KIERKEGAARD, RELIGION AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS OF CULTURE

Kierkegaard is often viewed in the history of ideas solely within the academic traditions of philosophy and theology. The secondary literature generally ignores the fact that he also took an active role in the public debate about the significance of the modern age that was taking shape in the flourishing feuilleton literature during the period of his authorship. Through a series of sharply focussed studies, George Pattison contextualizes Kierkegaard’s religious thought in relation to the debates about religion, culture and society carried on in the newspapers and journals read by the whole educated stratum of Danish society.

Pattison relates Kierkegaard not only to high art and literature but also to the ephemera of his contemporary culture. This has important implications for our understanding of Kierkegaard’s view of the nature of religious communication in modern society.

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To my mother Jean Pattison
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Although the chapters that follow each appeared or was produced independently, I believe that they offer a coherent and focussed exploration of some of the contexts in which and for which Kierkegaard wrote. Primarily these relate to his critique of the present age as that is expressed in his response to and appropriation of both its popular and its literary culture. It should go without saying that this is only one aspect of Kierkegaard. There is little or nothing here of his extensive and intensive probing of the psychology of the religious life, or, except almost in passing, of the literary and rhetorical means he employs to enable his readers to enter more deeply and committedly into that life as the matter of their own ultimate concern. Yet this is not ‘about’ Kierkegaard’s view of culture in the sense that it is not also ‘about’ his understanding of the religious situation of his time. As I hope the chapters that follow will suggest, these are not finally separable, even if we have to separate them for the purposes of commentary.

I am publishing separately a highly focussed study of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding writings. This study, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Theology, Literature* (2002), serves as a kind of companion volume to this book. It offers an exploration of what could be called ‘the inside’ aspect of what is here dealt with in its outward aspect. But given that Kierkegaard himself famously questioned what he called the Hegelian maxim that the inner and outer must necessarily coincide, what is the connection between them? We can scarcely read the inner anguish of a soul finding itself reduced to nothingness in its desperate search for God from the outer surface of a culture whose great event was the opening of Tivoli. If we are to speak of a connection here it can only be one
that is oblique, indirect, paradoxical. Anticipating the argument of
Chapter 1, perhaps we can put it like this: the emptiness of a culture
that has become pure surface is itself, in that very superficiality, the
figure of a sublime void that is, in its turn, an echo of the ontological
indeterminacy of the freedom in and through which our religious
destiny is decided.

Doesn’t that mean that we would do better simply to abandon the
opening moment of this sequence and go straight to the heart of the
matter? Why waste our time with Kierkegaard’s involvement in
the ephemera of his immediate cultural situation? Why preoccupy
ourselves with reconstructing a figure of sheer vacuity?

Of course, as I shall acknowledge, there is much in Kierkegaard’s
world that has simply faded into history. Yet it is integral to
Kierkegaard’s distinctive writerly watermark that he cannot write
about one aspect in separation from the other: that he is both a
man of the crowd and the poet of religious solitude. If we are to be
‘Kierkegaardian’ this will not simply be by repeating his ‘theology’,
but by re-enacting in our own age the double-citizenship of time and
eternity. To find out what the temporal dimension of this citizenship
meant for Kierkegaard, however, we have no alternative but the
kind of historical labour represented in what follows. It is my own
experience (which I certainly would not want to hold up as exem-
plary for anyone else, least of all for those disinclined or unequipped
for historical scholarship) that such labour also and in its own way
offers moments in which the insubstantial flow of time is revealed
as the fissure through which the eternal draws near, beyond words,
beyond knowledge, beyond art.
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drawing my attention to relevant texts and sources, and secretarial assistance. This is reaching the point at which I either have to extend the list of names to monstrous lengths or draw a line. The latter is probably the better option, as I do not wish to overlook any of the many from whom I have learned and continue to learn more not only about Kierkegaard but also about the way in which the rise of the culture of urbanity has provided a transformative provocation to Christian faith. Whether the theology of the Churches has yet grasped the scale of the transformation is an open question. Beyond the world of Kierkegaard scholarship in the narrow sense, it is my hope that this book will also engage those concerned with such questions – a hope that reflects my view that the nineteenth century’s crisis of religion and culture is not a matter of merely historical interest but lives on in our own concern with essentially analogous questions.

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All translations of foreign-language titles not otherwise acknowledged are my own, and though I have been helped with some of these, any faults are my own.
Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for titles of works by Kierkegaard. Any other abbreviations used are given at the point of first use.

CA  The Concept of Anxiety
CI  The Concept of Irony
COR The Corsair Affair
EO  Either/Or (followed by volume number)
EPW Early Polemical Writings
EUD Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses
FSE/JY For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!
FT/R Fear and Trembling and Repetition
JP  Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers (followed by volume and entry (not page) number)
M  The Moment and Late Writings
PC  Practice in Christianity
PF  Philosophical Fragments
P/WS Prefaces and A Writing Sampler
SKS Søren Kierkegaard’s Skrifter (followed by volume number)
SLW Stages on Life’s Way
TA  Two Ages
UDVS Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits

With the exception of JP and SKS these refer to titles in the Princeton University Press edition of Kierkegaard’s writings. Full details are given in the Bibliography.