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978-1-107-01861-7 - Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: The Paradox and the 'Point of Contact'

George Pattison

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard as student and writer of theology

Kierkegaard is a writer of contradictions. He is a master of irony who urges earnestness, a dancing master whose partner of choice is death, he is a post-Romantic and proto-postmodern man of masks, a flâneur and dandy who piously dedicates his devotional writings to the memory of his deceased father – and so we could continue . . . But whatever else we know about Kierkegaard, we know that he was an opponent of the system and of objective knowledge, above all when it was a matter of human beings' deepest existential commitments. In setting out to present Kierkegaard as a student and writer of theology, then, I am fully aware of the potential scandal of my procedure. For theology has become the object of intense suspicion in the contemporary academy. To many, the very name 'theology' indicates a kind of dogmatic, authoritarian, and spuriously 'objective' approach to questions that, if not entirely meaningless, can only properly be addressed in the spirit of open philosophical enquiry. And even if this suspicion itself reflects an unreflective prejudice and even if, in many cases, those who have the word 'theology' in their job description are as likely to be open to alternative perspectives and methods as any philosopher, many will feel that bringing 'Kierkegaard' and 'theology' into such close proximity indicates an inappropriate narrowing of how we should be reading him.

This book attempts to locate Kierkegaard in the context of some of the key theological debates and movements of the early to mid-nineteenth century, including his relations to some lesser-known Danish contemporaries. Against this background I shall then set out to offer an outline of what we might call Kierkegaard's own 'theology', starting with the traditional theological prolegomena concerning human beings' capacity for knowing God and then looking at his treatment of the core doctrinal topics of creation, fall (or sin), and redemption. Finally I proceed to look at how this 'theology' is developed in relation to proclamation and the life of the Church before returning to a final reflection on the theme of

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direct and indirect communication. For those predisposed to suspect all theology of inappropriate dogmatism, this programme will doubtless seem alarming. To such readers I straightaway concede that Kierkegaard did not present his theology in anything like a systematic or dogmatic manner. Still less did he present himself as an authoritative teacher of the faith. Nevertheless, I believe that his many writings on religion and on the Christian faith are informed by a coherent understanding of the nature of Christian doctrine and this is what I am hoping to demonstrate in this book.

Whatever else we know about Kierkegaard, we do know that for ten years he was a student of theology at Copenhagen University. Biographers have tended to be less interested in his theological studies per se than in other aspects of his student years, such as his taste for fine clothes, cigars, dining, debating, and his immersion in literary studies of many different kinds, from the troubadours to Faust. All of this is a part of the record. But, at the same time (though not always at *exactly* the same time!), he was a student of theology and his journals and notebooks offer a substantial body of notes relating to these studies. The earliest of these, from 1830–1, comprise notes on the German and Danish Reformations (see SKS27: Papir 1) and other topics (SKS27: Papir 2 and 3). These are followed by fairly extensive notes on H. N. Clausen's 1832–3 exegetical lectures on the gospels (SKS27: Papir 4), while further exegetical notes from 1833 relate to the book of Acts (SKS27: Papir 6) and the Letter to the Galatians (SKS27: Papir 7). From 1833–4 we have extensive notes on Clausen's lectures on dogmatics, covering the full spectrum of doctrinal topics in a historical perspective. From the same period we have the notes on Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* that will be the focus of Chapter 1 below, together with other notes indicative of wide-ranging theological reading. Papers from 1834–5 offer further New Testament exegetical notes (SKS27: Papir 15–18), some quite thorough. If literary and other studies then came to the foreground, 1835–6 nevertheless saw the theology student Søren Kierkegaard translating large parts of the New Testament from Greek into Latin, namely Acts 1–4 and 24–7, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, and James 1–4; 15 (see SKS17/KJN1 CC). The years 1837–8 saw an intensive return to philosophy of religion and systematic theology, particularly in relation to the wave of interest in speculative theology associated with H. L. Martensen's innovative 'Hegelian' lectures (see Chapter 2 below). Across this period Kierkegaard also made a range of loose notes to which he gave the title 'Theologica: Older Materials' (SKS27: Papir 48–51),

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including, in 1839, notes on Confession and Communion (SKS27: Papir 260). In 1839–40 he returns to the more philological and exegetical aspect of theological work with notes on the Letter to the Romans, Chapters 9–16, involving comparisons of Paul's text with both Hebrew and Septuagint sources. His subsequent studies at the pastoral seminary in the academic year 1840–1 produced a number of sermon notes and the text of his first sermon (SKS27: Papir 270), of which the official report states that 'The sermon had been very well memorized, the voice was clear, the tone dignified and thoughtful. – On the whole the sermon had been written with great thought and sharp logic. But it was somewhat difficult and certainly far too exalted in tone for the average person' (LD: xiv, p. 19). Even when he had completed his theological studies and headed off to Berlin, Kierkegaard voluntarily sat through many hours of Marheineke's lectures on Christian doctrine – which mostly covered the same main points of Christian doctrine that he had previously learned about from Clausen.

All of these notes add up to a considerable body of writing and leave us in no doubt that by the start of his self-styled 'authorship' he had a substantial knowledge of biblical, historical, and doctrinal theology, including extensive study of the most up-to-date scholarship in philosophy of religion and systematic theology. To ignore this background in interpreting an authorship that is constantly engaging points of Christian doctrine and biblical teaching would be foolishly self-denying. Naturally, it by no means follows that Kierkegaard's mature views can simply be 'explained' by reference to his student notes but I believe that it is the case that the more we know of these the more we see the coherence of the theological issues addressed in both pseudonymous and upbuilding works and also, crucially, the more we see the coherence of Kierkegaard's own approach to these issues.

My own task here is primarily expository and I shall, for the most part, be attempting to interpret Kierkegaard through his own words. For this reason I have only occasionally digressed into discussing the secondary literature. Kierkegaard scholars will doubtless identify many points at which they might think I should have engaged more with contemporary academic work on Kierkegaard, although I hope that what is said here is sufficiently clear for them also to see the line I might take in many current interpretative debates. At the same time I would not wish to conceal that I owe deep and manifold debts to many scholars – teachers, colleagues, and students – who have drawn my attention to key texts or opened my eyes to different possibilities of interpretation, even if only relatively few

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of their names appear in direct references. Although this is my interpretation, it is not just 'my' interpretation, but an interpretation arising out of a series of invariably good-natured if also often passionate readings and conversations, formal and informal. And, of course, I hope that this study will help generate more of the same. That said, let us turn to Kierkegaard, the twenty-one-year-old student of theology who sets himself to study one of the founding texts of modern theology, F. D. E. Schleiermacher's dogmatic treatise, *The Christian Faith*.

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CHAPTER I

Beginning with the beginning of modern theology

INTRODUCTION

In the period of Kierkegaard's university studies it was inevitable that he would have to reckon with the epochal figure of F. D. E. Schleiermacher. Through his great apologetic work *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers*, his translations of Plato, his exposition of Christian doctrine, and his personal role in Church and University life, Schleiermacher had in his lifetime become what he has remained, a point of reference for all subsequent Protestant theology – 'the father of modern theology'. In 1833, during Kierkegaard's student years, he visited Copenhagen to huge acclaim, with processions and receptions not unlike those appropriate to visiting royalty, although Kierkegaard never mentions the occasion. A year later, however, in 1834, Kierkegaard engaged a junior faculty member, Hans Lassen Martensen (who would later become a more or less constant foil for his attacks on Hegelian theology and establishment Christianity),¹ to give him tutorials on Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith (Glaubenslehre)*. Martensen wrote of these tutorials that Kierkegaard 'did not follow any set syllabus, but only asked that I lecture to him and converse with him. I chose to lecture to him on the main points of Schleiermacher's dogmatics and then discuss them.'² Although this comment and other sources suggest that the choice of topic was Martensen's, not Kierkegaard's, it is clear that serious work was done. We shall shortly

¹ See Chapters 2 and 9 below. As far as Kierkegaard's previous awareness of Schleiermacher is concerned, Andreas Krichbaum points to the influence of Schleiermacher on Clausen, whose lectures he had attended in the winter semester of 1833–4 (see Introduction above) and in the dogmatic writings of J. P. Mynster. See A. Krichbaum, *Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher. Eine historisch-systematische Studie zum Religionsbegriff* (Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series 18) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 19–29. Krichbaum's is the most detailed and systematic study of this relationship to date.

² Quoted in J. Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard. A Biography*, trans. B. H. Kirmmse (Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 30.

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return to the notes that are the only documentary record of these tutorials, but before doing so it may prove helpful to make some more general remarks about the relationship between these two pivotal figures of modern theology and especially its potential significance for understanding Kierkegaard.

At the most general level, very divergent views have been held as to whether or how far Kierkegaard was influenced by his German predecessor. Emmanuel Hirsch, an important if politically controversial historian of theology and Kierkegaard-commentator, is often quoted to the effect that 'Kierkegaard was the only true disciple of Schleiermacher in his generation.' However, Ingolf Dalferth, referring back to Hirsch, has suggested that Kierkegaard was the only person in his generation who was *not* a disciple of Schleiermacher.³ What makes such divergent interpretations possible?

On the one hand it is clear that Schleiermacher found the source and power of religious life in first-hand individual experience, thus opening a line of thinking that points towards Kierkegaard's his own emphasis on subjectivity. This seems also to harmonize with the tendency of Kierkegaard's few published comments on Schleiermacher, such as the remark in the Introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety* that he was a thinker 'in the beautiful Greek sense . . . who only spoke about what he knew' (CA, 20/SKS4, 327). On the other hand, it is equally clear that where Schleiermacher's theology led him to affirm the mutual benefits not only of Christian faith and science (in the sense of *Wissenschaft*), but also of faith and family life, faith and community, faith and nationality, and to endorse the legitimacy of an established Church, Kierkegaard would pursue a more negative dialectic that, in the end, led him to declare that the whole phenomenon of established Christendom was a monstrous error. This difference is also marked at the individual level, so that whereas Schleiermacher discerns an element of God-consciousness indwelling each and every person, Kierkegaard is more alert to the possible alienation of the self from its grounding in God. If Schleiermacher sees faith as a universal possibility, Kierkegaard sees despair – which for him is the essential opposite of faith – as a universal sickness unto death. Perhaps more fundamentally, a late journal entry from 1850 points to what we might call a metaphysical difference between the two thinkers. Here Kierkegaard

³ Ingolf Dalferth, "Die Sache ist viel entsetzlicher": Religiosität bei Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher, in N.-J. Cappelørn et al. (eds.), *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard: Subjektivität und Wahrheit*. Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series 21 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 217–64.

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says of Schleiermacher that he conceived the concept of absolute dependence as a state, a form of being, whereas he himself has a more 'ethical' understanding in the specific sense of seeing religion as a kind of striving, a process of appropriation. He further connects this with Schleiermacher's sense of religion as a kind of being-in-love, whereas for Kierkegaard it is marked by 'fear and trembling ... You "Shall" ... [and] the possibility of offence' (SKS23: NB15:83, 83^[a], 83^[b]). It is in the light of such differences that Joakim Garff surmises the Schleiermacher tutorials to have been broken off as a result of Kierkegaard's increasingly 'radical' view of Christianity.⁴ Both may be representative thinkers of the modern 'turn to the subject', but for Kierkegaard it is at least as true to say 'subjectivity is untruth' as to say that 'subjectivity is truth'.⁵ To put the point as briefly as possible: if Schleiermacher is the representative par excellence of the synthesis of theology and culture, Kierkegaard is the representative par excellence of their entire opposition.

Naturally, such headline claims can never tell the whole story. What I shall argue here and shall, I hope, confirm in subsequent chapters, is that whilst there are indeed many differences between Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard with regard to the ecclesiastical, social, psychological, and even metaphysical situation of religion in the modern world, the basic contours of Kierkegaard's thinking about the relationship between God and the world and, especially, between God and human beings bear an essentially Schleiermacherian shape. This is not immediately to say that this is the result of Kierkegaard deliberately applying what he had learned with Martensen to a series of theological problems. Much that Kierkegaard found in Schleiermacher could also be found in other representatives of the Christian tradition and, by Kierkegaard's time, an entire theological generation had internalized and then transmitted large parts of Schleiermacher's teaching, so that there are many possibilities of indirect as well as direct lines of influence. Even some of the Hegelians whom Kierkegaard studied had absorbed certain elements of Schleiermacherian thought, as we shall see.⁶ The issue, then, is not which propositions found in Kierkegaard can be correlated with propositions distinctive to Schleiermacher. Rather, it is a matter of a few fundamental principles that are influential for the overall shape of a theological development. Key

⁴ Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 31.

⁵ See A. Grøn, 'Subjektivität und Un-wahrheit', in Cappelørn et al. (eds.), *Schleiermacher und Kierkegaard*, pp. 13–28.

⁶ See Chapter 2 below.

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amongst these, I shall suggest, are the claims that the basic structure of the religious life is determined by a sense or feeling of absolute dependence on God; that every human life has the possibility of entering into a God-relationship; and that this possibility is realized in an experienced need of God – what Schleiermacher calls 'redemption' – that is both a manifestation of the individual's intimate self-consciousness and, at the same time, a divine gift; finally this need and this gift are focused on the person of the redeemer, the Christ. Furthermore – although this does not emerge directly from the sources we shall examine in this chapter – both are agreed in seeing the decisiveness of understanding God as love and, consequently, of seeing Christ not as effecting the salvation of human beings by mitigating or absorbing the Father's wrath against human sinfulness (as in some Lutheran dogmatic systems) but rather as expressing and enacting the love of the Father.

These theological commitments may seem to be too general really to define a distinctive theological orientation. In what follows, however, I hope to be able to show that in the context of Kierkegaard's own time they provided some of the resources that enabled him to develop a theological vision that was non-speculative (against Hegelian and other forms of speculative theology), that did not fall back into an older supernaturalism, and yet, at the same time, opened the way for the actual practices of piety (or, in Kierkegaard's vocabulary, edification or upbuilding) and 'works of love' to play a central role in defining the character of Christian faith. However, the foundation for any interpretation of this relationship has to be found in the texts themselves, which, in this case, means in the first instance the notes from Kierkegaard's 1834 tutorials on *The Christian Faith*. These show that Kierkegaard had at the very least a rather full knowledge of the Introduction and First Part of *The Christian Faith*. Probably his reading went beyond this – Martensen himself specifically mentions Kierkegaard's getting worked up over the treatment of the doctrine of Election, which comes much later on in the text.⁷ Similarly, there are passages elsewhere in the journals and in the published works that suggest a wider familiarity with Schleiermacher's thought as a whole, although, as has already been stated, this may in some cases be a result of secondary or other sources.⁸ Nevertheless, it is these notes that establish a primary fixed point without which anything else we might say about this crucial relationship will lack a secure textual basis.

⁷ Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 30.

⁸ For a complete discussion see Krichbaum, *Kierkegaard und Schleiermacher*.

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Before starting on Kierkegaard's notes, however, it should be mentioned that there were also other aspects of Schleiermacher's work that were in different ways important for Kierkegaard's authorship. I have suggested elsewhere that Schleiermacher's *Confidential Letters on Schlegel's Lucinde* possibly played a role in inspiring Kierkegaard's ideas about indirect communication. This was a fictional work, originally published anonymously, in which Schleiermacher presents a series of letters reflecting the different views of a circle of friends to Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde*. Schlegel was a personal friend of Schleiermacher and, like him, a central figure in Early Romanticism in Germany, but his novel, which celebrated an adulterous love-affair, caused considerable scandal. Schleiermacher's work was a rather clever fictional means of both defending his friend (which he also did under his own name in a published review) whilst re-imagining the issues in a non-controversial (because fictional) manner. Whilst it would go beyond the evidence to see this as the sole cause of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonymity, it probably played its part. Kierkegaard's comments are nothing short of fulsome:

It is probably a model review and also an example of how such a thing can be most productive, in that he constructs a host of personalities out of the book itself and through them illuminates the work and also illuminates their individuality, so that instead of being faced by the reviewers with various points of view, we get instead many personalities who represent these various points of view. But they are complete beings, so that it is possible to get a glance into the individuality of the single individual and through numerous relatively true judgements to draw up our own final judgement. Thus it is a true masterpiece. (SKS19/KJN3: Notebook 3:2)

If Kierkegaard was thus influenced by the Romantic Schleiermacher, he also learned from Schleiermacher the Plato scholar. This is especially clear in his Master's thesis *On the Concept of Irony with constant Reference to Socrates*. As the title indicates, Socrates plays a central role in this work and it is therefore unsurprising that much of it is taken up with interpreting the figure of Socrates as found in Plato – even though Kierkegaard also argues that the truest historical portrayal of Socrates is that found in Aristophanes! With regard to the relationship between Plato and Socrates, Kierkegaard does not conceal that he is guided at many points by Schleiermacher's prefaces to his translations of Plato's works and that the overall thrust of his own position rests on a sharp distinction between the dialogues that end without a conclusion (which Schleiermacher sees as earlier) and those which move on to a 'speculative' finale in which, via myth, Plato reveals the divine truth towards which the dialogue tends but

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which is not itself discoverable solely through argument (SKS1, 113f./CI, 54f.). In this connection Kierkegaard shows himself familiar with the Schleiermacherian position regarding the *Protagoras*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Apology*, and *Republic*. Taking account of alternative readings, such as those offered by Friedrich Ast, he broadly holds to Schleiermacher's textual solutions. This is strategically important, since Kierkegaard himself wants to hold on to a sharp distinction between Socrates (whose position he identifies as thoroughly ironic and, as such, infinitely and absolutely negative) and Plato, whom he sees as guilty of sliding into speculation and, in doing so, anticipating the errors of contemporary speculation. These references in *On the Concept of Irony* also contain a mention of Schleiermacher's remarks on the unity of God in *The Christian Faith*, remarks covered also by the 1834 notes.

Finally, and as we have seen with regard to Kierkegaard's praise of Schleiermacher as a thinker 'in the beautiful Greek sense', it is worth emphasizing that whatever theological differences separate the German and the Danish thinker, the latter would never subject the former to the kind of mockery he unleashed against Hegelianism. Even if, in the end, Schleiermacher is said not to have engaged the decisive features of Christianity (SKS23: NB15^{1b}) he is, from first to last, accorded a fundamental respect that, if not unique, is certainly rare in Kierkegaard's writings, especially in the case of one who was both a university professor (and a *German* professor at that) and an upholder of established bourgeois Christendom.

THE 1834 NOTES

Kierkegaard's notes on *The Christian Faith* take up about ten pages in the latest edition of his works. A few have been translated into English, although these do not give a clear impression of the scope of Kierkegaard's work on this text.⁹ That being said, they are not in any way exhaustive. The majority consist of little more than Danish renderings of short passages from Schleiermacher's work, sometimes citing just the section or paragraph headings and no more. There are a few that comment or raise questions, but there is no sustained discussion of the points at issue (although in some cases other notes elsewhere indicate something of Kierkegaard's further reflections on the relevant subject). What the notes do offer, however, is a reasonably firm basis

⁹ See JP 4:3843–4.