

# Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter

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# Søren Kierkegaard: As the Geese Fly

Rune Engebretsen

*Paper Presented at the Seventh International Kierkegaard Conference*

*June 23-27, 2013, at St. Olaf College,*

*In Recognition of the Bicentennial Celebration of Søren Kierkegaard's Birth*

Upon arrival at this conference, we received a celebratory medallion of Søren Kierkegaard. It is a medallion with at least three sides: a front side, a backside, and a rim. One might also consider it a medallion with two aspects and an edge. Stand the medal on edge, and it may, if not immediately, even disclose a point.

My point of departure is presently the image on the reverse surface of the medallion showing wild geese flying in formation. It is a motif that, in the given context, dates back to a short note that Søren Kierkegaard entered into his journal in spring 1838.

On March 13 of that year, Poul Martin Møller—writer, philosopher, and SK's favorite teacher—had passed away. Møller had been a good friend and a significant personal and intellectual influence. His death had a numbing effect on SK. "Such a long period," he wrote, "has again lapsed in which I have been unable to concentrate on the least little thing—now I must make another attempt. Poul Møller is dead."<sup>1</sup>

On Sunday April 1, SK attended an evening concert, which included a reading of one of Møller's poems. In a journal entry the next day, SK writes: "I went over to hear Nielsen [an actor] give a reading of "*Glæde over Danmark*" (Joy Over Denmark) and was strangely moved by the words: '*Remember the traveler far away.*' Yes, now he has gone far away—but I at least will remember him."<sup>2</sup>

Earlier that day, SK had been out for a bit of fresh air. Later, be it before or after the concert, he jotted down something he had observed:

This morning I saw about half a score of wild geese fly away in the crisp, cool air; at first they were right overhead, then farther and farther away, and at last they separated into two flocks, arching like two brows over my eyes, which now gazed into the land of poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Three sentences, six clauses, and a perspicuous image: wild geese in flight transformed into two eyebrows. Now if that is not transformative magic, what is? But then, says Climacus–Kierkegaard in *Postscript*, the poet creates "in the magic land of imagination, where poetry loves forth perfection."<sup>4</sup>

In this journal entry, SK likens the flight of the wild geese to poetry or to "the land of poetry," as he puts it. He presents us with a metaphor or, strictly speaking, a simile, since he avails himself of the word "like" in the expression "arching like two brows over my eyes."

Simply stated, a metaphor is an analogy. It is a device by means of which we talk about one thing in terms of something else. Now, theories on metaphor and anti-metaphor have been widely discussed and can be endlessly extended. In that regard, Nietzsche got the ball rolling by claiming that all language is metaphoric. This view of language reminds me a bit of what SK once said about Christians: In the beginning there were no Christians, then all became Christians, therefore we stand once again at the beginning.

For the purpose at hand, I.A. Richards has offered a useful twofold distinction between what he calls the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor.<sup>5</sup> The tenor is the signification or the subject matter that the metaphor is applied to—in our case, "the land of poetry." The vehicle is the metaphorical term itself—in our case, the flying geese. So it would appear.

Kierkegaard's metaphoric statement can be seen to fall into three parts: (1) "This morning I saw about half a score of wild geese fly away in the crisp cool air"; (2) "at first they were right overhead, then farther and farther away, and at last they separated into two flocks"; (3) "arching like two brows over my eyes, which now gazed into the land of poetry." The tripartite division of the whole statement is reinforced by other triadic elements, notably, the three phrases of the middle sentence: "at first they were right overhead," "then farther and farther away," "and at last they separated into two flocks." Now SK's description could have ended there, in which case we would have been left with an image but perhaps not with a metaphor evocative of the poetic. The comparison or parallel is struck at the beginning of the third sentence with the two words "arching like", that is, "arching like two brows over my eyes." With the word "like" linked to the word "arching," the now dual arc of the geese in flight turns into eyebrows: and SK is left standing with an extra set of brows far off on the horizon—plus his own? If that thought seems far-fetched, far is part of the picture. So what happens at this point?

Syntactically, the sentence takes a breath. We here encounter a pause, not unlike a caesura in poetry. Semantically, the phrase "arching like" signals a turn and a transition allowing for a meaning of another and higher order to come into view. There is a shift in direction from outward to inward. I would suggest that this is the juncture, or moment, at which sight turns into insight and visioning turns into envisioning, as the imagination assumes wings in poetic transfiguration.

Let us take a step back to look briefly at a basic triad of the metaphor: (1) the observer, (2) the wild geese in flight, and (3) the land of poetry. I, SK, saw some geese that pointed me to the land of poetry. Just how that pointing takes place is no small matter, but the text offers some clues.

The verb "to see" is one such clue. "This morning I saw," writes SK, setting the visual stage. Senses other than vision also enter into play. He speaks of "the crisp, cool air" conveying a sense of touch and thermal feel (tactility here), and perhaps one may assume that he first *heard* the geese before he looked up and caught sight of them (a presumed auditory element). Honk. Honk. Attention, attention. Above all, he conveys a kinesthetic sense, a sensation of movement, both in the geese flying and in his seeing. Through his eyes, and the subsequent flow of ink on paper later in the day, we follow the v-formation of the wild geese, moving from overhead, to points 2 and 3, and farther and farther away toward the horizon. Stephen Spender, the famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century English poet, has described this kind of seeing metaphorically as: "Eye, gazelle, delicate wanderer / Drinker of horizon's fluid line."<sup>6</sup>

SK takes us on an exercise in seeing. His seeing moves from the first person "I" in the first sentence ("I saw") to the eyes doing the seeing in the last sentence: "my eyes gazed into." This use of metonymy or synecdoche—this *pars pro toto*, with a part of something used to signify the whole, the eyes standing for the seeing self—reinforces the imagistic intensity and extensity in a double vision of vivid poetizing. With the lead goose and its outstretched beak, the geese can be seen to form an arrow, pointing ahead toward the horizon. The seeing self and the flying geese conjoin in an image in which the v-formation of the wild geese is transformed into two arcs on the far horizon. Is Eros at work here? As the geese change direction and go into the round, becoming a pair of eyebrows, we can envision a set of invisible eyes looking back, and perhaps a face that is a no-face beyond the threshold, now gazing into the soul of the beholder in an eye-to-eye encounter with the land of poetry.

The metaphor before us is immensely rich in implications, and only the fringe of the garment can be touched on this occasion. One of the possibilities is to see the depiction of the wild geese as a metaphor on metaphor, as a metaphor in the making. *Metaphora* [μεταφορά] in Greek means "transposition;" it is a "translation." Its role is like my finger when I point to something. And the point of pointing is usually not to look at the finger but to look in the direction in which it is pointing. In our case, the image of the wild geese in their arrowhead v-formation is the pointer. And what do they point to? They point to the horizon, flying through

the crisp, cool air of a morn in Copenhagen, beating their wings, moving toward the rising sun into another realm: the beyond. Con-figured against the sky they become trans-figured through a special kind of seeing issuing in a perspicuous poetic image. In this trans-figuring, seeing becomes a gazing, and succession an instant, and suddenly we are looking both outwards and inwards in reciprocity of sight and insight.<sup>7</sup>

The special kind of seeing referred to here is described by SK in a journal entry of September 11, 1834. He speaks of an “inner intuition” permitting him to capture the main idea in a work of art. “I can,” he says, “if I may put it this way, find that Archimedean point, and as soon as I have found it, everything is readily clear to me.”<sup>8</sup> By the same token, he notes that the great geniuses among the poets, such as Ossian and Homer, are represented as blind. Whether or not they actually were blind is of less importance than that people perceived them to be blind. This would seem to indicate that to these poets sight meant insight. In celebrating the beauty of nature, they did not depend on the external eye. What they saw was disclosed “to their inner intuition.”

Elsewhere SK distinguishes between the external eye and internal eye and observes: “It does not depend, then, merely upon what one sees, but what one sees depends on how one sees; all observation is not just a receiving, a discovering, but also a bringing forth.”<sup>9</sup>

Now SK was quite fond of referring to birds in a metaphoric sense, all kinds of birds: sparrows, finches, crows, doves, eagles, swans, ducks, and geese. The list goes on. On his walks in Copenhagen and his journeys by carriage to the Deer Park and elsewhere, he shows himself to be a keen observer, with a lyrical eye and ear for nature, and he uses this esthetic sensibility throughout his writing.

In 1835 (July 23), on his now famous summer vacation in Northern Zealand, he describes taking a long walk through the majestic beech woods by little lakes gleaming in the morning sun. Arriving at Hestehaven and Carlsø in the forenoon, he is struck by the beauty of the place. The fish peek out from under the green expanse of water lilies and venture onto the surface in frisky spurts. The sounds and scents of high summer fill the air. It is a Sunday and he hears the church bells calling people to worship “yet not,” as he says, “in a temple made by human hands. If the bird has no need to be reminded of praising God, shouldn’t humankind then be attuned to devotion without a church, in the true house of God, where heaven’s arch forms the ceiling of the church, where the roar of the storm and the gentle zephyr take the place of the bass and the treble of the organ, where the trilling of the birds form the jubilant congregational singing ... with everything resolving in an endless antiphony.”<sup>10</sup>

And then there is the scene at Gilleleje a few days later, with Kierkegaard “standing there alone and forlorn, the force of the sea and the battle of the elements reminding me of my nothingness, and on the other hand, the sure flight of the birds reminding me of Christ’s words: ‘Not a single sparrow falls to the ground without Your Heavenly Father’s Will’”<sup>11</sup> And also at this time, in a letter to his brother-in-law, the zoologist Peter Wilhelm Lund, in Brazil, Kierkegaard speaks of the birds of passage leaving for the season and reminding him “of the deeper longings in the human breast.”<sup>12</sup>

This longing of the human heart is also conveyed years later by Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard’s nimble dancer-pseudonym.<sup>13</sup> In his piece on *De omnibus dubitandum est* (Everything Is to Be Doubted), the young Johannes seeks out the eloquent speakers and proponents of modern speculative philosophy promising a new day with their so-called “eternal philosophy.” He listens intently and yet it pains him: “He thought the words so beautiful that he could not stop listening to them, just as one sadly gazes after the wild geese flying in the sky. Anyone who wants to belong to that world must join them, and yet no one has ever been seen flying with them.”<sup>14</sup>

Johannes wanted to fly.

As for geese, they do not always appear to Kierkegaard in full splendor, moving in sure flight, expressive of the yearning of the human heart. There are also the tame geese, and there is the interaction between tame geese and wild geese. “To be trampled to death by geese is a lingering death,”<sup>15</sup> writes SK, amid the Corsair Affair in 1847, when he had become an object of ridicule, taunted in the streets of Copenhagen, and “Søren” as well as “*Enten/Eller*” (“Either/Or”) had become nicknames among the rabble.

In another context, he speaks of the duodecimo (narrow) horizon of superficial, trite friendship in contrast to genuine friendship based on enlightened interaction. He assigns people of the former category to the tame geese and the latter to the wild geese. Occasionally, when encountering a great person or thinker, the prosaic prattler may also aspire to something higher beyond being “a hand-organ” or “a mobile automaton,” a rattlebox majoring in claptrap conversation. The reason is, says SK, that the run-of-the-mill Tom, Dick, and Harry “naturally, too, are moved by the train of events and by the mightier spirits, and they reproduce them by way of parody, just as tame geese and ducks beat their wings, cry out, and quiver for a moment when a wild goose or duck flies over them.”<sup>16</sup>

In a similar vein, SK presents us with a parable. It’s a journal entry from 1854, with the title “The Wild Goose: A Metaphor.”<sup>17</sup> It begins with the observation of the tame geese beating their wings, skirting and skirmishing along the ground in awkward, confused fashion when the wild geese fly overhead.

Then “once upon a time,” as SK puts it, a wild goose became enamored with these tame geese. It was autumn and time for migration, and not wanting to leave them behind, the wild goose hoped to win them over and have them join him on the flight. So he “tried to entice them to rise a little higher and then again a little higher in their flight” that they might take wings and “be saved from the wretched, mediocre life of waddling around on the earth as respectable, tame geese.”

Initially, the tame geese found this activity quite entertaining and liked the wild goose. But by and by, they grew tired of him and even began to speak of him as lacking in wisdom and experience. And alas, alas, says Kierkegaard, “the wild goose had become so involved with the tame geese that they gradually gained power over it . . . *summa summarum*, the wild goose finally became a tame goose.”

In one way, says Kierkegaard, the wild goose deserves to be admired for what it did. But it nevertheless made a mistake. For “this is the law—a tame goose never becomes a wild goose, but a wild goose can certainly become a tame goose.”

To the extent that the wild goose did anything commendable, it should have had enough sense to get out from under the power of the tame geese “away, away in migratory flight.”

For, says Kierkegaard, “the law of genius is this: a tame goose never becomes a wild goose, but, on the other hand, a wild goose can certainly become a tame goose—therefore watch out!”

At this point, Kierkegaard then states: “Christianity is not like this.” In the Christian faith, there is hope that a tame goose *can* become a wild goose, so stay on course and stick to the task of winning the tame geese “for the transformation.” But then again, for the life of it, get out—“away, away in migratory flight”—if the tame geese gain power over you, lest you be “blissfully sunk in wretched mediocrity.”<sup>18</sup>

In yet another parable—which is nothing short of an exercise in hilarity, though quite in earnest—Kierkegaard takes us to a worship service with tame geese. Entitled “The Tame Goose: A Meditation for Awakening,” it is best read aloud in the full version for its wondrous images and effectual rhetorical turns.<sup>19</sup> But the short of it is that the tame geese meet every Sunday for divine worship service, where a gander-preacher solemnly proclaims what “a high destiny geese have, to what a high goal the creator” has called them. And every time they hear the word “creator,” the geese curtsy and the ganders bow their heads, and the gander—

preacher proclaims that, “with the help of their wings, they could fly away to distant regions, blessed regions,” where they have their real home.

This is repeated Sunday upon Sunday, with attendant curtsies and bows. After the service, they waddle home to their families, eat and drink and become “fat, plump and delicious.” They talk about the horror of what had happened to the goose that had been serious about using the wings given by the creator for the high goal set before it. And then there were those few geese that grew thin and pale around the beak because they secretly harbored a notion of wanting to fly.

“So also with Christendom’s worship services,” says Kierkegaard, “Man, too, has wings, he has imagination, intended to help him rise aloft.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1956, Howard Hong gave a presentation at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis on the topic “God Calls You to Complete Commitment.” In that talk, sparkling with riddles and humor and seriousness, he read this little parable by Søren Kierkegaard and concluded with the words: “We are actually called to fly ... called to a divine fellowship ... to a life hidden in God. This is the first meaning of vocation.”<sup>21</sup>

The wings of the wild geese on our celebratory medallion now come into view as symbolic of the imagination. Kierkegaard called imagination the capacity *instar omnium*, the capacity for all capacities.<sup>22</sup> The wild geese point to a life of a higher order. They reflect the call of the eternal realm, the call to the beyond within, which SK perceived and conceived upon the death of his friend Poul Martin Møller in the words:

This morning I saw about half a score of wild geese fly away in the crisp, cool air; at first they were right overhead, then farther and farther away, and at last they separated into two flocks, arching like two brows over my eyes, which now gazed into the land of poetry.

## NOTES

### Abbreviations Used

- SV* *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, I–XIV, edited by A. B. Drachman, J. L. Heiberg, and H. O. Lange (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901–1906).
- KW* *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, I–XXVI, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978–2000).
- Pap.* *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* by Søren Kierkegaard, I–XI<sup>3</sup> (20 vols.), edited by P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909–1948), and 2 ed., I–XI<sup>3</sup>, photo-offset with supplemental volumes, XII–XIII, edited by Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968–1970), and with index, XIV–XVI (1975–1978), edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn.
- JP* *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, I–VII, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978).
- ed.tr.* Indicates that I have provided my own translation

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<sup>1</sup> *JP* V 5302; *Pap.* II A 209.

<sup>2</sup> *JP* V 5305; *Pap.* II A 212.

<sup>3</sup> *JP* V 5303; *Pap.* II A 210, ed.tr.

<sup>4</sup> *Postscript*, *KW* XIII<sup>1</sup> 357 (*SV* VII 311), ed. tr. The original Danish reads: “*I Phantasiens Trylleland, hvor Poesien elsker Fuldendelsen frem.*” “Poetry,” as Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms employ the term, refers to literary art in the widest sense. It denotes “all artistic production based on language and the historical consciousness.” *Either/Or I*, *KW* III (*SV* I 35), ed. tr. By the same token, “poet” is to be understood as “literary artist.”

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<sup>5</sup> See I.A. Richards, *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), Chapters 5–6.

<sup>6</sup> Lines from “Not palaces, an era’s crown,” from Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems, 1929–1953* (New York: The Modern Library, Inc., 1934).

<sup>7</sup> The metaphor explicated here could be viewed as an emblematic correlative to Kierkegaard’s formulation of poetry (literary art) in a journal entry of February 5, 1839: “All poetry is a glorification (i.e., transfiguration) [*Forklarelse*: transfiguration] of life by way of its clarification [*Forklarelse*] (in that it is explained, illuminated, developed, etc.). It is truly remarkable that language has this ambiguity.” *JP* I 136; *Pap.* II A 352. Poetry is transfiguration by way of clarification. The poet adds splendor to life; he makes it shine. His depiction outshines actuality. “The poet,” says Climacus–Kierkegaard, “can possess an ideality in contrast to which actuality is but a faint reflection.” (*Postscript*, *KW* XII<sup>1</sup> 388 (*SV* VII 336), ed. tr. The poet glorifies life, transfigures it, clarifies it. He idealizes life. For the implications of this particular passage, see Rune A. Engebretsen, *Kierkegaard and Poet– Existence with Special Reference to Germany and Rilke* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Dissertation, 1980), pp. 113–115. For the metaphoric transformation intrinsic to poetic recollection and clairvoyance, see *Ibid.*, pp. 77 (fn. 130 and 136), 124–131, 138–139, 146–148, and 174.

<sup>8</sup> *JP* I 117; *Pap.* I A 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, *KW* V 59 (*SV* III 277). The Continental Leibnizian view of mind suggested here assumes broader implications under Kierkegaard’s concept of “the experiment,” or imaginary construction, a crucial factor in poetic creativity and Kierkegaard’s anthropological (existential) poetics. See historical introduction to *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, *KW* VI (1983), ix–xxxix; *The Concept of Anxiety*, *KW* VIII (1980); *SV* IV 325–326. For secondary sources on “the experiment,” see: Engebretsen (1980), pp. 145–167; Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 127–128, 176–177, 205–206; Jamie Lorentzen, *Kierkegaard’s Metaphors* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001) pp. 16–17, 39–40, 140–141.

<sup>10</sup> *JP* V 5097; *Pap.* I A 66; ed. tr.

<sup>11</sup> *JP* V 5099, p. 32; *Pap.* I A 68, p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> *JP* V 5092, p. 22; *Pap.* I A 72, p. 50; ed. tr.

<sup>13</sup> For Johannes’s dexterity in dialectical dancing, see *Philosophical Fragments* *KW* VII 7–8 (*SV* IV 177–78).

<sup>14</sup> *Johannes Climacus or De omnibus dubitandum est*, *KW* VII 148; *Pap.* IV B 1 130.

<sup>15</sup> *JP* V 5998; *Pap.* VIII<sup>1</sup> A 99. See also *The Corsair Affair*, *KW* XIII 220.

<sup>16</sup> *JP* II 1279 and 1280; *Pap.* II A 22 and 23.

<sup>17</sup> *JP* III 3065; *Pap.* XI<sup>1</sup> A 195.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *JP* III 3068; *Pap.* XI<sup>2</sup> 210.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; *Ibid.* On the nature and function of the imagination in Kierkegaard’s writings, consult especially *The Concept of Irony*, *KW* II (*SV* XIII); *Stages on Life’s Way*, *KW* XI (*SV* VI); *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *KW* XII (*SV* VII); *The Sickness Unto Death*, *KW* XIX (*SV* XI); and *Practice in Christianity*, *KW* XX (*SV* XII). For secondary sources, see footnotes 7 and 9 above, as well as M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); David J. Gowens, *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of the Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Gregor Malantschuk, *Fra Individ til den Enkelte: Problemer omkring Friheden og det Etske hos Søren Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> Howard V. Hong, “God Calls You to Complete Commitment: Faithful Work,” an address given at Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, January 1956. Published in *God Calls You* (Minneapolis: The Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1956), pp. 37–41.

<sup>22</sup> *Sickness Unto Death*, *KW* XIV 30–31 (*SV* XI 144). Anti-Climacus—Kierkegaard here offers a weighty summation of imagination [*Phantasie*] in relation to three key concepts: reflection, possibility, and the self. Aligning himself epistemically with the elder Fichte, he views imagination as the highest mental capacity and presents it as “the medium for the process of infinitizing” or “infinitizing reflection.” He also points out its negative aspects when degenerating into the fantastical [*det Phantastiske*]. The shadow side of the imagination, especially with regard to poetic pathos and creativity, is, for example, discussed in *Postscript* *KW* XII 387–390, 443–447 (*SV* VII 335–338, 385–389). In *Practice in Christianity*, on the other hand, Anti-Climacus–Kierkegaard presents the constructive, idealizing aspect of the imagination in relation to the ethical, using the Danish word *Indbildningskraft* (also “imagination” in English) instead of *Phantasie*. Cp. footnote 7 above.

## Darwin at 200 versus Kierkegaard at 200

James Giles  
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Those with a keen sense of the history of ideas will have noticed that just a few years before Kierkegaard's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday was Darwin's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. Those with an even keener perception will have also seen the significance of the relation between these two bi-centenaries. For there is an important sense in which Kierkegaard's writings were a reaction to Darwin or, more broadly put, to the spirit of the times of which Darwin was the pinnacle.

Both Darwin and Kierkegaard lived during an era in which it was becoming increasingly obvious that the claims of the Bible could not literally be true. The findings of astronomy, geology, the discovery of ancient fossils, including the remains of extinct life forms, and the obvious biological and developmental relations among species, all added together to render the Christian account of creation untenable. Of course, the modern critique of Christian beliefs was taking place even before Darwin's time. David Hume, for example, mounted several attacks on Christian theism well before Darwin's birth. One of his targets was the argument for the existence of God known as the argument from design. This is the analogical argument that just as one can infer that a machine had been intelligently designed simply by inspecting it, so can one infer the world had been intelligently designed simply by inspecting it. But as Hume pointed out, among other things, the analogy between a machine and the world was so poor as to render the argument next to pointless.

The difficulty, however, was that even though Hume exposed the problems with the argument from design, he had no positive theory to offer in its place. As he said of the biological world, "The whole presents itself as nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle".<sup>1</sup>

But what this vivifying principle was and how it could explain why organisms seem designed to fit their environment, he could not say. Although this does not lessen the validity of his critique of the argument from design, it nevertheless left numerous questions unanswered, questions that the Christian account at least had seemed to answer. One could imagine a Christian contemporary of Hume saying to him, "All right David, if you're so smart, then how did porcupines get their spines that so adeptly protect them from predators? Even though there are the problems you pointed out in seeing them as being designed by a creator, you yourself have no account to replace the design story".

However, with the beginnings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the more and more detailed findings of comparative biology, different accounts of how species might evolve to fit their environment began quickly to appear. In 1809, for example, Lamarck published his *Zoological Philosophy* in which he presented a theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, suggesting how species might naturally evolve from earlier forms. Then, in 1818 Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire argued in his *Philosophy of Anatomy* that homologous structures showed that all vertebrates had descended from a single archaic type. Later, in 1833, he suggested that inherited modifications might lead to a species' eradication thus clearing the way for new forms. A flurry of activity followed which led to the 1844 publication of Robert Chalmers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, a highly popular work that attempted to give an account of "organic creation by natural law". Although these early evolutionary ideas either could not fully explain evolution or lacked a strong scientific backing, it was becoming obvious (ominous to some) that it was just a matter of time until a plausible theory with adequate scientific support would be found.

Here was the role that Darwin would play. For not only did his theory provide a simple, all-encompassing, and cohesive explanation of how evolution worked, it also had a good empirical foundation. In addition to his experiments, Darwin had collected much data during his five-year voyage around the world, an account of which he published in 1839. It was not, however, until 1844 that he first put together an outline of his theory of evolution by natural and sexual selection. With this work, which he presented to colleagues and which was published later together with Wallace's work on evolution, and especially with the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, it was clear that the positive theory to replace the Christian design story had been found.

It was during this rush to discover the mechanisms of evolution, a discovery that would ring the death knell for any objective truth in the Christian story of creation, that Kierkegaard came up with the idea that objective truth had nothing to do with Christianity: "It is subjectivity", he tells us, "that Christianity is concerned with, and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence".<sup>2</sup>

Kierkegaard is often seen here as responding to the Hegelian idea of world history. However, it was no accident, I would argue, that presenting Christianity in terms of subjectivity served another purpose. That is, it was also an obvious response to the threat that evolutionary thinking presented to ideas about creation and thus to the relevance or even existence of God. In his later description of this threat, Darwin argued that the tendency for large groups of organisms to increase in size, diverge in character, and face extinction, "explains the arrangement of all life forms, in groups, all within a few great classes, which we now see everywhere around us, and which has prevailed through all time. This grand fact of the grouping of all organic beings seems to me utterly inexplicable on the theory of creation".<sup>3</sup>

Kierkegaard thus can easily be seen as fighting a rear-guard action to salvage what was left of Christianity. For if the objective findings of biology, geology, and palaeontology were slowly but surely closing in on the stronghold of the Christian story of creation—and thus raising questions about the validity of Christianity itself—then one way to escape this attack would be to argue that Christianity has nothing to do with objectivity. This, it could then be hoped, would pull the carpet out from under the feet of evolutionists and render Christianity immune to any such critique. That Kierkegaard did have such scientists, and quite possibly Darwin, in mind, is suggested by a comment he makes in *Fear and Trembling*:

It is the custom of scientists to travel around the globe to see rivers and mountains, new stars, gaycolored birds, misshapen fish, ridiculous races of men. They abandon themselves to a bovine stupor which gapes at existence and believe they have seen something worth while. All this does not interest me.<sup>4</sup>

This was published in 1843; just four years after Darwin published the account of his "travel around the globe" in the HMS Beagle. Darwin's work, *Journal and Remarks*—commonly known as *The Voyage of the Beagle*—was widely read, with copies of the first edition making their way to Denmark (acquired shortly after publication by the Royal Library in Copenhagen). Darwin also had correspondents in Denmark and, even before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, was highly respected in Danish scientific circles.<sup>5</sup> One Danish naturalist of the times, Japetus Steenstrup, seemed much influenced by Darwin. He regularly corresponded with Darwin and was close enough to him to later receive a signed copy of *On the Origin of Species*. He was well-known at the University of Copenhagen, received prizes for his biological research, and even went, in 1839 (the year of the publication of Darwin's account of his voyage), on his own Beagle-like voyage, though only as far as Iceland and back (thus seeing no gay-coloured birds). His most important work, *On Reproduction and Development through Alternating Generations*, was published to much acclaim the year before the publication of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard plainly knew of Steenstrup and referred dismissively to him, though not by name, in an 1842 newspaper article.<sup>6</sup> All of this suggests that Kierkegaard also knew of Darwin and his travel around the globe.

Darwin of course did see gay-coloured birds, and even misshapen fish (if one allows the various shapes the porcupine fish takes on to be called “misshapen”). Whether Darwin also saw “ridiculous races of men” would depend much on what Kierkegaard would count as ridiculous. Perhaps Kierkegaard is referring to the South American tribe from Tierra del Fuego who habitually mimicked Darwin and the crew of the Beagle. Or perhaps he is thinking of the Australian aboriginals Darwin describes as being able to imitate the gait of anybody. Maybe these behaviours struck Kierkegaard as making such people ridiculous.

Although it is a bit more difficult to imagine Darwin abandoning himself to a bovine stupor while he gaped mindlessly at the different geological formations, life forms, and cultures he encountered, it is easy enough to see him as believing he was doing something worthwhile. If only he had met Kierkegaard before he set out on his voyage, Kierkegaard could have warned him that such a voyage would not be worthwhile. Darwin could have then used his time more productively.

The question of why none of Darwin’s discoveries interests Kierkegaard is a complex one. After the passage just quoted, Kierkegaard says that what really interests him is the knight of faith. This fits well with his view that faith is something that takes place in subjectivity and that Christianity, which similarly interests him, only exists in subjectivity (which is why one should not make too much out of the fact that these claims were said under different pseudonyms).<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, since Kierkegaard saw himself as being Christian, and since discoveries like Darwin’s were seen as chipping away at Christian beliefs, it is then understandable that they should not interest Kierkegaard, at least not in a positive way. However, since Darwin was conducting research in the realm of objectivity and since, for Kierkegaard, “objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence”, it could well be the objectivity of Darwin’s research that ensured Kierkegaard’s lack of concern.

There is, however, a major problem with Kierkegaard’s attempt to save Christianity in this “retreat to subjectivity” fashion. For in addition to pulling the carpet out from under the evolutionists, he also pulled the carpet out from under himself. The reason for this is because, despite his claims about Christian truths existing only in subjectivity and Christianity having no existence in objectivity, it is quite clear that Kierkegaard wants various Christian claims to be objectively true and therefore for Christianity also to have an objective existence.

Kierkegaard says, for example, “Nature is indeed the handiwork of God, but only the handiwork is directly present, not God” (p. 218). This sounds very much like an assertion about objective truth, namely, that as a matter of objective fact God exists and, as a matter of objective fact, God created nature. Further, while nature is directly present, God, as a matter of objective fact, is not. This does not mean God is not present at all (which might be taken to mean he does not exist), but rather that, as Kierkegaard tells us, he is present but, as a matter of objective fact “invisible”. God is, he says, “secretly present in his works”. It is important to note here that being invisible does not render one’s existence something that is only true in subjectivity. When the Coyote, for example, paints himself with invisible paint, and thus is secretly present in his works (that is, in his Road Runner-catching contraptions), his existence is still an objective fact. It is just that, also as a matter of objective fact, the Road Runner can no longer see him.

Kierkegaard is aware, however, of the difficulties he will face if these assertions are taken to be assertions about objective fact: not only will he have the epistemological problems pointed out by Hume (How does Kierkegaard know that nature is the handiwork of God? What are his arguments?), but he will also have to answer those troublesome scientists whose work was suggesting more and more that nature could be explained without appealing to the handiwork of God. How then does Kierkegaard attempt to support his claim that God is secretly present in his works (that is, nature)? He gives the appearance of doing this by saying,

The observer of nature does not have a result immediately before him, but must by himself be at pains to find it, and thereby the direct relationship is broken. But this breach is precisely the act of self-activity, the irruption of inwardness, the first determination of the truth as inwardness. (p. 218)

But what does this mean? From what comes before this it seems clear that by “result” Kierkegaard means “God as the creator of nature”, “God being secretly present in his works”, or some such thing. Thus, the observer of nature cannot objectively find God as the creator of nature or God as existing within nature. This observer, says Kierkegaard, “must by himself be at pains to find it”. That is, he must be at pains to find God’s secret presence in nature as the creator of nature.

But why *must* the observer of nature be at pains to do this? The only way to make sense of this, it seems to me, is if the “must” is taken as referring to an experience of the observer; that is, the observer *feels* he must be at such pains. But clearly, he will only feel he must do this if he is someone who already believes or perhaps hopes that nature is indeed the handiwork of God and so wants confirmation of his belief or hope. Darwin was an observer of nature and was not at pains to find God’s secret presence. Why? Because he did not already believe that nature was the handiwork of God. Nor do millions of other observers of nature who have no belief in God feel they *must* be at pains to find God in nature.

This not being able to see God in nature, but nevertheless being at pains to see him, leads (for the person who already believes in God) to a break in the direct relation. The direct relation that Kierkegaard refers to simply means the experience of nature as it immediately presents itself. In this direct experience there is no experience of God. Since, however, the Christian observer of nature is at pains to see God in nature, and since no such sight appears, the direct relation to nature is broken. What this means, I take it, is that the observer then gives up trying to find God in nature objectively. This is then the “self-activity” that gets the observer to turn inward towards “truth as inwardness”. This in turn appears to mean that, not being able objectively to find God in nature, the Christian observer decides instead passionately and inwardly to have faith that nature is the handiwork of God (and that God exists).

But as should be obvious, none of this provides any support for the assertion that nature is indeed the handiwork of God. And, of course, it is not really meant to. It is merely meant to show how someone who already believes God is the creator of nature comes passionately to believe that God is the creator of nature. But if this is all it shows, then why does Kierkegaard continue to talk of God, God’s invisibility, God’s secret presence in nature, God’s creating man and woman, and so forth, as if he were somehow talking about objective facts? Why does he think he can claim, “Nature is indeed the handiwork of God”, making it look like he has some sort of knowledge about where nature actually comes from, when in fact it is merely something he passionately and inwardly believes?

The answer is that Kierkegaard wants it both ways. In one way he wants to make Christianity immune to any criticisms that arise from the objective findings that were threatening the objective truth of Christian claims. This is his attempt to argue that Christianity has nothing to do with objectivity. But in another way he still wants Christianity to be saying something about the objective world: he wants God to be something that actually exists independently of people’s beliefs (even if God is invisible and secretive), and he wants nature actually to be the creation of God (whether or not one passionately believes it).

The problem, however, is that one cannot have it both ways. Either God in fact created nature, and the assertion that nature is his handiwork is a claim about objective truth, or God did not in fact create nature. This latter view is the subjective view of Christianity. Here the assertion about God creating nature lacks any connection to objective truth and is merely an assertion about a person’s state of passionate and inward belief. Neither of these options is by themselves particularly palatable for Kierkegaard. Consequently, he ends up mixing them together and tries to have his cake and eat it too.

I have often seen it written that Kierkegaard is above all else a Christian writer. If this is true, then Kierkegaard is above all else an inconsistent and confused writer. To save Kierkegaard from such a charge, perhaps it is better to see him as being first and foremost an existential and humanistic writer, a philosopher whose major concern is with human beings, their anxiety, despair, self-deception, irony, and freedom.<sup>8</sup> This will not satisfy those Kierkegaard scholars who are themselves, above all else, Christian writers and whose fundamental interest in Kierkegaard is in what support he can offer for their already held Christianity. Nor will it help with Kierkegaard's attempt to protect creationist beliefs from the work of Darwin. It will, however, give us good reason to commemorate Kierkegaard's bi-centenary, just as Darwin's discovery of natural and sexual selection gave us good reason to commemorate Darwin's bi-centenary.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner, 1972) P. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) p. 116. Further references to this edition are given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling in Selected Essays*, translated by Charles K. Bellinger and L. M. Hollander (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2011) p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Peter C. Kjærgaard, Niels Henrik Gergersen, and Hans Henrik Hjermitsev, "Darwinizing the Danes: 1859-1909" in *The Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe*, Volume 1, edited by Thomas F. Glick and Eve-Marie Engels (London: Continuum, 2008) p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Public Confession" in *The Corsair Affair and Articles Related to the Writings*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> James Giles, "Introduction" in *Kierkegaard and Freedom*, edited by James Giles (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2000) pp. 1-27.

<sup>8</sup> James Giles, "Introduction: Kierkegaard among the Temples of Kamakura" in *Kierkegaard and Japanese Thought*, edited by James Giles (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2008) pp. 1-30.

## **Kierkegaard and the Discussion about Society and Politics<sup>1</sup>**

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Kierkegaard is, according to his self-definition, a "religious thinker." He is not particularly interested in politics and he never makes a proposal to reform the social and political order. Kierkegaard's main concern is to call everyone to undertake the task of becoming "single individuals." This is for him a process that requires great effort and struggle and which demands that we pay due attention to the relation to God, to ourselves and to our fellow men and women.<sup>2</sup> It is not a process that forces us to isolate ourselves from the social and political order in which we live. On the contrary, we are already in a given social and political order at the time we approach the process of becoming singular individuals and have to reintegrate into the social and political order after completing this process of singularization. Johannes Sløk, in his book *Da Kierkegaard Tav*,<sup>3</sup> currently available only in Danish, argues that "enlightened despotism" is the social and political order Kierkegaard long took for granted and which he considered people reintegrated into after completing the process of becoming single individuals.

The problem is that Kierkegaard, because of the time in which he happened to live, was an involuntary witness to the dissolution of the social and political order he had favored and the emergence of a new democratic social and political order, into which he considered it impossible to uncritically reintegrate. Under these circumstances, Kierkegaard is reluctantly compelled to consider political issues in a specific way. My thesis, therefore, is that Kierkegaard makes criticisms and remarks about the emerging democratic social and political order that are relevant not only to the transition Denmark was going through at the time of his writing,

but which also capture the pulse of many of the political problems that our contemporary democratic societies are facing.

I will organize this short article into three parts. First I will expound the argument developed by Johannes Sløk in his *Da Kierkegaard Tav*. Then, in the second part, with the key provided by Sløk, I will examine some of Kierkegaard's references to political issues in four of Kierkegaard's works written after the social and political order of "enlightened despotism" had begun to dissolve in Denmark: *Two Ages*<sup>4</sup> (1846), *Works of Love*<sup>5</sup> (1847), *The Sickness Unto Death*<sup>6</sup> (1849) and *Practice in Christianity*<sup>7</sup> (1850). I will focus on what Kierkegaard considers the right understanding of the principles of equality, popular sovereignty, and election by majority, the conditions in which he thinks that beneficence is salutary, and his conclusion that every social and political order has a temporary character and rightly so. And assuming that we today also have to engage in the process of becoming singular individuals, I will in the final part of the article argue that religion maintains the role of promoter of the process of singularization, and should take on the challenging but unavoidable political task of representing and giving voice to the excluded and the least of our neighbors.

### **Enlightened Despotism: The Social and Political Order Accepted by Kierkegaard**

Sløk argues in *Da Kierkegaard tav* that for a long time there was a particular social and political order that Kierkegaard presupposed, the model of the enlightened despotism of the first half of the nineteenth century in Denmark, according to which the society was a community where each member had his or her place and work, so that all needed each other and could serve each other. To intrude into the place of someone else or to take over the task that corresponded to him or to her was understood as a kind of presumptive behavior which brought confusion into the whole structure of society. In this model, the church was not an institution and a system in line with, for instance, the school system, the military, the health services, etc., which existed to perform certain delimited functions. The church, on the contrary, existed in order to provide the legitimacy and the seriousness that were needed, so that people could unfold their lives in all the various social institutions and systems.<sup>8</sup>

Socially and externally, people were different and had different statuses and abilities, and those differences made all people equally necessary for the social organism.<sup>9</sup> The social and external differences between people also meant that in all the institutions and systems, including the church, there were some who had authority and who gave the orders and some who had to obey.<sup>10</sup> All the people were equal, both in the importance they had for the society and before God, that is, in the fact of being equally faced with the task of becoming single individuals who had to consciously assume their social roles.<sup>11</sup>

It is noteworthy that Kierkegaard understood the status of having authority and being able to give commands as a heavy burden which required the capacity to look away from oneself and take care of others, subordinates, and arrange their conditions in the best way. Conversely, Kierkegaard didn't understand a lack of authority or right to command as something causing humiliation. It was, on the contrary, a good position in life, where people could trust in the good judgment of the authorities and concentrate on doing their jobs and enjoying life in peace and tranquility,<sup>12</sup> providing the social and economic status which made the enjoyment materially possible. Kierkegaard was fully aware that most of the pleasures of life depend on circumstances beyond the individual.<sup>13</sup> Although he belonged to the privileged class and was the son of a rich man, he had a keen and sympathetic eye for the unfortunate plight of the poor, who have to spend their whole lives with hard work just to be able to continue working hard.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to say when exactly it was that the social and political order of enlightened despotism began to dissolve in Denmark. What we can say for sure is that the dissolution of that system began to take place long before the fall of the absolute monarchy in March of 1848 and the transition to constitutional monarchy and democracy. This also explains why regime change happened in Denmark in a remarkably peaceful and bloodless manner.

Kierkegaard experienced firsthand the incipient dissolution of enlightened despotism in 1846, at the time of the so-called *Corsair* controversy, named after the satirical magazine which had been permitted to acquire a power so disproportionate that it made Kierkegaard “an object of public ridicule,” to the point of changing dramatically “the character of his interchanges with ordinary people” and preventing him from “walk[ing] around Copenhagen without crowds of curious and sometimes jeering onlookers.”<sup>15</sup>

With the dissolution of the social and political order presupposed by Kierkegaard up to this time, he now reluctantly had to pay more attention to political issues than before. What until then had been crucial for Kierkegaard, namely, that the individual could engage in the never-ending process of becoming a single individual but return to life in the world, now had become unviable. There was no longer a structured society to which people could return. The social and political order to which Christianity until then had provided legitimacy and seriousness had now been destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

Sløk observes that at the same time that Kierkegaard had to take note of this definite change in the Danish society, a change also happened in his understanding of Christianity. He began to pay more attention to the content of Jesus’ life, words, deeds and fate, and to maintain that Jesus has to be both believed and imitated, that it is Christianity itself and not just a misguided development in society which makes it impossible to live as a Christian in the world without any Christian outwardly recognizable shape, that quite regardless of how society is structured, Christianity will and should lead to collision with it.<sup>17</sup> Sløk argues that the regime change which Kierkegaard had to take note of and the change in his understanding of Christianity are twined together, but that they objectively are two different modifications, due to different causes.<sup>18</sup> Below I will concentrate on the consequences of the regime change Kierkegaard witnessed.

Kierkegaard insisted again and again that the process of singularization which, always in a provisional way, completes itself in the confrontation with God should not divorce us from the society to which we belong. He didn’t believe that it is possible to cultivate a relation with God in total solitude<sup>19</sup> and he rejected the monastic way of life and the path of asceticism and self-inflicted pain. And although Kierkegaard only got to see the early developments of the social and political order that would replace the enlightened despotism he previously had favored, his problem was that what he did see of the new model, he didn’t like at all.

Johannes Sløk maintains that the combined effect of the rejection of new social and political order and the emphasis on the imitation of Jesus in the understanding of Christianity leads Kierkegaard to offer only one option to the singular individual: to say “no” in powerless protest.<sup>20</sup> Sløk insists that Kierkegaard provides neither positive advice, nor any suggestion of what could be done, nor any constructive alternative that eventually could be used to build a better society.<sup>21</sup> Here I disagree with Sløk. I will in the forthcoming sections of this article demonstrate that Kierkegaard does give positive advice and suggestions of what could be done and constructive alternatives that should be seriously considered when trying to build a better society.

### **The Dissolution of the Accepted Social and Political Order**

When the society model accepted by Kierkegaard began to dissolve and the model of a democratic society began to develop, Kierkegaard was forced to pay more attention to political issues than before. Re-reading *Two Ages*, *Works of Love*, *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity* (hereafter abbreviated TA, WL, SUD and PC, respectively) with an eye on comments of political nature, one finds criticisms and remarks that are illuminative not only of the problems the Danish society was facing back then, but also of the problems of our contemporary democratic societies. The criticisms and remarks can be organized into four groups: the principle of equality, the principles of popular sovereignty and election by majority, beneficence, and the temporary character of any established social and political order.

*Equality Should not be Confused with Leveling:*

For Kierkegaard, all human beings share “the inner glory of equality” (WL, 87) and exactly for the same reason the neighbor who we shall love “is all people” (WL, 52). Thus it is important, on one hand, that “in loving the actual individual person... one does not substitute an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person should be” (WL, 164), and, on the other, that we “never unlovingly give up on any human being or give up hope for that person, since it is possible that even the most prodigal son could still be saved, that even the most embittered enemy—alas, he who was your friend—it is still possible that he could again become your friend” (WL, 254).

As long as we can ensure what Kierkegaard calls “essential inwardness,” that is, that individuals can go through the process of becoming single individuals (which implies that religion takes priority over politics),<sup>22</sup> and that there is a common idea or object of commitment, then there will be “a decent modesty between man and man that prevents crude aggressiveness,” “the individuals [will] never come too close to each other in the herd sense, simple because they are united on the basis of an ideal distance,” and “the unanimity of separation [will] indeed [be] fully orchestrated music” (TA, 62-63). On the contrary, says Kierkegaard, “if individuals relate to an idea merely *en masse* (consequently without the individual separation of inwardness), we get violence, anarchy, [and] riotousness” (TA, 63) and if none of the conditions are met, that is, “if there is no idea for the individuals *in masse* and no individually separating essential inwardness... then we have crudeness” (TA, 63). Kierkegaard describes how this crudeness manifests itself: “gossip and rumor and specious importance and apathetic envy become a surrogate for each and all. Individuals do not in inwardness turn away from each other, do not turn outward in unanimity for an idea, but mutually turn to each other in a frustrating and suspicious, aggressive, leveling reciprocity” (TA, 63). Far from generating genuine equality, leveling is “the negative unity of the negative mutual reciprocity of individuals” (TA, 84). Leveling implies that one only has significance to the extent that he or she is part of “the proper number” (TA, 85). Leveling can take place thanks to the creation of the “phantom,” called “the public,” which is told what it thinks and what it has to think by the press (TA, 90).<sup>23</sup>

*The Limitations of the Principles of Popular Sovereignty and Election by Majority:*

Kierkegaard asks himself, “Should the determination of what is the Law’s requirement perhaps be an agreement among, a common decision by, all people, to which the individual then has to submit?” (WL, 115). And he answers himself with irony and more questions: “Splendid—that is, if it is possible to find the place and fix a date for this assembling of all people (all the living, all of them?—but what about the dead?), and if it is possible, something that is equally impossible, for all of them to agree on one thing! Or is perhaps the agreement of a number of people, a certain number of votes, sufficient for the decision? How large a number is necessary?” (WL, 115). Kierkegaard considers that “the more insignificant a matter is, the more suitable it is to make a decision by voting; the more significant, the less suitable.”<sup>24</sup> But “truth and everything connected with it cannot be decided by ballot. Someone who believes that there is a God cannot participate in any voting on whether there is a God. The outcome—which cannot be known in advance—makes no difference in the case. For even if our Lord got an absolute majority in the voting, yes, unanimity, it is blasphemy to vote.”<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard emphatically denies that the voice of the people can ever be the voice of God and through the pseudonym Anti-Climacus he accuses the speculative philosophers (Hegel, Feuerbach and their Danish followers Heiberg and Martensen) of having paved the way for the mob to consider itself “the God-man” upon the abolition of “the qualitative difference between God and man” (SUD, 117-118).

The principles of popular sovereignty and election by majority are nowadays perhaps more discussed than ever, especially because of the way in which the candidates who compete in an election are selected and the huge influence of money and lobbying. Also, issues brought to a vote can generate discussions about the viability of the principle of the number. Kierkegaard would be horrified to know that the principle of the number is the way in which theological discussions are settled in some churches.<sup>26</sup>

Kierkegaard shows the insight to foresee that these principles are also invoked as excuses for “avoiding decision” (TA, 76) and for replacing inactivity by publicity: “the present age is an age of publicity, the age of miscellaneous announcements: nothing happens but still there is instant publicity” (TA, 70). Unfortunately,

many governments nowadays devote more attention and resources to the publicity of fictitious government actions than to the responsibility of generating true facts of government, and to make matters worse, government funded advertising and publicity is what sustains many media, which for this same reason lose all credibility. Kierkegaard also points at a serious problem of contemporary democracies when he denounces his own as “an age of anticipation; even appreciative acknowledgment is accepted in advance. Just like a young man who, having resolved to study earnestly for his exams after September 1, fortifies himself for it by taking a vacation in the month of August, so the present generation—and this is much more difficult to understand—seems to have determined in earnest that the next generation must attend to the work in earnest, and in order not to frustrate or deter them in any way, the present generation attends banquets. But there is a difference: the young man understands that his enterprises are rash and reckless; the present age is sober and serious—even at banquets” (TA, 71). This is manifested today in the fact that many societies insist on generating debts that will have to be paid by future generations and on squandering scarce natural resources without regard to future generations.

#### *Salutary Beneficence:*

Kierkegaard denounces that the poor person is normally treated like “the pitiable object of mercifulness, who at most is able to bow and thank—if the rich person [or a government official] is so kind as to practice mercifulness” (WL, 322). In contrast, Kierkegaard “empowers the poor and the lowly”<sup>27</sup> when he insists that mercifulness can be practiced even if it can give nothing and is able to do nothing (WL, 315-330). “The greatest beneficence,” says Kierkegaard, is “in love to help someone... to become himself, free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone” (WL, 274).

#### *The Temporary Character of any Established Social and Political Order:*

Kierkegaard notes, in the voice of Anti-Climacus, that any established order has a tendency to deify itself. It “will not put up with consisting of something as loose as a collection of millions of individuals, each of whom has his relationship with God. The established order wants to be a totality that recognizes nothing above itself” (PC, 91). “This deification of the established order,” Kierkegaard also says, “is the perpetual revolt, the continual mutiny against God” and even when it is resorted to slogans like “the world’s development” or “to keep the human race developing,”<sup>28</sup> the truth is that “the deification of the established order... is the smug invention of the lazy, secular human mentality that wants to settle down and fancy that now there is total peace and security, now we have achieved the highest” (PC, 88).

### **The Functions of Religion in our Contemporary Societies**

Engaging in the never-ending process of becoming single individuals, which includes the confrontation with God and the eternal, is as imperative today as it was when Kierkegaard established “the single individual” as his most important category. Only the relation to God and the eternal of each individual and the true equality principle, the fact that the relation to the eternal is open to everybody, can preserve human life from dissolving into meaninglessness.<sup>29</sup>

In our pluralistic world, with its many different religions and Christianity divided into many different churches which understand themselves with delimited and marked-out functions, the churches are poorly prepared to create the conditions for everyone to have the personal encounter with God through which they can become single individuals. But the churches are not fulfilling their main function if they renounce or neglect the role of promoters of the process of singularization.

Some of Kierkegaard’s comments and remarks of political nature at the time when Denmark was in the transition to a democratic society show that he had to deal with excessive expectations regarding the social changes that could be accomplished through politics. In my opinion, today the problem is the opposite and too

many people remain, indeed, excluded from our societies. In virtue of the understanding of equality based on the fact that relation to the eternal is open to everybody, it is the responsibility of religion to raise awareness, give voice to, and advocate for the rights of the excluded.

An active commitment to the rights of the excluded can also today lead us to a both numerically and morally minority position and even to a state of unintended solitude, and we will have to bear the charge and accusation, which will also arise within our own beings, of hubris, masochism and even blasphemy.<sup>30</sup> We all have the inexcusable responsibility of being honest to God, to ourselves and to each other about the prices we are willing to pay for our commitment to our neighbors and particularly to the least of our neighbors, and we should be careful not to be overly critical of those who dare to take the risk of acting in favor of the excluded in opposition to the majority of society.

Kierkegaard says that “the religious is the transfigured rendition of what a politician, provided he [or she] actually loves being a human being and loves humankind, has thought in his [or her] most blissful moment, even if he [or she] will find the religious too lofty and too ideal to be practical.... But although ‘impractical,’ yet the religious is eternity’s transfigured rendition of the most beautiful dream of politics.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that Kierkegaard is right when he immediately thereafter says that “no politics have been able, no politics is able, no worldliness has been able, no worldliness is able to think through or to actualize to the ultimate consequences this idea: human-equality, human-likeness [*Menneske-Lighed*],”<sup>32</sup> I would say that another political function of religion is to ensure that politicians don’t forget this dream and to compel them to do their best to achieve an imperfect equality and create the material conditions that can facilitate the process of individualization that everyone is called to go through.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revision of the term paper presented as a requirement for the Independent Studies with the title “Kierkegaard: Love, Community and Politics” I did in the Fall Semester 2012/2013 at Luther Seminary with Prof. Paul Sponheim.

<sup>2</sup> Gregor Malantschuk, *The Controversial Kierkegaard*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Sløk, *Da Kierkegaard Tav. Fra Forfatterskab til Kirkestorm* (København: Hans Retizel, 1980). Also George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans in the introduction to the now classic collection of essays they edited about Kierkegaard’s understanding of community, society, ethics and politics with the title *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics and Politics in Kierkegaard* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992) stress the ground-breaking importance of Sløk’s book.

<sup>4</sup> *Two Ages: the Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Sløk, *Op. Cit.*, 46-47. Sløk emphasizes that this is not something that Kierkegaard ever explicitly reflected on. This society model was for him the obvious background for the literary, philosophical and theological problems, he intended to resolve. State theories were never subjects of study for him. He never mentions Hobbes, Locke and Burke, and when he occasionally refers to Rousseau or Spinoza, it is not their state theories he is dealing with. Sløk is right in considering that Kierkegaard’s theoretical knowledge about state philosophy derives from the authors he most thorough has dealt with, and who also have sketched theories about the state. Apart from the New Testament authors, this means Plato, Aristotle and Hegel. These three authors have strengthened Kierkegaard in his view of a organic society as the model. See *Op. Cit.*, 51-52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Sløk, *Op. Cit.*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 272.

<sup>23</sup> It should be studied if the increasing access of people to the internet and the widespread use of social networks in the world can help to reverse the leveling process.

<sup>24</sup> *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 1-VII (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), vol. IV, no. 4875 (X 4 A 35).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Also, the consensus decision-making model practiced for instance in the World Council of Churches and in the Occupy Wall Street movement deserves close attention.

<sup>27</sup> Lee C. Barrett III in "The Neighbor's Material and Social Well-Being in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*: Does it Matter?" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, Volume 16, 151.

<sup>28</sup> Development, growth, progress, and security are the slogans to which governments resort nowadays to prevent their policies from being discussed.

<sup>29</sup> Malantschuk, Op. Cit., 8.

<sup>30</sup> Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, Op. Cit., 376-377.

<sup>31</sup> *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 103. This citation is also found in Michele Nicoletti, "Politics and Religion in Kierkegaard's Thought: Secularization and the Martyr" in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics and Politics in Kierkegaard*, Op. Cit., 192.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters*  
By Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez  
Pickwick Publications: Eugene, Oregon, 2009.

Reviewed by Jamie Aroosi  
Yeshiva University

For those of us within the world of Kierkegaard Studies, the last few decades has produced a welcome abundance of rigorous scholarship, complemented by numerous dedicated Kierkegaard Studies conferences and conference sections, journals, book series, and a general vitality within the Kierkegaard community. In short, it is a good time to be studying Kierkegaard. However, for all this, there is one area lagging behind: Kierkegaard and the political. Granted, there have been important forays into this area, such as we find in the work of Jørgen Bukdahl, Kresten Nordentoft, and Johannes Sløk, within the Danish reception of a generation ago, or the work of James L. Marsh, Martin Beck Matušík, Michael Plekon, and Merold Westphal, whose more recent work continues this tradition within the Anglophone world. Yet, in spite of this important body of scholarship, the political dimensions of Kierkegaard's thoughts—not to mention its political consequences—remain somewhat of a niche market. This is all the more striking given that, until recently, some of the most interesting work within the larger world of social and political thought was work indebted to Kierkegaard. Theodor Adorno and Jean-Paul Sartre certainly exemplify this lineage, both of whom were deeply influenced by Kierkegaard, even if what they directly wrote about him sometimes lacked a charity that contemporary Kierkegaard scholars continue to lament. Nonetheless, their debt was pronounced,<sup>1</sup> and as Jon Stewart's edited volumes help demonstrate,<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard's influence throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century continental political thought hardly stopped with them.

This contemporary absence is easily explained (perhaps too easily) by way of Kierkegaard's own predominant focus on subjectivity. However, unless we are willing to justify the commonplace criticisms of Kierkegaard as a thinker too focused on interiority to the detriment of a concern with "the world"—criticisms popular even among political thinkers who knew him well, such as the aforementioned Adorno and Sartre—the time has certainly come to lay these criticisms to rest. It is for this reason that Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez's book, *A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters*, is such a welcome one. In it, Pérez-Álvarez advances a number of related claims, and foremost among them is that the late Kierkegaard's increasingly vitriolic attacks on the church are not only part and parcel with a larger political critique (and hence, incomprehensible without it), but that the political radicalization that occurred in his later years, a radicalization with a distinctly economic twist, does not signify a fundamental break with his earlier thought. Far from being disinterested in "the world," it only took Kierkegaard a little while to fully engage with it.

*A Vexing Gadfly* is divided into three parts, of which the final two will likely prove most valuable. The first, entitled "Golden Age in Denmark," provides an extensive survey of the world in which Kierkegaard wrote. It begins by surveying larger European intellectual trends, with which most readers will likely be familiar already; but, it is the latter portion of the first section which is much more useful. Here, the focus turns to Danish social and political life, including the evolving relationship between church and state, as this provides useful context for understanding the particularity of Kierkegaard's attempt to save Christianity from Christendom. As

ubiquitous as the term Christendom has become, it can be easy to forget that in Kierkegaard's Copenhagen, Christendom was a definite entity.

The first section aside, it is in the second that the argument begins in earnest. Entitled "Kierkegaard on Economic Issues: Years of Transition, 1846-1852," the purpose of this section is to act as a fulcrum, charting the development of Kierkegaard's radical turn. Working primarily with the *Papers and Journals*, *Christian Discourses*, and *The Present Age*, Pérez-Álvarez assembles voluminous supporting material documenting the growing intensity of Kierkegaard's attack on the church. However, in tandem with this narrative, he also demonstrates how this attack was not only a break with the church, but that it was fundamentally a break with bourgeois society. As Pérez-Álvarez convincingly tells it, a central point of Kierkegaard's critique of the church revolves around its role in serving bourgeois class interests; however, his attack isn't meant to sever Christianity from Christendom, while leaving bourgeois Christendom intact. Instead, Kierkegaard firstly attacks the church for its subservient role vis-à-vis bourgeois society (itself a distortion of Christianity), while *also* attacking that very society for its failure to extend basic charity and decency to the vast majority of Danes. It is this social inhumanity that necessitates the theological obfuscation and legitimation that the church provides; and it is this inhumanity, predicated on a humane life for the few while the many languor in inhumane conditions, that increasingly ires Kierkegaard.

In the third and final section, entitled "Kierkegaard on Economic Issues: The Radical Final Years, 1852-1855," Pérez-Álvarez's argument hits its full stride. As he writes, "My objective is here to show that with Søren Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom, economic issues are a significant factor in the Kierkegaardian theological discourse and not merely a footnote in his works."<sup>3</sup> As the previous section begins to suggest, Kierkegaard's Christianity becomes ever more based on the "ordinary person," and as this ordinary person was demographically a part of Copenhagen's poor and excluded classes, Kierkegaard's embodiment of a sense of religious equality increasingly manifested itself in an attack on a society (and church) of rampant inequality. Whereas Christendom's role in rationalizing bourgeois privilege led to a "doctrine of temporal retribution"<sup>4</sup>—a theological doctrine that viewed material wealth (and therefore poverty) as a consequence of divine judgment—a renewed Christianity that afforded the poor and disadvantaged spiritual dignity, without also attending to their lack of food, shelter, medicine, etc., was a Christianity that failed to realize its own principles. This is Kierkegaard's Christian community, a community he increasingly embodied in his own life, and one that led him not only to theological critique, but to material critique too.

Lest this review leave the reader with the false impression that this work relies more on interpretation than it does on textual references, this is not the case; in fact, its reliance on the text proves to be one of its real strengths. While much of the most interesting political work on Kierkegaard attempts to draw out the political consequences of Kierkegaard's thought—an aim this work shares for its explicit interest in using Kierkegaard to draw theological debates into a greater interrogation of material reality—this work demonstrates that a political theory already lies within it. It is certainly not presented by Kierkegaard with the systematic attention we might want, but in collecting and presenting the diverse and manifold comments Kierkegaard made in a variety of sources (many of them translated for the first time here), it is possible to see that a much more serious engagement with political life exists within his work. Perhaps a radical rethinking of Søren Kierkegaard is too much to expect from any single book, regardless of its merits; however, with *A Vexing Gadfly*, we can begin to realize that it might be the apolitical (or politically conservative) "Kierkegaard" who needs to be defended, not the political, and politically radical, one. And if the conversation switches in this subtle but important way, not only might Kierkegaard and the political begin to emerge from its niche, but we might also begin imagining neighborly love for the deep political commitments it implies.

*Kierkegaard's Influence on Social-Political Thought*. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources. edited by Jon Stewart. Vol. 14, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011.

Müller-Doohm, Stefan. *Adorno: A Biography*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005.

Perez-Alvarez, Eliseo. *A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal." In *Søren Kierkegaard*, edited by Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Views, 75-98. New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, in an homage he reserved for only two men, Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx, wrote that these two "institute themselves, now vanished, as our future, as the tasks that await us." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 98. As for Adorno, in a 1923 letter to Leo Löwenthal, Siegfried Kracauer remarked that: "If Teddie ever decided to make a declaration of love so as to escape from the sinful state of bachelorhood ... he will be sure to phrase it so obscurely that the young lady concerned ... will be unable to understand what he is saying unless she has read the complete works of Kierkegaard." Quoted from, Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005). 123.

<sup>2</sup> For the volume that most explicitly deals with this issue, see, *Kierkegaard's Influence on Social-Political Thought*, ed. Jon Stewart, vol. 14, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011). However, thinkers canonized within the field of political thought are dealt with extensively within many other of the volumes too.

<sup>3</sup> Eliseo Perez-Alvarez, *A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009). 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-09.

## Book Excerpt

Matias Møl Dalsgaard's Kierkegaardian letter novel *Du må ikke fortvivle (Don't Despair)* is going to be translated into English and published in US and UK by the new Danish publishing house Pine Publishing. Patrick Stokes whom many of us know is doing the translation. You can follow the project on this new Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/MatiasDalsgaardAuthorPage>.

*Don't Despair - Letters For a Modern Person* is an existential letter novel consisting of a missive written from an elderly, Protestant pastor to a young career oriented individual. Two different perspectives on life meet in the book. The novel draws on Protestant and Kierkegaardian thought, and targets a modern reader who is interested, but not trained in philosophy. The book contains critiques of the self-help movement and seeks to provide a helping hand to the person who suffers from contemporary forms of despair. At a more philosophical level the book is Dalsgaard's attempt to present the existential content of Kierkegaard thought in a way that is equally accessible to both Christian and atheist readers. Here is an excerpt/ appetizer.

### *Humour*

While humility is a precondition for being thoroughly willing, to maintain that thoroughness takes humour. It's humour that prevents thoroughness from ossifying and turning into its opposite. Of the phenomena I've mentioned in these letters – joy, courage, sorrow, humility and humour – humour is in fact the most complex. While joy, courage, sorrow and humility all express a certain straightforward and complete purity or wholeheartedness, there's something double-edged or contradictory about humour. Humour isn't pure in itself, but is what bends and relativizes purity – precisely in order to preserve it.

The fact is that every time someone wholeheartedly takes hold of himself and strikes out boldly into the world, as I have been urging you to do, he is also on the way to shutting himself in and becoming half-hearted. Wholeheartedness never exists in a pure form. Or to put it differently: one is never simply good. For as soon as

you positively say ‘yes’ to being yourself in your given situation, you are already in the process of negatively getting stuck in that situational conception of yourself and locking yourself into it. So when I say that you, today, are locked inside your self-conception, that is not a state you will ever be able to overcome entirely. You will always need to orient yourself in life with specific ideas or notions about yourself, and you will always be on the way to locking yourself in with them.

That you orient yourself according to specific ideas or representations is of course perfectly in order – that’s life – but as soon as you do so, those notions and ideas set out to trap you. What should have been a wholehearted, open boldness is on its way to becoming a simplistic and one-sided insistence on a particular idea. The unconditional will to be yourself is, in other words, always on the road to becoming a conditioned will, one that only wills in relation to specific conceptions, ideas or projects.

Even this very talk of wholeheartedness is also, all the time, on course to become a one-sided hectoring about a particular idea of wholeheartedness. If you do not have humour, wholeheartedness becomes a ridiculous little project in which, in zealous pursuit of that whole, full and pure heart, you stand and shout “all or nothing!” like Ibsen’s Brand - while you shut yourself up more and more inside the idea of wholeheartedness. As a higher form of humility, humour is that elasticity or flexibility in a person that allows him to keep his sense that, regardless of which way he chooses, the path will be full of limitations. In humour, he preserves his understanding that he must not think himself already safe and sound just because this path has been chosen. In this way, humour is a diversion and indulgence which, in a sense, reduces wholeheartedness, not in order to make it lukewarm and half-hearted, but rather to let it live on, struggling and striving, aware of its own limits and fallibility.

St Paul writes to the Romans that nothing is impure in itself. But the opposite is also true: nothing is pure in itself either. Perhaps we have ideas about pure purity, but for living human beings, everything also contains its opposite. To put it in philosophical language, everything is dialectical. The pure heart is an ideal, which always appears in a tainted form because, as I’ve said, it is always in the process of locking itself in as it opens itself. And humour understands this duality. Humour walks on two feet, as it were. If you’ve ever noticed how easy it is to catch a humourless person on the wrong foot, the explanation is quite simple: he only stands on one foot. Someone who lives without humour does not see the duality in his own situation, but thinks he can simply and straightaway be good. He speaks in simplistic, literal terms and thinks that because he *says* ‘wholehearted,’ he can also *be* wholehearted without any difficulty.

Someone without humour has not understood that he himself is something other than his idea or his conception. That makes him, at best, naïve; but more often it makes him annoying, and not infrequently it makes him dangerous. Insofar as he doesn’t see that the opposite of his idea also dwells within him, he stands smugly on that one foot of his, suspecting no danger, until humour or irony – humour’s strict little sister – comes by one day and pokes him. So he falls head over heels, for he knows of nothing to hold onto except his idea, and loses his balance just when he is no longer permitted to believe that he is identical with his idea. To poke a humourless person is like tipping a sleeping cow. They were both standing there just fine – stiff, rigid and self-satisfied – and suddenly they are lying on the ground kicking and flailing, wondering what on earth just happened.

Sorry if I got a little carried away there, having fun at the expense of humourless people. The art, naturally, is not to see and expose other people’s lack of humour, but to see how, all the time, you yourself are falling into feeling too secure in your one-sidedness. And for the record, let me also mention that if nothing is good in itself, that goes for humour as well. Humour’s diversion and indulgence can make one blasé and apathetic. Even humour itself needs to be kept on the leash of humour’s own duality, so to speak. Take care not to turn humour into a weapon that then turns itself against you.

And with that humourless admonition, let me close this letter, and my attempt to describe the forms of non-despair. I hope that at least some of the descriptions have made sense to you. My next letters will be of quite a different character than the last few, but more on that later – in my next letter.

## **An Announcement About the Papers of Paul L. Holmer**

*Sometimes it seems as though scholars have to re-invent the wheel every twenty years or so. No matter how insightful, secondary sources from just a couple of decades back often go untouched. And so it might have been for the epiphanic works of Paul L. Holmer, one of the most important interpreters of Kierkegaard of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were it not for our friends David Gouwens and Lee Barrett III. Gouwens and Barrett have recently published three sterling volumes of Holmer’s papers. We owe them both a deep debt of gratitude. Here is a note from the editors.*

*The Paul L. Holmer Papers, edited by David J. Gouwens and Lee C. Barrett III. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012:*

*Volume 1: On Kierkegaard and the Truth. Foreword by Stanley Hauerwas. Afterword by David Cain.*

*Volume 2: Thinking the Faith with Passion: Selected Essays, Foreword by Don E. Saliers. Afterword by David Cain.*

*Volume 3: Communicating the Faith Indirectly: Selected Sermons, Addresses, and Prayers. Foreword by William H. Willimon. Afterword by David Cain.*

Among his other accomplishments, Paul L. Holmer (1916–2004) was one of the most significant American students of Kierkegaard of his generation. As Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota (1946–1960) and Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale Divinity School (1960–1987), Holmer through his teaching and writing influenced several generations of Kierkegaard scholars.

Of his publications, Holmer is perhaps best known for *The Grammar of Faith* (1978). Holmer’s extensive writings on Kierkegaard, however, mostly in the form of essays published in journals and edited volumes, have not been as readily available as they deserve. Based upon the Paul L. Holmer Papers Special Collection in the Yale University Divinity School Library, David J. Gouwens and Lee C. Barrett III, two of Holmer’s students at Yale, have sought to bring Holmer’s accomplishments, including his work on Kierkegaard, into focus by publishing these three volumes of Holmer’s papers.

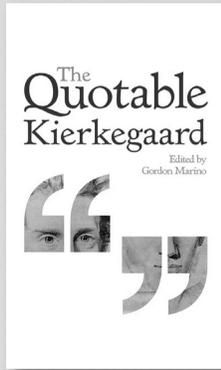
*On Kierkegaard and the Truth* is Holmer’s long-rumored book-length manuscript that the editors reconstructed from the Holmer papers in the Yale Library. Although written in the 1950s and 1960s, Holmer’s theological and philosophical engagement with Kierkegaard is of more than historical interest, since it engages many issues in contemporary scholarly discussions of Kierkegaard. Holmer resists reductionist readings that tie Kierkegaard to any particular school of thought. He likewise criticizes biographical readings of Kierkegaard, seeing Kierkegaard’s significance as an indirect communicator aiming at his reader’s own ethical and religious capacities. Holmer also rejects then-popular existentialist readings of Kierkegaard, seeing him as an analyzer of concepts, while at the same time denying that Kierkegaard is a “crypto-analyst.” So too, Holmer criticizes attempts to construe Kierkegaard as a didactic religious thinker, appreciating Kierkegaard’s “cool” descriptive objectivity and his ironic and stylistic virtuosity. Influenced by his studies under David F. Swenson as well as

his later assimilation of Wittgenstein's thought, Holmer explores in this volume Kierkegaard as a thinker who offers a carefully textured account of the conceptual grammar of truth in ethical and religious contexts. Fifty years after it was penned, Holmer addresses with surprising relevance current discussions of truth, meaning, reference, realism versus antirealism, relativism, and Scriptural hermeneutics.

The editors gather some of Holmer's most interesting and original essays in the second volume, *Thinking the Faith with Passion*, arranged into four significant areas of Holmer's contributions: essays on Kierkegaard; on Wittgenstein; Theology, Understanding, and Faith; and Emotions, Passions, and Virtues. The Kierkegaard essays show Holmer's sustained engagement with several features of Kierkegaard's thought: "Kierkegaard and Philosophy," "Kierkegaard and Logic," "Kierkegaard and Theology," and "About Being a Person: Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*." By placing these Kierkegaard essays in relation to his other essays, the volume shows too Holmer's constructive thinking through of Kierkegaard's thought in relation to a range of issues in philosophical theology.

Kierkegaard figures centrally too in the third volume of Holmer's papers, *Communicating the Faith Indirectly*. The first part of this volume displays Holmer's attempts to think through the relevance of the indirect communication of capabilities to fresh thinking on the sermon, liturgy, ministry, and spirituality. The volume also gives examples of Holmer's own exercises in the sermon and religious address, all reflecting Kierkegaard's sense of the challenge embodied in various forms of religious discourse. For anyone concerned with Kierkegaard's relevance to sermons, liturgy, spirituality, and the challenges of ministry, Holmer's essays and addresses will prove rewarding.

Taken together, the three volumes of the Holmer papers seek to illuminate the "faith and thought" of Paul L. Holmer, a thinker and teacher who was not only one of the premier students of Kierkegaard of his time, but who also, as his Yale colleague David Kelsey describes him, "was one of the most interesting and original religious thinkers in mid-twentieth-century America."



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