

2008

# Kierkegaard and/or Catholicism: A Matter of Conjunctions

Center for Catholic Studies, Seton Hall University

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Summer 2008

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Center for Catholic Studies, Seton Hall University

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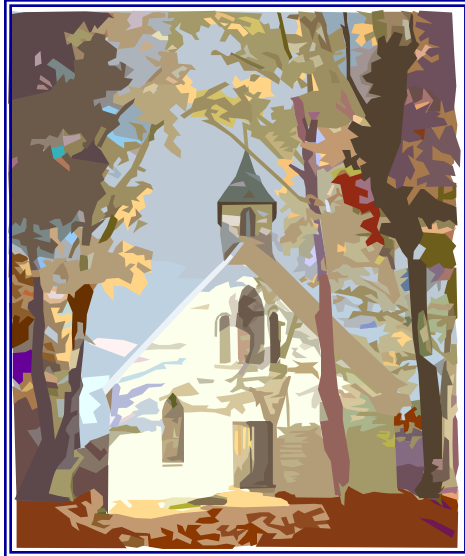
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*“Kierkegaard and/or Catholicism:  
A Matter of Conjunctions”*



**2008 Summer Seminar  
Center for Catholic Studies  
Seton Hall University**



## CENTER FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES

### *Faculty Summer Seminar 2008*

#### *“Kierkegaard and/or Catholicism: A Matter of Conjunctions”*

**Facilitator: William Cahoy**

*Dean, School of Theology and Seminary, Saint John's University*

***May 20-22 (8:30 am to 12:00 pm)***

#### **“Kierkegaard and/or Catholicism: A matter of conjunctions”**

It is often said (accurately) that one of the distinguishing marks of a Catholic understanding of life is its both-and approach in contrast to the either-or approach more characteristic of a Protestant sensibility. For example, Catholics tend to live with and argue for *both* scripture *and* tradition, faith and works. The Danish Lutheran Søren Kierkegaard is often cited as a paradigm of Protestant either-or thinking. In this seminar we will explore what we might learn not only about Catholicism and Kierkegaard, but even more about Christianity, human life, and the logic of conjunction.

**William Cahoy** is Dean of the School of Theology and Seminary and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Saint John's University in Collegeville, MN. A Catholic theologian, Professor Cahoy wrote his dissertation at Yale University on Kierkegaard's view of the self in community. He has published on Kierkegaard's theological anthropology and on feminist theology in *Modern Theology*, written many reviews, and gives talks around the country on issues in Catholic higher education, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, faith and the liberal arts, and faith and reason

**How to apply:** The seminar is open to all full-time faculty. Participants will receive a stipend of \$500.00 for the seminar. Participating faculty will be expected to discuss certain texts and to write a short article about the topic from their own perspective and discipline. These articles will be collected and disseminated on-line. Articles will be expected eight weeks after the end of the seminar. Fifteen faculty will be accepted for the seminar, preference being given to those who have not participated in the past. Apply by indicating your interest to Anthony Scigliano, Religious Studies Department, at [sciglian@shu.edu](mailto:sciglian@shu.edu) tel. 973-761-9544. Deadline for indicating interest is May 1, 2008.

*This seminar is co-sponsored by the Center for Catholic Studies and the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership at Seton Hall University. It is part of a series of such workshops focusing on the notion of “calling” in the various disciplines.*

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## On Knowing and Being: Reflections on Truth, Love, and Identity

Janine P. Buckner

I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to participate in the Center's Faculty seminar, "Kierkegaard and/or Catholicism: A Matter of Conjunctions" this May. The seminar, adeptly facilitated by Dr. William Cahoy, Dean of the School of Theology and Seminary at St. John's University, was focused upon Søren Kierkegaard's writings on Christianity, the human experience, and the value of recognizing and maximizing individuals' responsibilities in relation to an absolute God. Faith is a central aspect of my life, and I greatly enjoyed the discussions of Kierkegaard's views that ensued in the gathering of my esteemed and erudite colleagues! Perhaps most rewarding for me was the time we had to share our own definitions and perspectives with each other. I found the seminar personally enlightening, stimulating, and useful for some potential research projects, and am thrilled to have had the ability to participate.

The seminar afforded me many benefits, not the least of which was time to engage in discourse and learning at a level at which I have not had the luxury to experience in many years. Indeed, the experience of being immersed with colleagues in such a stimulating atmosphere was a rather luxurious one for me. Even though I was teaching (the Psychology of Gender course) while also reading and participating in the reflections regarding Kierkegaard's views of the world and the here-after, I felt as if I could go on forever in that "mode!" I am grateful for the wonderful experience, and I wish it could have continued. I doubt that I am alone in this feeling; many of us have hatched plans to continue in the fall what discourses have already begun.

For me, the most exciting aspect of the workshop was having the opportunity to be in the student/learner role in exploring some of my most favorite topics. (I used an entire notebook for notes) In what seems like an eternity ago (!) I enrolled as a college student in several courses on the intersection of psychology and philosophy as they relate to identity. At that time I was keenly interested in the immersion of self in community, and I enjoyed debates on principles such as knowing truth versus being truth. In those seem-

ingly long-ago days, I even wrote a few papers on the meaning-making processes of the human mind (or psyche) as engaged in living a life of faith (or *doing* a faith-full life, depending upon the perspective). Regrettably, however, once I began to specialize in the aspects of my professional expertise (research and theory of cognitive development in Psychology), I necessarily had to put some of these broader issues aside for the sake of finishing graduate school (not to mention forming my family and developing a professional and personal life). Having an opportunity to revisit some of these deeper aspects has been reinvigorating and inspiring.

Perhaps the greatest value for me in this workshop experience was the establishment of an incubation period and subsequent "re-percolation" of schemas surrounding the meaning of personhood in a spiritual sense. Indeed, some of Kierkegaard's ideas are echoed in some foundational theories underlying developmental psychology (particularly as these structures relate to identity development and moral reasoning). Many of Kierkegaard's ideas map directly onto my own personal views, and could be useful for developing a set of hypotheses for research. In fact, some of the seminar content with which we contended has stimulated new ideas which I hope to incorporate into upcoming research projects. For instance, I would like to explore how students who are still engaged in self-discovery come to terms with such issues as what it means to both *be and live* as a Christian, by asking them to share narratives about meaningful moments in their lives. Through such avenues, I may gain insight into not only what characteristics maturing students endorse or strive to acquire according to the values of a religious worldview or culture, but whether (or how) a developing sense of self as a spiritual person is defined or shaped by these such schemas of knowledge. Many constructs could be useful in an endeavor of this kind; moreover, such work could lend itself in valuable ways to practical applications in a place like Seton Hall where students, staff, faculty, and administrators are encouraged to consider vocation, personal development, commitment to missions and values, and a life of faith.

Of all the topics that we discussed, the most exciting potential for specific research relates to the ideas of the 3 stages of being, or what we as a group called the “3-ring circus” of life. This is particularly intriguing to me as a narrative researcher with developmental interests. My appreciation for this construct comes from the utility of this notion as a method for identifying the predominate focus of one’s life story. One “ring” that Kierkegaard likened to a beginning stage of life, or a default mode into which one is born, is a lifestyle built upon the “Aesthetic.” This type of living may be seen at any age but is most pronounced in young children, and prioritizes the pursuit of pleasure and avoiding pain. This lifestyle is fruitless as it is not ultimately possible to maintain; since pleasure is but a fleeting experience, much like music—once the notes are gone, so too is the pleasure associated with it. Although some may be deluded in thinking that they can commit to a life of pleasure, they in essence merely relegate themselves to a life of instability, since such individuals live a life of perpetual disappointment as they shift from one momentary pleasure in search of another more fruitful “place” to grow.

The second stage or perspective focuses upon the “Ethical” and is equally as unfulfilling as striving for constant pleasure. Persons in an “Ethical” mode commit to following laws and strive for goodness and constancy, regardless of emotion or intention. This kind of life is about “self” and human-crafted laws to follow, but this view leads to boredom as motivations to live and do are essentially external in nature, based upon doing what an authority figure commands, simply because it is right (or wrong). In the spiritual dimension, Kierkegaard likens this to individuals attempting to follow the Old Testament laws which were unattainable in and of themselves. Such a life binds one to feeling hopeless in the realization that he or she could not perfectly perform all of the commands of the Law of Holiness.

The third and last stage, which Kierkegaard labeled as the “Religious” life is one of hope and maturity; it is uniquely motivated by an individual’s desire and intention to follow after God’s Will. This stage is a collaborative effort between individuals and God; on the human side, individuals must recognize that in and of themselves they would never achieve or know what is perfection or truth, so they must choose to submit

themselves to the Grace of God to help shape their lives and instruct their choices. In this realm, the individual shifts to a more “mature” development, demonstrating a conviction to place the Will of God at the center point of who one strives to be (call it identity, becoming a self, meaning making, development, or what-have-you, depending upon the discipline through which one labels such constructs). I have been thinking some about this construct and hope to talk with colleagues about ways to potentially incorporate this into some kind of narrative inquiry project. One means of using this triarchic model would be to look for themes reflective of these three perspectives in individuals’ descriptions about meaningful moments or turning points in their lives. What kinds of stories would “aesthetically-tuned” individuals tell, and how would these differ from those concentrated upon “ethical concerns” or those more in a “religious” mode? How might such themes be related to successful or unsuccessful coping, or outcomes in cases where either positive or negative experiences (even stress) occur.

Besides the potential for informing research, a different aspect of the seminar which I found probably most gratifying of all was the multidisciplinary context into which we, as participants, placed our discussions. My co-participants in the seminar represented a wide range of fields, from Math to English, Seminary to Chemistry. This broad base was wonderful and led to deep interchanges regarding post-modernism, definitions of the Aesthetic, what is meant by vocation, Culture & Christendom, authority, truth and Truth (with a Capital “T”), and materiality. I believe that we all came to the understanding that each of us, living in community with others, and fashioning a life well-lived in the face of an ever-changing and relativistic culture, must individually strive to discover and understand some kind of spiritual reality, one which everyone may not readily comprehend in our own subjective humanness. Kierkegaard’s view on this spiritual reality was one of an *objective* truth, one that unfortunately is necessarily somewhat “colored” by our own viewpoints and knowledge. Nonetheless, he urged us to consider that there is a God-reality that exists, even if as humans we do not readily “see it.” To this end, we discussed several times the metaphor of looking through glasses to correct faulty vision. A person with nearsightedness, for instance, only

“sees” the distant world as blurry, though in reality it is not blurry. But unless this person is informed by a mediator (an ophthalmologist) that they need corrected vision, they may not realize the potential that their sight *could* have. In this sense, Kierkegaard referred to the human condition as seeing only dimly without the awakening and spiritual adjustment that comes via the Spirit of God. In effect, he spoke of being a Christian without a true relationship with God like living without the awareness of the ultimate reality beyond our visual perception. To exemplify this we spoke about the passage of scripture in 1 Corinthians 13:11-12, where the Apostle Paul speaks of these human limits in contrast to the standard, true depth of knowing found in God:

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. (1 Cor. 13: 11-12, NKJV)

Another, more contemporary biblical translation states it thus:

When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good. We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love. (1 Cor. 13:11-13, The Message)

In the end, much of what our discussion focused upon was this Love—what it is, how to recognize it, where to find it, how to display it, how human forms may differ from spiritual forms of love, and so on. What I took away from these discussions was not only relevant to myself as a cognitive developmental psychologist, but to a person striving to be more than what I am now. Likewise, I enjoyed getting to know others through their own

As participants, we represented a wide range of spiritual beliefs with many different potential definitions of love, and we spent a good amount of time considering how subjective mentality in itself may hinder efforts to fully grasp ultimate, objective reality in which we live and love. Though we didn't take a vote on how many of us believe in an “objective reality” beyond what we know and experience individually, what we did share in common is that we no doubt see dimly in our human condition, and often lack enlightenment as to reality beyond our moments of being that demand our attention. This is one reason why discourse from so many different scholarly domains was enlightening to me. And I know too well, like everyone, how the now-demands of many different roles often consume much of my focus, energies, and perceptions. As such, I have many perspectives or glasses that I myself often take on and off throughout the day. If for no other reason, this is probably the single largest contributor to my pleasure in being given the opportunity to step away for a few hours in the seminar days to re-calibrate my world- and self-views.

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(n.d.). The Message (1 Cor. 13:11-13). Retrieved July 22, 2008 from Web site: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013%20;&version=65;>



## Kierkegaard's Dialectic and the Distrust of Intimacy

Ed Jones

In the material we read of Kierkegaard last May, he comes across a bit as an Old Testament prophet—maybe not a righteous avenger, but outraged believer railing against the state of the Danish Church, and probably for good reason. He is incensed—almost flabbergasted—that Denmark can consider its priests *priests* when they're wrapped in earthly comforts and rewarded with earthly powers. He sees the Danish Christian as nothing like the New Testament Christian (*Attack upon Christendom*).

In this sense, he is part of a long tradition of prophets, among whom I would count Jesus, who earned the wrath of Pharisees and Sadducees for his sharp criticism of their hypocrisy. Such righteousness revels in setting up sharp contrasts between behavior that will lead to the Kingdom of Heaven and behavior that will lead in another direction. In one of Jesus' most stark expressions of the choices that we have to make he declares

For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Mt 10: 35-37).

So Kierkegaard is hardly a radical when it comes to framing earthly behavior in light of the perspective of eternity. However, there is still something odd about his brand of either/or thinking, which clearly he embraces, since one of his most important books is titled *Either/Or*. And the oddness has a most particular flavor when he writes about "fellowship" and the "congregation."

Kierkegaard works passionately for the redemption of humankind, and for the restoration of a Church that supports that redemption. But he must do so by continually positing the Militant Church against the Christianity of his time, embodied in the phrase a "Christian nation" or the "Church Triumphant," both of which appear to him to be oxymorons. Kierkegaard wants people

to return to a New Testament faith, and his way of doing this is to wield a theology sword that divides everything ruthlessly into Christ or not Christ. He provides a most interesting comparison to clarify what he claims for Christianity.

If there were living in the land a poet who in view of the ideal of what it is to love talked in the fashion: "Alas, I must myself admit that I cannot truly be said to be in love; neither will I play the hypocrite and say that I am endeavoring more and more in this direction for the truth unfortunately is that things are rather going backward with me. Moreover, my observation convinces me that in the whole land there is not a single person who can be said to be truly in love"—then the inhabitants of the land could reply to him, and in a certain degree with justice: "Yes, my good poet, that may be true enough with your ideals; but we are content, we find ourselves happy with what we call being in love, and that settles it." *But, such can never be the case with Christianity*" (my emphasis). (Articles in *The Fatherland* 31-32)

There is no middle ground. One cannot be content with what people prefer to call Christianity. Kierkegaard is ruthless for Christ, which is only befitting a philosopher theologian, one who could never in eternity be a politician or perhaps a bishop.

His vision of contemporary society makes it difficult for Kierkegaard to talk about fellowship and congregation in ways that give them much meaning or importance in one's day-to-day life. Fellowship, for example, is always a lower category than the single individual, because it's at the level of the latter that we commit to a spiritual struggle (*Practice in Christianity No. III* 223) Kierkegaard is so set on reaffirming Jesus' message for a corrupt world that all the terms that belong to the world he redefines in absolute terms, like "congregation": "To apply such a term as 'congregation' (about which people busy themselves so much these days) to this life is really an impatient anticipation of the eternal" (223). Thus the congregation is merely the collection of individuals who have gone to heaven

(223). In this language of absolutes, of either/or, once he's defined the congregation as belonging to eternity, it seems difficult to claim congregation as a living breathing group of people who, imperfectly, seek God and goodness and wholeness in their lives.

The contrast between Kierkegaard's talk about congregation starkly contrasts with the way the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh talks about sangha, the Buddhist term for a "community of fellow practitioners" (*Touching Peace* 102). One of the central practices of a Buddhist is to "take refuge" in—or commit to, study, and respect—the Buddha, the Dharma (the truth), and the Sangha (the community that lives in harmony and awareness). For Thich Nhat Hanh, the sangha is no other-worldly abstraction that doesn't exist until eternity come. Rather, it is a very practical thing. Of it, he says "it is difficulty or even impossible to practice [i.e. one's religion] with a sangha" (*Touching Peace* 103). Whereas for Kierkegaard, the congregation is less a living reality ("[it] does not really come until eternity") than "the gathering of all the single individuals who endured in the struggle and passed the test," for Thich Nhat Hanh, and presumably the Zen Buddhist tradition in general, "interpersonal relationships are the key for success in the practice. Without an intimate, deep relationship with at least one person, transformation is unlikely" (*Touching Peace* 107). His statements are grounded in the practical matters of making a spiritual community work, as he describes elsewhere a time-tested process whereby brothers in a monastery deal with anger and frustration amongst themselves and reconcile with each other.

For Kierkegaard—so concerned with the Church that has become a part of the World instead of apart from the World, so cognizant of the frailty of human beings, of their desperate attraction to comfort and their need to conform to the World instead of to Christ—the rest of the world must melt away. Thus "to become and to be a Christian is to become so turned inward that it seems as if all the others do not exist at all for a person, so turned inward that one is quite literally alone in the whole world, alone before God" and "every moment he is turned outward is wasted" (*Practice in Christianity No. III* 225). Of course, we understand what Kierkegaard is doing with his concerned for being turned outward, be-

cause for him, such a turning is an orientation to the values of the world. However, the word "outward" never appears to refer to an actual outward, an empirical outward, despite Kierkegaard's professed concern with the actual state of the Church. Rather, it becomes part of a dialectical argument, as "outward" simply becomes *defined* in relation to its opposite, "inward." There is never the empirical "outward" or, for that matter, an empirical "inward." This explains why Kierkegaard is all about railing, all about struggle, all about life as a test (how the Church merely serves as a parenthetical entity between the time of Christ's death and his second coming).

According to Kierkegaard, "the world is going neither forward nor backward; it remains essentially the same, like the sea, like the air, in short, like an element. It is, namely, and must be the element that can provide the test of being a Christian" (*Practice in Christianity No. III* 232). The world serves no purpose except as a test for human salvation. When he says "Woe, woe to the Christian Church when it will have been victorious in this world, for then it is not the Church that has been victorious but the world" (*Practice in Christianity No. III* 223), he seems to be adopting a stand about the ultimate redemption of the world that seems to be at odds with the Catholic notion of progression of the world toward God. Similarly, when he says "Christ has never wanted to be victorious in this world. We came into the world in order to suffer; *that* he called being victorious" (*Practice in Christianity No. III* 224), he seems to assert a complete break between what is possible in the world and what is possible in Christ. And, admittedly, Jesus's own words—"My kingdom is not of this world"—provide heavy support for this assertion. However, in contrast to Kierkegaard, Catholics believe in human progress, at least according to the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*:

The line representing progress has its ups and downs, there are periods of decadence and of retrogression, and such was the period, Revelation tells us, that followed the first sin. The human race however, began to rise again little by little, for neither intelligence nor free will had been destroyed by original sin and, consequently, there still remained the possibility of material progress, whilst in the spiritual order God did not abandon man, to whom He had promised redemption..

Because of Kierkegaard's radical either/or outlook on the world, it makes sense that he defines congregation as irrelevant until eternity come; for him, the congregation may be too tainted by the world to be considered something positive outside of eternity.

If progress in human society is not possible, either as a cause or consequence of the distance at which Kierkegaard keeps the world, then it is understandable that he adopts a tone of some severity, as he does in the following passage: "When Christ requires us to save our life eternally (and that surely is what we propose to attain as Christians) and to hate our own life in this world, is there then a single one among us whose life in the remotest degree could be called even the weakest effort in this direction" (38)."

I must admit that I am suspicious of the source of Kierkegaard's apparent pessimism about the human race. I remember the story of his impassioned but ultimately broken relationship with Regine Olsen. About one and three-quarters years into his relation with, he wrote in his journal

it seems to me that I should have to possess the beauty of all girls in order to draw out a beauty equal to yours; that I should have to circumnavigate the world in order to find the place I lack and which the deepest mystery of my whole being points towards, and at the next moment you are so near to me, filling my spirit so powerfully that I am transfigured for myself, and feel that it's good to be here. (*shamelessly taken from the Wikipedia article on Kierkegaard*)

About a year and a half later he proposed to her, and then before the year was up he had dissolved the engagement. Such passions are not unusual among young men, or perhaps any men, but clearly Kierkegaard was a man capable of the strongest romantic feelings. I can't help but feel that he held himself to insanely high expectations for himself in this relationship, based upon ideal that he expresses for true love: "The deeper the revolution of love, the less the distinctions of mine and yours matter, and the more 'justice shudders'" because distinctions of rightful possession blur (*Works of Love* 248-249). Such ideals are fine, but I suspect that may have provided a case where the perfect became the enemy of the good. I also suspect that the hypothetical poet in the passage near the beginning of this essay was not

Kierkegaard. He is not one who could say, even of earthly love, "We are content, we find ourselves happy with what we call being in love, and that settles it." If Kierkegaard was uncomfortable with intimate relationships before Regine, his failed relationship—and lack of a serious love relationship after that—must have reinforced the distance at which he kept the world.

Kierkegaard takes a common term (like congregation) and redefines it to create his own theology. It's safer to keep the world at a distance by defining congregation as an aspect of eternity, but such a strategy is only partly satisfying. The world and Christ are *defined* as diametrical opposites, not observed, in all their complexity, as only *partial* opposites.

One final observation about the difficulty Kierkegaard with relationships: In the chapter "Love Seeks Not Its Own," Kierkegaard makes a big fuss over the importance of hiding the identity of the benefactor who might wish to say, "This man, by my help, stands on his own." He claims that once this statement is proclaimed in the presence of the beneficiary, "he does not stand by himself: then he has not in fact become his own, then he is indebted to [the benefactor's] help" (*Works of Love* 256). In other words, Kierkegaard finds it impossible for someone who truly loves another to openly help him become independent. I admit that the man means well. After all Jesus talks about not trumpeting the good one does but doing good secretly (Matthew 6: 1-4). However, in reality, it's perfectly possible *in the context of an intimate relationship* to help someone become independent and for both benefactor and beneficiary to acknowledge this. In an intimate relationship, the roles of benefactor and beneficiary may switch depending on the occasion. My beloved and I may agree that it would be helpful to her if I reminded her how important it is for her to get to her yoga class, so I remind her occasionally and am openly delighted when she remembers to go. Over a period of time, she develops the habit of going to the class regularly and no longer needs any encouragement or reminders. She is more independent. We can openly acknowledge that I helped her stand on her own. And there are other aspects of our relationship in which we can acknowledge that she helps *me* stand on my own. In turn, the mutual joy we take in assisting each other, and the self-

confidence that comes with that joy, lead to each of us standing on our own. Kierkegaard, having kept the world at a distance, is not versed in the arts of worldly love that partake of the divine Love.

I understand better now what seems odd about Kierkegaard's dialectic that appears to take on the world in a quasi-empirical fashion but in fact takes on the absolutes that embody a harshness not really appropriate to the Christian message. Yes, becoming a Christian entails radical breaks from the world in many ways, and I have no doubt that the Church in the Netherlands needed a prophet, as does any powerful religious institution (such as the Catholic Church), but Kierkegaard needed a reminder about the goodness that lies with all human hearts, however buried, and of our capacity to lean on each other, making our weaknesses strengths.

# Lonergan and Kierkegaard: Some Convergences

Richard M. Liddy

Anyone familiar with the writings of Bernard Lonergan knows his “generous” interpretation of other writers. Almost invariably, in citing others he would bring out the best in their thought while not focusing on their shortcomings. For the most part he practiced what Paul Ricoeur would call a positive “hermeneutics of recovery” as distinct from a critical “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Although on occasion he had serious disagreements with others - see his criticism in of Piet Schoonenberg’s interpretation of the early church councils - generally he was quite generous in bringing out the positive points in any particular writer. (*Second Collection*, 239ff)

I preface this short article on Lonergan and Kierkegaard with this observation for it is obvious to me from many years of reading Lonergan that, although he might have had his disagreements with Kierkegaard on this or that issue - for example, the latter’s Lutheran account of faith, his discounting of the role of intellect, etc. - still Lonergan pays tribute to Kierkegaard as a major turning-point in modern philosophy and a contributor to his own - seemingly so different - philosophy. As he put it on one occasion, “Kierkegaard had a point.” (*Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, 400)

Lonergan has no book or article specifically dedicated to Kierkegaard, but he does refer to him extensively in his Boston College “Lectures on Existentialism” from 1956 and references to Kierkegaard are scattered throughout his writings. In these pages I would like to briefly point out three points in Lonergan’s own thought where he pays tribute to Kierkegaard. I will conclude by pointing to the notion of love where some discern convergences between the two writers. The article will consist mostly of quotes from Lonergan that touch upon Kierkegaard. These are “explorations” that might form the basis of a future article.

The convergences we discern between the two writers are, then:

1) Kierkegaard as representing *the move*

*toward interiority* in modern philosophy, what Lonergan calls *the third stage of meaning*;

2) Kierkegaard’s highlighting of the importance of *authenticity*; and

3) the central role of *conversion* in Kierkegaard;

4) the notion of *love* in Kierkegaard and Lonergan.

## 1. Kierkegaard and the Third Stage of Meaning

According to Lonergan, human culture has moved through three major stages in the development of culture. The first stage is the stage of common sense: that is, the stage in which everything is related to one’s own particular culture and spatio-temporal framework. Anything beyond that is spoken of symbolically, through poetry, metaphor, etc. This is the stage where most people reside most of the time.

The universal style is symbolic. Its language is instinct with feeling. At its liveliest it is poetry. At its profoundest it is rhetoric. It lacks neither attention to detail nor keen insight nor balanced judgment nor responsible decision. But it has all these, not stripped of feeling, but permeated with feeling. The calm, the detachment, the clarity, the coherence, the rigor of the logician, the mathematician, the scientist - these are just beyond its horizon. Such by and large is the language of the New Testament which employs parable and aphorism and apocalyptic to shift thought and meaning from man’s everyday world to the world of religious meaning. Such also in the main was the language of the Church Fathers, and down the ages it has remained the straightforward simple language of mainstream Christianity. (“Questionnaire on Philosophy,” *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, 363)

However, according to Lonergan, the Greek philosophers represent the move to a whole new stage of meaning, that is, the stage of theory. Theory seeks clarity through universal and univocally defined terms. Remember Socra-



tes' driving people crazy in his quest for universal definitions. Such a world of theory – achieved quintessentially first in Aristotle's philosophy and then in the modern sciences – goes beyond common sense's relating of things to ourselves by seeking the relationships of things to each other in an explanatory framework. Mathematical physics is the quintessential example of such a world of theory. The search for theoretical understanding even influenced the Christian church as councils used theoretical terminology in order to protect the truths of the Christian faith. Think of the term "homocousios" ("consubstantial") which the Council of Nicea used to express the divinity of Christ. Think also of Thomas Aquinas employing Aristotelian theory to articulate a systematic account of Christian theology.

This second stage of meaning, the stage of theory, found its apogee in the massive theoretical constructs of modern science. Beginning with Descartes and especially with Immanuel Kant, however, a new stage of meaning began to emerge, that is, the world of interiority. While common sense people and theoreticians both sought to excel in their own realms, modern philosophers began to ask how it was possible that both of these worlds emerged from the human person. Naturally they were led to ask: Who is this person from which these realms proceed? What was it in human interiority, in human consciousness, that makes possible the emergence of the realm of common sense and the world of theory? What is it about human consciousness, human subjectivity, the "I" at the center of human operations, that makes the emergence of these worlds possible?

It was in within this modern context of the turn toward interiority that Soren Kierkegaard began to insist on authenticity and on faith. The following quote from Lonergan highlights Kierkegaard's role within the emergence of modern philosophy.

The absolute idealist, Hegel, brilliantly explores whole realms of meaning; he gives poor marks to naive realists; but he fails to advance to a critical realism, so that Kierkegaard can complain that what is logical also is static, that movement cannot be inserted into a logic, that Hegel's system has room not for existence (self-determining freedom) but only for the idea of existence.

Kierkegaard marks a trend. Where he was concerned with faith, Nietzsche was with power, Dilthey with concrete human living, Husserl with the constitution of our intending, Bergson with his *elan vital*, Blondel with action, American pragmatists with results, European existentialists with authentic subjectivity. While the mathematicians were discovering that their axioms were not self-evident truths, while the physicists were discovering that their laws were not inevitable necessities but verifiable possibilities, the philosophers ceased to think of themselves as the voice of pure reason and began to be the representatives of something far more concrete and human. (*Method in Theology*, 264-265)

This move to interiority has implications for Christianity and Christian theology and Kierkegaard played a key role in the emergence of this modern cultural consciousness. For example, during the Second Vatican Council it became evident to many that doctrine and theology are expressions of something more fundamental, that is, the encounter with the living Christ. Theologians such as Dominique Marie Chenu stated that those who insist on putting doctrine first put the cart before the horse; the first thing is encountering the living Jesus. The Words of the Good Shepherd come before doctrine. If one begins with doctrine, one can reduce the pastoral to doctrine – "the simplifications and clarifications of classical oratory."

But what comes first is the word of God. The task of the church is the kerygma, announcing the good news, preaching the gospel. That preaching is pastoral. It is the concrete reality. From it one may abstract doctrines, and theologians may work the doctrines into conceptual systems. But the doctrines and systems, however valuable and true, are but the skeleton of the original message. A word is the word of a person, but doctrine objectifies and deperson-alizes. The word of God comes to us through the God-man. The church has to mediate to the world not just a doctrine but the living Christ." (*A Third Collection*, 227-228)

## 2. Kierkegaard and Authenticity

In his Boston College "Lectures on Existentialism" from 1956 Lonergan described the fundamental thrust of modern existentialist philosophy by using an example from contemporary politics. At that time President Eisenhower was asked why American troops had to join the British

in invading the Suez Canal and he replied, "Well, we have to be men." Lonergan connected that expression, "we have to be men," with the whole thrust of existentialist philosophy beginning with Kierkegaard and flowing into secularist existentialist philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The question is: what does it mean to be a man? To be myself? Not just a "substance" like very other human being, but a "subject," my "self," a conscious being with a history, needs, desires, etc.? What does it mean to be myself truly? That is, authentically? What is such authenticity?

Such a question has social implications, that is, what does it mean to be who I profess to be? What does it mean to be a genuine Dane? A genuine Christian? It is this question that forms the backdrop for many of the formulations that Lonergan gave to his own work during his later years. Let me give one such formulation.

As Kierkegaard asked whether he was a Christian, so divers men can ask themselves whether or not they are genuine Catholics or Protestants, Muslims or Buddhists, Platonists or Aristotelians, Kantians or Hegelians, artists or scientists, and so forth. Now they may answer that they are, and their answers may be correct. But they can also answer affirmatively and still be mistaken. In that case there will exist a series of points in which they are what the ideals of the tradition demand, but there will be another series in which there is a greater or less divergence. These points of divergence are overlooked from a selective inattention, or from a failure to understand, or from an undetected rationalization. What I am is one thing, what a genuine Christian or Buddhist is, is another, and I am unaware of the difference. My unawareness is unexpressed. I have no language to express what I am, so I use the language of the tradition I unauthentically appropriate, and thereby I devalue, distort, water down, corrupt that language.

Such devaluation, distortion, corruption may occur only in scattered individuals. But it may occur on a more massive scale, and then the words are repeated, but the meaning is gone. The chair was still the chair of Moses, but it was occupied by the scribes and Pharisees. The theology was still scholastic, but the scholasticism was decadent. The religious order

still read out the rules, but one wonders whether the home fires were still burning. The sacred name of science may still be invoked but, as Edmund Husserl has argued, all significant scientific ideals can vanish to be replaced by the conventions of a clique. So the unauthenticity of individuals becomes the unauthenticity of a tradition. Then, in the measure a subject takes the tradition, as it exists, for his standard, in that measure he can do no more than authentically realize unauthenticity. (*Method in Theology*, 80-81)

According to Lonergan, then, following up on Kierkegaard's point, there are two types of authenticity. Minor authenticity regards the individual in relation to the community in which he has been brought up. Major authenticity, on the other hand, regards the authenticity of the community itself in the light of history – or in the light of God.

There is the minor authenticity or unauthenticity of the subject with respect to the tradition that nourishes him. There is the major authenticity that justifies or condemns the tradition itself in the first case there is passed a human judgment on subjects. In the second case history and, ultimately, divine providence pass judgment on traditions. (*Method in Theology*, 80)

### 3. Kierkegaard and the Process of Conversion

On several occasions Lonergan called attention to the parallel between his own categories and those of Kierkegaard. His own major categories involve the personal identification of the various levels of human conscious activity: experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding. These levels of conscious activity are reflected in the three levels of the social-cultural world where Lonergan distinguishes particular goods (corresponding to experiencing), the good of order (corresponding to understanding) and value (corresponding to judging and deciding).

After setting these out in **Lectures on Existentialism** Lonergan draws the analogy between his own three-fold division and Kierkegaard's three spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic sphere, symbolized by the character of Don Juan, is focused on pleasures and satisfactions. Paradoxically, the more one seeks happiness

within this horizon, the less happy one becomes. It is only through personal transformation, accompanied by *angst*, that one is able to make a leap to the ethical sphere, the sphere that requires a correspondence between one's reason and one's behavior. Finally, it is only through realizing one's ethical powerlessness that one turns in faith to the religious level and takes one's stand before God in history. Lonergan called attention to the incommensurability of these levels and the clear articulation of these distinctions by Kierkegaard.

Now these philosophical differences will radiate through the whole of life. Earlier, we considered three levels of the good: the particular good (the level of satisfactions), the good of order, and value. We distinguished aesthetic, ethical, and religious values, where the aesthetic value is apprehended by insight into the concrete, the ethical value is the individual demanding correspondence between *his* rationality and *his* activity, and the religious value is the rational individual using truth to know being, orienting himself before God within the world and history.

The distinction of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious comes, of course, from Kierkegaard. He used the three categories in speaking of three spheres of existential subjectivity. A person moves from one sphere to another only by a leap. In other words, when a person is within a given sphere of existential subjectivity, as Kierkegaard would put it, or within a given horizon, to use the terminology we developed earlier, then it is not by arguing from that sphere that one will bring him to another sphere. That sphere becomes a closed system, and a person has to be dynamited out of it. (*Topics in Education*, 179)

To put the issue in other terms: how does one escape from Plato's cave? Just by "being told" about the world outside? Lonergan says that Plato set himself a tremendous problem when he realized that getting out of the cave was not just a matter of imparting information. And that is why he wrote his dialogues – he had to persuade people to allow themselves to be put in a position to be pulled out of the cave. They had to be persuaded to make some decisions: decisions that in the context of people's present circumstances involved anxiety and fear.

It is easy to introduce a new viewpoint, a higher viewpoint on the side of the object, as

does when he distinguishes between the sensible and the intelligible...But when Plato wants to *convert* people to the *noeta* as what really exists, he has quite a job on his hands. He has to write a series of highly literary dialogues and to introduce the myth of the cave in order to explain what he means. And even when he gets his meaning across, it is quite another thing for people to live according to those principles. (*Phenomenology and Logic*, 289)

Anxiety – existential angst - arises as soon as you start facing the possibility of changing what so far has been a successful concrete synthesis in your living.

When a person has one's living organized on a lower level, the movement to a higher level involves something like the apparent eruption of a latent power, the possibility of a radical discovery, where the discovered has been present all along -but where there has been a hiding of what has been discovered. These notions of obnubilation, discovery, uncovering what has been there all along, conversion, transformation of one's living, are all right in the center of existentialism, and they lead to the most fundamental questions that can be raised with regard to the philosophic enterprise. (*Phenomenology and Logic*, 244-246)

There is need, then, for a leap from one level to the next. You can't pull yourself up by the bootstraps. You can't change yourself by just taking thought. And, Lonergan notes, this analysis is relevant to divisions among scholastic theologians. That, he notes, was the existential issue that concerned him the most: theology was his central issue. "That is where the shoe pinches" -

Conversion involves a change in that concrete synthesis. It means that living is organized in a new way, in the light of new concepts, new principles, new norms of action, new modes of response to situations, new types of interests, new orientations. (*Phenomenology and Logic*, 289)

There is then, an "existential gap," that is, a difference between what I think I am and what I truly am. This is the line between the *docta ignorantia*, that is, the questions which have a meaning for me even though I don't know the answers to them and the *indocta ignorantia*, that is, the vast world of questions about which "I couldn't care less." The issue is a spiritual one:



am I going to be open to where questions are leading me? Really?

It would seem that formational processes, such as “12 Step” programs or the **Spiritual Exercises** of Saint Ignatius are oriented to helping the subject to such openness of spirit. Or, as Lonergan once put it when asked about how conversion happens, “You get converted by being kicked around.”

#### 4. Lonergan and Kierkegaard on Love:

Recently, at a Lonergan workshop at Boston College, David Aiken, Professor of Philosophy at Gordon College and Sarah Pike Cabral, Doctoral Candidate at Loyola College, Chicago, gave a workshop on “The Dynamics of Love in Kierkegaard and Lonergan.” The description of their workshop described the subtle differences and conjunctions between Kierkegaard and Lonergan on the subject of love.

Lonergan’s preoccupation with spiritual **eros** is perhaps the most salient aspect of his philosophy. Though it goes by many names – the pure and unrestricted desire to know, the natural desire to see God, the dynamism of the human subject, the notion of being, or simply “exigence” – it underwrites virtually every page of Lonergan’s voluminous authorship. Kierkegaard, for his part, recognizes the all-encompassing sway of this desire only to subject it to radical delimitation by pointing out its paradoxical character – namely, that as emblematic of our fallenness and offense at God’s unsolicited generosity, the **eros** of the human mind ineluctably strives for its own downfall. Would it be just, then, to characterize Lonergan as an apostle of exigent **eros** and Kierkegaard as an apostle of unmerited **agape**? As Treebeard might caution us, “Not so hasty!” For by examining the fine print of each authorship we discover that Kierkegaardian **eros** is by no means unambiguously vicious – indeed, it provides essential clues for apprehending God’s unrestricted generosity – and that Lonergan acknowledges this very **agape** as the Alpha and Omega of a universal drive to self-transcendence. (From privately printed announcement of workshop)

This is a subject – the subject of love in Lonergan and Kierkegaard – about which I wish to learn more.

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## Kierkegaard's Attack upon Assistant Professors: Proof of the Importance of Systematic Theology

Lawrence B. Porter, Ph.D.

I have always been interested in learning more about Kierkegaard because, though he looms as an important figure in modern Christian thought, my education has provided me with very limited exposure to him. As an undergraduate English major I once was assigned to read his *Fear and Trembling* as an example of 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic, that is, emotive, anti-rational and perhaps overly imaginative, interpretation of an ancient text (the account in the book of Genesis of the patriarch Abraham's near sacrificial slaying of his son Isaac). But in all my studies at a Catholic seminary, Kierkegaard was referred to only in passing. Nor was he treated significantly in my graduate studies at a non-denominational Protestant divinity school. However, despite his absence from the curriculum at that divinity school, more than once I saw evidence there of Kierkegaard's influence upon faculty and students. For example, an evangelical student, a friend of mine, was always reading Kierkegaard for spiritual comfort. I seem to recall him always accompanied by a copy of Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*. On the other hand, one of my professors at that same school, a man of pronounced liberal theological persuasion, more than once made reference to Kierkegaard's scornful attacks upon "Christendom" and its clergy as support for that professor's own disdain for the Church, that is, any form of organized Christianity. And so when I saw the announcement that Seton Hall University's Center for Catholic Studies' "faculty summer seminar 2008" would have as its theme "Kierkegaard and/or Catholicism: A Matter of Conjunctions," I was eager to attend.

While I found Dean Cahoy's lectures in this seminar illuminating especially as regards Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian rationalism, I was not impressed by the assigned readings from Kierkegaard. In fact, initially I found them personally offensive—his attacks upon organized religion and academic professionals could not help but annoy someone like myself who is an ordained minister and a professor. But the more important thing is that on further consideration I found Kierkegaard's arguments intellectually unconvincing and representative of a kind of pietism that I feel is particularly dangerous not just for the Christian faith but for society in general.

That is, while Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's gross rationalization of Christianity may be at times quite cogent, Kierkegaard's alternative to philosophical idealism, his own biblical fideism, is an even more dangerous distortion of Christianity than Hegel's rationalism. More precisely, Kierkegaard's constant appeal to blind faith and his deprecation of the *merely* human in contrast to the *truly* Christian constitutes an invitation to mindless religious fanaticism and denies to Christian faith a major apologetic tool, namely, its ability to appeal to what is most noble and most reasonable in human nature, its moral idealism and rational capacity for genuine insight.

I would like to illustrate this judgment with reference to the assigned readings, starting with Kierkegaard's writings on love. We were given several selections from Kierkegaard's *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses* (translated by Howard and Edna Hong, New York: Harper and Row, 1962). In those readings, Kierkegaard constantly contrasts Christian love with human love, "love . . . which is weak indulgence" with "the love of which Christianity speaks" (p. 25), the "purely human conception of love" (p. 169) over and against the infinitely superior Christian love, more precisely what Kierkegaard calls that "Christian love [which] goes from heaven to earth" (p.169) as distinguished from the all-too-human "friendship and erotic love" which proceed "from the ground up" (p. 249). I wonder if Kierkegaard's polarization, not to say caricature, of erotic love as simply desire for possession and Christian love as purely self-sacrificing love was the inspiration for Swedish theologian Anders Nygren's famous two-volume study called *Eros and Agape* (1930,1936) in which the author analyzes the connotations of two Greek words for love, *eros* as sexual love and *agape* as unconditional love and concludes that *agape* alone is truly Christian. In contrast, Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, in typically Catholic fashion, argues quite the opposite, that is, he insists *both* *eros* and *agape* are aspects of divine love.

By mentioning the current pope, I do not mean to appeal to authority here. Rather, one can rati-

ally argue it is patently observable, indeed, common experience that erotic attraction does not always lead to physical aggression. Instead, more often erotic attraction is a motive for tenderness rather than aggression, as when a young man's strong attraction to a shapely young woman leads him not to impose himself upon her but rather to try to win her attention and favor by acts of kindness and gentlemanly behavior on his part. This is an example of grace building upon human nature, a human nature that is not totally perverse. But Kierkegaard is loath to give any recognition to the decency of any purely human motive. Take for example his critique of charitable contributions: "Because one makes charitable contributions, because one visits the widow and clothes the naked—his love is not necessarily demonstrated or made recognizable in such deeds, for one can perform works of love in an unloving, yes, even in a self-loving way, and when this is so, the works of love are nevertheless not the work of love." Once again, Kierkegaard fails to recognize that human self-interest need not be entirely selfish but can lead to virtuous, even Christian actions. In this regard, it is only appropriate to note how the modern state uses the incentive of tax deductions to transform otherwise miserly citizens into generous benefactors of the community. This is yet another example of how grace can build upon nature when an appeal to self-interest can result in virtuous behavior. But Kierkegaard does not believe in the possibility of virtue only in what he feels is the power of blind faith.

Indeed, Kierkegaard's appeal to blind faith is yet another prominent and inappropriate element in his considerations on love. For it is not just that Kierkegaard cannot acknowledge the strange mixture of good and evil, of self interest and generosity in each person, he also denies us the use of our rational faculties. I am referring to how Kierkegaard, in these his writings on love, constantly ridicules discretion and judgment as "fastidiousness" (p.160, 161, 162, 163) and insists that "love is rather the closed eye of forbearance and gentleness, the closed eye which does not see defects and imperfections," (p. 159). Such an attitude is an invitation to tragedy as it was for Regine Olsen who should have exercised more discretion, more discernment when she first met this brilliant young Dane with an infinite capacity for intellectual debate but no capacity for

emotional commitment. One needs to use one's brain, one needs to be intelligent and discerning in the ways of love, making important judgments all along the way.

Something more can be learned from Kierkegaard's attack upon the church and the academy, organized religion and university professors. These attacks appeared in 21 articles written for *The Fatherland*, the daily newspaper in Copenhagen from Dec. 18, 1854 to May 26, 1855 (they are collected in Kierkegaard's work called *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. By Walter Lowrie (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, and in *Practice in Christianity*, No. III, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton, 1991) and in another series of articles which Kierkegaard published shortly after the completion of his series in the *Fatherland*, but now in a broadsheet funded by Kierkegaard himself which he called *The Moment* or *The Instant* (these are collected in his *Journals and Papers*, Vol. 2, F-K, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970). While the articles in both *The Fatherland* and *The Moment* are written in patently journalistic fashion, that is, often in the form of savage satire, that crude form must not be allowed to obscure the fact that Kierkegaard was utterly sincere in all he wrote therein, that is, he was setting forth sincere intellectual and religious convictions.

In the January 29, 1855 issue of *The Fatherland*, Kierkegaard published an article entitled, "The Point at Issue with Bishop Martensen." There Kierkegaard vents a veritable paroxysm of rage against a Danish Lutheran bishop who gave the eulogy at the funeral of another Danish bishop, one Mynster. Kierkegaard was upset because Martensen had praised Mynster at his funeral as "a witness to the truth." In one sense, Kierkegaard's attack upon Martensen is pathetic and inappropriate. To this day eulogies of the dead often tend to be unrealistic idealizations of the dear departed. Moreover, I cannot share Kierkegaard's moral indignation at the fact that the king of Denmark had bestowed upon Bishop Mynster "the accolade of knighthood" (p. 21) when in my time the monarchy of England has done the same for rock stars Mick Jagger, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and U2 singer Bono.

In another sense, however, something can be said in favor of Kierkegaard's critique of bourgeois religion and, more precisely, the state Church of Denmark. Here I can agree, at least in part. For example, I do not think "Constantinianism," that is, state-sponsored, established religion, is a healthy option for Christianity whether Catholic or Protestant. The Catholic Church has never truly flourished under state sponsorship, instead, state sponsorship of Catholicism—whether their "Catholic Majesties" in Spain or their "Apostolic Majesties" in Austria—has always proven more counter-productive than truly supportive. Indeed, if contemporary Mexico is any example, the church has always benefited more from persecution by the state rather than support from the state. Also, to some degree I can identify with Kierkegaard's criticism of bourgeois Christianity. I have in mind the politically correct, socially accommodated, "preeminently reasonable" Christianity of contemporary, American Catholic politicians such as Giuliani, Pelosi and Kennedy. However, after having said all this I also think it is important to be balanced when making such a judgment about the faith or sincerity of individuals. Even among Jesus' hand picked inner circle there is observable varying degrees of commitment, besides the loyalty of John the beloved disciple to the very end (Jn 19.25-26), there is also the treachery of Judas (Jn 13.21-30), the waffling of Peter (Jn 13.36-38), the doubting of Thomas (Jn 20.24-25) and the incomprehension of Philip (John 14.9, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip?") In pointing to these multiple biblical references I am trying to be comprehensive and systematic in my theologizing. That is, I am trying to be "scientific" in the sense of systematically taking account of all the available evidence. Good theology must do that. Anything less is sheer opportunism, or worse, dishonesty, purely adventitious and manipulative, Bible-quoting. Unfortunately, this is often what I find Kierkegaard is doing. All too often Kierkegaard refuses to be comprehensive and systematic and instead arbitrarily insists upon seeing everything in terms of radical polarities, moral antitheses. For Kierkegaard there are only "true Christians" and false Christians or what he prefers to call hypocrites. But the truth is much more complex and the gospels, as we have seen, make it clear there is a considerable variety among Christians: there are deeply committed Christians, lukewarm

Christians, nominal Christians, uncomprehending Christians, to name but a few.

A more pointed illustration of this is Kierkegaard's opportunistic and manipulative use of the Bible in his attack upon clergy and academics in his September 22, 1855 essay "Imitation" (it first appeared in *The Moment* and is now in *Journals and Papers*, Vol.2, F-K, trans by H. and E. Hong, Indiana University Press, 1970) and a collection of short essays collected under the general title "Professor" (in *Journals and Papers*, Vol. 3, L-R, pages 634-657). Not only are assistant professors referred to in the "Imitation" as "animal-creatures" (p.375) but in the "Professor" the academic professional is variously and continually pilloried in such statements as "the professor is the greatest satire on the 'apostle'" (p. 638) and "the assistant professor is a non-human" (p. 654). The scientific study of religion is mocked in "Imitation" as "an insuperable mass of historical and learned nonsense" (p.373), and in "Professor" as "speculative effeminacy" (p. 635), "scholarship of evil" (p. 657), and "erudite, learned nonsense" (p. 656). Indeed, Kierkegaard accuses professors of having "invented scholarship in order to evade doing God's will" (p. 657). Moreover, he proposes as an alternative to such pernicious scholarship his formation of Bible study groups: "If there are five or six like-minded people who together with me and without any solemn ceremonies will pledge themselves simply to try to understand the New Testament and simply strive to express its demands in action, I propose to start religious meetings in which I will interpret the new testament." I quote Kierkegaard at length here because his use of the word "simply" is particularly revealing. Even earlier Kierkegaard had suggested we should "take the New Testament and read it directly and simply" (p. 637). But the problem is: nothing in the Bible is that simple. Quite the contrary, all the words of Jesus cry out for learned, historically informed, interpretation.

An example of this is Kierkegaard's exaltation of "Christian poverty" over and against the idea that a Christian teacher should be paid. In his March 1855 article in *The Fatherland* entitled, "What do I want?" he says: "A teacher is paid, let us say, several thousand. If then we suppress the Christian standard and apply the ordinary human rule, that it is a matter of course a man should



receive a wage for his labor, a wage sufficient to support a family, and a considerable wage to enable him to enjoy the consideration due to a government official—then a few thousand a year is certainly not much. On the other hand, as soon as the Christian requirement of poverty is brought to bear, family is a luxury, and several thousand is very high pay,” (p. 38 *Attack upon Christendom*, 1966).

This passage is replete with irony, the irony that Kierkegaard never held a paying job in his life and instead lived off of a substantial inheritance and those very reasons was able to publish many more books and essays than most professors might ever hope to publish. But the more serious problem is Kierkegaard’s abuse of Christian doctrine regarding wealth and poverty. The NT witness on the subject of money is abundant, and, at times, apparently conflicting. But if that witness is systematically surveyed, a balanced, logical argument becomes evident. More precisely, no doubt, at times Jesus does indeed severely criticize inordinate wealth especially when it makes us neglectful of our neighbor as in Mark 10.23, “how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” And no doubt in one place at least Jesus invites a disciple to give up all his wealth and embrace poverty, his advice to the rich young man in Mk 10.17-27. However, we must also consider we have considerable evidence that suggests Jesus readily accepted and was grateful for financial support for himself and his work which he received from wealthy patrons: Jesus accepted the support of wealthy women such as “Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household” (Lk 8.3), it was another wealthy patron who supplied the place for the last supper, “a large upper room, well furnished” (Lk 22.12), and, when Jesus dines with the wealthy Zaccheus, He pronounces a blessing on that man’s house (Lk 19). We must also consider the evidence that Jesus was exquisitely sensitive to the issue of just compensation for laborers and strongly endorsed what Kierkegaard calls, “the ordinary human rule” that one should receive wages for one’s labor. In this regard it is important to note: it was Jesus and not Karl Marx who insisted “the laborer is worthy of his hire”( Luke 10.7). Moreover, in 1Cor 9.7-11, Saint Paul applies the teaching of Jesus on just compensation of workers for Paul’s own defense of clergy compensation: “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard

without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox, when it is treading out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop. If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?”

In view of all this, it is obvious Kierkegaard’s attack on the modest wages of assistant professors and their diligent efforts to improve their lot in life (to publish articles so as to earn tenure and promotion) is an arbitrary, purely adventitious, one could even say malicious, employment of select passages from the gospel. Struggling academics deserve encouragement rather than savage attack. Indeed, God bless those assistant, associate and full professors who can challenge self-styled prophets who use the Bible to their own ends (false prophets were a constant problem in ancient Israel—see Is 9.15, Jer 14.14, Ezk 13.3--and in NT times—see Mk 13.22, 2Peter 2.1, 1Jn 4.1). God bless those academics whose learned distinctions can challenge and keep honest, curb the excesses of, popular preachers, and amateur exegetes eager to lead others in study of the Bible. Kierkegaard himself needs to be cautioned: the truth can rarely be caste in such simplistic formulas as either/or or “both/and”, instead the bible and the NT especially makes it clear the truth is often a very complex thing requiring not blind or impulsive engagement but careful analysis and discernment, contemplation even, before commitment to any definitive conclusions.

And so in the end, I must conclude it is better that we ignore Kierkegaard’s fideistic, voluntaristic plea “just believe it” (Professor, p.647), and instead adopt the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary who, when the angel Gabriel confronts her with his mind-boggling message, does not respond with mindless enthusiasm, “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord.” Instead, Mary responds with a sober and challenging question, “But how can this be since I do not know man?” (Lk 1.34). It is only after she gets an answer to that important question that she says, “Behold, I am the humble servant of the Lord.” Similarly, we would do well

to take seriously the apostle Peter's instruction: "be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you" (1Peter 3.15). No wonder Peter has been called by some "the prince of the apostles!" Conversion to Christ must involve the whole person, one's mind as well as one's heart. It is important to appeal as much to the mind as to the heart of potential or less than perfect believers.

## The Idea of Order in Soren Kierkegaard

John P. Wargacki

*She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry, That  
was not ours although we understood, Inhuman,  
of the veritable ocean.*

Wallace Stevens

Thus begins Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," in which the imaginary figure of the singing woman on the shore serves as the central trope in the poet's endless quest for meaning, order, and beauty in "A Universe of death."<sup>1</sup> The complex enterprises of Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and often obtuse musings of American poet Wallace Stevens intersect at the point of an artificial order – not in terms of the order necessarily being unreal but rather that this order, by definition, is artifice: a creation of the human imagination designed, in the case of Kierkegaard, to impose meaning upon paradox; or, in the case of Stevens, to impose the "idea of order" on a human existence predicted upon disorder and chaos. Neither example, neither quest will provide answers to metaphysical or spiritual mysteries; neither is able to do more than to find or invent a pattern of reason behind the absurdity. The central difference is the way in which the philosopher ultimately manages to embrace a paradox that the poet cannot. Their connection then is not so much the result, but rather the journey and the language each must use to facilitate it.

For Stevens, the fiercest anti-Christian poet of the American Modernists (perhaps the most anti-Christian in the entire western canon), his brilliant and poignant "The Idea of Order at Key West," keenly illustrates his reliance upon a resemblance of a reality – the poetry he often described as "The Supreme Fiction." For Stevens, even the act of writing poetry was always, in some way, about poetics itself, and the result, though admittedly a complete fiction. An illusion without substance, it was, nonetheless necessary to human survival. Stevens, with only language at his disposal, replaces the notion of a "Supreme Being" (God), with a "Supreme Fiction" (poetry).<sup>2</sup>

While in Key West,<sup>3</sup> Stevens rediscovered that the sheer beauty of nature, which one can behold, ponder, and use for inspiration, nevertheless did not compensate for the absence of real love and coherence in the universe of profound emotional suffering. While his own "Blessed Rage for Order" becomes an impossible cry for a teleological existence in a present-tense world devoid of meaning, his imaginary "she" seems able to reduce the mighty sea to a mere seascape of her own creation – a footnote overshadowed by her song,

For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to  
sing.

(15-17)

Here Stevens wrestles against this paradox of beauty and nature. His attempt to manufacture order rages against reality while the creation of verse serves to displace the sensory existence and emotional abandonment with an imaginary dream -- his own "supreme" but nonetheless unreal "fiction." Kierkegaard, meanwhile, in so many ways, relies upon his own version of the "supreme fiction." Yet if Stevens's result is the fiction of an unbeliever, it nevertheless represents that awkward but often sublime matrix of poetry and philosophy, as the two alternate universes – Kierkegaard's and Stevens's bend and sometimes break the artifice of language to express the unutterable: the paradoxical mystery of Eternal Love, the reality of God.

For Stevens then all reality, even language, is mythic; "the tomb in Palestine" remains "...the grave of Jesus where he lay," he concludes in *Sunday Morning*, perhaps the most blatantly anti-Christian poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Still he cannot help but puzzle over and struggle against what human mind and the human heart can both create but, perhaps, never realize – "an idea of order" only. He concludes:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,

As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  
(44-55)

In his “Works of Love” and elsewhere, Kierkegaard’s philosophy demands so much more of his words, and he demands so much more than a mere “idea” -- even in terms of his own deep personal struggles:

What wonderful recollections the lover acquires as thanks for all his labour! In a sense he can pack his whole life together in a dash. He can say: I have laboured in spite of everyone, early and late, but what have I accomplished – a dash!...I have suffered as heavily as any man, inwardly as only love can suffer, but what have I gained – a dash! (259-60)

Stevens must be content with a dash, and thrust his existence thoroughly into the only semblance of truth: a “fiction,” an “idea of order.” The paradox of “a happy people in an unhappy world--”<sup>4</sup> is beyond comprehension, it is beyond belief, utterly hopeless, and worse, it cannot be made whole even by language. Kierkegaard, seemingly undaunted by the same paradox, unwittingly retorts, reiterating:

Is, then, the life of the lover wasted, has he lived entirely in vain, since there is nothing, absolutely nothing, which witnesses to his work? Answer: is seeking one’s own the wasting of one’s life? No, in truth, this life is not wasted. This the lover knows in blessed joy in himself and with God...he is completely and wholly transformed into being simply an active power in the hands of God. (260)

As St. John of the Cross came to realize in “Dark Night of Soul,”<sup>5</sup> God (Christ) forms both nexus and solution to paradox – the paradox of being completely alone in the universe, even inasmuch as to create a woman who might sing “beyond the genius of the sea,” but who cannot replace a woman’s flesh and blood. The transformation, Kierkegaard reminds us, is not in the “supreme fiction” but in the “supreme truth” – the reality of

God’s love, expressed most paradoxically in the Incarnation - even when the tropical night is cold and the dark sky and sea are impossible to distinguish.

## Endnotes

1. In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan describes hell, or Pandemonium, as: A Universe of death, which God by curse Created evil, for evil only good.(Book II 622-23).

2. A vice president for the Hartford Insurance company, Stevens’s domestic life was, as critic Denis Donoghue once described it, to be “somewhere between desolate and bleak.” Unsatisfied with work alone and miserable in his marriage, Stevens’s, an atheist, sought solace in the writing of poetry, what he described as “The Supreme Fiction.”

3. Stevens’s many travels, especially to the Florida Keys, often served to reinforce his that chaotic universe can only be ordered by the imagination, finding no satisfaction his relationships, poetry serves Stevens as both an escape and means of survival.

4. In the final section of “The Auroras of Autumn,” perhaps Stevens’s most ambitious attempt to create order from chaos as he observes the Northern Lights, he presents four scenarios: “An unhappy people in an unhappy world”; “A happy people in an unhappy world”; “A happy people in a happy world”; and, “An unhappy people in a happy world,” all of which he rejects as:

This contrivance of the spectre of spheres,  
Contriving balance to contrive a whole,  
(Stanza X)

5. St. John of the Cross, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite mystic, is considered by many critics to be the strongest writer in the Spanish language after Miguel De Cervantes. His “Dark Night of the Soul,” written while isolated in prison, celebrates his “mystical union” with Christ expressed in sexual terms. Void of all other human contact, the poet’s spiritual union with the Word Incarnate is metaphorized as secret lovers meeting in the night.



## ABOUT OF THE PARTICIPANTS

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