

S. U. Zuidema of the Free University of Amsterdam, in the concluding paragraph of his monograph on Kierkegaard in the *Modern Thinkers* series, writes:

For anyone who wishes to understand the period in which we live, a knowledge of the basic ideas of Kierkegaard is indispensable. The origin of these ideas is inwardly bound up with the person of Kierkegaard but their power and content go far beyond his personal life... Any attempt to conquer irrationalism must begin with Kierkegaard.

Who was Soren Kierkegaard? He was born on May 5, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark, the youngest of seven children. His parents were of peasant stock. Under a very strict orthodox Lutheran education of a somber and depressing kind, Soren reports that he never really enjoyed his childhood. He says that he was never a child, never young, had never really lived, had never experienced the "joy of life", and had never enjoyed immediate contact with other people. An outsider during his school and university days, gifted, witty, but argumentative and an object of mockery (because of a humpback), he lived in an imaginary world. At the University of Copenhagen he absorbed Hegelianism, the prevailing philosophy of the day. In 1840 he passed the theological examination, entered seminary, and in 1841 delivered his first sermon in a Copenhagen church. In 1840 he had become engaged to Regina Olsen, but broke the engagement in 1841. This break had significant consequences for his literary and spiritual life. It marked the beginning of a very prolific literary activity, which was accompanied by an ever-increasing loneliness and withdrawal from contact with other people. The polemic character of his writings brought him into conflict with the Danish version of the British Punch, the *Corsair*, and with the official state church. Kierkegaard came to regard it as his mission in life to defend true Christian life against its distortion by the church. These constant polemics broke his health; and on October 2, 1885, while walking in the streets of Copenhagen, he collapsed and was brought to the Frederiks Hospital, where he died on November 11.

This brief biographical sketch does not reveal what it was that made Soren Kierkegaard of such great influence and importance in the twentieth century. Although he was a lonely thinker of nineteenth-century Denmark who made no mark on his own age and who died in relative obscurity, he has become a central figure in the genesis of existentialism.

Kierkegaard's influence is based on the translation of his works, first into German in 1909, into Italian in 1910, into French in 1929, and into English in 1938. Among these works are 35 books and a 20-volume journal. His books include *Either-Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* (1844), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), *Stages on life's Way* (1845), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *The Present Age* (1847), *Purity of Heart* (1847), *Sickness Unto Death* (1849), and *Attack Upon Christendom* (1855).