75. A contrary position has been put forward by Anders Kingo, who views Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses as essentially dogmatic in nature and therefore representing a break with the anthropological starting point typical of modern thinking. As he puts it, “Kierkegaard is a thinker of revelation [*åbenbaringstænk*]” (Anders Kingo, *Den Opbyggelige Tale: En systematisk-teologisk studie over Søren Kierkegaards opbyggelige forfatterskab* [Copenhagen: Gad, 1987], 25). Yet, this stance suggests a rift between nature and grace that, as will be seen below, is problematic for many spiritual authors, who perceive a degree of continuity between the natural and the supernatural. This study ought to provide support for the view that Kierkegaard falls into the latter camp, though it does not have pretensions of resolving the debate once and for all. After all, this issue extends well beyond the pale of Kierkegaard scholarship, becoming, arguably, the defining question of twentieth-century theology, which has involved thinkers as diverse as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Henri de Lubac, and Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

49. Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses*, 193.

not least because of the various scholarly interests in Kierkegaard, some of which prize his humanism over his Christianity and vice versa. In this context, however, a more helpful approach would be to show that Kierkegaard's twin spiritual emphases—on an intrinsic human desire for that which brings fulfillment, as well as on the Christian claim that the triune God can best satisfy this desire—are hardly alien to the Christian spiritual tradition writ large. In other words, Kierkegaard's twofold approach to spirituality puts him in company with other great spiritual writers. This connection will be underscored by a survey of two spiritual authors with whom he had a degree of familiarity: Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart. The claim here will not be that Kierkegaard's views are identical to these predecessors, nor that their approaches constitute a unified spiritual "school." At stake, rather, is a much more basic claim, namely, that their respective spiritualities highlight a common progression from human longing to divine fulfillment.

Bernard of Clairvaux

In his epistolary treatise, "On Loving God," the great Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) begins by pointing out that human love—whether for God or for neighbor—is only possible because of the preceding love of the divine. His point here is quite literal. As Bernard sees it, human love cannot even get started without "food for everyone who eats, light for seeing, air to breathe."⁵⁰ Yet, he adds, these bodily needs are by no means the only gifts bestowed upon human beings, for persons also receive the three "higher goods" of dignity, knowledge, and virtue.⁵¹ To consider the "natural man,"

50. Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God," in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987), 175.

51. *Ibid.*, 176.

then, is already to make out the presence of God. As Bernard explains, “There are two things you should know: first, what you are; second, that you are not what you are by your own power.”⁵²

Bernard later illustrates this point in more lucid fashion, paying particular attention to love. He notes that it is a “natural” passion, adding that “what is natural should be at the service of the Lord of nature.”⁵³ But this service is not of one kind or quality. It has to develop gradually, beginning with an immanent, “this-worldly” focus. As Bernard writes, “[B]ecause nature has become rather frail and weak, man is driven by necessity to serve nature first. This results in bodily love, by which man loves himself for his own sake. He does not yet know anything but himself . . .”⁵⁴ According to this “innate” self-love, the person seeks to provide for his basic needs, including the necessity of getting along well with others.⁵⁵

This process is not easy. It is inevitable that “tribulation” will arise, which leads to what Bernard calls love’s “second degree”—the human being’s turn to God “for his own sake, not God’s.”⁵⁶ This is the first gesture toward the eternal, whereby the person recognizes “what he can do by himself and what he can do only with God’s help.”⁵⁷ This stage of love, then, remains rooted in the desire for self-preservation.

And yet, the more a person calls upon God for help, the more she appreciates “how sweet the Lord is.”⁵⁸ Thus there is an evolution into “the third degree of love, in which God is loved for his own sake.”⁵⁹ But this is only the penultimate step of love. For, according to Bernard, even greater is the one who “loves himself only for God’s

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, 191.

54. *Ibid.*, 192.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, 193.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 194.

59. *Ibid.*

sake.”⁶⁰ This is the point at which the human being unites with the divine. No longer curtailed by the “entanglements of the flesh,”⁶¹ the person comes to will whatever God wills. One’s self-concern is precisely concern for God. As Bernard puts it, “To lose yourself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself, to be emptied out of yourself and almost annihilated, belongs to heavenly not to human love.”⁶² He likens this process to that of a drop of water that falls into a vat of wine and takes on its color and taste.⁶³ This, he adds, is the sort of love found in the “holy martyrs”⁶⁴ of the Christian faith.

Thus Bernard concludes with a definitive form of Christian *caritas*, albeit one that grows out of love’s natural beginning. For him, in other words, that which is Christian does not break from the human but perfects it. The contours of human life unfold in the direction of Christian fulfillment. As will be seen, the spirituality of the great Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1327) supports a similar, if not identical, point of view.

Meister Eckhart

Eckhart begins his short treatise “On the Noble Man” with an affirmation: there is an inherent “nobility” in the “created nature” of human beings, inasmuch as humans can be brought to a “divine” end through the grace of God.⁶⁵ The word “can” here is not incidental. For Eckhart, the person’s growth toward his divine fulfillment is hardly a matter of course but, rather, must be won through a

60. *Ibid.*, 195.

61. *Ibid.*, 197.

62. *Ibid.*, 195.

63. *Ibid.*, 196.

64. *Ibid.*, 197.

65. Meister Eckhart, “On the Noble Man,” in *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 99.

process—a gradual, and sometimes painful, cultivation of the “inner” or “noble” man.

Indeed, citing the Apostle Paul, Eckhart argues that human nature is not monolithic but complex. Juxtaposed with the divinely inclined inner man is the “outer man,” who bears bodily concerns and temptations and thus serves as a channel through which evil can ensnare the inner man.⁶⁶ In this tension Eckhart sees a repetition of the fall of humanity, as depicted in the book of Genesis: the “inner man is Adam,” the outer the “serpent.”⁶⁷

What, then, is the person to do? The good news, according to Eckhart, is that neither temptation nor sin can do away with the inner man: “[S]ince it is God himself who has engendered this seed, sowing and implanting it, it can never be destroyed or extinguished in itself, even if it is overgrown and hidden. It glows and gleams, shines and burns and always seeks God.”⁶⁸ This natural impulse toward God, then, has to be developed. Eckhart, like Bernard, maintains that this is done through stages, beginning with what comes easiest and progressing to that which is most difficult. So one starts by imitating “the example of good and holy people,” much as a child copies her parents.⁶⁹ But this concentration on external behavior has to be slowly left behind, evolving into a focus on the “teaching and counsel of God and divine wisdom” and, eventually, into an “eager devotion” to everything divine.⁷⁰ Such dedication will encounter opposition in the world. Hence, as one progresses, one must not only learn to endure trials and sufferings, but also to “live altogether at peace in [oneself], quietly resting in the overflowing wealth of the highest and unutterable wisdom.”⁷¹ Now one is ready for what Eckhart sees as the

66. *Ibid.*, 100.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, 101.

69. *Ibid.*, 101.

70. *Ibid.*

final stage of spiritual growth: “stripped” of all worldly cares, one is “drawn into and changed into an image of the divine.”⁷² The outer man has lost its power, and “eternal peace and blessedness reign.”⁷³

Hence, as with Bernard, Eckhart traces the correspondence between “the natural self” and “the religious self.” In the gift of the former—a gift received by every human being—lies the seed of the latter. The spiritual life, then, is not extrinsic to human nature, imposed on a select number of persons by an alien and arbitrary power. Rather, it is already *there*, implicit in all human experience and merely awaiting active cultivation. The goal of the spiritual writer is to clarify this connection and, like a practiced navigator, to chart its course.

Conclusion

The examples of Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart shed light on Kierkegaard’s own status as a spiritual writer. Though his authorship may involve a variety of aspects and categories—the aesthetic and the religious, the genius and the apostle, the immanent and the transcendent—these features are in service to a larger purpose, namely, the flourishing of the human self. This flourishing is not static, but dynamic. It is not so much a birthright as a process. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, as for figures such as Bernard and Eckhart, that which is Christian does not foreclose on or interrupt this process but, rather, emerges out of it and marks its culmination.

The “progressive” nature of Kierkegaard’s spirituality should become clearer over the remainder of this work. Later chapters will explore how Kierkegaard uses imagery to promote spiritual growth,

71. *Ibid.*, 102.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*

so that faith is distinguished by an ever-deepening contemplation of certain “icons.” First, however, it is necessary to summarize Kierkegaard’s understanding of the interior life—an understanding that provides the anthropological and theological foundation of his spirituality. It is to that subject, then, that this study now turns.