

TRUTH IS SUBJECTIVITY

Kierkegaard and Political Theology

A SYMPOSIUM IN HONOR OF

ROBERT L. PERKINS

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In Memoriam

Robert Lee Perkins

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ABBREVIATIONS

- BA *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CD *Christian Discourses* and *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- CI *The Concept of Irony* together with "Notes on Schelling's Berlin NSBL Lectures," ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, 2 vols. ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

- COR *The Corsair Affair*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1982.
- DCF *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, trans. Sylvia Walsh, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- EO1, 2 *Either/Or*, 2 vols. ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- EPW *Early Polemical Writings*, ed. and trans. Julia Watkin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard H. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FPOSL *From the Papers of One Still Living*. See *Early Polemical Writings*.
- FSE/JFY *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself?*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FT *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh and trans. Sylvia Walsh, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Books, 1985.

- JC "Johannes Climacus or De omnibus dubitandum est,"
See *Philosophical Fragments*.
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!* See *For Self-Examination*.
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 vols. ed. and
trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by
Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington and London: Indi-
ana University Press, 1, 1967; 2, 1970; 3 and 4, 1975; 5,
1978; 6, 1978; 7, 1978.
- KJN *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, gen. ed. Bruce H.
Kirmmse. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University
Press, 1, 2007; 2, 2008; 3, 2010; 4 and 5, 2011; 6, 2012;
7, 2014; 8, 2015.
- LD *Letters and Documents*, ed. and trans. Henrik Rosenmei-
er. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- NE *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*,
Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton Uni-
versity Press, 1995).
- PC *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong
and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1991.
- PCCP *Philosophical Crumbs or A Crumb of Philosophy*, trans. M.
G. Piety. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- PF *Philosophical Fragments* and "Johannes Climacus," ed.
and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

- PV, OMWA, AN *The Point of View*, "The Single Individual," *On My Work as an Author*, "Armed Neutrality," ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- R *Repetition*, trans. M. G. Piety. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- SKP *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2nd enlarged ed., ed. by Niels Thulstrup, with index vols. 14-16 by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-78.
- SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, and Alastair McKinnon. Published by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997-2011.
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- SUD *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age. A Literary Review*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

- TM *'The Moment' and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- WA *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- WL *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Kierkegaard's Apocryphal Politics

M.G. Piety

There has been much discussion among scholars concerning the nature of Kierkegaard's political views.¹ Opinions on the substance of those views are widely diverging, however, and this is undoubtedly because Kierkegaard does not write in the straightforward style that has come to be typical of philosophers, at least since the period of the Enlightenment. His style has a certain affinity, as I have argued elsewhere,² with that of Plato in that he often expresses his views indirectly, through a variety of literary devices that include not only pseudonymity, but also hyperbole, irony, and humor. Kierkegaard's views, like those of Plato, are thus to a certain extent hidden beneath the surface of his writings. Hence the

¹ See, for example, *Kierkegaard: The Self In Society*, eds. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (Macmillan, 1998); *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*, eds. George Connell and C. Stephen Evans (Humanities Press, 1992); and Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Backhouse's bibliography also lists numerous individual articles on the topic of Kierkegaard's political views that were not included in either the Pattison-Shakespeare or the Connell-Evans volumes.

² See "The Dangers of Indirection: Plato, Kierkegaard and Leo Strauss," in *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*. Ed. Edward Mooney (Indiana University Press, 2008), 163-74.

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title of this talk. The term "apocryphal" comes from the Greek ἀπόκρυφος which means "hidden," or "concealed."³

"Kierkegaard's politics" is an inherently equivocal concept. It can be interpreted to mean either his expressly-held political views, or the political views that can reasonably be inferred from, or made to cohere with, his more general philosophical and theological views. Often, these two senses are conflated. It is important, however, to distinguish them. My project here is to examine in outline Kierkegaard's expressly-held political views, as well as what would appear to be the reasons and sentiment behind those views.

I

Kierkegaard's expressly-held political views are relatively easy to identify. The political implications of his thought, on the other hand, are more difficult to trace. Robert Perkins was among the first Kierkegaard scholars to point out how fundamentally social are the implications of Kierkegaard's thought. And there is now a growing body of scholarly literature devoted to showing that.⁴ This project should in itself make clear, however, that Kierkegaard was not essentially a political thinker, at least not in the traditional sense, even if Perkins is correct, and I believe he is, in his view that Kierkegaard's thought has important positive social implications.

Kierkegaard is a religious thinker, of course, yet he inherited his religious views from Pietism and there is little evidence that he viewed himself as making an original contribution to the field of theology, at least not beyond the sense in which his psychological insights could be viewed as making such a contribution. Kierkegaard's primary interest is in the psychology of the individual,

³ See *Greek-English Lexicon*, eds. Liddell, Scott, Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/about.php>.

⁴ See note 1 above.

which is to say that his theoretical orientation is that of a psychologist. All traditional philosophical questions, not merely those concerning religion and ethics, but also those concerning epistemology and metaphysics are important, for Kierkegaard, only in terms of their significance relative to the individual as such.

This may be part of the reason that, as Stephen Backhouse observes in his book *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism*, Kierkegaard has often been viewed as a "radical, anti-social individualist."⁵ This view is held by such important figures in the history of thought as Martin Buber, Karl Barth, Richard Niebuhr, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno.⁶ Despite repeated efforts of contemporary scholars to retire this caricature of Kierkegaard⁷ it continues to hold sway in the larger intellectual community as was witnessed by Peter Gordon's review of Daphne Hampson's *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique*⁸ in *The New York Review of Books*.⁹ Gordon describes Kierkegaard there as "an unbending conservative" whose "hatred of the mob...fosters...a disabling contempt for the public good."

Most contemporary Kierkegaard scholars realize, however, that Kierkegaard's expressed political conservatism did not stem from any sort of social elitism. He tended to identify, in fact, with

⁵ Backhouse, 163.

⁶ Ibid, "Kierkegaard and Society: The anti-social Kierkegaard?" 163-166.

⁷ See, for example, ibid, "The social Kierkegaard" 166-169. This section of Backhouse's book contains a wealth of references to this attempt, including George Pattison and Stephen Shakespeare's *Kierkegaard: the Self and Society*, and George Connell and C. Stephen Evans, *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*.

⁸ Daphne Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ Peter Gordon, "Kierkegaard's Rebellion," *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 10, 2016.

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the common people,¹⁰ which is not surprising considering this is the soil from which his father had sprung. Kierkegaard's conservatism is not an expression of contempt for the public good, but more an expression of his contempt for the mob, or more precisely, his cynicism concerning the ability of large groups of people to govern themselves humanely.

II

Kierkegaard was a monarchist. "Government [by] royal power is representative," he writes in a journal entry from 1847, "and to this extent Christian (monarchy)[.] The dialectic of monarchy is world-historically both well-established and unchanging" (KJN 4: NB 2.3). This is likely an allusion to Romans 13:1-7 where Paul asserts that "[e]veryone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God."¹¹ That is, a monarch represents God, however imperfectly, in his or her role of governing a people, as well as representing the people themselves, to the extent that they also have a say in whether the monarch will remain in power and how extensive his or her powers will be.¹² The qualification "however imperfectly" is important because there is no reason to suppose Kierkegaard thought every monarch was equally good any more than there is reason to suppose that Paul thought all "governing authorities" were equally good. The meaning of Romans

¹⁰ See, for example, Jørgen Bukdahl's *Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

¹¹ New Living Translation.

¹² See, for example, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton University Press, 1980) 151 note.

13:1-7 is more likely, as David Papineau has argued,¹³ that any government is better than no government in that it is a force for order, order without which human flourishing is impossible.

Kierkegaard was a monarchist,¹⁴ not because he thought monarchs were invariably good, but because he had more faith in the individual than in any collective. Kierkegaard had reason, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ to be sanguine about the institution of monarchy. Frederik VI was a benign monarch. He instituted numerous progressive reforms, including freeing the serfs in 1788. Since Kierkegaard's own father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, had been a serf, had it not been for the progressive views of Frederik VI, Kierkegaard would likely have been a serf as well and begun and ended his days on the same desolate Jutland heath where his father had herded sheep as a boy.

Frederik VI ruled Denmark for the first 26 years of Kierkegaard's life. Given that Kierkegaard lived to be only 42, that means Frederik VI ruled Denmark for most of Kierkegaard's life. Unfortunately, Frederik became more conservative after the French defeat in the Napoleonic Wars in 1814 and the loss of Norway by Denmark. Still, the Danish society in which Kierkegaard grew up

¹³ "Even a bad state," observes Papineau, "is much better than none at all. When the hated regimes of Eastern Europe and South Africa collapsed at the end of the last century, their populations had the good sense to carry on recognizing the existing police, courts, and other state institutions until new constitutional arrangements could be made. By contrast, the misguided disbanding of the defeated Iraqi army and police by the US authorities in 2003 created a vacuum for mob rule, and is viewed by many commentators as the main source of the subsequent chaos in the Middle East. David Papineau, *Knowing the Score* (Basic Books, 2017), 58.

¹⁴ See, for example, KJN 8: NB 23.

¹⁵ See "Kierkegaard's Conservatism," *Piety on Kierkegaard*, January 22, 2017 <https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/2017/01/22/kierkegaards-conservatism/>.

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was a product of his earlier progressive reforms.

A monarch, as an individual, and in particular as an individual standing alone, can be guided in his decision making by his conscience, or as Kierkegaard expresses it in the *Postscript*, by "the ethical only in himself," which, according to Kierkegaard, is his co-knowledge with God (CUP, 155; see also KJN 10: NB 36: 21), and which will hence be reliable even if his God-relationship is not what it ought to be. The same dynamic is more problematic, however, when a group rather than an individual holds the reins of political power. The greater the number of people involved in decision making, the harder it is for the individual to hear the voice of his or her conscience. The voice of conscience can be drowned out by the clatter of the mob. Hence the greater the number of people involved in decision making, the greater probability that decisions will be influenced by concerns other than those of conscience.

The difficulty, according to Kierkegaard, with political theorizing in the traditional sense is that it starts from a mistaken assumption. That is, it starts from the assumption that people are immanently capable of determining a just order of society, as well as of implementing and sustaining this order. But this assumption rests in turn on another assumption that Kierkegaard categorically rejects: that people are fundamentally good-willed toward one another. It's not that Kierkegaard has such a negative view of human nature that he thinks people are unrelentingly ill-willed toward one another. The problem, for Kierkegaard, is that the human will is divided. It wants the flourishing of the neighbor, but it wants as well a flourishing for itself that it sees as at least occasionally opposed to the neighbor's flourishing. Or to put the problem in more theological terms: the will wants to conform itself to God's will, yet also wants to be self determining.

Only by relating ourselves properly to God is it possible, according to Kierkegaard, for us to understand how to relate

properly to our neighbor. "[L]ove for God," he explains, "is the decisive factor; from this originates love for the neighbor.... [I]n love for the neighbor," Kierkegaard continues,

God is the middle term. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being. Only by loving God above all else can one love the neighbor in the other human being. The other human being, this is the neighbor who is the other human being in the sense that the other human being is every other human being (WL, 57-58).

Nowhere is this made clearer than in chapter VII of the second part of *Works of Love*. The chapter begins with the biblical injunction "Do not forget to do good and to share" [Heb 13:16]—but do not forget either," warns Kierkegaard,

that this incessant talk by worldliness about beneficence and benevolence and generosity and charitable donations and gift upon gift is almost merciless. Ah, let the newspaper writers and tax collectors and the parish beadies talk about generosity and count and count; but let us never ignore that Christianity speaks essentially of mercifulness, that *Christianity would least of all be guilty of mercilessness*....But people prattle and prate ecclesiastically-worldly and worldly-ecclesiastically about generosity, beneficence—but forget, even in the sermon, mercifulness. From the Christian point of view, this is an impropriety....*Woe to him who devours the inheritance of widows and the fatherless* [Matt. 23:14], but woe also to the preacher who is silent about mercifulness in order to talk about generosity! Preaching should indeed be solely and only about mercifulness. If you know how to speak effectually [*tilgavns*] about this, then generosity [*Gavmildhed*] will follow of itself and come by itself accordingly as the individual is capable of

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it (WL, 315, emphasis added).

It is clear from this passage from *Works of Love*, a work published under Kierkegaard's own name rather than a pseudonym, that Kierkegaard believes we have a duty to do good and to share. That is, it is clear he believes we have a duty to help one another in a practical sense, to ameliorate the deficiencies in others' material circumstances. It is equally clear, however, that he traces those deficiencies to a spiritual poverty whose amelioration is more urgent in that once it is taken care of, material generosity "will follow of itself."

III

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, one of the difficulties scholars face in attempting to understand Kierkegaard is that Kierkegaard does not present his views in the straightforward way we have come to expect of philosophers. I also observed, however, that in this respect he is in good company. Plato, arguably the greatest philosopher in the history of Western thought, if not in the history of thought more generally, declined to present his views directly, but forced his readers to delve beneath the surface of his works in an effort to divine their meaning. The German classicist Norbert Blössner argues in a wonderful essay entitled "The City-Soul Analogy,"¹⁶ that contrary to what generations of Plato scholars have thought, the *Republic* is not primarily a piece of political philosophy but a piece of moral philosophy. The entire city-soul analogy, he argues, is a rhetorical device employed by Plato in the service of the argument that it is better to be just than unjust.

¹⁶ Norbert Blössner, "The City-Soul Analogy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 345-385.

Knowledge of the Good is prerequisite, argues Socrates in the *Republic*, to genuine knowledge of what is just.¹⁷ The difficulty, of course, is that most people, according to Socrates, lack knowledge of the Good, and hence of justice. Not only are most people ignorant of the Good, they are, in fact, not even oriented properly relative to it. That is, they are not "approaching it as a proselyte," to use a phrase from Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Crumbs*,¹⁸ but are facing *away* from it.¹⁹ They must be turned around, or "converted to the light from the darkness" (στρέφειν πρὸς τὸ φανὸν ἐξ τοῦ σκοτώδους).²⁰

Only once such a "conversion" has taken place in the individual, asserts Socrates, can he attain the proper relation to the Good and hence genuine knowledge of justice. And only once such knowledge is attained, can there be any talk of constructing a just city.

And yet, observes Blössner, "it is important for Socrates' argument that the city shapes the souls of its citizens and their conceptions of happiness and that it creates the framework within which those conceptions are either easier or more difficult to realize."²¹ That is, the *Republic* is, in a sense, a political work, even if its ultimate objective is the conversion of the individual from darkness to light.

¹⁷ See *Republic* 506a-b.

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M.G. Piety (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁰ *Plato VI Republic Books 6-10*, tran. Paul Shorey (*The Loeb Classical Library*, 1935) 518c5-7. The expression Plato uses here for "converted" is στρέφω, the same expression that is translated as "converted" in the King James rendering of Matt 18:3.

²¹ Blössner, 383.

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The same thing can be said of Kierkegaard's works. His primary concern is always the spiritual situation of the *individual*, or the conversion of the individual from the darkness of what he believed was the bourgeois pseudo-Christianity that dominated the Denmark of his day to the light of authentic Christianity. And yet, he conceived of himself as the spiritual watchman of his own city.²² "I love my native land," he wrote in his journal in 1848, "it is true that I have not gone to war— but I believe I have served it in another way...." (PV, 170/JP 6: 6259).²³

Kierkegaard wrote in Danish for fellow Danes whom he felt had lost their spiritual way. So although his primary concern, like Plato's, is with the individual, it is clear that, again like Plato, he understood the intimate connection between the city and human-kind and hence the political implications of his thought.

"[I]f what one sees all over Europe is Christendom," Kierkegaard wrote in his journal in 1849, "then I propose to start here in Denmark to list the price for being Christian in such a way that the whole concept—state church, official appointments, livelihood—bursts open" (PV, 201/JP 6:6444).

Kierkegaard's Denmark, or perhaps for the purposes of alliteration I may be allowed to say Kierkegaard's Copenhagen, shaped the souls of its citizens just as Plato's Athens shaped the souls of *its* citizen. Kierkegaard's Copenhagen shaped its citizens' concep-

²² The pseudonym under which *The Concept of Anxiety* appeared was Vigilius Haufniensis which translated literally as "watchman of Copenhagen."

²³ It is interesting to note here that while Kierkegaard may not have been nationalistic, at least in the sense of Christian nationalism, he was patriotic in the sense in which Robert Audi discusses what he argues is the difference between nationalism and patriotism. See Audi, "Nationalism, Patriotism, and Cosmopolitanism in an Age of Globalization," *The Journal of Ethics*, 13, 2009, 365-381.

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tions of Christianity and created a framework within which, according to Kierkegaard, a proper understanding of Christianity was difficult to attain.

Thus Kierkegaard, like Plato, set for himself the task of helping his compatriots, one individual at a time.