KIERKEGAARD ON SIN, AMBIGUITY, AND GOSPEL RADICALITY:

Towards a Response to George Pattison

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Abstract: *It is often assumed that Kierkegaard became "less nuanced" in his more polemical later period, leading many scholars to an interpretative ambivalence over his fundamental theological convictions. This article engages critically with George Pattison, in particular, to explicate Kierkegaard's convictions on sin, redemption, and the implications of doubt and ambiguity. It will be argued that Kierkegaard's Gospel — following both Paul and Luther — is indeed radical: the catastrophic sickness of sin cannot be undone without a drastically invasive redemption. To speak in such homiletical binaries, of course, is to sound "unnuanced." But this is indeed how Kierkegaard portrayed the Gospel, in numerous ways, in numerous texts. Furthermore, he did so as one of the most complexly reflective thinkers of the modern era. He remained fully aware of the tensions of ambiguity precisely in and through his more "unambiguous" kerygmatic expressions. To underplay Kierkegaard's radicality is to misunderstand the inherent nuance that undergirds such directly homiletical assertions, which were based entirely on his understanding of the Gospel. However alarming Kierkegaard's voice may sound to contemporary academic theology, it is precisely by not removing his veil of kerygmatic radicality that we retain his most paradoxically nuanced contribution to modern Christian thought.*

For the last two centuries there have been many Kierkegaards in this world. Some of these are, of course, Kierkegaard's own creation. But many are also due to his long, ever-expanding list of academic interpreters. Kierkegaard's complex authorship certainly gives rise to this hermeneutical multiplicity, despite his wry protestations that scholars would distract themselves for many years trying to interpret him. However, it can become all too easy to settle for an ambivalence as to what Kierkegaard's convictions actually were, particularly those theological convictions which were most fundamental.

Perhaps the most prominent theological interpreter of Kierkegaard's authorship in recent decades has been George Pattison, whose work has often taken the stance of blurring the lines between Kierkegaard's theological, philosophical, and literary intentions. This article is not an attempt to respond to George Pattison's work *in se* but it will engage with him on a particular point that seems crucial to what Kierkegaard really stood for theologically. This relates to Kierkegaard's conviction about the Gospel, and its implications for sin, redemption, and the wider homiletical tone of Kierkegaard's theology. I will argue, contrary to Pattison, that Kierkegaard's theology of sin and redemption is indeed radical. One might even be tempted to call it "unnuanced," however odd that might sound of one of the most complex and reflective thinkers of the modern era. To see Kierkegaard in this way, however, would be to misunderstand the inherent nuance of polemical simplicity that characterised much of his directly theological work.

Notwithstanding the ongoing interaction between the direct and indirect aspects of his authorship (including the mystique of the pseudonymous characters), it is the second authorship — in light of his journals and his subsequent reflections — which yields the possibility of a confident reading of Kierkegaard's "view." It will be affirmed, in distinction to Pattison's immanentist hermeneutic, that for Kierkegaard, both sin and Gospel are radically transformative. Sin is not an inconvenience, but a pure corruption of the human self; and its effects cannot be undone without the radical redemption of a Gospel which is apocalyptically invasive rather than naturally immanent. Some reflection will also be offered in the conclusion regarding the notion of reflective nuance in light of Kierkegaard's more radically emphatic theological expressions, a point which will first be introduced by

discussing the "problem" of hermeneutical ambiguity when interpreting Kierkegaard's kerygmatic thought.

Between Ambiguity and Extremity

One key feature of George Pattison's reading of Kierkegaard's project is that Kierkegaard's view of sin and the implications of the Gospel — accentuated most overtly in his so-called "later period" — is a significant departure either from his distinctively Christian position, and from evangelical orthodoxy as a whole. Pattison asserts that Kierkegaard's position "darkened" with the attack literature,[1] and by this seems to imply that this darkening provides us with a trajectoried hermeneutic for the inherent untrustworthiness of Kierkegaard's radical kerygmatic emphases in general. There is no question that there is a *kind* of darkening in certain moments in Kierkegaard's attack period, especially vis-à-vis his echoes of Schopenhauer, who begins to creep into the journals more frequently in the 1850s. In one journal entry from 1854 — where he is actually critiquing Luther — Kierkegaard cites Schopenhauer before going on to state that "the world is immersed in evil."[2] However, it might be a little too convenient to tar the late Kierkegaard with the brush of Schopenhauerian pessimism as though this colored any of his other (to some eyes) "extreme" views about the seriousness of humanity's sinful state *coram deo*.

For one thing, Kierkegaard himself regularly showed a sense of frustrated self-awareness at the idea that he was somehow a "mad" Christian.[3] Indeed, he often contrasts this with the problem of the perpetual middle way:

> In the world of mediocrity in which we live it is assumed — and this is one of the ways used to safeguard mediocrity — that only crackpot boldness, etc. should be deplored as offensive, as inspired by Satan,

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[1] See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: The Paradox and the "Point of Contact"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 125.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vols. 1–6 , ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967–78), vol. 3, no. 3044, 376.

[3] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 6:6257, 57.

> and that the middle way, however, is secure against any such charge. Christ and Christianity are of another mind: mediocrity itself is the offense, the most dangerous kind of demon possession, farthest removed from the possibility of being cured.[4]

This journal entry was written on 5th July 1855, in the year of his death, and just two days before his infamous "Medical Diagnosis" in *The Moment*, whereby he compared the Danish Church to a disease-ridden hospital deceptively poisoning its patients to death.[5] One can sense Kierkegaard's frustration at how impossible it was for those within the Christendom system to see the system's inherent madness precisely in its mediocre failure to embody its central Christian message. Such an approach, though, is not exclusive to the attack period. Five years earlier, we see a critique along similar lines regarding devotion to Christ:

> In respect to God, the how is what. He who does not involve himself with God in the mode of absolute devotion does not become involved with God. In relationship to God one cannot involve himself to a certain degree, for God is precisely the contradiction to all that which is to a certain degree.[6]

For Kierkegaard, to speak of and relate to *this* God cannot be done on "mediocre" or "ambiguous" terms; it can only be one-sided and all-encompassing.

Such "unambiguous" expressions cannot be conveniently excised from the authorship as though they were a mere unfortunate aberration, the crazed ramblings of an unhinged penitent winding himself up before the impending doom

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[4] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 4:4494, 320.

[5] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom," 1854-1855*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 139-41.

[6] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 2:1405, 123. Indeed, Kierkegaard's critique of holiness "to a certain extent" goes hand in hand with his theology of suffering as the mark of devotion which was so overtly missing in Christendom: "One who in truth has become involved with God is instantaneously recognizable by his limp." Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 2:1405, 123. For Kierkegaard, the Danish Church, in its comfortable assimilation and social religious guise, existed very much *without* a limp. This context dominated his expression of the Gospel throughout the second authorship.

of death row.[7] Where Roger Poole warns against "blunt" readings of Kierkegaard which interpret his religious consistency with all too much certainty,[8] it is perhaps even more important to counteract those "incisive" readings of Kierkegaard which actually serve to blunten his homiletical Gospel emphasis. It was, after all, Kierkegaard's radical commitment *to* the Gospel's radical existential implications that undergirded the great doctrinal experiment that was his authorship.

Pattison offers an account of Kierkegaard's journey in and through the fog of ambiguity in such a way that his final convictions (theological or otherwise) merely reflect one of the many oscillating moments in a dominantly ambiguous existence: "'Kierkegaard' is not to be identified with one or other unambiguous gesture, poetic or political, but is rather found in the complex movements he traced in the contested and ambiguous elliptical space."[9] This is why, for Pattison, Kierkegaard's "unambiguity" is seen as a "quest," that which teems with mystery and without necessary conclusiveness.[10] Although he is right to stress the importance of the ambiguous elliptical space, it might be more appropriate to call Kierkegaard a "post-ambiguitarian." This is where we might retain the nuance in his more acerbic expressions of thought. To be post-ambiguous is not to reject ambiguity entirely but to see that even though one recognizes the role of ambiguity, it does not dictate one's outlook, nor — more importantly — one's quest.

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[7] What is more, we might ask, why ought Kierkegaard's "central period" be privileged as his most trustworthy or reasonable? Although he certainly thought much about death, it cannot be the case that he had succumbed to some kind of death-row morosity in his later theological stances, as though he *knew* that he was, in fact, *in* his "latter period" at the time rather than an ongoingly "present" period.

[8] Roger Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Receptions," in Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48-75.

[9] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life: Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

[10] On this, note a somewhat jarring contrast with Kierkegaard's negative reference to "the knight errant" who embarks upon a quest in inconclusive doubt of what may befall him. Kierkegaard, *Gospel of Sufferings*, trans. A. S. Aldworth and W. S. Ferries (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015), 92.

What, though, is the problem at the heart of the Kierkegaardian quest — and how much of a "problem" is it? That is, how much does humanity truly *need* the revelation of the Gospel, and *why* do we need it?

Between Religiousness and Reformation

Kierkegaard's view of the Gospel is undoubtedly shaped by his Reformational inheritance, which was key to his pervasive (albeit varied) impact upon twentieth century Protestant theology.[11] Central to this inheritance is a necessarily "low" view of natural humanity prior to divine revelatory encounter. It is this foundation that underlies his view of what is accomplished in the work of redemption, as will be seen. However, Pattison counters this: "Kierkegaard's actual position is considerably more nuanced than this rather standard account of what is going on in his theology... his position involves both a theology of redemption and a theology of creation."[12] It is certainly the case that Kierkegaard did not *merely* hold a view of total depravity which ignored the ongoing redemptive work of God, but neither can his position on the necessity of the divine rescue of fallen humanity be masked by God's subsequent sanctifying work. We see this radical position most overtly in the distinction between the two "types" of Religiousness.

At the apex of Kierkegaard's three stages of existence (aesthetic; ethical; religious) is the distinction between Religiousness A and B. Where Religiousness A tends to refer to the natural religiosity of the human spirit, Religiousness B is the recipient of radical divine revelation.[13] At the heart of the endeavour to interpret Kierkegaard theologically is to work out what to do with this distinction and how it might apply more widely across his soteriological thought. It appears that a clear dialectical taxonomy exists between the two. Religiousness A and B are precisely and necessarily a binary distinction. Within this, the radicality of Religiousness B

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[11] See Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology, Tome I: German Protestant Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

[12] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 81.

[13] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* Vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 555-585.

cannot be a mere "option" of equal weighting, but can *only* and *always* be "the ideal" and "essence" of true Christianity — and indeed, true religion. This does not mean that there is no interaction or movement between the two, but merely that at *all* points, the great taxonomical headline remains in place: that faith comes by hearing, that revelation from without is *required* in order to rescue and liberate us into true freedom.

To hold to a theology more inclined to Religiousness A, as Pattison does — with all the implications of human possibility therein — is not the primary issue here. The more pertinent question is why he would choose Kierkegaard (of all people) for this task, when doing so inevitably invokes so much pushback from Religiousness B *against* the notion of divine immanence? After all, there are plenty of more suitable suitors within the history of theology for that particular marriage of divinity and contingency. Kierkegaard — though perhaps far more interesting to read than a Schleiermacher or a Tillich — is far too committed to the radicality of the Gospel to allow for any notion of individual freedom that might compete with the radical impact of Christ's unique revelation *upon* the individual.[14] Indeed, it was this Christological fixation, coupled with the time/eternity dialectic, that was — unsurprisingly — the very thing that so captivated those dialectical revolutionaries of the *Zwischen den Zeiten* journal in 1920s Weimar Germany.

Perhaps one could even say that the Barth/Brunner debate over natural theology (including Barth's radical "Nein!" to Brunner's entire "eristic" project) centred precisely around the same kind of problem of the impasse between Religiousness A and B.[15] The idea of an *Anknüpfungspunkt* in humanity, to which Barth was so hostile, was an issue of dialectical taxonomy. For Barth, one cannot somehow have and eat one's revelational cake. In Pattison's reading, however, Religiousness A offers a "privileged position" vis-à-vis faith, that might somehow

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[14] See Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 145-209; Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 124-144.

[15] See Kierkegaard's influence on Brunner in Cynthia Bennett Brown, *Believing Thinking, Bounded Theology: The Theological Methodology of Emil Brunner* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015), 141-81.

avoid what he calls "the 'crater' left by the exploding shells of revelation à la Barth."[16] This notion of A as "privileged" is another way in which Pattison is attempting to add "nuance" to what might otherwise appear an uncouth rendering of human religiosity. However, it seems to summon the image of a "first class" compartment in the reception of divine revelation as though it comes "closer" to it than others. This seems oddly out of sync with Kierkegaard's ear for identifying and satirising hypocrisy.

In many respects, Barth's *Römerbrief* — that famous "bombshell" — was Barth's own Diet of Worms with nineteenth century theology (or, Religiousness A). And like Luther, whom Barth would go on to love and hate in appropriately tumultuous measure,[17] he wanted to stress the *one thing needful*: that God is in heaven and you are on earth.[18] It was that and precisely that, as ludicrously crude as it sounds to the so-called "privileged" ears of Religiousness A, that required Barth's radical break — a break he made with the help of Kierkegaard.[19] It was this same kind of radical expression that Kierkegaard articulated in the time-eternity disjunction,[20] the double-paradox of the Atonement,[21] and the infinite qualitative distinction.[22]

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[16] George Pattison, "Kierkegaard, Freedom, Love" (paper presented at the UK Søren Kierkegaard Society, University of Glasgow, 7th May 2016), 6.

[17] See Rustin E. Brian, *Covering Up Luther: How Barth's Christology Challenged the* Deus Absconditus *That Haunts Modernity* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013).

[18] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Sixth Edition, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 310-311.

[19] Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 10, 99.

[20] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 87-9.

[21] "The paradox is the implicit consequence of the doctrine of the Atonement. First of all, Christianity proceeds to establish sin so firmly as a position that the human understanding can never comprehend it; and then it is this same Christian teaching that again undertakes to eliminate this position in such a way that the human understanding can never comprehend it." Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 100.

[22] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 28-9.

There is, in Pattison's case against the radical Kierkegaard, an apparent ease with which the doctrinal substance of the Gospel which Kierkegaard so vigorously proclaimed is simplistically categorized under rubrics like "the Augustinian-Lutheran view" or "the Reformation doctrine."[23] One does not, of course, want to exude naïveté or ignorance by bypassing the hermeneutical reality that singular figures or traditions have always held doctrinal truth claims which exhibit contextual particularity. Yet this is a different thing to the obvious implication of a condescending use of a phrase like "the Augustinian-Lutheran view," which suggests not just particularity, but idiosyncrasy. This would even seem to be the very kind of bourgeois strategy Kierkegaard might have mocked in his day, to deflect attention from the substance of the doctrine itself by calling it "the X view" as a sly ruse to deny its potential existential implications.

For all the wealth of caveats surrounding Luther's legacy, it is abundantly clear that he had that unique ability to see through the mire and to take a courageous stand for that which was being quietly but violently neglected in his time.[24] Although arguably Kierkegaard's "stand" actually seems virtually the opposite of Luther's, by accentuating striving rather than mere grace, he always maintained that his emphasis is precisely what Luther himself would have preached in nineteenth century Copenhagen.[25] Thomas Carlyle, in his famous 1840 lectures on the "heroic" motif in human history, called Luther the great "Prophet Idol-

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[23] See Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 8, 93, 158, 160; *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, 216.

[24] "His greatest intellectual gift was his ability to simplify, to cut to the heart of an issue — but this also made it difficult for him to compromise or see nuance." Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (London: Vintage, 2017), 422. However, this does seem to underplay Luther's dialectical nuance, particularly in his varied homiletical expression, alert to various diversities of congregation and context. See Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centred Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 174-208.

[25] Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 24. For a revised view of Kierkegaard's reading of Luther vis-à-vis their respective kerygmatic emphases, see David L. Coe, "Kierkegaard's Forking for Extracts from Extracts of Luther's Sermons: Reviewing Kierkegaard's Laud and Lance of Luther," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 1 (2011): 3-18.

breaker; a bringer-back of men to reality."[26] It can become all too easy, with a half-millenium of hindsight, to assert that the intensity of Luther's experience negates the possibility that his imperatives can speak meaningfully beyond his time.[27] But this would surely be to miss the entire point of the Reformation: "The Reformation age, amid grievous destruction, swept away the clutter, pursued simplicity of vision, and directed the gaze of the worshipper towards that which truly mattered."[28] Indeed, Luther's reformation was of a most *existential* kind. At heart it was primarily only about himself, and only secondarily (or, accidentally) did it happen to affect the rest of world history. That is, the doctrinal revolt was inseparable from its existential import.[29]

Kierkegaard might also be called an existential reformer, notwithstanding his own caveats that he was not — and could not be — a reformer because he could never live up to Luther's heroism,[30] and was dubious about those who followed in the Reformer's wake without the same existential involvement.[31] However, if Luther *was* right, then the truth to which he bore witness, and the truth to which the Reformation as a whole bore witness, cannot be swept away under a neat category as though we could somehow move *beyond* it, like a Hegelian *Aufhebung* en masse. Indeed, it would simply be too convenient — and perhaps too suspiciously

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[26] Thomas Carlyle, *On Great Men* (London: Penguin, 1996), 58. The heroic motif also evokes the potential idolatry inherent in Religiousness A, and the problem at the heart of theological immanence whereby the eternal is infused with the temporal indiscriminately, whereby God's revelatory activity is minimized under a false ideality.

[27] The opposite case is made by Ryrie, who argues that Luther's "shattering spiritual experiences" continue to speak today not for their theological import but for their resonance within the culture of modern individualism they helped create. Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals Who Made the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2017), 19-20.

[28] Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (London: Penguin, 1979), 443-4.

[29] "Luther's inner certainty depended on identifying his cause with Christ's." Roper, *Martin Luther*, 189.

[30] Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 211-13.

[31] "It has often been said that a reformation should begin with each man reforming himself. That, however, is not what actually happened, for the Reformation produced a hero who paid God dearly enough for his position as hero. By joining up with him directly people buy cheap, indeed at bargain prices, what he had paid for so dearly." Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Collins, 1962), 63.

Christendomian — to separate Luther's view of the Gospel into a "perspective" of the past, as we continue on at a safe distance from his aggravating light. Rather, "contemporaneity with Luther," to borrow a concept (albeit somewhat blasphemously) from *Practice in Christianity* — is Christianly essential, at least in regards to the *condition* Luther was proclaiming. That is, if Luther is right on the diagnosis and cure of sin, as Kierkegaard believed he was, we no longer have the diversionist luxury of assuming that his condition was *only* his. Even if his thunderous experience *was* idiosyncratic of the anguished conscience *ad absurdum*, this does not remove *us* from facing the potential implications of our state *coram deo*, nor for how we interpret Kierkegaard's appropriation of it.

What Hugh Pyper says of Kierkegaard could also be said of Luther: "What he burns to communicate is good news, while knowing that the majority of his hearers cannot tell good news from bad and have a tendency to mistake the disease for the cure and the cure for the disease."[32] As Pattison himself says in his work on Kierkegaard's discourses:

> The Christian communicator must be indirect in so far as he must meet his "audience" where they are, in the aesthetic and the babel of hermeneutic ambiguity. But it is never simply his intention to leave them there. His aim is rather to bring them to a point at which they will be appropriately receptive to the kerygmatic imperatives of the gospel.[33]

Evidently, Pattison does not want to minimize Kierkegaard's kerygmatic witness, even as he remains critical of the Reformational moorings in which it is often seen. But he primarily wants to stress the possibilities inherent in the hearer, as forming part of a revised view of the Kierkegaardian kerygma. Elsewhere Pattison points to the mode of the "subjunctive" in the discourses (lying somewhere between the "indicative" and the "imperative") as a way to guarantee the hearer's freedom in

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[32] Hugh S. Pyper, *The Joy of Kierkegaard: Essays on Kierkegaard as a Biblical Reader* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 1.

[33] George Pattison, "The Theory and Practice of Language and Communication in Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses,*" in *Kierkegaardiana* 19, ed. Joakim Garff, Arne Grøn, et al. (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1998), 81-94 [86].

the midst of proclamation: "The ideality of the subjunctive... concerns what *may be* and, specifically, what may be a possibility for subjective appropriation... The subjunctive does not present its subject matter as simple fact, but makes the narrated facts available as ideal existential possibilities elicited from history."[34] This evokes an important distinction between the hearer of the Gospel and their sinfulness.

Between Sin and Redemption

In *Philosophical Fragments* the idea of "the Socratic" is distinguished against the decisive "moment" of Christian revelation.[35] For the Socratic hearer it is supposed that the truth must merely be "recalled" in order to be grasped. They are what Pattison might call "privileged." However, the hearer of the Gospel recognizes that they cannot recall anything whatsoever since they begin in a state of fundamental "error."[36] They are bound within this error and must be radically "liberated" and "delivered" by a Saviour.[37]

Kierkegaard often makes the key distinction between what we might call the *act* of sin and the *condition* of sin:

> Fundamentally, the relation between God and man is in this, that a man is a sinner, and God is the Holy One. Confronting God... a man is not a sinner in this or that regard, but in his being he is sinful, not

[34] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, theology, literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 157.

[35] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 88-110, 125-39.

[36] "If the teacher is to be the occasion that reminds the learner, then he cannot contribute to the learner's remembering that he really knows the truth, because the learner is actually in a state of error." Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs*, 92.

[37] Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs*, 95. For a nuanced account of Kierkegaard's Christocentric hamartiology in light of the place of sin within the purposes of redemption, see Jason A. Mahn, *Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

guilty in this or that, but guilty essentially and absolutely.[38]

Pattison claims that although we are tempted *by* sin, we are "free to resist and free to orient ourselves towards the good, to will it, and to pray for it."[39] If indeed this "we" includes all human beings, it must be asked — in light of Kierkegaard's apparent definition of the *ontological* entrapments of sin in light of the Pauline imperative of Ephesians 2:1-5 (dead in sin, made alive in Christ) — on what grounds are we free to overcome the problem of sin by ourselves? For Kierkegaard, as for Calvin,[40] the raising of Lazarus was a perfect analogy of the sinner's redemption. Indeed, in an 1849 journal entry, Kierkegaard relates this stark difference to the suppression of the ideal in Christendom: "What it means actually to be Christian is seen here (John 12:10): the Jews wanted to kill Lazarus — because Christ had raised him from the dead. So dangerous it is to be raised from the dead — by Christ!"[41]

As Kierkegaard concludes his introduction to *Sickness Unto Death*: "Only the *Christian* knows what is meant by the sickness unto death."[42] This is precisely because the Christian has learned to fear God in the confrontation — and forgiveness — of their sin. This also assumes, of course, the paradox Kierkegaard refers to frequently, that original sin and individual guilt are complexly conflated,

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[38] Kierkegaard, *Gospel of Sufferings*, 89. The effect of the sin-consciousness of the person before God is also mentioned in an 1850 journal entry: "original sin as guilt is also an expression of God's using his standard; for God sees everything in uno; and therefore the merely human understanding finds it so difficult." Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 1:525, 207. This refers to the notion that the more God (as the superior one) loves the sinner, the more unhappy the sinner becomes — even if God lays down his standard (i.e. who he is, in the sense of a "flag") in order to love us. The more he loves us, the more the difference (his superiority) is accentuated; and thus, the more "difficult" it is for us, the more we suffer as a result of God's love.

[39] Pattison, "Kierkegaard, Freedom, Love," 2.

[40] John Calvin, *Commentaries*, trans. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 395.

[41] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 3:2866, 268.

[42] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 8.

and may only be engaged via faith.[43] For Kierkegaard, the fundamental difference between paganism and Christianity is that Christianity knows what sin actually is.[44] So clear is Kierkegaard on the radical doctrine of sin that he claims it would be a terrible slight on Christianity if paganism's definition of sin were shown to be in agreement with its own.[45] It is this radical disjunction between the Christian and non-Christian that is labelled by Pattison as the "extreme" Augustinian-Protestant view of sin.[46] Unsurprisingly, this also manifests in a de-radicalized account of redemption *from* this sinful condition too, whereby Pattison argues that Kierkegaard's doctrine inclines more towards "recreation" than "satisfaction" of sin *per se*.[47] On Kierkegaard's frequent use of the term "satisfaction," Pattison sees this as related to God's love, not his wrath.[48] This reflects something of a common view in western academic theology today whereby divine wrath is often entirely ignored

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[43] "That 'Original Sin' is 'guilt' is the real paradox. How paradoxical is best seen as follows. The paradox is formed by a composite of qualitatively heterogeneous categories. To 'inherit' is a category of nature. 'Guilt' is an ethical category of spirit. How can it ever occur to anyone to put these two together, the understanding says — to say that something is inherited which by its very concept cannot be inherited. It must be believed. The paradox in Christian truth always involves the truth as before God. A superhuman goal and standard are used — and with regard to them there is only one relationship possible — that of faith." Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 2:1530, 194.

[44] See Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 89.

[45] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 89-90.

[46] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 124.

[47] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 81.

[48] See Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 157-60; Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, 216. Pattison's argument here is not wrong in its illustration of the colourful variety within Kierkegaard's account, but rather in assuming that Kierkegaard's emphasis on love thereby necessarily excludes the category of God's judgement simultaneously.

within theological discussions of redemption.[49] In Pattison's case, he seems to have expressed a false dichotomy of divine love over against divine justice. In doing so, however, this would seem to render the "requirement" of satisfaction something of a farce. That is, God might have simply *chosen* to love in spite of the sin of his beloved rather than requiring satisfaction of sin *in order that* he might be reconciled to his beloved.

For Kierkegaard, the sinful condition is so severe that even the conviction of human depravity itself is dependent upon radical revelation: "there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted."[50] And yet, perhaps like the Reformers and like Augustine, Kierkegaard's expression of redemption is equally as radical as his expression of depravity: "the Atonement wants to eliminate sin so completely as if it were drowned in the sea."[51] One is able to apprehend the gift of this Atonement only by faith, referred to in *The Concept of Anxiety* as "the inner certainty that anticipates infinity."[52] For Kierkegaard, the inner certainty of faith anticipates and expects much from God in eternity because it has eschewed the false foundation of doubt.

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[49] At an academic theology conference on the subject of eternity at the University of Aberdeen in 2015 the final session involved an anonymous Q&A box which had been set out for the panel of plenary speakers to discuss. One of the questions slipped into the box was the cause of great amusement as it highlighted a topic which had, up to that point, rather curiously, not been mentioned *at all* throughout the entirety of the conference. The question simply stated: "Eternal death and hell, anyone?" It is one thing for contemporary academic theology to nuance the various unreflective expressions of divine wrath in previous eras of the Church, but another thing entirely to eliminate (deliberately or otherwise) the concept of divine wrath from the theological conversation *per se*. This reflects the wider problem of the general embarrassment within the modern theological academy towards those attributes of God which simply cannot hope to gain a hearing in contemporary western society. See Philip G. Ziegler, ed., *Eternal God, Eternal Life: Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

[50] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 96; see also Fremstedal and Jackson's neat summary: "Because of human guilt and sinfulness, Kierkegaard holds that we are neither capable of realizing moral virtue nor eternal happiness by our own unaided powers; we are only capable of realizing our incapability and of choosing whether or not to accept divine grace." Roe Fremstedal and Timothy P. Jackson, "Salvation/Eternal Happiness," in Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart, eds., *Kierkegaard's Concepts, Tome VI: Salvation to Writing* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 1-8 [3].

[51] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 100.

[52] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 157.

Between Disconsolate Doubt and Reflective Radicality

The antithesis to Kierkegaard's radical proclamation of this Gospel is the attitude of deliberative doubt. This is a particularly urgent problem in modernity, wherein doubt becomes the unquestioned foundation prior to faith. Kierkegaard calls out the sinner's subtle way of attempting to bypass their sinfulness by assuming a kind of neutral starting-point by which they may judge God's revelation: "If the starting-point be doubt, then long, long before the end God is lost to us... If, on the other hand, a sense of sin be the starting-point, then the starting point of doubt is made impossible, and so there is joy."[53] Doubt, for Kierkegaard, becomes an attitude of presumptuousness before God.[54]

In the discourse, "The Care of Indecisiveness, Vacillation, and Disconsolateness" (a reflection on Christ's call that we cannot serve two masters), Kierkegaard says: "the Christian, free from care is never *indecisive* — he has faith; never *vacillating* — he is eternally resolved."[55] This is put in stark contrast to the pagan, who epitomizes Kierkegaard's critique of endless deliberation: "Perhaps one thinks that the longer a person deliberates the more earnest his decision becomes. Perhaps — if it does not entirely fail to come."[56] To an extent, modern Christendom itself epitomized the choice to privilege doubt over decision, becoming what Kierkegaard called "the slave of indecisiveness."[57] Faith, on the other hand, chooses God and "refuses to hear about anything else."[58] One can see, of course, as Pattison aptly observes, how easy it was for Kierkegaard to become co-opted into the "decisionistic" thinking of the twentieth century via controversial thinkers such as

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[53] Kierkegaard, *Gospel of Sufferings*, 82.

[54] Presumptuousness, of course, is the very thing one might often assume to be the "problem" with radically decisive faith.

[55] Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses* and *The Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 85.

[56] Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 88.

[57] Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 89.

[58] Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 88.

Emanuel Hirsch.[59] Kierkegaard, though certainly responsible for much of his interpretative litter, cannot be faulted for readings which are so violently selective of the grounds for which his strong emphases on "decision" were made (namely, Christ as the qualitative "content" of the Gospel). To see his reflections as "unnuanced" would itself seem to be an ironically simplistic approach. What Kierkegaard offers is not an ignorance of complexity in the midst of action but a rather profound knowledge of its inner workings, tensions, and implications. He is also aware, in a deeply important way, of the perils of calling for "complexity" when this becomes simplistically accepted as the guiding mantra.[60] Kierkegaard, especially in his discourses, is encouraging the reader towards critical reflection precisely in relation to the ideology of critical reflection.

Commenting on the preacher in Ecclesiastes, a book which fascinated Kierkegaard and in many ways epitomized his own dialectical-but-decisive approach:

> He speaks not as one who wishes, not as one who longs, not as one who swoons, but he speaks to the young with the power of conviction, with the authority of experience, with the trustworthiness of assured insight, with the joyful trust of bold confidence, with the emphasis of earnestness, with the concern of the admonition.[61]

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[59] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, 86-114; see also Matthias Wilke, "Emmanuel Hirsch: A German Dialogue with 'Saint Søren,'" in Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology* I, 155-184.

[60] If Hirsch could read Kierkegaard as a Romantic who enabled him to see the decisive action of National Socialism as a theological good, one must counter this with interpreters like Bonhoeffer, a great reader of Kierkegaard who saw in him precisely the opposite dynamic and a means by which individual decision (not passive vacillation to the Zeitgeist) was precisely necessarily in resisting the same ethical evils, which had been so seductively veiled within the tidal wave of *Völkisch* cultural energy. For an account of Kierkegaard's influence on Bonhoeffer, see Christiane Tietz, "Standing 'in the Tradition of Paul, Luther, Kierkegaard, in the Tradition of Genuine Christian Thinking,'" in Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology* I, 43-65. See also Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of "Religionless" Christianity* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

[61] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 238.

It might be tempting to imagine Kierkegaard was speaking indirectly here, especially given the hermeneutical complexity of Ecclesiastes itself, and Kierkegaard's own critique of preachers. Countering this, Will Williams observes:

> While Kierkegaard can undoubtedly make potent use of humor and irony, I believe it is a mistake to read him as a thoroughgoing ironist at every turn. Kierkegaard uses the Preacher [of Ecclesiastes] non-ironically as a genuine authority on wise living. If one attempts an inappropriately ironic reading of the Preacher in order to generate ambiguity and so to escape the moral earnestness of a passage, Kierkegaard locates the fault in the reader and not in the author.[62]

This chimes in well with Kierkegaard's view of doubt as the temptation for the sinner to circumvent their sinfulness, and indeed their need of the Gospel. This is precisely what also concerned "the preacher," who — as Kierkegaard notes — spoke not with mere wishfulness but with "bold confidence."

To speak with boldness is to echo the Apostle Paul's prayerful plea: "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel... that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." (Ephesians 6:19-20). Kierkegaard's desire to heed the realities of "New Testament Christianity"[63] makes a rhetorical comparison with what has become known as "Pauline apocalyptic" particularly interesting.[64] Paul is often seen as having been eclipsed by James in Kierkegaard's writings, but in fact he and his writings appear far more abundantly

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[62] Will Williams, "Ecclesiastes: Vanity, Grief, and the Distinctions of Wisdom," in Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart, eds., *Kierkegaard and the Bible, Tome I: The Old Testament* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 179-94 [181, n. 11].

[63] See, for example, Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 2:1807, 296; 3:2379, 31; 4:4499, 324.

[64] For an example of a Kierkegaardian implementation within this emerging theological movement, see Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 153-68.

than references to James across the authorship.[65] His employment of Pauline themes is numerous, but it is evident from Kierkegaard's genius/Apostle distinction that Paul has particular interest for him as a bringer of revelatory authority.[66] Something *happened* to Paul which affected how one ought to hear what he says. His encounter with Christ is truly dramatic, beginning as it does somewhat violently and ending in temporary blindness (Acts 9:3-9). This is not a mere historical curiosity but, like Lazarus' resurrection, is also a picture of what happens when sin is confronted by liberating love in its most supreme form.[67] This is a supremely chastening liberation, and yet it is one that could lead Paul to "rejoice" in all things (Philippians 4:4) despite the avalanche of suffering which would confront him in fulfilment of his revelatory calling (2 Corinthians 11:23-30).

It is the combination of radical revelation and Paul's willingness to suffer rejoicingly that Kierkegaard finds so inspiring as an antidote to Christendom's insipidness.[68] Kierkegaard's task as a Christian author from beginning to end was indeed to follow Paul's lead as the herald of a Gospel that was both dialectical and radically undilutable. The radicality of sin was precisely what Kierkegaard believed had been "diluted" out of Christendom:

> The consciousness of sin shuts my mouth so that in spite of the possibility of offense I choose to believe. The relationship has to be that penetrating. Christianity repels in order to attract. But Christianity has been diluted, the aspect of Christianity which, so to speak, turns a man upside down, has been diluted, and therefore the impetus of sin-

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[65] See Lori Unger Brandt, "Paul: Herald of Grace and Paradigm of Christian Living," in Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart, eds., *Kierkegaard and the Bible, Tome II: The New Testament* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 189-208. See also Cyril O'Regan's comments on the influence of a Pauline vision on Kierkegaard in "The Rule of Chaos and the Perturbation of Love," in Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans, ed., *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 131-56 [154].

[66] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 91-106.

[67] See again Calvin's connection between the raising of Lazarus and the radically activating power of the Gospel. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 395.

[68] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 315.

> consciousness is not needed to drive one into it — that is, it is all sentimentality.[69]

Try telling Paul that we may free ourselves from the bondage of sin-consciousness. He might respond, paradoxically — as indeed would Kierkegaard — that it is *for freedom* that Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1) and that to submit again to a yoke of slavery (be it slavery to the self-contained ego *or* slavery to the crowd) is to step back into a life which is abundantly *less* than the life abundant that Christ's sacrifice secured for us.

But it is not only "for freedom" that we are set free, but also "from freedom," as Kierkegaard well knew — that is, from notions of freedom which conform precisely to this world;[70] the questionably "radical" freedom which might refuse to bow the knee to Christ's lordship, which might see radical discipleship as giving oneself away in vain,[71] which might refuse to be transformed by the liberating love and power of the Spirit (Romans 12:1-2) but rather insist on the fetishization of one's individual existential rights above all.[72] All such moves render the preaching of the cross all the more foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18) to the modern self-understanding, and render Kierkegaard's voice all the more important as one who continues to preach such apparent foolishness in the footsteps of Paul. Indeed, it is precisely in *not* removing the veil of Kierkegaard's Gospel radicality — in all its thoughtfully deliberate offensiveness — that we retain his most vital and most nuanced contribution to modern Christian thought (however alarming that may appear to many proponents of modern Christian thought).

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[69] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 6:6261, 64.

[70] See Kierkegaard's critique of the false deification of the concept of freedom in light of the 1848 European revolutions. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers,* 2:1261, 67-9.

[71] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Paris Gallimard (London: Routledge, 2003), 636.

[72] See Hauerwas' critique of "the unlimited scope of rights language" in contemporary political discourse. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 196-98.

The Nuance of Radicality

Pattison certainly sees Kierkegaard's later period (beyond 1851) as offering "a much less dialectical and nuanced view."[73] To be sure, the period that led to the "Attack" literature had a polemical slant, but it is not as though we are left in ignorance as to why Kierkegaard's approach changed. He offers reams of reflection not only in his various "total" interpretations of his authorship but also especially in his journals, whereby we see the contemplative agony that lay behind his careful change in emphasis.[74] To simply label his attack period "unnuanced" is almost to act as though this other reflective material simply doesn't exist.

As is well known, Kierkegaard thought long and hard about how and why he would choose to communicate in particular ways at particular times during his life, based on numerous factors.[75] Although his later work took a decisive turn towards a more radical emphasis it is not as though there was a substantial change in his fundamental understanding of the efficacy of sin, the incapacity of humanity, and the human need for divine deliverance. These were already present in his theology even during the earlier writings, albeit sometimes veiled. This radicality itself need not be seen as unreflective. Kierkegaard is just as dialectical in the attack literature as in the pseudonymous literature; he has merely chosen the one thing needful to the moment, at that particular time and in that particular place, taking into account all the complexities of Danish public life and what it would entail to challenge Christendom's lethargy most effectively.

One must also say, of course, that Kierkegaard saw the gravitation to reflective nuance as itself something of a temptation, precisely by imprisoning the self in a myriad of perpetually dialectical options. His critique of what we might call cultures of incessant reflection offers a sharp point of contact with our own

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[73] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century*, 105, n. 3. See also Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006), 159-60.

[74] See the section, "a Theology of (In)direct Communication" in Aaron Edwards, "Kierkegaard as Socratic Street Preacher?: Reimagining the Dialectic of Direct and Indirect Communication for Christian Proclamation," *Harvard Theological Review* 110:2 (2017), 280-300 [287-91].

[75] For one of many possible examples, see Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 215.

contemporary digital existence, as Sheridan Hough aptly notes: "what Kierkegaard calls the 'prison' of reflection is nothing more than the infinite availability of yet another point of view, opinion, or aspect of the notion at hand. Consider the endless Web-parade of images and opinions, its torrential, quenchless, and indeed senseless variety."[76] In a world still coming to terms with what this culture does to our thought, Kierkegaard's riposte to incessant reflection — particularly on the note of theological decisiveness — risks being drowned out for its uneasiness within contemporary academic modes of practice.

What is easily forgotten is just how thoroughly modern is the problem of conceiving of the "appropriate" tenor for theological discourse. This is a trait that was frequently challenged by the late John Webster, who began one memorable essay with the following unapologetic caveat:

> What follows is half-way between a theological essay and a homily; but we should not be particularly troubled by its homiletic tone. The clear distinctions which some members of the academic theological guild draw between proclamation and critical reflection are part of the pathology of modern theology; our forebears would have been distressed by the way in which theology has succumbed to the standardization of discourse in the academy and the consequent exclusion of certain modes of Christian speech, and we should probably worry more about what Bernard or Calvin might think of us than about the way in which our *wissenschaftlich* colleagues may shake their heads.[77]

We might certainly add Kierkegaard to the chorus of Bernard, Calvin, and Webster, that a homiletic tone does not mean an absence of reflective thought, not least when we consider that the content of theology is inseparable from its kerygma. That is, as Kierkegaard well knew, "the Gospel" is not the kind of content that can be spoken of abstractly, devoid of a kerygmatic imperative. This does not

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[76] Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18.

[77] John Webster, "Christ, Church, and Reconciliation," in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 211-30 [211].

necessitate a sacralisation of "homiletic tone" *per se*. Anyone who has ever marked a first-year undergraduate essay knows of the need for an iconoclastic "stripping of the pulpits" too, wherever a bombastic or explosive rhetoric seeks to hide — as though via a questionable fig-leaf — the absence of thoughtful argumentation. In another sense, Kierkegaard was also the greatest critic of the pulpiteering voices of Christendom who sought to proclaim Christianity in words alone.[78] But such abuses do not change a single iota about the fundamental and inseparable connection between theology and proclamation. This is something all too easily forgotten in contemporary academic settings which may promote deliberatively hazier perspectives of the many bygone theological voices who sought to embody the Gospel in appropriately strong words.

[78] See Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 233-37.