

Lessons from Kierkegaard to a Pastor in 21st Century America

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In her introduction to Kierkegaard, Julia Watkin says that Kierkegaard can be interpreted as the founder of existentialism, a forerunner of postmodernism, or the proponent of a purely humanistic religiosity, and that he can be read as a philosopher, a psychologist or a novelist. All these approaches contain a component of truth, she says, but they leave aside the driving force behind his authorship. Julia Watkin maintains that Kierkegaard was primarily Christian thinker and an outstanding one, who believed in the God of traditional Christianity, and whose attraction has gone well beyond the particular time he wrote at and the particular culture he wrote for. It has to be recognized, though, Watkin adds, that Kierkegaard makes it difficult for the reader to see this because of two main reasons: his method of communication, and his denial that he was a Christian (as he defined the word).¹ That he above all was a Christian author is also what Kierkegaard himself recognized in retrospect in his *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, completed in 1848, and published posthumously in 1859. In that book, Kierkegaard insisted that he was “a religious author,” whose whole authorship pertained to Christianity and to the issue of what it meant to become a Christian, with direct and indirect polemical aim at the enormous illusion that he called Christendom.²

I agree with Julia Watkin. It is as a Christian thinker that I read him. It was only in 1999, when I had been the pastor of the Danish Lutheran Church in Buenos

¹ Julia Watkin, *Kierkegaard* (London: Continuum, 1997), 1-3.

² Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 10 (from Merold Westphal's Foreword).

Aires for 6 years, that Kierkegaard began to occupy my attention in a serious way. I knew, of course, that Kierkegaard was a central figure of the Danish cultural world of the 19th century together with two figures about whom I knew much more, the fairy tales writer Hans Christian Andersen, and the pastor, hymn writer, and reformer of church and society Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. The Danish Church in Buenos Aires was both a church in the specific sense of the term and a Danish cultural center, and part of my work was to teach Danish classes to members of the church and anybody interested. That is how two Philosophy instructors at the university and a friend of them contacted me in 1999 and asked if I would teach them Danish so that they could begin reading Kierkegaard in his own language. They had already been reading and studying Kierkegaard in the limited (and not always good) translations of his work into Spanish that they had been able to access. As you can imagine, I did not say no to such a request and opportunity. This Danish class was the beginning of what later would become an interdisciplinary translation team and the Kierkegaard Library Argentina. What is more important for the purposes of this presentation is that Kierkegaard has not, since then, stopped bothering me and questioning the way I live and the way I preach the gospel to others. This evening I want to share some of the lessons I have learned from him so far, and that I draw from as a pastor now in 21st century America. None of these lessons is definitive. I keep learning from him each time I read from one of his works and let him address me as one of his dear readers, as he uses to put it. I also learn from Kierkegaard when I read any of his interpreters, and when I engage in conversation about Kierkegaard with both scholars and persons who are just interested in the vital questions about existence. I also expect to learn from you and from your questions and comments tonight.

I will divide my presentation in three parts. In the first one, I will talk about the distinction that Kierkegaard makes between Christendom and Christianity. In the second part, I will refer to the lack of authority with which Kierkegaard addressed his audience. And in the third, my theme will be Kierkegaard's preference for the lowly and the poor.

1. Christendom / Christianity

The Danish King Christian III mandated the conversion of all Danes to Lutheranism in 1536 (this is why I use to say that in my family we have been Lutherans since 1536) and instituted himself as the leader and protector of the new faith. King Frederick III introduced absolute monarchy in 1660, and formalized and heightened the sovereign authority of the King in the religious affairs. Absolutism lasted until 1849. Lutheranism was the obligatory religion, the Lutheran church was the state church, and the law of the church was part of the national law. In fact, there was no distinction between state and church. It was the King's responsibility to ensure his subjects' fidelity to the Lutheran Christian faith.³ Small groups of Catholics, Jews, and Huguenots did get permission to settle in Denmark, but it was under the condition that they would be loyal to the Danish king and not propagate their beliefs. Those groups were not considered Danish. They were only tolerated under special dispensations and within certain restrictions.

Due to pietistic influence, compulsory confirmation was introduced in 1736, the year of bicentenary of the Reformation in Denmark. From then on, although the King had the authority to make some exceptions, baptism and confirmation in the Lutheran State Church would be synonymous with official Danish citizenship and

³ Julie K. Allen, *Danish but Not Lutheran: The Impact of Mormonism on Danish Cultural Identity, 1850-1920* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2017), 37.

legal adulthood status. The confirmation certificate, extended by the pastor of the corresponding local parish, in his capacity of civil servant, was the document that conferred the legal adulthood status. The exercise of any of the rights associated with being a legal adult required baptism and confirmation in the Lutheran State Church. Those rights included among others the rights to marry, to enter into contractual relationships, to enter a guild, to access a profession, to change the place of residence, to travel freely within the regions of the state, to receive an inheritance, to comply with the compulsory military service, to study at the university, and to access employment in the state bureaucracy.⁴

Every Dane (or at least one member of each household) had the obligation not only to attend church on Sundays and feast days, but also to remain awoken during the services. There were overseers provided with long sticks appointed to make sure that nobody fell asleep. If somebody dared to take a nap during the service, he or she was woken by the strokes of those overseers. We must add that this rule of compulsory church attendance became more relaxed in the late eighteenth century. And during the time that the rule was effective, it was easier to enforce in the countryside than in the towns and in the capital city, where residents could attend any parish church they wished, and therefore the pastors had a harder time keeping an eye on their parishioners.⁵ In the countryside it was, however, where most of the population lived (8 out of 10 residents lived in the countryside in Denmark in 1850),⁶ and peasants had to attend the parish of their place of residence and were under the watchful eye of the local pastor. The pastor in the countryside was the only local symbol of the authority of the King and of the culture of the capital. Normally the pastor would be the only academically trained

⁴ Carsten Bach-Nielsen, "The Role of the Lutheran Church in Denmark," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 25, no. 2 (2012): 301.

⁵ Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 27-28.

⁶ <http://danmarkshistorien.dk/perioder/det-unge-demokrati-1848-1901/befolkningsudviklingen/>

person in the parish, he would own the only library in the parish, and he would operate the biggest farm in the parish, the one assigned to the pastor in order to provide him with a good income. The farm was not the pastors' only income though. The members of each parish had to pay tithe to the pastor, and the pastor charged a fee for performing baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals.⁷

It is worth mentioning that the pastor, in his capacity of civil servant, carried out other duties as well (apart from the strictly pastoral duties). The pastor had to collect the taxes; take the censuses; help with the administration of the compulsory military service; record births, baptisms, deaths, weddings and confirmations in the parish register; supervise and inspect the local schools; encourage agricultural innovations; run the system of poor relief; in some parishes the pastor was in charge even of performing the vaccination against smallpox.⁸ And when in 1841 the rural districts received the authority to govern themselves, the pastor was normally the one appointed to preside over the corresponding council. Meanwhile, in the Copenhagen area, clergymen would play leading roles in the Danish government and bureaucracy.

The disempowerment of the Danish nobility brought about by the implementation of absolute monarchy in 1660 was an important factor in giving clergymen the position of prominence that they reached in the Danish society.⁹

The end of absolutism came with the approval of a constitution in 1849. The constitution guaranteed the right to freedom of religion and supposedly put an end to the connection between religion and civil rights in Denmark. In principle, no one would ever again be forced to become a member of a certain religious community

⁷ https://www.egtvedkirke.dk/fileadmin/group/468/Billeder/Kirkeside_fra_Egtved_Posten/Juni_2014.pdf See also <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kirke-tro/hvordan-pr%C3%A6stel%C3%B8n-blev-en-statsopgave>

⁸ <http://www.kb.dk/da/nb/fag/dafos/kildevaeld/Baggrundsartikler/Artikler/paestenen/index.html>

⁹ Allen, *Danish but Not Lutheran: The Impact of Mormonism on Danish Cultural Identity, 1850-1920*, 37.

nor be deprived of the full use of civil and political rights based on religion. Yet the Lutheran State Church, that up to that time had not had a legal corporate existence of its own, was transformed into the “Danish People’s Church.” The constitution stated that “the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the Danish People’s Church and as such is supported by the state,” with the understanding that the state could not disregard its responsibility for the spiritual needs of its people.¹⁰ The constitution also promised that a future law would codify and lay down the internal organization of the church and the mode of its relationship to the state. To the annoyance of some and the delight of others, the parliament never passed such a law (and never means even to this day of May 1st, 2018). The promise of the constitution came to be interpreted instead as meaning that the church affairs would be settled by laws, on a case-by-case basis, passed in the parliament and administered by the minister for church affairs. And please pay attention to the fact that the minister for church affairs for many decades to come would be in charge of overseeing not only the church, but also the education, museums, the ballet and opera, and culture in general.¹¹ It was as late as in 1933 that the church and the school system were separated. We also have to notice that in 1849 99.9% of the population were Lutherans. In spite of the approval of the 1849 Constitution, the organization of state and society in accord with the church went on as if nothing had changed. The way to become something in society was much easier if you were a good conforming Danish Lutheran.¹²

These were the conditions of what Kierkegaard calls Christendom: a Christian state, in a Christian nation, where everything was Christian and all were Christians where one saw, wherever one turned, nothing but Christians and

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, 76.

¹² I thank prof. Carsten Bach-Nielsen for the data of the last sentences of this paragraph he provided me in an email.

Christianity. In Christendom, maybe even the nobler domestic animals and their offspring were Christians, Kierkegaard jokingly says, although he recommended the setting up of a committee composed of pastors and veterinarians to look further at the issue.¹³

Under the conditions of Christendom, Kierkegaard says that the pastors could call for help upon the state that they represented as civil servants in order to remind people of taking proper care of their spiritual needs: “‘What, you feel no need for Christianity—perhaps you want to go to prison?’ ‘What, you feel no need for Christianity—then perhaps you feel a great need to become nobody, because unless you are a Christian, all the roads in society are barred to you!’”¹⁴

Kierkegaard accused the Danish state of having employed 1000 officials (this was the total number of pastors in Denmark around 1850) who –in the name of proclaiming Christianity (and this was to Kierkegaard far more dangerous than a clear and open attempt to hinder Christianity) were financially interested in having people call themselves Christians –the larger the flock of sheep taking the name “Christians” the better, and in letting the matter rest there, so that they did not come to know what Christianity in truth is.¹⁵

To illustrate to what degree it was certain that everyone was and had to be Christian, Kierkegaard gives in 1855, 6 years after the approval of the constitution, the example of “an atheist who in the strongest terms declared all Christianity to be a lie,” and who “moreover, in the strongest terms declared he was not a Christian.” Even when it was against the law to state that Christianity was a lie, the author of the statement would have been considered a Christian anyway. As evidence, Kierkegaard imagines what would have happened if the atheist man died. As long

¹³ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 115-116.

¹⁴ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 152.

¹⁵ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 95.

as he left so much money that the pastor, the funeral director and several others were each able to get their due, he would have been buried as a Christian. Only if he had left nothing (Kierkegaard says that “a little” would not have made any difference, because “the pastor, who is Christianly contented, is always contented with little when there is not more”), only if the man had left literally nothing—then attention might have been paid to his protests, since by being dead he would also have been prevented from corporally paying with physical labor the costs of being Christianly buried.¹⁶ With this statement, Kierkegaard is also denouncing that the financial interest of the pastors led them to discriminate against the poor and in favor of those who had money. Kierkegaard gets to the point of saying that the teachers for whom preaching was their career had abandoned the sufferers and ingratiated themselves instead with the fortunate and the powerful by preaching to them a cozy Christianity.¹⁷

“When Christianity entered the world, the task was to proclaim Christianity directly,” but “in ‘Christendom’ the relation is different,” says Kierkegaard. “What is found there is not Christianity but an enormous illusion,” and therefore “if Christianity is to be introduced here, then first and foremost the illusion must be removed. But since this illusion, this delusion, is that they are Christians, then it of course seems as if the introduction of Christianity would deprive people of Christianity. Yet this is the first thing that must be done; the illusion must go.”¹⁸

We do not live under the conditions of Christendom in 21st century America. Although there are differences in how culturally rooted Christian faith is depending on where in America we are talking about,¹⁹ nowhere we have the conditions of

¹⁶ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 117-118.

¹⁷ JP 4697.

¹⁸ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 107.

¹⁹ Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians*, 120.

Christendom from Kierkegaard's Denmark. Notwithstanding, I do not believe that Christianity should repudiate the privileged position as guarantor of social order and public morality that it still has to a certain extent in some places of this country. I think that it would be faithful to Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity to use this position of privilege where we have it to become champions of the poor, the vulnerable, the afflicted, and the outcast, and to promote respectful, considerate, and non-coercive interactions.²⁰

As a pastor in 21st century America, I have a lot to learn from Kierkegaard in order to engage persons who identify themselves as Christians or who would like to identify themselves as Christians today, as well as to engage persons for whom the word "Christian" does not mean anything, or even has a negative connotation.

The first group, the one composed of those who identify or would like to identify themselves as Christians, I will invite one by one to join me in the fascinating and hard task of a lifetime that it is in Kierkegaard's view to become a Christian.

The second group, the one composed of those to whom the word "Christian" is not appealing, I will not try to convince about the plausibility of the Christian faith. Kierkegaard did not want to have anything to do with apologetics, with the attempt to make a rational defense of faith. Kierkegaard is not ambiguous. If we embark upon making Christianity plausible with rational arguments and the attempt succeeds, Kierkegaard says, "then this endeavor would have the ironical fate that on the very day of victory it would have forfeited everything and

²⁰ Paul R. Sponheim, *Existing before God: Søren Kierkegaard and the Human Venture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 140. The case of the House chaplain dismissed from his job apparently after a prayer on occasion of the discussion of tax reform is an example of the price that a pastor can pay for using such a position of privilege in the right way. See http://religiondispatches.org/ryans-expulsion-of-the-house-chaplain-our-savage-inequality-shall-not-be-spoken-of/?utm_source=Religion+Dispatches+Newsletter&utm_campaign=e0888a8a21-RD_Daily_Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_742d86f519-e0888a8a21-42428337

completely cashiered Christianity.”²¹ Kierkegaard says further, “the good news of the Gospel is not to be foisted on people by means of demonstrations and reasons, demeaningly, as when a mother must sit and beg her child to eat the good wholesome food, but he [the child] turns up his nose at it and does not really care to eat. No, the appetite has to be aroused in a different way—and then the glad news of the Gospel will certainly be found to be appetizing.”²²

At the moment of interacting with the second group, I will try, however, to counter some misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the Christian faith. And I will invite my partners in the conversation to think with the heart²³ and consider with me the many times in which Kierkegaard, both in pseudonymous works and in the works under his own name, refers to thoughts that could not have arisen in a human heart. When using this expression, Kierkegaard alludes to 1 Corinthians 2, where the apostle Paul claims that “God’s wisdom is hidden from normal human perception.”²⁴ Let me give you some examples of thoughts that could not have arisen in a human heart, according to Kierkegaard: the thought that “the blessed god could need” the human being;²⁵ the thought, referring to Jesus Christ, “that in order to make others rich one must oneself be poor;”²⁶ the thought that God in Jesus Christ on “own initiative showed mercy upon the world;”²⁷ the thought that it is God Godself who implants love in the human heart,²⁸ and who commands us to

²¹ *The Book on Adler*, 39.

²² *Judge for Yourself!*, 203.

²³ This means to engage in what Kierkegaard called the “double reflection” that is essential for genuine subjective understanding. He wanted to encourage not merely intellectual understanding, but the “second reflection” that requires understanding of what these concepts would mean for a person’s own life. Communication on moral and religious matters would not be effective without the active involvement and appropriation by the person receiving the communication.

²⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=798

²⁵ *Philosophical Fragments*, 36.

²⁶ *Christian Discourses*, 122.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁸ *Works of Love*, 163.

love.²⁹ My favorite example of a thought not arisen in a human heart that Kierkegaard gives is the story that he tells us through his pseudonym Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death* about a poor day laborer and the mightiest emperor who ever lived. It turns out that the emperor not only wants to see the day laborer; he also wants him for a son-in-law. Quite humanly, Anti-Climacus tells us, the news embarrasses the day laborer, and he does not want to share it with anybody. Would his neighbors not think that the emperor wanted to make a fool of him, and make him a laughingstock of the whole region? A little favor from the emperor would have made some sense, but this plan for him to become a son-in-law, was far too much. The poor day laborer would never have dreamt of it; it was, here it comes, a thought that would never have arisen in his heart. Would he have the courage to believe it? Would he be offended? Or would he honestly and forthrightly confess that such a thing was too high for him, that he could not grasp it, that it was to him a piece of folly? You can imagine how Anti-Climacus continues the story. He does it by saying that this is exactly what Christianity is. Not only some of its aspects, Christianity as a whole is something that could not have arisen in any human heart. Christianity as the teaching that every single individual human being, no matter whether man, woman, servant, girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student, or whatever—this individual human being exists before God, this individual human being who perhaps would be proud of having spoken with the king once in his life, this human being who does not have the slightest illusion of being on intimate terms with this one or that one, this human being exists before God, and may speak with God any time he wants to, assured of being heard by God—in short, this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God! Furthermore, for this person’s sake, also for this very

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

person's sake, God comes to the world, allows Godself to be born, to suffer, to die, and this suffering God—this suffering God almost implores and beseeches this person to accept the help that is offered to him! Truly, if there is anything to lose one's mind over, this is it! But will I have the humble courage to dare to believe or will I be offended?³⁰ This invitation from God is not only a demand on our intellect, but on our whole way of living, and depending on the circumstances in which we receive the invitation, it can be an accusation, a message of comfort and a call to repentance. This is how I would like to talk about Christianity with those who do not care about the word "Christian." I do not expect to convince them of anything by presenting Christianity as the response to a lack in the human being.³¹ I will rather explore with them to what extent Christianity, by contradicting common sense in such a radical way, is the invitation to live in a way that can indeed be appealing. I believe that we all need to expose ourselves again and again to the astonishing claims Christianity makes and that are not obvious to anyone,³² that we have to live up to our dignity as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.

The salary issue, on the other hand, has to be faced with honesty. I have been pastor in Denmark, where the state paid my salary, and in Argentina, where I was an employee of my congregation, and I expect to be employed by a congregation in the US soon. The worst thing we could do is to repeat the story that Kierkegaard narrates more than once, the story about the theological graduate Ludvig From ("From" in Danish means pious). Everybody knew that he had spent years first seeking to become a theological graduate, and then seeking to get the

³⁰ *The Sickness Unto Death*, 84-86.

³¹ Gordon Daniel Marino, *The Existentialist's Survival Guide: How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 153. Kierkegaard's argument is that the need of God is not a lack, but a sign of perfection. See the upbuilding discourse "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection" (in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*). In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard says that "the devout man's greatest and his true riches" is that "he needs God."

³² John Depoe, "Rejuvenating Apologetics in the Twenty-First Century: Taking Hints from Søren Kierkegaard", 11.

call as a pastor that would provide him the best income. Everybody knew that when he finally accepted a call, he was about to withdraw when he discovered that his income would be 150 rix-dollars less than he had believed. The fact is that he was ordained. And when the dean installed him, he recommended him to the parish with the words of Peter to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Precisely in times such as ours, the dean said, “there must be such men as teachers.” And this is not all, for now the young man himself mounts the pulpit—and the Gospel for the day (strangely enough!) is another passage from Matthew, “Seek first the kingdom of God.” The pastor delivers the sermon, and the first one to praise it is the bishop, who happened to be present. “A very good sermon,” the bishop said; “and it made the proper impression, the whole part about ‘first’ the kingdom of God, the manner in which he emphasized this first.”³³ This disagreement between the discourse and the life of the pastor is unacceptable, especially when it concerns matters about income and livelihood. By ignoring these matters in their preaching, pastors legitimate an unequal and excluding bourgeois society, and give implicit rationale for a doctrine of temporal retribution that views material wealth, and therefore also poverty, as consequences of divine judgment.³⁴

2. Without authority

Kierkegaard entered the University of Copenhagen to study theology in 1830 and took his theological examinations in July 1840. By then he had already been thinking about pursuing doctoral work, but the most obvious option for a theologian was to become a pastor in the established church in Denmark. And the doctoral work was not incompatible with that. This is also what Kierkegaard

³³ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 233-235, and *Judge for Yourself!*, 110-112.

³⁴ Eliseo Pérez Álvarez, *Introducción a Søren Kierkegaard: O La Teología Patas Arriba* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 151-154.

thought, and he did enroll in the one semester long Royal Pastoral Seminary for his ordination training. Kierkegaard preached his first sermon on January 12, 1841, while he attended the Pastoral Seminary. The assessors commented that he had delivered the sermon with a clear voice and a dignified tone. They had though two objections, that the wealth of ideas had been too rich, and that his depiction of the soul's struggle would not have appealed to the average churchgoer. I imagine that Kierkegaard would have replied first, that he was not concerned mainly with the struggle of the average churchgoer, but with his own.³⁵ Second, that he never would be condescending with any of his listeners, interlocutors, or readers. He would not be their waiters nor promote their comfortableness; he would rather require them to make an effort and take the trouble to read him carefully.³⁶ Third, that he did believe that a sermon (as well as any other mission work done by a pastor) had at all times to "be self-directed just as much, if not more, than at the 'target' audience." Nobody could "speak to others about religious matters from a position of superiority and expect to succeed—either in winning a convert or in pleasing God."³⁷

Kierkegaard should have ended his ordination training with an examination in homiletics (that is, the art of preaching), but postponed it given that he had begun working on his dissertation for the doctoral degree. His dissertation in Danish on the concept of Socratic irony that was accepted in July of 1841 and he defended it in September of the same year. It was only in February of 1844, after he already had published numerous works, both under pseudonyms (*Either/Or*, *Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*) and under his own name (several series of what

³⁵ Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 95.

³⁶ *The Moment and Last Writings*, 106.

³⁷ Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard: A Christian Missionary to Christians*, 22.

he called upbuilding discourses), that he took his examination in the arts of preaching with a sermon he delivered in Trinity Church.

Kierkegaard would preach again a couple of times at the Friday communion services at a church in Copenhagen and he preached for the last time in May 1851 in another church in Copenhagen. He did it so well that an author and future pastor who was there made the following comment: “No one who has heard him preach will forget that extremely weak, but wonderfully expressive voice. Never have I heard a voice that was so capable of inflecting even the most delicate nuances of expression.” Kierkegaard even received several letters from female admirers who praised his sermon. However, the act of preaching the sermon left him so physically exhausted that he promised himself that he would never take the pulpit again.³⁸ His main vocation and blissful pastime was to be an author, who could distance himself from the moment, and like a lover, tag after the thoughts, and just like an artist in love with his instrument, converse with the language, and draw forth the expressions just as the thought required them.³⁹

Only in 1846 Kierkegaard prayerfully considered the possibility of getting a call to become the pastor of a parish in the countryside, and he fantasized that out there he would breathe more easily and still be able to grant himself a bit of literary productivity in his free moments.⁴⁰ However, he soon realized that his call to be an author required his full time commitment in Copenhagen.

As a lay person, Kierkegaard could not claim any other authority than the honesty and persuasiveness of what he said. “I am without authority; far be it from me to judge any person.”⁴¹ “I am an unauthorized poet who influences by means of

³⁸ Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 675.

³⁹ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 91.

⁴⁰ JP 5887.

⁴¹ *For Self-Examination*, 17.

the ideals.”⁴² “I do not call myself a Christian; I do not speak of myself as a Christian,”⁴³ Kierkegaard provokingly said. In the face of the hard task of a lifetime that it is in Kierkegaard’s view to become a Christian, we are all lifelong learners. Kierkegaard also repeatedly said that he first talked to himself,⁴⁴ and he invited his dear reader to read him aloud, if possible, and gain in this way the strongest impression that he or she would only have him or herself to consider. Kierkegaard knew that to be alone, and especially to dare to be alone with Christ’s demand and invitation is dreadful. It makes us aware of all the undefined possibilities of life;⁴⁵ it compels us to make a choice, our own choice. The honesty of the choice—and we can never make our choice once and for all; we have to choose again and again—the honesty of the choice matters more than anything else to Kierkegaard. Nothing could be worse than the indifferentism of having a religion diluted and botched into sheer blather, in a passionless way.⁴⁶ Preferable to that is to Kierkegaard the honesty of the humble admission that we cannot fully respond to the demands of Jesus Christ on our life, or the honesty of the plain acknowledgement that we do not want to be Christians,⁴⁷ or even the honesty of the decisive, resolute, and definite choice of not wanting to have a religion.⁴⁸

I am an ordained pastor, and Kierkegaard animates me to embrace the authority that ordination implies. This authority should not be confused with dominion without accountability, and I will have to earn it over and over again by being honest, and by showing that I will not expose others to demands that I myself am not willing to face as well.

⁴² Ibid., 21.

⁴³ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 340.

⁴⁴ *Practice in Christianity*, 7.

⁴⁵ Backhouse, *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*, 230.

⁴⁶ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 209.

⁴⁷ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 97.

⁴⁸ *The Moment and Late Writings*, 208.

3. The preference for the poor and the lowly

Kierkegaard did not conceal his contemptuousness of those who had made money into a god. And he makes a description that could be applied to today's society: "To make money is earnestness; to make much money, even if it were by selling human beings, this is earnestness. To make a lot of money by contemptible slander—this is earnestness. To proclaim some truth—provided one also makes much money (it does not depend on its being true but on one's making money)—this is earnestness. Money, money—this is earnestness. This is how we are brought up; from earliest childhood we are disciplined in the ungodly worship of money."⁴⁹ At the same time, Kierkegaard did not conceal either his preference for the poor and the lowly. They may think that their fate is to be pitiable objects of mercifulness, that they have no choice but to bow and thank the rich or the authorities for their misunderstood mercifulness toward them.⁵⁰ But this is not true, Kierkegaard argued. Also the poor and the lowly can become themselves and stand alone, free and independent, as their own masters,⁵¹ and even be able to practice mercifulness. Mercifulness can be shown even if it can give nothing and is able to do nothing. It follows of itself, says Kierkegaard, that if the merciful person has something to give he or she should give it more than willingly. But the problem is that if we have, for instance, money to give, then we can hide our lack of concern for others behind public displays of financial generosity that are gratifying to our egos and oppressive towards the persons who receive the money. Kierkegaard denounces the pastors who are silent about mercifulness and talk instead about generosity. Those pastors, says Kierkegaard, are partners in the worship of money and the oppression of the poor.

⁴⁹ *Works of Love*, 320.

⁵⁰ *Works of Love*, 322.

⁵¹ *Works of Love*, 274.

“My task has always been difficult,” Kierkegaard said at some point. “With regard to a brash scientific scholarship, a brash culture, etc...I jack up the requirements of ideality so high—and at the same time I also have a great responsibility, since I have the most intense sympathy for the common man, somen, etc., and I do not want to make them anxious.”⁵²

It was the poor and the lowly, the common man and woman, Kierkegaard had in mind when he talked about the need to love ourselves in the right way. Gordon Marino is not only right, but in full agreement with Kierkegaard when he in his latest book says that “We need the love of others to love ourselves, but in order to be nurtured by the love of others, we need to love ourselves sufficiently to accept that love.” Then Gordon Marino adds, “Herein lies part of the poison of racism and oppression. They profoundly damage a person's ability to love themselves.”⁵³ Maybe Kierkegaard did not fully unfold the political commitments that neighborly love implies. He does insinuate however that he would have rejected two of the main factors that in today’s America conspire against any kind of structural reform: first, the belief that there is a direct relationship between God’s favor and hunger or plenty,⁵⁴ and second, the dream that we through hard work should be able make ourselves and achieve whatever we want.⁵⁵ As a pastor, I would like to explore and pursue the political commitments implied by Kierkegaard’s understanding of love together with my congregation.

Kierkegaard also manifested his preference for the poor and the lowly in his personal interactions with them. And this is what I will finish with.

⁵² *The Moment and Late Writings*, 405-406.

⁵³ Marino, *The Existentialist's Survival Guide: How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age*, 224-225.

⁵⁴ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

⁵⁵ Roberto Mangabeira Unger calls it Prometheanism. See Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 31. We could also identify it as “the American dream.”

Kierkegaard used to take lengthy walks around Copenhagen and engage in conversation with all kinds of people, especially “with people whose interests in life were completely different from his own or which were diametrically opposed to his own,”⁵⁶ that is, with common men and women. At a certain point, he was considered Copenhagen’s “foremost peripatetic and street observer and conversationalist.”⁵⁷ He congratulated himself on being able to remember each one of his interlocutors from one encounter to the next. “Although I can be totally engrossed in my own production, and although together with all this I am doing seventeen other things and talk every day with about fifty people of all ages, I swear, nevertheless, that I am able to relate what each person with whom I have spoken said the last time, next-to-the-last time, not to mention someone who is the object of particular attention—his remarks, his emotions are immediately vivid to me as soon as I see him, even though it is a long time since I saw him,”⁵⁸ Kierkegaard said in 1844. There are many eyewitness accounts that confirm that Kierkegaard was not exaggerating, and as you can imagine, Kierkegaard kept away from the commonplace remarks of everyday chatter. When he encountered the same person again, he could take up the thread from an earlier conversation and carry it a step further, to a point where it could be continued again at another opportunity.⁵⁹

I will also mention the relationship Kierkegaard had with one of his half-cousins, Hans Peter, who was known as Peter. He was severely crippled from birth, and Kierkegaard had granted him the rare permission to visit him at home rather than on the street. The two could spend hours talking together, and they also exchanged letters. “He is so unspeakably loving and understands me so well,”

⁵⁶ Backhouse, *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*, 109.

⁵⁷ *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Volume 5, 520n1008.

⁵⁸ JP 5731.

⁵⁹ Backhouse, *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*, 108-109.

Peter used to say.⁶⁰ I will quote from one of Kierkegaard's letters to Peter, a belated New Year greeting from 1848, where he says, "Among the other thoughts or considerations I often have had and intend to go on having about you is this: that reconciled to your fate, with patience and quiet devotion, you carry out as important a task as the rest of us who perform on a larger or smaller stage, engage in important business, build houses, write copious books, and God knows what. Undeniable your stage is the smallest, that of solitude, and inwardness—but... when all is said and done, what matters most is inwardness—and when everything has been forgotten, it is still inwardness that is most important." And in the following paragraph he adds, "Above all do not forget your duty to love yourself; do not permit the fact that you have been set apart from life in a way, been prevented from participating actively in it, and that you are superfluous in the obtuse eyes of a busy world, above all do not permit this to deprive you of your idea of yourself, as if your life, if lived in inwardness, did not have just as much meaning and worth as that of any other human being in the loving eyes of an all-wise Governance, and considerably more than the busy, busier, busiest haste of busy-ness—busy with wasting life and losing oneself." In the last paragraph he says: "Take care of yourself in the new year. If you would enjoy visiting me once in a while, please do come. You are welcome."⁶¹

As a pastor in 21st century America, I expect to draw on these lessons I have learned from Kierkegaard. And in my personal interactions with people, especially with the common men and women who constitute the majority of any congregation, I will even do my best to imitate Kierkegaard in a direct way. Thank you for your attention!

⁶⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁶¹ *Letters and Documents*, 280-281.