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# A look at Kierkegaard and his infinite passion of inwardness

Chase Nordengren | Feb. 27, 2012 Young Voices

*This is the first in a three-part series examining the theological ideas of Søren Kierkegaard through the work of three contemporary church critics.*

*Kierkegaard?s work is notoriously difficult to comprehend in total: He was a prolific author and frequently wrote under pseudonyms using characters designed to represent contrary or hypocritical positions. Most of my observations on Kierkegaard over this and the next two columns come from writings selected in "Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard" (edited by Charles E. Moore, Plough Publishing House 1999). Unless otherwise noted, the translations quoted here come from that volume.The podcast "The Partially Examined Life" [1] provides a good introduction to the philosophical Kierkegaard. (Be advised that the recording contains occasional adult language.)*

No matter the depth of our involvement with the community, the 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argues, religious faith is at its heart the question of what we believe individually, removed from all other influence: "Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty."

Born in 1830s Copenhagen, Kierkegaard quickly became interested in a theology of authenticity. The tensions between his father's outward piety and inner turmoil gave the character to Kierkegaard's obsession with what is "essentially Christian." With millions born into Christendom by sheer accident, Kierkegaard argues, the essential challenge of the Christian life is to break through this cultural influence and seek an independent and authentic religious experience.

Coming to truth, Kierkegaard argues, comes from the freedom for individuals to produce that truth. Supporting that freedom requires inwardness. It is one thing to advance a doctrine like the immortality of the soul; it is quite another to convince yourself of that idea and allow it to compel you to live different. "Eternity is a very radical thought, and thus a matter of inwardness," he writes. "Whenever the reality of the eternal is affirmed, the present becomes something entirely different from what it was apart from it." Because eternity is so radical, Kierkegaard argues, human beings fear it under the guise of fearing death.

Both the overly intellectual and the overly pious, Kierkegaard argues, lack this inwardness. The intellectuals who attempt to systematically prove the existence of God, Kierkegaard says, are too dependent on the proof written in notebooks to profess a true faith. The overly pious, too, he argues, express their uncertainty by loudly expressing countercultural ideas. "They battle ideas," he writes, "but not with their lives."

The modern form of these two pieties is considered in Adam McHugh's *Introverts in the Church*. An evangelical pastor, McHugh argues an extroverted bias in American culture has subtly shifted into church practice. Our often-ideal Christian -- gregarious, enthusiastic among groups of people, eager to share their faith and frequently engaged in leadership positions -- assume that faithfulness is the only barrier to frequent interaction with the church community.

While McHugh directs his message to the Evangelical church, Catholics, too, have reason to consider their

stance towards introversion. Particularly among the progressive faith community, Vatican II has brought a vital emphasis on the participation of the laity in all elements of liturgy, ministry and service. We are mistaken, however, when opportunity becomes obligation, when we assume that church members who don't sign up as Eucharistic ministers or Sunday school teachers are practicing a weaker faith.

Vatican II's renewed emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers" is also a call to recognize the diversity of ministry: both public and private, in church and in community, among family and friends, among large groups of people and in one-on-one conversation.

Introverts, McHugh argues, should seek to embrace their God-given identity as introverts. While both introverts and extroverts need church -- as a source of comfort, strength, healing and confrontation with the full magnitude of the Gospel -- introverts will ultimately complete their faith lessons by "probing the depths of God's nature and discovering the identity and purpose he gives us." Extroverts will, in turn, complete those lessons through their public ministry, provided that ministry serves as the occasion for deeper reflection.

Although Kierkegaard lacked the psychological lens to understand the nature of his own neurosis, he would likely find resonance with McHugh's argument that introverts have untapped lessons for the broader church. Both authors warn, however, of the possibility that inwardness could lead to a detached, academic faith. God, Kierkegaard says, is "a subject to be related to, not an object to be studied or mediated on. He exists only for subjective inwardness. The person who chooses the subjective way immediately grasps the difficulty of trying to find God objectively."

If introverts, McHugh writes, are more equipped to witness God's actions within them, and extroverts more sensitive to God's revelation in the world, then it takes both introverts and extroverts to complete the church's conception of God's mercy and love. The diversity of Catholic vocations provides another good guide. Just as the ranks of the ordained are complete only with hermits, contemplatives, academics, preachers and activists, so too the laity is complete only by keeping open the parish to new and different forms of piety and faith.

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