

# Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter

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## Contents

### ANNOUNCEMENTS AND NEWS

For current information from the Hong Kierkegaard Library and other news from Kierkegaard scholars and related groups around the world, please see the website of the Hong Kierkegaard Library at <http://www.stolaf.edu/collections/kierkegaard/>.

### BOOK SYMPOSIUM

- Postmodernity and/or Christendom: A Response to Kyle Roberts** 4  
Reviewed by Jason A. Mahn
- Kierkegaard as Emerging Prophet: A Response to Kyle Roberts** 8  
Reviewed by Sylvia Walsh
- Too Close to Christianity for Comfort?: A Response to Kyle Roberts** 11  
Reviewed by Silas Morgan
- Emerging Prophet: A Reply to Jason Mahn, Sylvia Walsh, and Silas Morgan*** 15  
Kyle A. Roberts

### BOOK REVIEW

- The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, by Richard McCombs** 18  
Reviewed by Walter Wietzke
- Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, by Jon Stewart** 20  
Reviewed by Eric Hamm

## **ARTICLE**

- Gratitude for Kierkegaard Characters** 22  
David Cain
- A Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Witness of Kierkegaard** 24  
David Cain

**Editor: Gordon D. Marino**  
**Spanish Editor: Begonya Saez Tajafuerce**  
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## **Kierkegaard as Prophet of the Church Today**

**A Panel Discussion of:**

***Emerging Prophet: Kierkegaard and the Postmodern People of God***

**By Kyle Roberts**

**Cascade Books, 2013, 176 pp.**

**ISBN: 978-1610972222**

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**Sylvia Walsh, Stetson University**

**Silas Morgan, Loyola University Chicago**

**Kyle A. Roberts, Bethel University**

The following three examinations of Kyle Roberts's *Emerging Prophet: Kierkegaard and the Postmodern People of God*, along with Roberts's response, were first presented at the 2013 Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture under the conference theme: "Kierkegaard: A Christian Thinker for Our Time?" We thank the organizers of the conference; Matthew Wilson, who chaired our session; Silas Morgan for first proposing it; and especially Kyle Roberts, who has written a book enabling each of us to think carefully and creatively about the shape of church, culture, and Kierkegaard in our place and time.

# Postmodernity and/or Christendom: A Response to Kyle Roberts

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In his thoughtful and helpful book, *Emerging Prophet: Kierkegaard and the Postmodern People of God* (Cascade, 2013), Kyle Roberts introduces Kierkegaard as a valuable resource to “emergent” Christians experimenting with faith apart from the benefits of “established” or “inherited” Christianity. He also introduces this growing group of faithful, creative Christians wrestling with radical discipleship to those who know something of Kierkegaard and are ready to glimpse his principles on the ground, as it were. Roberts succeeds masterfully at both sides of the acquaintance. I come to the book from the Kierkegaardian side, and to emerging Christianity not from “traditional, conservative evangelicalism” as does Roberts and most of its apologists (and critics), but from mainline Protestantism of a liberal stripe—a tradition of which I am critical, just as Roberts is critical in key places of “emergents.” That outsider perspective helps me raise two overlapping concerns about this church renewal movement and what could become the use of Kierkegaard to sanction it rather than prophetically question it. I understand these concerns to join Roberts in proposing Kierkegaard as emerging prophet—and not underwriter—of this movement. I will say something about (1) postmodernity and (2) Christendom.

## Postmodernity

Roberts quickly sets up the emerging church as a “postmodern people of God” and Kierkegaard as a “proto-postmodernist” (Roberts 2) over-and-against “deeply *modernist* forms of Christianity today” (2). He repeatedly adds that the modernism that postmodernity interrogates and transcends is a two-headed beast, having both a “modernist conservative evangelical” and a “modernist liberal Protestant” form (2, 6). As Roberts analyzes biblical hermeneutics, epistemology, ethics, and so forth, he thus positions the postmodern option between and beyond two modern Christian forms. Or, we might say, he is aware that *directly opposing* either form of modern Christianity will only reproduce its mirror image (liberal Protestantism recapitulating conservative evangelicalism or vice-versa); needed is a more deconstructive move that will play the “modernities” off one another, showing how each depends on that which it rejects—and this to open up options that are *neither* fundamentalist/evangelical *nor* liberal protestant but something less easily defined, something, well, emerging.

My critique is that, while Roberts presents the two modernist Christianities as equally dangerous and reciprocally self-defeating, in his actual analyses it is clear that emergent Christianity is more clearly distinct from, and so defined by, its rejection of fundamentalist/conservative evangelicalism (footnote 7, page 3 says as much). This, of course, is historically true. Although the renewal church movement is now absorbing many mainline denominations (many who call themselves hyphenated emergents: Lutheran-Emergents, Episcopal-Emergents, and so forth), the movement first gains attention and traction by moving *clearly away* (no hyphens here!) from conservative evangelicalism. And yet, this historically-understandable lopsidedness does pose a problem for Robert’s portrayal of the emerging church as postmodern and of Kierkegaard as exemplar. In short, if the emerging ecclesial forms only or primarily transcend conservative evangelicalism, and if evangelicalism gets equated with foundationalist epistemology and “bibliolatry,” then they risk reproducing an equally modern counterpart—namely, liberal Protestantism. We turn to a couple of examples from Robert’s book.

Through the first two main chapters and into the third, Roberts deals with matters of epistemology, especially claims about religious certainty, which Roberts suggests comprise “the central issues dividing

proponents of emergent Christianity from its critics” (44). Per usual, he distinguishes the postmodern possibility from the modernist ditches flanking it on either side: in the case of epistemology, from both evangelical absolutism and liberal endless skepticism; in the case of biblical hermeneutics, from both conservative biblical literalism and liberalism’s “reputation of historicizing and demythologizing the Bible in order to extract its ‘real message’ or its moral/ethical teachings” (64). But note here that, in either case, the “liberal” camp characterizes *not* liberal Protestantism as an ecclesial form or the majority in mainline churches, but rather *academic* liberals and (other) *cultured despisers*—whether “skeptics” in general or those who employ the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation in particular. What is more, that liberal side is now criticized not for being a polar opposite and inverse mirror of conservative Christianity, but for partaking in the *same* error of *overly-rationalizing, objectifying*, and otherwise making *certain* a faith that should include anxiety and doubt. In other words, Roberts’s categories have shifted as he positions the emergent church and postmodern Christianity not between and beyond a Janus-faced modernity, but over-and-against a fairly monolithic one, with various forms of the same need to objectify, reify, and grasp at certainty at the expense of open-endedness, uncertainty, and personal experience.

Another way of saying this is that the modernity from which postmodern Christianity here emerges and from beneath which Kierkegaard is retrieved is almost exclusively associated with spiritless rationalism, represented by “Objective Truth” and predicated on the sacrifice of subjective questing. Might this not overlook *Romanticism* in both its philosophical/literary and theological (a.k.a. “Schleiermachean”) stripes as the danger that is truly apposite the rationalism of conservative evangelicalism? Walter Lowe, for one, has discerned a tendency in *prima facie* postmodernism to associate modernity with the Enlightenment and the Enlightenment with the Newtonian closed universe. Wanting to break down the rigid walls of rationalism, such “postmoderners” alleviate modern claustrophobia by repeating an *equally modern*, this time *Romantic*, disdain for determinacy. Endless possibility and the infinite human spirit replace the arid dogmatism of rationalism.<sup>1</sup> Certainly there is a danger to reproduce romantic religion under the guise of postmodernity here, as well as to make Kierkegaard its celebrant.

Having named this danger, I need to be fairer to Roberts. At critical moments, Roberts holds up Kierkegaard as chastening prophet (*not* spokesperson) of Emergent Christianity precisely because Kierkegaard would help them resist the slide into what I am calling liberal, romantic religion. First, he notes that Kierkegaard’s “understanding of the importance of divine revelation” and of the “importance of its authority” for human life and experience will restrain some of the emerging enthusiasm for the free-play of conversation (26). Second, Roberts directly counters Tim Keel who writes about the significance of the imagination within the emergent church, singing praises to the “artists and poets and others in our midst [who] are in tune with the collective, intuitive, and spiritual” (Keel, as quoted in Roberts 83). Writes Roberts:

A danger lurks in the excitement about the imagination, whether applied to biblical interpretation and theology or to other practices within the church and Christian life. A recovery of the role of imagination in religion should not cause an undue exaltation of the poet, the artist, the musician...over other vocations represented in the church. Indeed, this would be, in Kierkegaard’s terms, to return to the aesthetic sphere of life, where the imagination (for imagination’s sake) is exalted over the practicality, earnestness, and concreteness of actuality. (83-84)

This is wise warning. Given these shared concerns, my own scruples are probably more with emergents than with Roberts’ portrayal of them. In either case, I think that progressive, so-called postmodern evangelicalism such as you find in the emerging church is much more distinguishable from conservative, fundamentalist Christianity than from the liberal Christianity found in most modern, “experiential expressivist”<sup>2</sup> mainline Protestant churches such as my own. If this is true, the theology of emergent churches would be neither as postmodern nor as emergent as it could be. Roberts is more knowledgeable here than I am so we should put the question to him: Are emergents in danger of repeating modern Christianity in the form of romantic religion in the guise of postmodernity? If so, how can Kierkegaard get us past *that* quandary?

## Christendom

My second, related concern is about how the trope of “Christendom” is employed by a number of emergent writers, and how “Kierkegaard” is then evoked—sometimes also as no more than a trope—to describe our time as having become or as quickly becoming a “post-Christendom” era. This concern relates to the first insofar as Christendom seems, to many, to comprise an embankment which the tides of secularism and the winds of postmodernity steadily erode. According to many, postmodernity and the less conventional, more “secular” ways of doing church that emergent Christianity proposes leads us out of the problems that Kierkegaard names “Christendom.” I’m not sure that is the case.

One of Kierkegaard’s central problems, as we know, was how to become a Christian *in* Christendom, that is, in a cultural-political-ecclesial context where “Christian” is the assumed default position of nearly everyone and anyone in such a way that attempts to actually embody the faith seem superfluous at best and smack of self-righteousness at worst. My concern is that many emergent and other progressive Christians tend to link Christendom to *institutionalized*, *ritualized*, and *creedal* Christianity and to the *indoctrination* of people into it. They do so over and against that which they value: the free choice of individuals to have the Christianity of their choosing or making. On these terms, the way to become Christian *after* Christendom would be to simply *choose* from a position “unencumbered by the hassle of old-fashioned custom and dogma.”<sup>3</sup>

To cite just one representative example, for emergent spokesperson Phyllis Tickle, the world’s new way of being Christian and being Church emerges primarily over and against “established churches and their governing bodies” or, again, against those inherited churches filled with members who cling to traditional religious forms “like those who have fallen heir to Grandpa’s old home place and who still like things just the way he had them” and so see no need to “change the furniture.”<sup>4</sup> Far from simply rearranging rooms, the “great emergence” as described by Tickle amounts to the latest giant rummage sale when the church as a whole cleans out its attic, following (in roughly 500 year intervals) the Great Reformation, the Great Schism, Gregory the Great, and the great emergence of Christianity itself.<sup>5</sup> Tickle’s metaphor is telling. The church now requiring reformation amounts to an impersonal structure (cluttered attic and all), while the most promising new forms of Christian identity decidedly resist becoming institutionalized, ritualized, uniform, authoritarian, or otherwise too “churchy.” The choice appears to be between buoying individual freedom and creativity and clinging to wooden social conventions. On those terms, who wouldn’t be emergent?

Tickle’s appeals to individual creativity and choice over-and-against ossified church structures and traditions dovetail with her welcome of secular liberalism—again, with an institutionalized Christendom as the negative foil. In fact, she and other proponents of emergent Christianity carry forward the vision first announced in 1965 with Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City*. Cox unambiguously described the baggage of Christendom and secular society as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. Moreover, he explicitly *celebrated* secularity as authentic Christianity’s first and truest form—the retrieval or revival of which ostensibly gets us around Kierkegaard’s problem of Christendom. Cox says exactly as much, using Europe as a standard for the United States:

Increasingly, the process of secularization in Europe has alleviated Kierkegaard’s problem [of becoming a Christian in Christendom]. Marxism of various kinds, existentialism in its different forms, the passionate humanism of Camus, and a kind of “what-the-hellism” associated with *la dolce vita* [“the sweet life”] have increasingly presented Europeans with genuine, live options to Christian faith. More and more, “being a Christian” is a conscious choice rather than a matter of birth and inertia. The change can hardly be viewed as unfortunate.<sup>6</sup>

As with Tickle, individual choice for Cox in and of itself confers authenticity on faith and practice.<sup>7</sup> The entrapment of Christendom remains limited to the church’s past power to acculturate and indoctrinate. Secularism now frees one for genuine, responsible faith.

How does Roberts stack up to these invocations of Kierkegaard's Christendom in celebration of unencumbered choice in our so-called post-Christendom era? As a much closer reader of Kierkegaard, he stacks up really well, although he also sometimes reflects the common understanding of Christendom, rather than Kierkegaard's.

On the one hand, Roberts does, like emergents, sometimes associate institutionalization as such with idolatry in his chapter "Against Christendom." He also writes of the Christendom that is "still" with us (129, 134) but fading quickly, thereby "creating new opportunities for capturing a fresh powerful vision for testifying to the gospel" (129), or for getting "beyond the trappings of static forms of institutional religion" (145). In these cases, Roberts does seem to reflect the common assumption—and one which the emergent church capitalizes on—that "Christendom" names only the cultural or political power of church as hegemonic institution. On the other hand, in that same chapter on Christendom Roberts also suggests that what the church needs—in Kierkegaard's terms—is not more freedom of choice per se but repentance and prayer. He even commends formation, the process of being schooled into a tradition, as one thing emergent might excel at (144).

Roberts thus helpfully recognizes the tenacity of acculturated and accommodated Christianity *beyond its institutional trappings*. Most importantly, he acknowledges that the response to one configuration of Christendom might entrench us in an ensuing form. Roberts writes, "Kierkegaard was cognizant that his emphasis on the individual person 'before God' and the primacy of subjectivity in his thought could be interpreted in a very limited way and could end up being utilized as justification for yet *another iteration of Christendom*, where everything becomes inward...and not externally expressed" (96-7).

In a dominant culture such as ours that so privileges the freedom of individuals to choose and express that which they find meaningful, might not the praise of interpersonal, immediate relations with Jesus and others—at the expense of institutions, structures, creeds, and so forth—become what Roberts here calls another "iteration" of Christendom, and one which American culture is particularly prone to miss? Do we find ourselves in a post-Christendom situation or something closer to neo-Christendom? If the latter, can Kierkegaard help us to "emerge" beyond that new cult of authenticity?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Lowe, "Second Thoughts About Transcendence." *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo. Blackwell Readings in Continental Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 244.

<sup>2</sup> The language is borrowed from George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Haw, *From Willow Creek to Sacred Heart: Rekindling my Love for Catholicism* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 127-28.

<sup>4</sup> Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 135-40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-31.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 109.

<sup>7</sup> See also Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Taylor here explicitly retrieves the moral norms and frameworks of meaning that occasion what he calls our "age of authenticity." It is only when we take choice as bestowing its *own* meaning and value that authenticity is undercut, precipitating a slide toward empty relativism and the celebration of choice and difference for their own sakes.

## Kierkegaard as Emerging Prophet: A Response to Kyle Roberts

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Kierkegaard's task as a writer was to provide a corrective to the established order of his day by reintroducing Christianity to a church, culture, and society which had so severely confused and compromised "the essentially Christian" that he finally came to the conclusion that Christianity simply did not exist any more. For years Kierkegaard hoped to elicit at least an admission from the officials of the Danish People's Church that the Christianity it promoted was a lenient, toned-down version that bore little or no resemblance to true Christianity, falsely identifying it with paganism, aestheticism, worldliness, and Danish nationalism. When that admission did not materialize, he launched a final open attack upon the established order, especially the officials and clergy of the de facto state church, excoriating them with a barrage of damning epithets and graphically portraying the state church as a "toxic jump heap" that was utterly indefensible.<sup>1</sup> In earlier years, however, Kierkegaard had hoped for and expected a religious reformation in the future that would introduce a new era of spirituality led by a different breed of Christian pastors and/or martyrs who would educate people in true Christianity by their willingness to suffer for the truth.<sup>2</sup> Regarding himself as neither physically nor spiritually qualified to undertake such a reformation himself, Kierkegaard nevertheless saw his task as involving a step-by-step monitoring of anyone who dared to walk ethically in the character of a reformer to see if that person was actually walking in the character of a reformer or merely passing him/herself off as one.<sup>3</sup> In Kierkegaard's estimation, "dabblers in reforming are more corrupting than the most corrupt established order," which in spite of "its many faults" is not "the evil in our time" but is "this evil penchant for reforming, this flirting with wanting to reform, this sham of wanting to reform without being willing to suffer and to make sacrifices."<sup>4</sup> This statement stands as an ominous warning to would-be reformers of the established order, particularly to those who wish to reform the Christian church.

Viewing American Christianity as in dire need of such a reformation, Kyle Roberts suggests that the religious movement which calls itself "emerging" and/or "emergent" Christianity is ready to undertake this daunting task. As a possible guide in carrying out this mission he suggests the prophetic voice of Kierkegaard inasmuch as they purportedly share some important elements in common. Noting similarities regarding divine revelation, subjectivity, imagination, sin, atonement, morality, and the primacy of love in their respective views of the Christian life, Roberts identifies a number of areas where a possible fruitful dialogue between Kierkegaard and emerging postmodern expressions of Christianity may take place. Rightly claiming that not much has been done to relate Kierkegaard's thought to emergent Christianity (Merold Westphal and John Caputo being notable exceptions), he deserves both credit and gratitude for initiating this conversation between them. While Kierkegaard's appeal as a poetic, psychological, philosophical, and religious thinker is widespread, especially in the academic world, his devastating critique of Christendom is often lost at the level of the institutional church, for which it was primarily intended and where it is most needed.

Not being a member of the emergent church myself, I am not qualified to evaluate Roberts' characterization of this movement, which he claims is non-exclusive, non-creedal, pluralistic, egalitarian, skeptical, dialogical, relational, dedicated to a view of the Christian life as a quest or journey, and seeking a fresh, new, vibrant, and authentic form of Christian faith and practice. Locating it both within and beyond evangelicalism and mainline Protestantism and seeing it as involving a critique of both modern liberalism and fundamentalism, Roberts aligns the emergent church primarily with postmodernism, which embraces ambiguity, plurality, indeterminacy of meaning, respect for individuality, and a suspicion of authority. If this is a correct characterization and correlation of emergent Christianity, then it certainly stands to gain from Kierkegaard a more precise understanding of what Christianity is and how one may become and continue to be an authentic Christian in the postmodern age. But it also suggests that Kierkegaard and emergent Christianity

are not entirely in accord, nor are they altogether in tune with postmodernism, inasmuch as both affirm divine revelation and the authority of the Bible as central to Christianity; indeed, there are those who regard Kierkegaard's view of Christianity as pre-modern rather than post-modern in its emphasis on revelation, the authority of the Bible, and the divinity of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

While Kierkegaard would surely applaud the subjective, egalitarian, open, relational, and questing character of this new movement, he did not embrace doubt "as a friend of faith" even though they are mutually opposed to knowledge and certainty. Rather, he viewed doubt as an opposite passion to that of faith which must be brought to an end through a resolution of the will in the decision to believe without being able to understand and mastered in existence through the imitation of Christ.<sup>6</sup> For those who want to affirm doubt in constant tension with faith, the Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno would perhaps make a better partner.<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard was not opposed, however, to using doubt in the right way, which is not to doubt God or the eternal but oneself, namely one's natural capacity and competence to do the good.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he had no quarrel with traditional Christian doctrines, e.g. the doctrines of the Incarnation and Atonement, only with the identification of Christianity as a doctrine or objective account of Christian truth that is to be believed and rationally comprehended rather than an existence-communication that is to be appropriated and re-duplicated in one's own life. Kierkegaard claimed to know exactly what Christianity is and what is involved in becoming a Christian, and he saw it as his duty "to what has been passed on from the fathers" and entrusted to him by his own father to present the ideal picture of what it means to be a Christian in his writings.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Christianity he depicts is not something new or nebulous nor is it open to re-formulation in any essential respect. If emergent Christianity is to be guided by him, therefore, it must cut through what Roberts calls "the maze of an undefined, hopeful, but often confused postmodern faith" (6) by grounding itself firmly in the New Testament, which for Kierkegaard is the absolute standard for determining what Christianity is and what is required to be a Christian, namely faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate who is the redeemer and prototype for humankind. Roberts rightly notes that the imitation of Christ is important in Kierkegaard's thought, but he does not spell out in any detail what this involves for Kierkegaard, namely dying to selfishness and worldliness in voluntary self-denial and suffering in likeness to Christ, which is where the rub really comes in following Christ. Roberts is more interested in addressing epistemological and hermeneutical issues which in his view are the central problems at issue between emergent Christianity and its critics. He thus engages in an extended discussion of foundationalism, realism, and the role of the imagination and community in biblical interpretation and liturgical practices, which are important matters to debate but surely less important for the average church goer, who is or should be more interested in learning how the Christian faith is to be reduplicated in his or her daily life. Given that the fundamental categories of Christianity had become so hopelessly confused and watered down in his day, Kierkegaard felt obligated to clarify what constitutes "the essentially Christian" in the strictest sense, and it is here that his greatest contribution to a potential reformation of the church is to be found.

While the imitation of Christ is emphasized in Kierkegaard's specifically Christian writings, a theme that is equally important, if not more so, in them is the role of Christ as the redeemer of humankind in and through his death on the cross as the atonement for sin. According to Kierkegaard, "the Atonement and grace are and remain definitive" in Christianity.<sup>10</sup> It is important, therefore, to address a criticism of his view of the atonement made by Roberts, namely that it affirms aspects of the traditional penal substitution / satisfaction model, which views salvation as an economic transaction that is unacceptable to postmodern, emergent theology. There are, of course, several different ways in which the atonement of Christ has been understood in the Christian tradition: the Classic, Juridical, Sacrificial, and Exemplar theories. The only place in Kierkegaard's authorship where his understanding of the atonement is spelled out is in his discourses for the Communion on Fridays. In these discourses he does not try to explain or comprehend the atonement, which in his view is incomprehensible and must simply be believed. Nor does he advocate any particular atonement theory in them, although he does view Christ's suffering and death on the cross as a sacrifice that makes repayment or satisfaction for the sins of the world. But he understands Christ's sacrifice in a more personal manner as being offered not for human beings in general but for each person individually. What is emphasized

in the communion discourses, therefore, is the fact that Christ died “also for you,” that is, for all our individual actual sins as well as those that lurk deep within our souls without our being aware of it.<sup>11</sup> In their emphasis on the atonement as the supreme act of divine love that elicits or “loves forth” human love in return, Kierkegaard’s communion discourses also resonate with the Exemplar theory of atonement. What they reflect most of all, however, is a variant version of the juridical theory of atonement called the sacrificial theory, which is based on the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament. In this epistle Christ is seen as both the High Priest and sacrificial victim who acts as the representative of and substitute for human beings in making a sin-offering to God by his death in order to expiate or atone for the sins of the world rather than to propitiate or appease a wrathful God. Kierkegaard explains Christ’s work of atonement in two ways, first of all as the High Priest of Hebrews who sympathizes with human beings by putting himself entirely in our place, suffering the punishment of sin so that we may be saved and suffering death on the cross that we may live. For Kierkegaard, that is precisely what the satisfaction of atonement means. Postmodernists affirm the ultimacy or non-deconstructability of justice, but to suggest that sin has no cost and is simply to be forgiven does not seem to square with the demands of justice, nor is it in accord with the New Testament, which views Christ’s death as a sacrifice in numerous places.<sup>12</sup>

The second way Kierkegaard describes what happens in the atonement is to say that Christ hides or covers a multitude of sins through his sacrificial death. While we may be able to hide our sins from others, conscience does not allow us to hide them from ourselves, leading us to feel the need of a hiding place from our sins and a forgiveness that does not increase our sense of guilt but takes it away. The atonement or satisfaction wrought by Christ’s death is the ultimate pledge that our sins have been forgiven. For Kierkegaard forgiveness is a totally unmerited gift of grace that places the sinner in an infinite debt of gratitude to God in Christ, but it also passes judgment on those who do not respond to Christ’s forgiveness with love in return. Just as, according to Luke 7:47, those who love Christ much are forgiven much, so too those who love him little are forgiven little. In this sense, Kierkegaard observes, love is more severe than justice, which does not forgive at all, whereas everything is forgiven in love, with the result that, if one is forgiven little, it is due to the self-inflicted judgment that one has loved little in return.<sup>13</sup>

Although Kierkegaard finally gave up on the established church as a viable institution in Christendom, he did not give up on Christianity itself nor did he lack a positive conception of what the true church should be in the realm of temporality. As Roberts has pointed out, that is always a church militant, namely a church that is continually in the process of becoming victorious in the world through struggle in a hostile environment that is the opposite of the essentially Christian. But as Kierkegaard’s Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus points out, struggling is always done by single individuals, who by virtue of being spirit or single individuals before God are not only higher than the universal but also higher than the congregation. While we may struggle conjointly with others, we must also struggle individually and give an accounting of ourselves on judgment day when our lives as single individuals will be examined.<sup>14</sup> Still, I think Kierkegaard had no idea what concrete shape a reformation of the Christian church and society should take. He was equally opposed to both communism and pietism as ways of achieving social equality in the world. Given his antipathy toward the numerical and the crowd, I suspect that he would also strongly disapprove of American mega-churches as the way to go. But I think he would wholeheartedly agree with Roberts that the church must extricate itself from privilege, power, and materialism. Imagine, for example, the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Francis divesting itself of all its vast wealth so that he could not only wash the feet of the poor but also lift them out of poverty! That would be a wondrous, kenotic, truly Christian way for a genuine religious and social reformation to begin.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>TM 43-44, 61, 158, 160, 162-66, 188, 226, 321-23, 340.

<sup>2</sup>JP 1: 187, 599; 2: 2649; 6: 6256, 6395, 6761.

<sup>3</sup>JFY 211-12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. 212-13.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Daphne Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> PF 84; JC passim; FSE 67-70; JFY 190, 196-97; UDVS 273; JP 2:1902, 3:3049. See also Stephen N. Dunning, “The Illusory Grandeur of Doubt: The Dialectic of Subjectivity in ‘Johannes Climacus’ in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994), 203-222.

<sup>7</sup> See Jan E. Evans, *Miguel de Unamuno’s Quest for Faith* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 41, 65-82.

<sup>8</sup> EUD 136.

<sup>9</sup> PV/AN 130-31, 138.

<sup>10</sup> JP 2:1909.

<sup>11</sup> DCF 47.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 13:10-13 and *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> DCF 128-31.

<sup>14</sup> PC 223.

## Too Close to Christianity for Comfort?: A Response to Kyle Roberts

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The central argument of Kyle Robert’s *Emerging Prophet* is that the philosophy and theology of Søren Kierkegaard, a thoroughly modern figure, can be put to great constructive use for major trajectories and movements in postmodern American Christianity. Roberts gathers these trajectories and movements, albeit (intentionally) diffuse and unorganized, loosely under the contentious moniker, “the postmodern people of God”, or rather more colloquially, the emerging/emergent church. The bold move here is that Kierkegaard’s “prophetic, alternative consciousness” presented in his writings find themselves naturally fitting within the specific emergent “form of life.” It is Roberts’ position that Kierkegaard’s understanding of subjectivity, authenticity, passion, and faith is *essentially* theological and as such, is at home with the particular language games of the practices and beliefs of these intrepid Christians in their collective struggle against Christendom. Kierkegaard is not just a critical force; he helps them in their quest to reclaim an original and essential spirit of direct faith in Jesus Christ, unmediated by the forced binary choices generated within the modern construction of “culture” and “religion”: fundamentalism and liberalism. Kierkegaard can be that traditional theological resource that grounds the emergent Christian struggle against modernity, freeing to reclaim its true mission and identity in “a new kind of Christianity,” presumably outside modern systems and frameworks.

While this may indeed be *Emerging Prophet’s* central argument, I do not consider it to be its most important one. Indeed, the book can be read both as an introduction to Kierkegaard’s theology and as an introduction to the theology of the Emerging/emergent Christian movement. It is thorough and mature enough, despite its short length, in both areas. The important point, I think, that undergirds the book’s argument is the fact that interpreting Kierkegaard as a theologian, which was once considered somewhere between novel and scandalous, has become mainstream, perhaps even ‘establishment.’ That Kierkegaard would be perceived as being quite at home within Christianity, with the codes and habits of its theological vernacular, would have deeply surprised him. Not that I am wanting to discern an original, “historical” Kierkegaard so as to set him against an “effective” variant, but only eager to ask more questions about what precisely we are doing when we read Kierkegaard, even his signed and explicitly religious writings, as a Christian, much less a Christian theologian—a designation that he would be all accounts would have likely resisted.

Reading this book was a bit like catching up with a very old and dear friend. I was fortunate enough to study under Kyle Roberts in Bethel Seminary. With the same nostalgia and ease of familiarity that one enjoys when reacquainting oneself with an old friend, I read this book in its final form with great joy and anticipation. But as it often goes with old friends, one also becomes easily annoyed by the little idiosyncrasies, those minor “quirks” that often go undetected by the uninitiated. In those early days, I was taught how to think

theologically—indeed how to think like a Christian—by the work of Søren Kierkegaard. What irony! Of all the possibilities one is normally presented with during one's seminary years, it was Søren Kierkegaard that taught me how to be a theologian! My own comments will be focused on this idea of reading Kierkegaard as a Christian prophet, which I think amounts to a distinct hermeneutical strategy, a type that produces a particular “Kierkegaard,” one that may indeed prove to be quite different from the “historical” Kierkegaard—if there is such a thing.

So much attention in Kierkegaard studies has been given to how best to read Kierkegaard: question of interpretation, methods, intertextual strategies, and the like. Those familiar with his oeuvre know that Kierkegaard was astonishingly self-conscious about his work and about his readership, coupled with his equally complicated ideas about authorship. We should take notice, then of, at Robert's central interpretative move here: he presents, with little fanfare, Kierkegaard as a theologian. It takes little self-consciousness qualification, it appears, to characterize Kierkegaard's ideas as freely available for theological use—a move that should give us some pause, considering how peculiar Kierkegaard was about his own writing, always resisting the idea that one might simply trust him at word, that he always meant what he wrote, and so it should be taken at *prima facie*.

According to Roberts, Kierkegaard is a prophet for and of the emerging church, heralding the challenges and prefiguring the critiques that emerging Christianities level against both the conservative and liberal sectors of American Protestant Christendom. Roberts convincingly argues that there are intriguing familial similarities between Kierkegaard's theology and that of “the postmodern people of God.” He is so successful on this point that this book ought to become *the* place to go for those eager to better understand these parallels and integrate the dynamics of this important relationship, not only in terms of understanding this very important movement within American Evangelical Protestantism, but also in terms of understanding the contemporary salience of Kierkegaard's theology. The importance of Kierkegaard's theology is both in its force and its structural elements: the dialectic between the critical and the constructive lend is one feature of Kierkegaard's prophetic consciousness, a category for which Roberts wisely turns to the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. Roberts finds Brueggemann's account of the prophet consciousness to be an apt description of the effect that Kierkegaard hopes this theological position will have on Christendom: “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception, alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”<sup>1</sup> To the extent to which Emerging/emergent Christianity takes up this task, Kierkegaard emerges as a particularly salient figure in the Christian tradition that nevertheless grounds them, keeping them squarely within the Christianity while freeing them from the modern strictures endemic to Christendom. Indeed, I find this thesis to be very convincing—and this is what bothers me. The Kierkegaard that I find when I read *Emerging Prophet* is far too familiar, too digestible, too agreeable—it is too close to Christianity for comfort.

Put differently, I am concerned about the kind of reading represented here—one that appears to be at ease when closely linking Christian theology to Kierkegaard. I wonder if it produces a version of Kierkegaard that handily affirms contemporary theological sensibilities, perhaps in contradistinction both to the “historical” Kierkegaard (if there is such a thing) and the “effective” Kierkegaard. At some points, it is clear that the *prophetic* nature of Kierkegaard ought to leave us all a bit nervous, unsettled, restless, even if the reader find herself in agreement with the theological, cultural, and religious perspective broadly identified with the emerging church. The overall gist of the book is to draw sharp continuities between Kierkegaard and postmodern Christianity, and yet I wonder if this really does justice to the dialectic and ironic ways in which Kierkegaard engages theological questions. Is it really that obvious that we can identity Kierkegaard as a theologian who would be quite at home in faith communities whose collective lives resemble the privilege and self-indulgence of indie rock rather than the self-abnegation and suffering of Jesus? Roberts does very well to emphasize themes like the theology of the cross, the gospel of suffering, and the political demands of faith, but seems to consider them more in line with emerging Christianity than in contradistinction to it.

We do find a very particular “Kierkegaard” here, one that is only conceivable after landmark texts in the field (not only the early Dupré, but also David Gouwens, Sylvia Walsh, Lee Barrett, C. Stephen Evans, Amy Laura Hall) wherein we discovered in Kierkegaard a theological voice that had for a long time been overlooked and therefore underutilized. *Emerging Prophet* is not merely an attempt to read Kierkegaard as a conversation partner for postmodern forms of Christian faith and practice, as this move is altogether too easy. Its more radical point is that Kierkegaard can, and indeed must, be read *as a prophet*. The decision to read and use Kierkegaard this way affords emergent Christianity an opportunity to not only employ Kierkegaard’s work to aid their own theological and ethical goals, but also to continue to think more and more thoroughly about key matters. Kierkegaard ends up dovetailing all too cleanly with the ideas of leading emergent figures. Roberts envisions Kierkegaard as the instigator of a critical uneasiness, a restlessness, a interventionary scandal between postmodern Christianity and established Christian communities. But what about postmodern Christianities themselves? Is Kierkegaard really postmodern? Is Kierkegaard really Christian? These questions are too easily answered in the affirmative and as a result, Kierkegaard’s critical modality hardly registers amidst the frequent citations of resonance, continuity, and partnership.

This further specifies my question about the relationship between the critical and the prophetic, especially in reference to the relation between Kierkegaard’s theology and that of the emergent church. I think there are some ways that Kyle privileges an idea of the prophetic as a kind of anticipation or foreshadowing that predicts the course of events and ideas prior to their fruition; he reads Kierkegaard as anticipating many of the theological questions raised by the emergent church’s challenges, and this seems quite right in my judgment. And yet I am not particularly certain this captures the textured complexity of reading Kierkegaard as a prophetic voice, namely its *critical* and *negative* aspects. Is there a sense in which Kierkegaard must also be “used” as a site of immanent critique of emergent communities? It is true that we see glimpses here and there, but they appear more or less to be rather slimmed-down attempts to anticipate this objection, rather than actually respond to it.

Can we not also discern threads and layers of Kierkegaard’s work that present a rather stiff threat to the veracity of emergent narcissism and self-congratulatory practices, to the heterogeneity, the way that postmodern Christianity is likewise branded, packaged, and sold in a way activity complicit with commodity fetishism? Would Kierkegaard not have found fault with the way that emergent Christianity is often arranged, promoted, and structured in order to “reach those who have been turned off” by more traditional approaches to religious identity and practice? If we are going to embrace the prophetic voice in Kierkegaard, is there not a sense that Kierkegaard has something to say about the ways that emergent Christianities have not avoided the monological trappings of bourgeoisie cultural formations, or the alienating moods of the modern social character? Can we not also use Kierkegaard to identify the ways that emergent Christianity, while it may not be “Christendom” proper, has itself fallen prey to its own form of cultural establishment—with its own rituals, practices, and narratives to which it is always already entangled? It is in this way that we can compare, perhaps, the critique of Christendom in Kierkegaard with that of Marx’s critique of ideology. Much can be said about the continuity of Kierkegaard’s conception of critique with both the Frankfurt School’s critique of the Culture Industry, and with the Slavoj Žižek’s dismissal of cynical false consciousness, both of which would have an ideological field day with the cover image of the book which packages and mediates Kierkegaard as an commodified object of consumption and fetishism, complicit in and benefiting from the corporate deployment of cynical aesthetics.

Following Max Horkheimer’s classic definition in the 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”, critical theory is a *social* theory that critiques dynamics rather than simply trying to understand and explain the world as a merely descriptive or normative way. Fueled by a negative dialectics, critical theory integrates Kant and Marx in their respective uses of the term “critique” in that it examines and establishes the limits of a body of knowledge, accounting for the weaknesses of the fundamental concepts as they are used *within* that specific knowledge regime. Marx further politicized it into a critique of ideology, linked irreducibly to the liberating

praxis of social revolution. In this view, immanent forms of *critique* are always part and parcel of what a prophetic imagination affords theology. I am suggesting that this aspect of the prophetic gets a bit lost in the midst of Robert's justified eagerness to make the case that Kierkegaard is a germane voice for the postmodern people of God. If we are to understand the prophetic voice to function *as* a critical theory, on account of its own negative dialectics, a critical prophetic theology must restrain from the kind of theological immediacy that the emerging church is so quick to embrace. As such, I wonder if Kierkegaard is a much less friendly voice for the postmodern people of God, but also a far more prophetic—and thus critical—one than we get in *Emerging Prophet*.

It is important, I think, to heed Albert Schweitzer's warning about the "well-gazers" where in the nineteenth century "life of Jesus" scholars looked into "the well" of scholarship about the historical Jesus and conveniently discovered there a Jesus whose life and ministry very closely resembled their own. Roberts takes up a contextual hermeneutics with Kierkegaard that seems to render his theology in a similar way. Roberts's particular reading of Kierkegaard amounts to a rather strategic *use* of Kierkegaard and his theology that serves the emerging forms of postmodern Christianity as they try to find their unique voice articulation within the fractured and polyphonic landscape of American Protestant Christianity.

What does this mean for how we ought to understand what *Emerging Prophet* offers us in terms of the relevance of Kierkegaard's theology for the emerging church? I conclude with the following questions, some of which are truly open for me: First, do we agree that Kierkegaard can and should be leveraged for the sake of illuminating *particular* theological ideas and interests of a particular religious identity and practice? Does this not strike us as serving a kind of identitarian politics that Kierkegaard would find problematic? Do we run the risk of participating in a kind of Schweitzerian well-gazing, whereby in our quest to understand the contemporary significance of Kierkegaard, we look into the well of his writings and discover the theological "shape" of Kierkegaard in the water—or better, as framed, contoured, and fetishized into the screen of our iPad Minis? Second, what characterization best fits Kierkegaard in relation to postmodern forms of Christianity: as a prophet or a critic? Indeed, it is clear that he can and must be both to be either.

I raise these questions as a dear friend of this book, as a grateful reader who sees so much of himself in its pages, as one willing to risk pressing hard at a few nits, precisely because I consider the book to be quite important. Indeed, I have learned much from this work—and the countless conversations that preceded it—about what it means to be Christian, to practice a restless, uncertain, and doubting Christian faith, and to appropriate hope and justice in a broken world desperately in need of both. Notwithstanding my concerns, I consider *Emerging Prophet* to be a fine contribution to this ethical and political work, to contemporary theology, and to Kierkegaard studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination*, second ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 13, as quoted in Roberts, 2.

## ***Emerging Prophet: A Reply to Jason Mahn, Sylvia Walsh, and Silas Morgan***

**Kyle A. Roberts**  
**Bethel University**

I am grateful to Jason, Sylvia, and Silas, each of whom has brought a uniquely insightful and challenging perspective to *Emerging Prophet*. My goal in this book was to explore what Kierkegaard's theology means for the Christian church—in our time. As a Christian theologian, this has been the central question behind my reading of Kierkegaard; however, I fully recognize that this is by no means the only good reason to be interested in Kierkegaard. Nonetheless, I set out in this book to explore what Kierkegaard offers to the growing set of questions and concerns regarding what it means to be Christian and to be and do “church” in the contemporary world.

The emerging church has been attempting to carve out a new way of being Christian and doing church in a postmodern context; as such, it casts aside the “old wineskins” of modernist forms of church and seeks a way beyond both modernist fundamentalism and modernist liberalism. Kierkegaard's critiques of elements of modernism and his anticipations of aspects of postmodernism position him uniquely as both a guide and a prophetic voice (in the sense of a *critical consciousness*) for the emerging church—a creative, reforming movement within Christianity that embraces elements of the postmodern turn.

As with any project that attempts to “use” Kierkegaard, my thesis is open to critique. What does it mean to use Kierkegaard as a theological source for contemporary life? Which “Kierkegaard” are we using? And what—or who—determines the validity of a particular use? Silas Morgan questions whether I have used the real Kierkegaard: would the real Kierkegaard be so friendly to emergent Christianity? Have I domesticated or morphed Kierkegaard to fit postmodern Christianity? Have I muted his *truly* prophetic, and incisively critical, voice? Is Kierkegaard as friendly to contemporary Christianity and, in particular, to *postmodern* Christianity as I have taken him to be? Silas's critical question is an important one. Perhaps in the “apologetic” approach of my book (wanting to introduce Kierkegaard to a community which I think shares quite a bit in common with him) I have underscored the commonalities and understated those places where Kierkegaard's voice might be a dissonant one.

Nonetheless, I remain convinced that the impulses of Kierkegaard and the critical reflections implied in his theology toward established Christianity are applicable to and useful for the emerging church movement. The restlessness motivating the emerging church to rethink elements of institutional Christianity in America (elements both of mainline Protestantism and evangelical “big box” mega-church pragmatism) is not entirely dissimilar to the restlessness which motivated Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom in his day. Just as Kierkegaard came to question whether established Christianity was salvageable, so emergent Christians are questioning whether current institutional Christianity is beyond saving in its current form. Perhaps the old wineskins have broken beyond repair.

But emergent Christianity has in many respects set out to radically rethink (rather than just moderately reform or refine) the structures of the church: its hierarchical and corporate polity, its implicit—or explicit—objectivist dogmatism, its often-superficial or “thin” theology, its inability or unwillingness to countenance difficult questions, and the resultant flattening or leveling of what it means to be a Christian (the “crowd” nature of institutional Christianity). The emerging church is trying—however clumsily—to go to a deeper place—a more intimate, sacred, and vulnerable place. A place that I think Kierkegaard can help them to go, because both Kierkegaard and the emerging church diagnose the problem of Christianity in similar ways: objectivity is valued over subjective appropriation, doctrinal assent over inward appropriation, destination or fixed identity rather than process and “quest.” Whether my project is truly successful is an open question, and requires

looking at specific issues of content. This is what both Sylvia Walsh and Jason Mahn's paper, in particular, address.

Mahn worries that I have misused or—in at least a few places—misunderstood Kierkegaard's critique of *Christendom* (or, if I haven't, perhaps a number of emergent thinkers have). But by *Christendom*, did Kierkegaard have in mind only the conflation of the state and the church, such that the church was swallowed up by the political powers of the State, with the consequence that Danish citizenship was equated with membership in the church, resulting in a pervasive *nominalism*, or a lack of religious seriousness in the church at large? Jason writes, "My concern is that many emergent and other progressive Christians tend to link Christendom to *institutionalized, ritualized, and creedal* Christianity and to the *indoctrination* of people into it. They do so over and against that which they value: the free choice of individuals to have the Christianity of their choosing or making. On these terms, the way to become Christian *after* Christendom would be to simply choose from a position [quoting Chris Haw] 'unencumbered by the hassle of old-fashioned custom and dogma.'" While Jason's question is important, I want to insist that, while Kierkegaard had a more technical or context-specific definition of *Christendom* than many emergent critics use, Kierkegaard did link "Christendom to *institutionalized, ritualized, and creedal* Christianity and to the *indoctrination* of people into it." He was equally critical of orthodox creedalism and of fundamentalist Biblicism as he was of the conflation of state and church; he was as critical of *orthodox* Lutheran creedalism as he was of the more "liberal" cultural Christianity. So I would want to press the point that Christendom means more than this; or rather, that the two are inextricably related. The "trappings" of institutionalism are not disconnected from Kierkegaard's critique of the problems of the state-church conflation. In her review, it appears that Walsh agrees with me on this point: Kierkegaard's "devastating critique of Christendom is often lost at the level of the institutional church, for which it was primarily intended and where it is most needed." Kierkegaard's most strident criticisms of *Christendom*, even though targeted at the form in which it took in *his* day, point to ways in which the institutional church gets bogged down by materialism, superficial religious practices, fundamentalist legalism and judgmentalism, and other "isms" that drain the church of its spirit.

In what I think is his most interesting point, Mahn suggests that, in setting modernist literalism (evangelical fundamentalism) against modernist liberalism (mainline Protestantism), I might be begging for another problem. By modernist liberalism, he asks, do I not really have in mind *rationalism* of the intellectual sort (historicism, skepticism, etc.), which is really only descriptive of the educated liberal elites—i.e. the *cultured despisers*? If these are the two sides of the ditch (evangelical fundamentalism and liberal academic skepticism), then might the *real* "third way" end up being a kind of Romanticism, what George Lindbeck has called "experiential-expressivism"? But if rationalism is the problem, then is experientialism really the solution? As Mahn rightly points out, this would simply be yet another iteration of modernism. This is Mahn's most poignant criticism; indeed, it is conceivable that the emerging church could simply wind up being yet another expression of modernism, insofar as *freedom of choice* and *personal experience* becomes the goal and the criterion for "authenticity." Mahn notes, however, that I do issue a caution on this very point. To the extent to which emergent Christians value freedom of choice over divine revelation, creativity and artistic expression over prayer, and the celebration of doubt over repentance, then Kierkegaard's prophetic voice should promptly and emphatically rise to the surface.

In her essay, Sylvia Walsh suggests that Kierkegaard would not have elevated to such a high plane the experience of *doubt* in Christian existence. Is doubt the "other side of faith" or does Kierkegaard think that genuine, passionate faith squeezes doubt from the picture? Kierkegaard was obviously against a certain kind of doubt—the *modernist* kind. That is, Kierkegaard clearly viewed the Cartesian, foundationalist approach to certainty as a dead end. This road begins with doubt, but goes nowhere. Kierkegaard had no room for doubt in that he had little use for the skeptical rationalist project. In this modernist, Cartesian framework, doubt is the friend of objective certainty, not of faith; Climacus calls this kind of doubt the "toehold" of certainty. As is well-known, Kierkegaard believed that objective certainty of Christian faith (an existential reality) is neither

possible nor desirable. For Kierkegaard, whereas subjective certainty is possible, Christian faith is always shrouded in the paradoxical. In this sense, Kierkegaard is a theologian of the cross, not of glory. While rationalist (objective) doubt can be overcome by the passion of faith, does this only need to be done once? Do we not find ourselves in something of a cyclical pattern, one in which a certain kind of doubt is always lurking around the corner?

An implication of the rejection of the project of epistemological (objective) certitude means that faith and the subjective passion of faith is not tied to certainty about matters like the historicity of Jesus, the inerrancy of the Bible, or the problem of evil, etc. When emergent Christians speak of doubt, I think they mean there are some nagging questions that reveal a lack of epistemological certainty. In the modernist framework, such doubts could spell the end of faith itself. In the postmodern framework, such doubts can remain *as doubts*, and yet be dialectically overcome by action—by praxis. While there is no reason to celebrate doubt, the subjectivity of faith suggests that churches need to make room for genuine questioning around the “objective” elements of religion. The emerging church recognizes the importance of such doubt as integral moments in the development of faith and in the deepening of subjectivity.

Another important critique Walsh makes has to do with my treatment of Kierkegaard’s theology of sin and the atonement. She writes: “It is important, therefore, to address a criticism of [Kierkegaard’s] view of the atonement made by Roberts, namely that it affirms aspects of the traditional penal substitution / satisfaction model, which views salvation as an economic transaction that is unacceptable to postmodern, emergent theology.” Here I want to clarify that, while I acknowledged Kierkegaard’s basic affirmation of the penal substitution / satisfaction model, I note that his atonement theology was “more nuanced than a simple restatement of the theory would imply” (90). Furthermore, here I cite Walsh, among other scholars, as pointing out the nuances and ambiguities in Kierkegaard’s atonement theology. I state that, whereas traditional models “tend to speak of salvation as an economic transaction, fundamentally based in God’s need for justice and, consequently, his need for a payment (a punishment) to be exacted in stead of the guilty one so that he can forgive,” for Kierkegaard, on the other hand, “God has already forgiven us in Christ and has already repaired the relationship” from his side (91). What is needed is the existential embrace of that forgiveness through the act of repentance, which leads to reconciliation with God. *We* need to be reconciled to God, not the other way around. Furthermore, as I point out, while Kierkegaard “takes sin seriously,” he understands sin as the cause of a relational break with God—a break which is repaired through atonement, so long as sinners appropriate the benefits of atonement by accepting God’s love (91). Kierkegaard’s articulation of the atonement privileges God’s forgiveness over his justice; the atonement in Kierkegaard does not so much signal an objective, economic exchange as point to God’s love and his desire for reconciliation with humanity. From God’s side, all that is required for satisfaction has already been enacted; forgiveness is already on the table. This is a subtle shift in the way that atonement theories are commonly understood within many Protestant churches today, but the result remains an “orthodox” theory of atonement and, as Murray Rae has pointed out, is not only true to Kierkegaard but is also more consistent with the New Testament understanding of atonement.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard’s privileging of a gift-economy of forgiveness over a debt-economy of justice is consistent with the tenor of the emerging church; which is more interested in reconciliation than in retaining a “traditional” sense of God’s overriding justice. Nonetheless, any appropriation of Kierkegaard’s theology of the atonement needs to grapple with the gravity of *sin*; to undermine sin’s significance would be to undercut Kierkegaard’s theological anthropology and his Christology. On *this point*, the seriousness of sin is perhaps the place where Kierkegaard’s prophetic voice might be a most poignant cautionary word to the emerging church. And here Walsh is right to raise this important question. As I note, emergent theologian Tony Jones, in *The Church is Flat*, suggests that, given their “generally optimistic view about humankind,” emergent Christians need to develop a theology of sin that is both realistic and relational (103-104). Kierkegaard can provide this corrective.

*One final remark:* On the cover jacket of *Emerging Prophet* is an image of an iPad on which is juxtaposed an image of Kierkegaard. That image of Kierkegaard is a digital replica of a painting, which was done by my sister, Stephanie. That painting is a creative representation of a digital image (found on the web) of a painting that was done of Kierkegaard by an artist in the nineteenth century. Imagine this trail of representations! The creative renderings, the imperfect reflections, the way in which the media transfers and disseminates those images—all these constitute the travels of an image. But which counts as the *true* image of Kierkegaard? Who will determine this—and on what basis? In the case of appropriating Kierkegaard for any contemporary project, the challenge is similar. Would not Kierkegaard want his thought to be used in the pursuit of a pressing into a deeper Christian life? A community more definitively shaped by *works of love*? Can Kierkegaard be justly “used” in this way? In any case, for better or worse, this has been my attempt—the reader can determine the outcome. My book has been limited by the unique focus on a particular, and still somewhat obscure, slice of contemporary Christianity. Perhaps an even more important project lies ahead for those who wish to appropriate Kierkegaard for the church: utilizing Kierkegaard’s theological provocations in the direction of informing, challenging and shaping the larger Christian church toward a more *New Testament Christianity*.

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 100.

## BOOK REVIEW

***The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, by Richard McCombs.**

**Indiana University Press, 2013.**

**244pp, \$40.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0253006479.**

**Reviewed by Walter Wietzke  
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In his book, *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, Richard McCombs argues that Kierkegaard deliberately employs an argumentative strategy that appears irrational for the sake of conveying a deeper, more rational truth about human nature. For the most part this strategy refers to the idiosyncratic style that Kierkegaard brings to his writings, of which the concept of indirect communication is a well-known example. This claim about Kierkegaard’s work is not so controversial. In the course of McCombs’s argument, however, he also puts forward the thesis that faith is “above reason,” and that it actually “perfects” human reason (14-16). At the conclusion of the book we even learn that “faith is a kind of understanding” (214). Faith can thus be understood in supra-rational terms—rather than non-rational or a-rational—since it is “more reasonable than ordinary reason” (15). In all of these cases McCombs seems to have in mind the more theoretical function of reason: that is, an abstract logical framework that could systematize human existence and religious faith. From this perspective Christianity is paradoxical in that it satisfies the most deep-seated interests that we human beings have, even though it does not present itself as a reasonable existential possibility to such a framework.

McCombs bases support for his thesis on a particular account of reason. Reason should be understood as coextensive with human subjectivity. Subjectivity is an expression of “practical rationality” or, as I shall also refer to it, practical reasoning (2). In its simplest of manifestations practical reasoning requires that human agents utilize their capacity to organize their lives in order to satisfy basic interests that belong to them personally, and to demonstrate consistency in living out these goals (3). But in another sense consistency in living also shows us the ideal expression of subjectivity. As the reader of the Climacan texts well knows, Socrates is the hero of subjectivity, in that his quest to understand truth is a perfect illustration of the interest we ought to have for our eternal happiness. Socrates shows an infinite interest for understanding himself as an

existing human being, and in so doing he distinguishes himself from those people who lead a “pathologically objective” life (35), people whom Climacus calls “objective thinkers”. Part of an objective thinker’s problem is that he or she is fundamentally mistaken about the means that will satisfy his or her inherent human interest for an eternal happiness. Abstract, theoretical reflection on the issue does not help one achieve it; only the components of subjectivity can properly respond to this desire. In sum, this is evidence for the overriding rationality of subjectivity.

The main virtue of this book is that it provides a focused, sustained, and complementary reading of several primary texts that are not often read together. Obviously the Climacian texts are important to McCombs’s discussion, but he also makes use of works such as *The Point of View*, *Judge for Yourself*, *For Self-Examination*, and *Christian Discourses*. McCombs’s interpretation of these signed and pseudonymous works is reasonable when considered in light of what is surely a common sentiment in Kierkegaard studies: that Kierkegaard actually did think Christian existence was superior to other forms of existence, stages, or spheres. It was Climacus who famously declared that Christianity is “a perfect fit” for the existing human subject, so obviously Kierkegaard’s work suggests that a Christian mode of existence can satisfy certain structural elements within human existence (i.e., the capacity to take an infinite interest in one’s eternal happiness). In a few places McCombs even offers some interesting comparisons between Kierkegaard and particular elements of the Buddhist philosophical tradition (80-82). Nevertheless, there are crucial philosophical and methodological nuances to Kierkegaard’s overall position that invalidate the more ambitious claims of McCombs’s thesis.

One of these ambitious claims is that the example of Socrates inevitably leads to Christianity; McCombs interprets the stage of naturalized religion as ineluctably inclined towards Christianity (see especially Chapters 1, 6 & 7). In this sense subjectivity involves a commitment to pursue certain ideals, or to follow an established path of reasoning about what is ultimately important and worth caring about in life. Now, the advantage to this understanding of subjectivity is that it provides a roadmap of sorts for guiding a person beyond certain forms of self-deception (i.e., a person’s tendency to neglect the obligations inherent to an ethical-religious existence). Self-deception is a problem that some of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms address, as well as Kierkegaard himself. But at times McCombs interprets Kierkegaard’s view to be that human subjectivity always makes accessible to us some basic knowledge of ethical-religious truths (191).

This ambitious account of subjectivity pushes things too far. The idea that the Socratic philosophical position (i.e., Religiousness A) will inevitably lead one to embrace Christianity (i.e., Religiousness B) is not supported in the main texts that address the distinction between these two forms of existence. For example, Climacus himself makes it clear in the *Postscript* that “Religiousness A... is so strenuous for a human being that there is always a sufficient task in it” (CUP, 1:557). To be sure Religiousness A is a necessary condition for B, insofar as it generates the appropriate quality of concern for one’s eternal happiness. But arising as it does from the natural condition of human existence, there must remain a conceptual boundary between it and revealed religion. The latter always requires an extra interpretive step that is not implicit in the former. This is not an inconsequential difference. However discouraging a way of life Religiousness A may sometimes appear (and an earnest reader of the *Postscript* should probably think that), its soteriological framework will always provide worthy and legitimate existential goals to a human being.

We find the same understanding of this distinction in *The Sickness Unto Death*. In the chapter “Sin Is Not a Negation but a Position” (*SUD*: 96-100), for example, Anti-Climacus is explicit on the point that one cannot access Christian truths through the channels of natural, ordinary human reason itself. One of the central points of this chapter is to differentiate between those truths that are accessible to human reason and those that are based on revelation and dogmatics. Of course, from Anti-Climacus’s perspective it is true that Christianity ultimately serves the human self better than a non-Christian understanding of the self, but that fact does not mean that knowledge of Christianity is necessarily implicit in the natural, non-Christian understanding. Moreover, the discussion of unconscious despair earlier in *Sickness* illustrates the fact that we do not necessarily

have access to the Christian anthropology of the self. It is true that some people do take a more active role in their self-deception and despair, and can be held accountable for that, but accountability to Christianity is not the natural state of human existence.

To be fair, McCombs does recognize that specific knowledge of Christian content requires revelation (148). But the point of the Climacan and Anti-Climacan texts is that this knowledge brings about a holistic change to our existential situation. It is only with this new perspective that we can review our former life and see the continuity between our prior and present condition. It is also possible that this sort of existential evaluation pertains to any new perspective one brings. If the proof for a superior form of life consists in how well it “fits”, subjectively speaking (181-183), then we must acknowledge that other, non-Christian forms of existence can meet this standard (especially Religiousness A) and that the rationality of Christian existence is a moot point.

In conclusion, McCombs offers a fresh approach to reading several Kierkegaard texts alongside one another, but I do not think that the texts support the more ambitious aspects of McCombs’s argument.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Both Anthony Aumann and Adam Buben have raised points similar to those in this review. See Aumann’s review at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/46241-the-paradoxical-rationality-of-sren-kierkegaard/>; and Buben, “Review of *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*,” forthcoming in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*.

***Kierkegaard and Existentialism* by Jon Stewart**  
**Ashgate Publishing, 2011**  
**428 pp, \$116.90, ISBN 978-1409426417**

**Reviewed by Eric Hamm**  
**Purdue University**

*Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, the collection of essays situating Kierkegaard within the broader field of existentialism, represents a valuable addition to the “Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources” series put out by Ashgate Publishing in 2011. In this volume, the ninth in the sequence, editor Jon Stewart has brought together papers comparing Kierkegaard’s work, and particularly the early, pseudonymous writings, with other big names in existentialist philosophy. The usefulness of this book lies in these comparisons, and the intuitive chapter layout provides readers with an easy way to access important current scholarship on the subject. Existentialism as a field is undoubtedly interdisciplinary. As such, the essays in this book are divided into sections reflecting the different areas of Kierkegaard’s contributions. The contributions on Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Simone de Beauvoir bring the philosophical aspect of Kierkegaard into focus. Similarly, analyses of Kierkegaard’s connections to writers such as Martin Buber, Nicholas Berdyaev, Gabriel Marcel and Franz Rosenzweig highlight the profound influence of his religious writings.

In his preface, Stewart explains that the purpose of this volume is to explore Kierkegaard’s somewhat complicated relationship with the rest of the existentialist movement. Although many of the thinkers popular in the heyday of European existential philosophy allied themselves with the Kierkegaardian tradition, it is not clear whether the Danish philosopher would recognize many traces of his own musings in their works. Take Jean-Paul Sartre, who cited Kierkegaard as the foundation for much of his own thought. Arguably, Stewart writes, Kierkegaard would disagree with even the most basic of Sartrean constructions that “existence precedes essence.”<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the religious character of Kierkegaard’s work seems to be at odds with most twentieth-

century interpretations of Sartre and Camus. This tension is highlighted in George Pattison's contribution to the volume, "Nicholas Berdyaev: Kierkegaard amongst the Artists, Mystics, and Solitary Thinkers." In this chapter, Pattison argues that the religious is at odds with any kind of radical individualism.<sup>2</sup> Given this kind of disconnect, Pattison, Stewart, and the other contributors seek to explore nuanced ways of understanding Kierkegaard within the context of the later philosophical movement of existentialism.

Although the authors illuminate ways in which later existentialists departed from Kierkegaard's thought, this volume is not intended to cast doubt on the importance of Kierkegaard's influence on religion or existential philosophy. Without a doubt, his understanding of the world was seminal to Heidegger and Sartre's earliest works. Vincent McCarthy's "Martin Heidegger: Influence Hidden in Full View," for example, demonstrates the great extent to which Kierkegaard's work shaped later existential thought.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir was "powerfully influenced by Kierkegaard in key moments in the development of her thought" according to Ronald M. Green and Mary Jean Green in "Simone de Beauvoir: A Founding Feminist's Appreciation of Kierkegaard."<sup>4</sup>

However, not all of the essays in the collection are meant to show only *Kierkegaard's* influence. In "Karl Jaspers: A Great Awakener's Way to Philosophy of Existence," István Czakó seeks to show how Jaspers's interpretation had a lasting impact on Kierkegaard's legacy.<sup>5</sup> In his contribution to the volume, Czakó demonstrates how Jaspers's discussions of Kierkegaard affected the latter's reception in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Other chapters demonstrate how some thinkers actively distanced themselves from Kierkegaard, even if through tenuous understandings of his work. In his essay "Martin Buber: 'No-One Can so Refute Kierkegaard as Kierkegaard Himself,'" Peter Šajda argues Buber's "interpretation was demonstrably based on a narrow and largely arbitrary selection of Kierkegaard's texts."<sup>6</sup> Šajda thus seeks to salvage Kierkegaard from Buber's misinterpretation.

Kierkegaard maintains a proper place within the religious philosophy of both Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel; the latter's similarity to Kierkegaard's own thought, according to Jeanette Bresson Ladegaard Knox in "Gabriel Marcel: The Silence of Truth," remains primarily coincidental, as Marcel does not openly credit Kierkegaard as an inspiration the way Jaspers does. One must both accept the existential primacy of individuality while at the same time acknowledging some kind of higher power. This central dilemma is presented well throughout the entirety of the volume.

If there is any weakness to this collection, it lies in the format. With only one essay per major figure in the existentialist movement, readers are presented with univocal accounts of philosophical connections. Despite the potential dangers of this format, however, most of the included chapters present a balanced, objective viewpoint. Manuela Hackel's essay on Sartre, "Jean-Paul Sartre: Kierkegaard's Influence on His Theory of Nothingness," does so with particular aplomb.<sup>7</sup> Without a doubt, the editor adapts to the limitations of a short volume well by including representations touching on a wide range of relevant thinkers. If readers are left feeling that these essays present only one opinion on issues that are controversial, the secondary literature on Kierkegaard is exhaustive enough to satiate any desire for alternate viewpoints.

In all, the chapters are well chosen to explore the philosophical connections between Kierkegaard and other key existentialist philosophers. Stewart did an admirable job selecting contributions that both place Kierkegaard within the existential movement, and separate him from it—surely an aporetic construction Kierkegaard himself would admire.

This book provides an excellent starting point for researchers looking to situate Kierkegaard with other thinkers commonly labeled as "existentialists." Each of the essays presents how Kierkegaard's thought

influenced modern theorists and writers. While Stewart remains silent beyond the preface, his editorial choices confirm his overall intentions brought up at the beginning. Philosophy has taken too much credit for Kierkegaard, and religion has not taken enough. Sartre exploited Kierkegaard; Buber ought to have used him more, with a more careful reading. *Kierkegaard and Existentialism* encourages readers to use (but not exploit) recent scholarship in order to understand Kierkegaard's complex place within multiple philosophical and religious traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Stewart, "Preface" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) pp. ix – x.

<sup>2</sup> George Pattison, "Nicholas Berdyaev: Kierkegaard amongst the Artists, Mystics, and Solitary Thinkers" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) pp. 23 – 32.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent McCarthy, "Martin Heidegger: Kierkegaard's Influence Hidden in Full View" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) pp. 95 – 126.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald M. Green and Mary Jean Green, "Simone de Beauvoir: A Founding Feminist's Appreciation of Kierkegaard" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) pp. 1 – 22.

<sup>5</sup> István Czakó, "Karl Jaspers: A Great Awakener's Way to Philosophy of Existence" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) pp. 155 – 198.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Šajda, "Martin Buber: 'No-One Can so Refute Kierkegaard as Kierkegaard Himself'" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) p. 57

<sup>7</sup> Manuela Hackel, "Jean-Paul Sartre: Kierkegaard's Influence on His Theory of Nothingness" in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, edited by Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011) pp. 323 – 354.

## ***Two Pieces Presented at the Hong Kierkegaard Library 2013 Conference during the Closing Luncheon***

### **Gratitude for Kierkegaard Characters**

**David Cain  
University of Mary Washington**

Last evening many of us were in Frederiksberg Have at Restaurant Josty. Just there, right outside our dining room, Johannes Climacus famously smoked his cigar—Joakim Garff remarked on this at Josty last night—and decided that, since he did not have the capacity to make matters in life easier, he would make them more difficult. Climacus and Kierkegaard succeeded and succeed, and their success applies to our theme, "A Global World." Stephen Evans is right (I am tempted to say, "For once"): "What Kierkegaard might have to say to a religiously pluralistic world is an open and fascinating question." The temptation—and I think Kierkegaard would consider it a temptation—comes quickly to press beyond the whats of apparent discord to proclaim the accord of underlying hows. And who is more attentive to what-how relationships and who champions the decisiveness of the how in relation to the what more discerningly than Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms? But suppose how one lives, far from unifying existence underneath diverse doctrines, words, whats, more profoundly secures difference, alterity, otherness—making matters more difficult.

Some of us remember David Lodge reading from his novel, *Therapy*, here in this *festsal* in May, 1996. The central character, Laurence Passmore, otherwise known as "Tubby," has discovered and entered into an existential relationship with Kierkegaard. His marriage is secure, he thinks, as he writes an ode to "repetition." Just then his wife announces that she wants a separation and soon leaves him. So much for Tubby's rendition of "repetition." He takes a woman named Samantha to Copenhagen to follow in Kierkegaard's footsteps—and

to make love to Samantha. He has booked separate hotel rooms. Nothing happens. Finally, in frustration, Samantha phones Tubby and invites—implores—him to come to her. He says he can't do it. Why not? Samantha asks. Tubby replies, "Because of Kierkegaard."

"Because of Kierkegaard": I suggest that that phrase has found each of us and finds us here today together. "Because of Kierkegaard" characterizes all of us in sundry ways as "Kierkegaard Characters."

Not least among the many gifts our friend Søren Kierkegaard has given to us is the gift of one another. What a motley international assortment of Kierkegaard Characters—"Kierkegaard Reconsidered in a Global World" indeed. I mention now but a few I knew. Each of you could—and I hope in one way or another will—enrich the list. But not "list": more like "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1).

Stephen Crites, lovely prose and wonderful aesthetic appreciation of Kierkegaard—with a beautiful voice and Schubert *lieder* on the side.

Vernard Eller, warm, playful, engaging, earnest—a sensitive and faithful student of Kierkegaard.

Paul Holmer stood tall with chest inflated and mouth awry in the highest regard for and, with all of his irony, no fear of ironically inflating the greatness of Kierkegaard.

Howard Hong, whom I regard as the Mark Twain of Kierkegaard scholarship for more than his white wavy hair and cigar, which he smoked in the Kierkegaard Library when it was atop Holland Hall at St Olaf. Those were the days.

Edna Hong, gutsy, emphatic, engaging. What did Kierkegaard want? Honesty. He got it in Edna and got it good.

Niels Thulstrup, deeply troubled; but caring and kindness were there deep down.

Roger Poole, a scholar elegant in English, Danish, and French. Dear Roger: perhaps he made unnecessary hermeneutical adversaries with his rhetorical provocations.

Julia Watkin, kind and clear, supportive and calmly enthusiastic, welcoming. Howard Hong referred to Julia as "our person on the spot in Copenhagen." Julia and the gentle, gracious, industrious Grethe Kjær together became our persons on the spot in Hellerup. In Hellerup at 15 Stenagervej is a door which tells a rich and remarkable story in name plaques still in place: "Malantschuk," "Kjær," "Watkin."

I mention these Kierkegaard Characters—and I use the word "characters" lovingly as well as descriptively—in their own right and for their own sake and in gratitude for all they have given us. But I mention them also symbolically of and for all who have found and who find in this unlikely, dazzling Dane some form of sustenance and who knew and who know that there was and is so much more to and in Søren Kierkegaard than melancholy, who stumbled upon and still do—or even careened into and careen into still—merriment as well. Well indeed—because of Kierkegaard. *Brindiamo alla salute!* Skål til Søren Aabye Kierkegaard and to his Kierkegaard Characters.

## **A Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Witness of Kierkegaard**

**David Cain**  
**University of Mary Washington**

O Lord, because as we count time, today is the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, we pause to give you thanks for Kierkegaard's witness. It is, of course, possible that Kierkegaard may have been wrong about one or two matters, but we trust that what truly matters before you is not the right position but the right love. Birthdays mark your gift of time to us, time in which to learn to fall in love with you and with your glory. And Kierkegaard fell hard.

We thank you not for the genius of Kierkegaard but for what he did with it. He used the blessing and curse of genius to open the way to faith and to true life for those not so blessed—and cursed. We thank you for the beauty, brilliance, humor, playfulness, pathos, richness, music, merriment, range, and wonder of Kierkegaard's authorship. We thank you for his honesty. He called the risk of faith "risk" and the offense of faith "offense," in this daring creation of yours filled with horror and outrage as well as with magnificence and marvel and mystery and humble goodness. We thank you that Kierkegaard's own suffering and anguish defeated neither him nor his faith in you. We thank you, as he did, that he held together in your grace. We thank you for the elation and deep satisfaction he felt in the extraordinary achievement of authorship in which he saw your hand and in which he clung to your embrace. We thank you that he died in peace. May he live in your promise that you are not God of the dead but God of the living. May we live a little better because of his witness and have a little more life to bring into that same promise.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

--David Cain, København, 3 maj, 1997  
Spotsylvania, Virginia, 28 april, 2013