

Kierkegaard on Time: A Christian Existential Approach

by RONDA CHERVIN

How men and women conceive of time is very important to how they use it. In this jewel-like article, Ronda Chervin examines the three stages of time-consciousness in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard. In so doing she gives fresh and penetrating insight into both the non-Christian and Christian dimensions of time and eternity.

The words *Christian* and *existential* are still thought of as opposites more often than not. That this is not necessarily the case may be observed in the sphere of philosophy of time. Indeed, it has often been taken for granted that existentialist thought concentrates on the temporal, particularly in terms of human anguish, as in the philosophies of Sartre and Heidegger, whereas Christian philosophy is supposed to focus on eternity, relegating time to the status of a prelude. In an effort to make themselves contemporary, however, some Christian philosophers currently insist on the centrality of the concept of time in religious thought. Therefore, it is essential to examine approaches to the philosophy of time which present ways to understand man's existential confrontation with time in the light of eternity. A study of Kierkegaard in this matter is particularly helpful.

Søren A. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) did not present his philosophy of time as a developed system, which is hardly surprising for a man who believed that all philosophical edifices were towers of Babel. However, to eschew system-building is not to preclude systematic thinking. A careful study of Kierkegaard's writings reveals fascinating insights into the nature of man's experience of time as he flees from or moves toward faith in Christ. The results of such a study are summarized in this article.

The fundamentals of the Kierkegaardian insight into time are found in his three stages (life-styles or levels of consciousness, in contemporary terminology): the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each of these must be considered in turn.¹ First, the *aesthetic stage* is characterized by the search for pleasure – sensual, artistic, intellectual or spiritual – as exhibited respectively by the seducer, the diletante, the intellectual snob, and those who adopt religion as a source of exalted emotions rather than as a commitment. Unfortunately the exciting, delightful feelings which accompany entrance into the aesthetic stage ultimately give way to boredom, superficiality, emptiness and despair. Some remain trapped in this stage, but others go on to try a life of commitment to some ideal.

Second, the *ethical stage*, described so well in Kierkegaard's amusing yet incisive and challenging book *Either/Or?*,² is characterized by the decision to become responsible for others and to give up those aimless hours of rapturous daydreams and desperate introspections which characterize the aesthetic lifestyle. Marriage is the most frequent entrance into the ethical stage with its emphasis on responsibility, but a person may also enter into it through dedication to a cause.

Although ethical commitment brings with it the happiness of worthwhile activities for others, Kierkegaard believed certain difficulties will inevitably arise. The higher ideals of the ethical stage will lead to confrontation with failure, guilt, disappointment and a new form of despair. This leads either to a falling back into the aesthetic stage or a leap into the religious stage.

This third, or *religious stage*, is characterized by the effort to be changed through relationship to a source of goodness outside oneself – the divine. Henceforth one enters into the ethical arena with faith in God's help for sinful, weak man through the transmitting of His victorious love to all those in need.

Having described Kierkegaard's stages, there remains the task of relating these levels of existence to man's temporality and his experience of time. What does time feel like to men living in terms of the basic life-styles – aesthetic, ethical and religious?

Time for the aesthete is the space of a mood, or the bearer of possibility. The refined Kierkegaardian aesthete's pleasure is not a mere sensual gratification, but rather the delight in a life unburdened by predictability.³ The time category most accentuated in the aesthetic stage is the moment,⁴

and the moment represents a mock eternity, for the next moment it is all over and has no meaning in terms of commitment. As Kierkegaard described it:

. . . instead of learning to grasp the eternal, one learns only to kill (chase life out of) oneself and one's neighbor with fatigue by chasing the instant. If only one can join the party, if merely for a single instant one can lead the dance . . . then one has lived.⁵

In the aesthetic stage love takes the form of lust, as in Don Juan as described by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or?*, and lust is defined by its relationship to time. Don Juan exists in the moment alone, conceives the moment to be the sum of moments, and so becomes the seducer. Soon, however, the ordinary daily time rebels against being treated as a mere means to the moment. Its protest is experienced as boredom.

Kierkegaard never tired of expressing the aesthete's true condition in telling images:

When one skims a stone over the surface of the water, it skips lightly for a time, but as soon as it ceases to skip, it instantly sinks down to the depths; the Don Juan dances over the abyss, jubilant in his brief respite.⁶

For Kierkegaard, to be willing to give one's life for the moment is to ultimately die the death of despair.⁷ In 1848 in the *Christian Discourses*, he wrote that:

the pleasure loving man whose motto is 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,' thinks that he lives in today but really he is so in dread of tomorrow and death that he has to cast himself into wild befuddlement in order to forget it.⁸

For Kierkegaard, as we shall see, only in the religious stage, where God is master, is the moment transformed from a temptation into a grace.

Turning from time in the aesthetic stage to time in the ethical stage, it can be seen that one shifts from a world without an *ought* to the arena where time is the matrix of actions and decisions. Whereas in the aesthetic stage time assumes its meaning only as present, in the ethical stage time assumes its normal contours of present, future, and past. The present is resolution, the future is the task, and the past is gratitude and guilt.

The task is to do the finite in the instant but with infinite resolution and a sense of the eternal. All the time between great moments, which is a cause of despair in the bored aesthete, is filled for the ethical man with the great task of making the eternal grow in the temporal. The moment still exists, as Judge William is at pains to prove in *Either/Or?* and *Stages on Life's Way*.⁹ But rather than being an idyll it is a beginning. For the aesthete eternity meets time in the moment. For the ethical man eternity expresses itself in continuity. Once life is viewed in terms of the duty of making the moment have a history, then every moment has eternal significance.

In characterizing the ethical stage by marriage and the aesthetic by the love affair, Kierkegaard makes clearer the difference in terms of time:

What richness of modulation in the matrimonial 'Mine!' in comparison with the erotic! It re-echoes not only in the seductive eternity of the instant, not only in the illusory eternity of fantasy and imagination, but in the eternity of inner consciousness, in the eternity of eternity.¹⁰

Only in marriage vows can the moment of first love gain the right to a history, for marriage is that in which the eternal has the temporal within itself.

Indeed, sometimes Kierkegaard became so eloquent about the ethical stage that one forgets that it is not an end in itself. It is the function of the past in the form of guilt or thanksgiving that propels the ethical man toward the religious stage. If the past moments are filled with failure to realize the task, one finds it hard to develop the courage to go on. Furthermore, the ethical, while satisfying the need for meaningful time, by no means satisfies the desire for eternity.

The religious stage, of course, satisfies this desire, and time in the religious stage is so rich a subject in Kierkegaard's writings that it is only possible to hint at some of its ramifications. What is important is to see how time is accentuated in the religious sphere. It is marked by the quality of decisiveness of the conversion experience and what follows from it.

Religious time appears to be a synthesis of ethical and aesthetic time. The poetic exaltation of the moment is freed from its irresponsibility by being linked to the ethical seriousness about concrete time. The ethical commitment to time is made still more profound and passionate by taking its starting point, in the case of Christian time, from the Moment: the Incarnation, in which time and eternity meet. Through its relationship to eternity, every instant being a communication with God, time becomes unified in a fruitful dialogue of past, present, and future.

The present is the hour of salvation in which repentance for the past and hope for the future are joined together. The past, if not brought into positive relationship to eternity, overshadows the present and the future: every unrepented sin is a new sin, and every moment it is unrepented is a new sin. Redemption means that time is real – the past act is real. One deed in time such as the repentance of the good thief at the crucifixion can change the meaning of time in all directions. Eternity penetrates time in the religious stage through our sinfulness and acceptance of suffering, which makes us leave the temporal in God's hands. Time and eternity mingle in the religious because the moment of conversion becomes concrete in the acceptance of the providence of all things that happen.

The past, if it was lived in relationship to eternity, gives rise to certain possibilities in the future. Kierkegaard used the figure of Abraham to illustrate the point:

By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all races of the world would be blessed. Abraham believed, time passed, it became unreasonable, Abraham believed. . . . Then came the fullness of time. If Abraham had not believed, Sarah surely would have been dead of sorrow, and Abraham dulled by grief, would not have understood the fulfillment but would have smiled at it as at a dream of youth. But Abraham believed, therefore he was young; for he who always hopes for the best becomes old, and he who is always prepared for the worst grows old early, but he who believes preserves an eternal youth.¹¹

There is a double conception of future in the religious stage. One must hope for the future which is heaven, but also for the fulfillment of God's promises in time. Abraham, the father of faith, is nothing if he does not hope for Isaac in time. His positive attitude toward earthly future takes Kierkegaard out of the camp of the strictly other-worldly.

The reason for the dynamic character of religious time is that it is chained to the paradox of the Incarnation, which characteristically for Kierkegaard in the early works, is not that God became man, but that eternity entered time. Henceforth all time is contemporaneous with Christ, as Kierkegaard pointed out at length in the *Fragments*, and to have faith in Christ means to be contemporary.¹²

This concept of time which characterizes the religious man especially after conversion is one of the most interesting of Kierkegaard's ideas. The key to it is the notion of repetition. The *now* of conversion must be repeated, not in other great moments but in the daily life of the Christian. It is an attempt to bring the day to day life into vital relationship with God and thereby to save the present from the despair of killing time or false fantasies about the next day. Repetition is the daily consecration in silence of the self to the redeeming of time. Man has a long life because it is a real life and not a sanctification in the imagination alone.

The following beautiful quotation expresses the significance of the Kierkegaardian affirmation of time in a most characteristic fashion:

It is precisely the greatness of the finite spirit that the temporal is assigned to it. The temporal . . . is the greatest of all gifts of grace. For man's eternal dignity consists in the fact that he can have a history. The divine element in him consists in the fact that he himself, if he will, may impart to this history continuity . . . transformed and translated from necessity to freedom [and] it seems to me as if one had only to say this aloud to a man to make him envious of himself.¹³

The implications of this view of time in the religious stage are overwhelming. Kierkegaard, a true Christian existentialist, successfully challenges all Christian philosophers to see man's confrontation with time in the light of eternity – as the juncture of the fundamental choice between death and rebirth in Christ.

NOTES

¹For more information on the Stages see *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941, pp. 225-266.

²*Either/Or?*, transl. by David F. and Lillian Marvin Swenson, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946.

³*Ibid.*, Vol. I, 19.

⁴*Ibid.*, Vol. II, 193.

⁵*The Concept of Dread*, transl. by Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946, p. 94.

⁶*Either/Or?*, Vol. I, 105.

⁷James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1965, p. 26.

⁸*Christian Discourses*, transl. by Walter Lowrie, London: Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 105.

⁹*Stages on Life's Way*, Vol. I and II, transl. by Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945.

¹⁰*Either/Or?*, Vol. II, 49.

¹¹*Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955, pp. 32-33.

¹²*Training in Christianity*, transl. by Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944, pp. 67-68.

¹³*Either/Or?*, Vol. II, 209-210.