

Kierkegaard

Thinking Christianly in an
Existential Mode

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1

That Single Individual

Like many young people struggling to find themselves in the modern world, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–55) at age 22 was uncertain about his purpose in life. Writing in a poetic, possibly quasi-autobiographical fashion for a projected novel while vacationing by the sea, he mused:

What I really need is to get clear about *what I must do*, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find my purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that *I shall do*; the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. Of what use would it be to me to discover a so-called objective truth, to work through the philosophical systems so that I could, if asked, make critical judgments about them, could point out the inconsistencies within each system; of what use would it be to me to be able to develop a theory of the state, combining the details from various sources into a whole and constructing a world I did not live in but merely held up for others to see; of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity, to be able to explain many specific points—if it had no deeper meaning *for me and for my life?* . . . I certainly do not deny that I still accept an *imperative of knowledge* and that through it people can be influenced, but *then it must come alive in me*, and *this* is what I now recognize as the most important thing. This is what my soul thirsts for as the African deserts thirst for water.

(Cf. *JP* v. 5100; *SKP* i, AA 12, translations modified)¹

Kierkegaard found in Christianity the truth that would give meaning and purpose to his life and the idea for which he was willing to live and die. While contemplating the possible significance of his authorship years later, he wrote: ‘If I were to request an inscription on my grave, I request none other than *that single individual*’ (*PV* 118–19; cf. *JP* ii. 2004). The category of the single individual (*den Enkelte*) was the central category of Kierkegaard’s life and thought, constituting for him ‘the very principle of Christianity’ and ‘the one single idea’ that essentially contains his whole thought (*JP* ii. 1997, 2033). As he understands it, to become the single individual is to become a whole and unified self before God, which is a possibility for every human

¹ See Fenger (1980: 81–131), and *KJN* i. 301–5 for a critical assessment of his claim that this journal entry is fictional in character.

being and our common ethical-religious task in life.² The category of the single individual is thus ‘the category through which, in a religious sense, the age, history, the human race must go’ (*PV* 118). ‘The first condition of all religiousness’, he claims, is to be an individual, for ‘it is impossible to build up or to be built up *en masse*’ (117). By the same token, ‘only as an individual’ can one most truly relate oneself to God (*JP* ii. 2009). Kierkegaard’s own struggle to become ‘that single individual’ was a lifelong quest that was shaped not only by his writings, which in a very real sense constituted his own religious education and personal upbuilding, but also by the formative influences, intellectual cultivation, and significant events of his life.³

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

‘I Owe Everything to my Father’

Chief among the influences that figured importantly in shaping Kierkegaard’s early life was his father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard (1756–1838), a highly successful, self-made businessman who came from peasant stock in West Jutland.⁴ Shortly before his twelfth birthday Michael moved to Copenhagen to become a hosier or dry goods apprentice under a family relative and worked his way up to establish his own business by the age of 24. At age 38 he married Kirstine Nielsdatter Røyen (1757–96), the sister of his business partner, but it was a short-lived and childless marriage, as she died from pneumonia within two years. Eleven months later Michael retired from business and shortly thereafter married a maidservant in his house, Ane Sørensdatter Lund (1768–1834), who bore their first child less than five months later.⁵ The shame of his premarital incontinence, a strong sense of guilt and deep remorse for having once cursed God for his hard lot as a poor shepherd boy, and the untimely deaths of five of the seven children Ane bore him, leaving only the youngest son Søren and the oldest son Peter Christian (1805–88) alive, imbued Michael Kierkegaard with a morbid melancholy that not only persisted throughout his own life but infected Søren and Peter as well (*JP* v. 5874; *PV* 79).

² See further Eller (1968: 101–200).

³ For extensive biographies of Kierkegaard, see Garff (2005); Hannay (2001); Lowrie (1962).

⁴ Tudvad (2004: 16–17). Kierkegaard was also deeply attached to his mother, although he never wrote about her directly in his journals or works. Upon her death, which occurred when he was only 21 years old, he visited the mother of his tutor, Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–84), who reports in his autobiography that she had never seen ‘a human being so deeply distressed as S. Kierkegaard was by the death of his mother’. See Kirmmse (1996: 196).

⁵ Tudvad (2004: 17–18).

According to Kierkegaard's own retrospective accounts of his childhood, his father, who was already 56 years old when Søren was born on 5 May 1813, subjected him to a very strict Christian upbringing, towards which the boy was highly ambivalent (*JP* vi. 6243; *PV* 79–80; cf. *CUP* i. 589–602). In a particularly poignant passage from his journals Kierkegaard observes: 'Humanly speaking, I owe everything to my father. In every way he has made me as unhappy as possible, made my youth incomparable anguish, made me inwardly almost scandalized by Christianity' (*JP* vi. 6167). On the one hand, his father cultivated imagination and the art of dialectic in him—capacities that would later serve him well as a thinker and writer—and instilled in him a love and veneration of Christianity that he never gave up (*JC* 118–25; *PV* 79–80). On the other hand, even though his father was 'the most affectionate of fathers', Christianity was presented to him in such a way that at times it seemed to him to be 'the most inhuman cruelty' (*JP* vi. 6167; v. 6019; *PV* 79).

Søren felt that his father had robbed him of his childhood, of the immediacy that rightfully belongs to a child: 'His fault consisted not in a lack of love but in mistaking a child for an old man' (*PV* 80; cf. *JP* vi. 6379). Søren was deprived of the opportunity to be, even to dress, like other children, leading him to declare in one of his works: 'Christianity cannot be poured into a child, because it always holds true that every human being grasps only what he has use for, and the child has no decisive use for Christianity' (*CUP* i. 590).⁶ In other words, Christianity is a religion for adults, not children. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard believed that his rigorous Christian upbringing predisposed him to become a religious author and to be able to discern at an early age 'how seldom Christianity is presented in its true form' (*PV* 80). As 'fanatic' as his own Christian upbringing had been, he regarded it as far better than the 'gibberish' that often passes for Christian upbringing, and in one of his works he formulated a more adequate approach for introducing Christianity to a child (*JP* ii. 1215; *PC* 174–9).

Mynster's Sermons

A stock ingredient in Søren's Christian upbringing was the sermons of Jacob Peter Mynster (1775–1854), a curate at Our Lady's Church in Copenhagen and a popular preacher among the cultural elite of Danish society at that time. Kierkegaard's father was devoted to Mynster as a preacher and spiritual advisor, and his published sermons were regularly read at devotionals in the Kierkegaard household (*JP* vi. 6627). Søren was even

⁶ See Garff (2005: 19–20); Kirmmse (1996: 151).

encouraged, on promise of a monetary reward, not only to read Mynster's sermons aloud to his father but also to write up from memory those he heard in church, which he refused to do (*JP* vi. 6355). Nevertheless, this early childhood immersion in Mynster's sermons instilled in the boy a lasting respect for the man, even though Kierkegaard later became highly critical of Mynster as Primate Bishop of the Danish People's Church, admonishing the bishop for the incongruity between his preaching and personal lifestyle and for his failure to admit publicly that the established church he represented was a watered-down version of Christianity.⁷

The Herrnhuters

Another major influence in Kierkegaard's early upbringing was his family's involvement with the Herrnhuters, a Moravian pietist group that Michael Kierkegaard joined soon after coming to Copenhagen. Although its roots go back to the Czech reformer John Hus (1374–1415) and his followers, this movement originated in the eighteenth century in the German state of Saxony through the good will of Count Nikolaus Ludvig von Zinzendorf (1700–60), a Lutheran nobleman who invited a group of Moravian refugees to form a settlement called Herrnhut (meaning 'the Lord protects') on his estate.⁸ The Herrnhuters formed part of a wider pietist movement of inner religious awakening that erupted on the European continent in the seventeenth century and was popular throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. Often characterized as a 'Christianity of the heart' for its emphasis on the primacy of feeling in Christian experience, this movement was heralded by Johann Arndt's immensely popular book, *True Christianity* (1605), and received its name from a book titled *Pia Desideria* (Pious Desires), written by a German professor at the University of Halle, Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705).⁹ Spener and another Halle colleague, August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), organized lay groups for devotional study of the Bible and cultivation of personal piety and trained ministers to revitalize the Lutheran church, which in their view emphasized doctrine over personal experience.¹⁰

Unlike the Halle pietists, the Herrnhuters tended to be lay-centred, mission-oriented, and separatist in organization. Although officially part of the Danish Lutheran Church, the Moravian society in Copenhagen existed alongside it. Thus the Kierkegaard family attended the Lutheran

⁷ See also Tolstrup (2004); Saxbee (2003); Kirmmse (1990: 100–35).

⁸ Burgess (2004: 220).

⁹ *Ibid.* See also M. M. Thulstrup (1981); Kirmmse (1990: 29–31).

¹⁰ Burgess (2004: 220, 222).

church on Sunday mornings for worship and went to Moravian meetings, often devoted to congregational singing, on Sunday evenings.¹¹ Moravian theology, with its emphasis on the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, the consciousness of sin, repentance, conversion, grace, joy, witnessing, and martyrdom for the sake of Christ, made a strong impression on young Søren and figured importantly, both pro and con, in shaping his understanding of Christianity.¹² What seems to have impressed him most about the Moravians, however, was the way they put their beliefs into practice, especially those who were willing to leave everything to preach the gospel in foreign lands and to become martyrs for their cause.¹³ Their examples of dedication and discipleship stood powerfully in the background as Kierkegaard later formulated his own understanding of Christian witnessing and martyrdom.

The School of Civic Virtue

Søren's formal education commenced in 1821 when he was enrolled at the Borgerdyd School (School of Civic Virtue), a private school under the tutelage of headmaster Michael Nielsen, who had a reputation as a hard taskmaster.¹⁴ As remembered by some of his classmates and relatives, young Søren was somewhat withdrawn yet known for the mischievous teasing and satirical remarks to which he frequently subjected people, earning him the nickname 'the Fork' at home.¹⁵ At school he was called 'Choirboy' because of the resemblance of his dress to the outfits worn by choirboys in cathedral schools and 'Søren Sock' for the woollen stockings he wore that were emblematic of his father's occupation as a hosier.¹⁶ Although Søren was a diligent and competent student, he did not particularly excel in his schoolwork, generally coming second or third in his class, and apparently he was not above occasionally cheating or 'peeking' as it was called at that time. He was schooled in a wide range of subjects, including history, geography, mathematics, languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Danish, French, and German, but not English), composition, and religion.¹⁷

Balle's Catechism

One of the religious texts in which Kierkegaard was instructed as a child was Balle's *Primer*, a catechism that contained an elementary exposition

¹¹ Ibid. 224, 228–9, 231–5.

¹² Ibid. 235–43.

¹³ Burgess (2006).

¹⁴ Tudvad (2004: 168–9); Kirmmse (1996: 14).

¹⁵ Kirmmse (1996: 3–4, 6–8, 10, 151).

¹⁶ Ibid. 7.

¹⁷ Tudvad (2004: 168–73).

of the main tenets of the Christian faith.¹⁸ It was from this book that Kierkegaard received his first formal theological instruction. Balle's catechism was authorized for use in all Danish schools in 1794 and remained the standard text for the religious education of Danish children until 1856, when it was replaced by a new one. Structured differently from most catechisms, which are usually organized as a series of questions and answers, Balle's text was intended to be used in conjunction with Luther's *Small Catechism*.¹⁹ It was divided into eight chapters that gave a systematic, theologically conservative, and somewhat rationalist account of the accepted doctrines of the Lutheran tradition, with particular emphasis on spelling out one's duties to God, self, and neighbour and in particular relationships (man/wife, parent/child, master/servants, authority/subjects, teachers/students).²⁰ The deep impression this catechism made upon Søren may be glimpsed in a poetically transmuted autobiographical account in one of his early works about a young boy who is assigned the first ten lines of Balle to be learned by heart for the next day (*EO* ii. 266–7). In this reminiscence he makes the following telling observation: 'That this event made such an impression on me, I owe to my father's earnestness, and even if I owed him nothing else, this would be sufficient to place me in an eternal debt to him' (267). Kierkegaard often incorporated autobiographical tidbits in his writings, and this was surely one of them, testifying once again to the importance of his father in structuring his early life.

UNIVERSITY YEARS

Getting Started

After completing his primary and secondary education at the Borgerdyd School, Kierkegaard took the entrance exam to Copenhagen University in October 1830 and began attending classes the next month.²¹ On 1 November he was appointed to His Majesty the King's Guards but was discharged three days later by the army surgeon for being physically 'unfit for service', leaving him free to continue his higher education (*LD* 8–9). Much to the chagrin of his family, Kierkegaard lingered in the university for ten years before finally completing his degree. The university at that time was composed of four faculties: theology, law, medicine, and philosophy.²² Before Søren could choose a primary field of study, he had to take a year of general education courses and pass qualifying exams in those subjects.

¹⁸ N. Thulstrup (1984: 60–71).

¹⁹ Cf. Luther (1989: 471–96).

²⁰ Watkin (1995: 115); N. Thulstrup (1984: 64–8).

²¹ Tudvad (2004: 174).

²² *Ibid.*

Acceding to his father's wish, he then enrolled in the school of theology, where he attended lectures on biblical literature, hermeneutics, exegesis, Christian dogmatics, and speculative dogmatics, as well as lectures in the school of philosophy on ancient philosophy, Christian philosophy, moral philosophy, metaphysics, aesthetics and poetics, logic, and psychology.²³ Being highly proficient in Latin, he also taught Latin for several years at the Borgerdyd School, winning acclaim from his former headmaster as a good teacher who motivated students 'to do the sort of thinking that is not merely directed at passing the examination but that will continue to have an effect in their later lives'.²⁴ With regard to preparing for his own examination for a degree, however, Kierkegaard confessed in a letter of 1835 that he was not making much progress because of a lack of interest, although he recognized that he 'had better dig in' for several reasons, namely because it was required for entering 'the scholarly pastures', it would be advantageous, and it would make his father happy (*JP* v. 5092).

'I Grew up in Orthodoxy'

Kierkegaard was also having doubts about Christianity at this time, as it seemed to him to have 'such great contradictions that a clear view is hindered, to say the least' (*JP* v. 5092). The Lutheran orthodox 'colossus' under which he had grown up began to totter when he started to think for himself. This colossus was built upon the Bible as the absolute standard and sole authority for all Christian teaching, the confessional writings of the early church (the Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds), the Augsburg Confession (a comprehensive statement of the articles of the Lutheran faith adopted in 1530), and Luther's *Small Catechism* (1529), which together constituted the official writings and tenets (dogma) of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church as prescribed by Danish law.²⁵ There were also a host of theological works by Lutheran scholastic theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who systematized Luther's teachings and engaged in doctrinal disputes and theological hairsplitting in the interest of emphasizing right belief (orthodoxy) as the basis of faith. Kierkegaard became familiar with the major dogmatic theology texts of his day while preparing for his degree.²⁶ But he apparently had little or no first-hand knowledge

²³ *Ibid.* 177–83.

²⁴ Kirmmse (1996: 28).

²⁵ N. Thulstrup (1984: 32–7). The Formula of Concord (1577) was also widely adopted in German Lutheran churches but was not officially recognized in Denmark. See N. Thulstrup (1980c).

²⁶ See Barrett (2006: 155); N. Thulstrup (1978: 42–3; 1980b: 88.)

of Luther's writings at this stage, as they were not generally studied in the theological faculties of the time.²⁷ As late as 1847 Kierkegaard stated in his journal, 'I have never really read anything by Luther' (*JP* iii. 2463), although several entries in earlier years indicate that this statement should not be taken too literally (*JP* iii. 2460–2). When he did begin to dip into Luther, it was mainly Luther's sermons, not his theological works, which were read (*JP* iii. 2463–2556).

It has been plausibly argued that the thinker most influential in mediating Luther's theology to Kierkegaard was Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), a German philosopher, theologian, and literary-social critic known as the 'Wise Man in the North'.²⁸ Hamann's witty, ironic, satirical, and aphoristic writing style undoubtedly left its mark on Kierkegaard, and Hamann's writings, particularly his *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759), which emphasized Socratic ignorance, faith, revelation, passion, and paradox rather than reason as the foundation for the knowledge of God, anticipated major themes in Kierkegaard's theology, leading one of Kierkegaard's biographers to declare of Hamann: 'I am inclined to say that he is the only author by whom Søren Kierkegaard was profoundly influenced.'²⁹

Rationalist Theology

If Kierkegaard was in doubt about the foundations of orthodox Christianity, he was even less satisfied with the rationalist theology to which he was introduced in the lectures of Professor Henrik Nicolai Clausen (1793–1877) (*SKS* xix/1. 1–8).³⁰ Theological rationalism was a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which sought to subject everything to rational criticism, making reason the primary criterion for determining truth.³¹ Philosophically, modern rationalism had its genesis in the thought of Descartes (1596–1650), Leibniz (1646–1715), and Spinoza (1632–77), and its terminus in the scepticism of Hume (1711–76) and the recognition of the limitations of theoretical reason by Kant (1724–1804). Theological rationalism received its impetus in the thought of John Locke (1632–1704), whose book *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) gave expression in its title and content to the central tenet of the movement, and Christian Wolff (1679–1754), a Leibnizian thinker whom Kierkegaard's father especially admired and read.³² Through the pioneering work of Wolff's successor, J. S. Semler (1725–91), and other biblical scholars such as Hermann Reimarus

²⁷ Hinkson (2002: 45–6).

²⁸ *Ibid.* 71–6.

²⁹ Lowrie (1962: i. 164). See also Ringleben (2006).

³⁰ N. Thulstrup (1982).

³¹ Welch (1972: 32).

³² Hannay (2001: 37); Welch (1972: 32).

(1694–1768), theological rationalism also gave birth to modern biblical criticism.³³

In general, theological rationalists viewed morality as the essence of religion and rejected the orthodox doctrine of original sin, believing in the basic goodness of human nature and the possibility of human progress through enlightenment and understanding. Over against positive or revealed religion they espoused natural religion, the knowledge of God through nature and the moral law within, and regarded it as being either in harmony with (Wolff) or in opposition to (Reimarus) revelation. They rejected the possibility of miracles and called into question the literal truth of the Bible by subjecting it to the emerging historical-critical methods of examination and interpretation of the time.³⁴ Clausen, the Danish biblical scholar under whom Kierkegaard studied, espoused a moderate form of rationalism which Kierkegaard regarded as ‘second-rate’ and inconsistent inasmuch as its formulations were based on scripture ‘when they agree with it but otherwise not’ (*JP* v. 5092; *KJN* i, AA 12). Kierkegaard also objected to the union of philosophy and Christianity,³⁵ particularly the notion of a ‘reasonable Christianity’, which in his view did not take into account the defectiveness of human cognition due to sin nor how Christianity appears to those outside of faith (*JP* iii. 3245–7; *KJN* i, AA 13, 17, 18).

Schleiermacher

A third theological position to which Kierkegaard was exposed as a university student was that of the German Reformed (Calvinist) theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whose dogmatics, *The Christian Faith* (1830), Kierkegaard read with his tutor, Hans Lassen Martensen, in the summer of 1834.³⁶ Martensen, a rising star soon to be appointed to the faculty of the university, met and was greatly impressed by Schleiermacher when he visited Copenhagen in 1833 (although Martensen’s own theological preference soon turned to the Hegelian philosophy he encountered on a two-year study trip to Germany that commenced in autumn 1834).³⁷ Recognized as the father of modern theology, Schleiermacher was a seminal thinker who offered a fresh interpretation of religion and revolutionized the nature and method of doing theology in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher was deeply influenced by the

³³ Welch (1972: 35).

³⁴ *Ibid.* 30–40.

³⁵ See Barrett (2007) on the synthesis of philosophy and Christian doctrine in the standard rationalist theological textbook of the time by Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider (1776–1848).

³⁶ Hannay (2001: 50).

³⁷ Schjørring (1982: 181).

Herrnhuters, having grown up in a Moravian community and attended a Moravian seminary before transferring to the University of Halle, where he was later appointed as the first university preacher before taking up a pastorate in Berlin and helping to found and teach in the university there.³⁸ Schleiermacher also shared Kierkegaard's dissatisfaction with theological rationalism, which led him to locate the essence of religion not in knowing or doing but in intuition and feeling, specifically the feeling of absolute dependence on God.³⁹

Although Kierkegaard did not embrace Schleiermacher's theology, it has been claimed that 'of all the dogmatists [Kierkegaard] knew, he had a fundamental respect only for Schleiermacher', who is cited approvingly in several of his early writings (*CI* 59, 118, 120; *CA* 20; *SLW* 479).⁴⁰ It is quite likely that Kierkegaard was indebted to Schleiermacher for the literary idea of imaginatively constructing characters to represent different points of view in his writings, a technique he noted while reading Schleiermacher's review of the novel *Lucinde* by the German romantic writer Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) (*JP* iv. 3846).⁴¹ A highly respected Plato scholar and translator, Schleiermacher also undoubtedly contributed much to the formation of Kierkegaard's lifelong love and appreciation of Socrates, who next to Jesus Christ was the main inspiration for his life.⁴² While there is some complementarity between their theological views, Kierkegaard faulted Schleiermacher's early definition of religion for 'remaining in pantheism' and regarded his dogmatics as heterodox in many respects as well as genuinely orthodox and right on many points (*JP* iv. 3849, 3850; *KJN* i, DD 9, 86).⁴³ The main error of Schleiermacher's theology, in Kierkegaard's mature judgement, was that it treated religiousness in the sphere of being as a given condition (immediacy), whereas for Kierkegaard Christianity 'is essentially to be conceived ethically, as striving' and thus in the sphere of becoming (*JP* ii. 1096; iv. 3852–3).

Grundtvig's 'Matchless Discovery'

Another anti-rationalist theological movement in Denmark from which Kierkegaard disassociated himself early on was the cultic Christianity of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) and his followers, one of whom was Kierkegaard's older brother, Peter Christian. A pastor, theologian, poet, hymnodist, educator, politician, historian, and philologist,

³⁸ Tice (2006: 1–16). ³⁹ Schleiermacher (1996: 22, 29–31, 46–7; 1956: 5–18).

⁴⁰ N. Thulstrup (1978: 46); see also Crouter (2005: 98–119).

⁴¹ Crouter (2005: 109–17). ⁴² *Ibid.* 109.

⁴³ See further Cappelørn *et al.* (2006); Crouter (2007); Quinn (1990).

Grundtvig was a monumental figure who exerted great influence on the development of Danish religious life and culture in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ While serving as a Lutheran pastor in Copenhagen, Grundtvig professed to have made ‘the matchless discovery’ that it was not the ‘dead wood’ of the New Testament but the ‘Living Word’ of the Apostles’ Creed, together with the sacraments of baptism and communion instituted by Christ, that gave birth to the Christian church and constituted the ‘exclusive condition’ for incorporation into its cultic community.⁴⁵ This view of the church was utterly at odds with orthodox Lutheran Christianity as well as theological rationalism, inasmuch as it replaced the authority of the Bible, whether established through revelation or through reason, with that of the church, its creed, and other symbols. Already as a university student Kierkegaard found Grundtvig’s theory of the church unsatisfactory, pointing out, among other problems, different versions of the creed and the questionable status of translations of the original (*JP* v. 5089). A more incisive critique of Grundtvig was later mounted in Kierkegaard’s authorship, particularly in his late writings and journals, where Grundtvig is taken to task for selfishly seeking religious freedom for himself and his adherents rather than fighting for true Christianity and for being hypocritical on the issue of the separation of church and state, which he strongly advocated but did not uphold by resigning his pastorate in the state church as a paid servant of the Crown (*TM* 207–8, 564–75).

Speculative Dogmatics

Kierkegaard’s theological training culminated in an introduction to speculative dogmatics in the university lectures of his former tutor Hans Lassen Martensen and readings on the subject. Nineteenth-century German and Danish speculative dogmatics developed out of the idealist philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who sought to comprehend everything, including God or Absolute Spirit, as an encompassing whole through speculation (from the Latin *speculum*, meaning ‘mirror’) or the ‘double mirroring’ of thought and being, ideality and reality, human consciousness and ultimate reality in each other.⁴⁶ Hegel’s philosophical system evolves through a necessary dialectical movement in three phases: *thesis* (the positing of a rational concept), *antithesis* (the negation of the posited concept by its opposite), and *synthesis* (the mediation or reconciliation of these polarities in a higher rational unity that simultaneously annuls and

⁴⁴ See Kirmmse (1990: 198–237); Allchin (1997); Koch (1952).

⁴⁵ Kirmmse (1990: 212–13). ⁴⁶ Hodgson (2005: 7, 69, 79–81).

preserves (German: *aufheben*) both terms). Contra Kant, for whom human knowledge was limited to the sensible intuition and understanding (*Verstand*) of the phenomenal realm, Hegel envisioned the rational as the real and the real as rational, in other words, the identity of thought and being. He believed that the meaning and unity of science, history, and the products of human self-consciousness in art, religion, philosophy, and sociopolitical structures can be known and comprehended through reason (*Vernunft*), the intellectual apprehension of reality as the dialectical process by which God or Absolute Spirit progressively acquires self-consciousness or knowledge of itself in and through its divestment and self-becoming in nature and human self-consciousness. The consciousness of God as Absolute Spirit, which for Hegel culminates in philosophy rather than theology, in turn constitutes the highest realization of human self-consciousness.

There was, then, a strongly religious dimension in Hegel's philosophy that made it appealing to many Christian theologians. Indeed, for Hegel philosophy is theology, inasmuch as in his view they share the same content expressed in different forms (through concepts in philosophy; via representation in religion).⁴⁷ Hegel himself was a Lutheran, studied theology at the Tübingen seminary, wrote some early theological essays on Christianity, and lectured on the philosophy of religion.⁴⁸ After his death the Hegelian school divided into three factions: right-wing and centre Hegelians, made up mostly of older disciples of Hegel, and left-wing Hegelians, dubbed the 'Young Hegelians', although some on the right and in the centre were of the same generation.⁴⁹ Those on the right, such as Carl Friedrich Göschel (1784–1861), Philipp Konrad Marheineke (1780–1846), Carl Daub (1765–1836), and Johann Eduard Erdmann (1805–92), defended the compatibility of Hegelian philosophy with Christianity and continued to develop Hegel's speculative thought along theistic lines, arguing in favour of a personal God and the immortality of the soul. Those in the centre, such as Eduard Gans (1797–1839), Karl Michelet (1801–93), and Karl Rosenkranz (1805–79), continued to concern themselves with the main lines of Hegelian philosophy and the reinterpretation of religious dogma in Hegelian terms.⁵⁰ The left wing included David Strauss (1808–74), Bruno Bauer (1809–82), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), Max Stirner (1806–56), Arnold Ruge (1802–80), and Karl Marx (1818–83), among others. These thinkers radically undermined Hegelian philosophy from within, converting its idealism into materialism (Marx), its theology into anthropology (Feuerbach), its objectivity into

⁴⁷ Hegel (1984–7: i. 84). ⁴⁸ Crites (1998: 16–27); Hegel (1948 and 1984–7).

⁴⁹ Toews (1980: 203–54); Hodgson (2005: 15); Brazill (1970); Wood (1993a: 414); Strauss (1983: 43–66).

⁵⁰ Jaeschke (1990: 365–81); Wood (1993a: 414).

subjectivity (Bauer and Stirner), its constitutional monarchism into democracy (Ruge), and its historical basis in the New Testament into mythology (Strauss and Bauer).⁵¹ Hegelian philosophy was attacked on other fronts as well. In Denmark the broadside was led by Bishop Mynster and two of Kierkegaard's teachers, Frederik Christian Sibbern (1785–1872) and Poul Martin Møller (1794–1838), against Hegel, Martensen, and Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791–1860), the foremost Danish exponent of Hegelian philosophy of the time.⁵²

It was primarily right-wing Hegelian speculative theology and critiques thereof to which Kierkegaard was introduced in the lectures of Martensen and in his readings on the subject, which included works by Erdmann, Marheineke, Franz Xavier von Baader (1765–1841), and Immanuel Herman Fichte (1797–1879), as well as articles by Erdmann, Rosenkranz, Daub, and others in the German periodical *Zeitschrift für Spekulative Theologie* (Journal for Speculative Theology) (SKS xviii. KK 11. 19; NB 4. 3–12, 13–46; SKP i, C 25–7; xiii, II C 26–8, 61; JP v. 5066, 5222; KJN i, DD 1–2, 8, 10, 12–13).⁵³ Martensen had studied Hegelian speculative theology with Daub and Marheineke in Germany but professed to go beyond Hegel as well as orthodox supernaturalism and rationalism in the development of a theonomous theology that grounds human freedom and reason in divine power.⁵⁴ In this way he sought to reassert the primacy of faith and revelation over Hegelian autonomous reason while continuing to employ the Hegelian dialectical method. The concept of mediation or reconciliation, the central category of Hegel's dialectic and Martensen's speculative dogmatics, became the primary target of Kierkegaard's later critique of speculative philosophy and theology.⁵⁵

Kierkegaard also became acquainted with the left-wing Hegelian school, especially critiques of Strauss's epoch-making book of 1835, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (The Life of Jesus Critically Examined), by Julius Schaller (1807–68), von Baader, and Marheineke (SKS xviii, KK 2; xix, NB 9. 1; SKP xiii, II C 54).⁵⁶ He also formed a friendship with Hans Brøchner (1820–75), a distant relative who translated Strauss's *Die christliche Glaubenslehre* (The Doctrines of the Christian Faith, 1842–3) into Danish, a copy of which Kierkegaard owned.⁵⁷ Later he acquired Feuerbach's revolutionary work,

⁵¹ Brazill (1970); Welch (1972: 147–54, 170–7); Toews (1993: 378–413). See also Stewart (2007a, 2007b).

⁵² Mynster (2004); Kirmmse (1990: 140–5); N. Thulstrup (1980d: 33–9, 150–4, 178); Widenmann (1982: 76).

⁵³ See also N. Thulstrup (1980d: 49–50, 115–49).

⁵⁴ Thompson and Kangas (1997: 6–9).

⁵⁵ Stewart (2004b: 583–7); Martensen (2004).

⁵⁶ See Pattison (2007); Hannay (2001: 210–11); Rohde (1967: nos. 407, 759).

⁵⁷ Kirmmse (1996: 225–52); Sorainen (1981: 198–203); Rohde (1967: nos. 803–4).

Das Wesen des Christenthums (The Essence of Christianity, 1841), and was even mentioned in company with Strauss and Feuerbach in a book by the Danish left-wing Hegelian Andreas Frederik Beck (1816–61).⁵⁸ As for the writings of Hegel himself, Kierkegaard apparently had little direct acquaintance with them during this period, and his attitude toward Hegel's philosophy was both appreciative and critical, depending on the topic being discussed.⁵⁹ One commentator claims that Kierkegaard underwent 'a phase of infatuation' with Hegel's philosophy, and Kierkegaard himself, looking back on these years in a late journal entry, declared: 'What a Hegelian fool I was!' (*JP* iv. 4281).⁶⁰

Politics and Philosophy

In addition to studying theology at the university, Kierkegaard engaged in light-hearted political debates at the Student Association and in a series of newspaper articles (his first published writings) on the freedom of the press, which had been under strict censorship in Denmark since 1799, and the emancipation of women, a goal of the budding feminist movement in Europe at that time (*EPW* 1–52).⁶¹ Although wittily critical of both the press and the Crown on the first issue and ironically opposed to the second through mock praise of 'woman's great abilities', Kierkegaard demonstrates at this young age an awareness of important political issues of the time even though politics was not a subject of serious interest to him (*EPW* 1–52). Academically, he gravitated more and more toward philosophy under the influence of Poul Martin Møller, his intellectual mentor and revered friend whom he credited with being 'the mighty trumpet of my awakening' (*SKP* s, B 46).⁶² As a result of the deaths of both Møller and Kierkegaard's father in 1838, and perhaps also due to a personal religious experience of 'an *indescribable joy*' that same year, Søren finally settled down in earnest to prepare for his theological examination, which he took and passed in July 1840. He then entered the Pastoral Seminary for a year of homiletic and catechetical training to qualify him to become an ordained minister (*JP* v. 5324; *LD* 10–22). Although he often contemplated becoming a rural pastor or a teacher at the seminary in later years, he was never ordained and never actually applied for either position. Having inherited half of his father's large estate, he lived the rest of his life as an independent author.

⁵⁸ Rohde (1967: nos. 424, 488); Czak (2007: 31–2).

⁵⁹ N. Thulstrup (1980d: 46–212); Stewart (2003: 27–34).

⁶⁰ Stewart (2003: 17).

⁶¹ See Perkins (1999b); Watkin (1999a); Kirmmse (1990: 45–52).

⁶² Hannay (2001: 47–8, 58–87); Garff (2005: 86–95).

Denmark's Golden Age

During these years Kierkegaard was very interested in drama, music, and literary subjects, including romanticism, the poetry of the troubadours, the art of telling children's stories, mythology, the aesthetic categories of comedy, irony, and humour, and the figures of Faust, the Wandering Jew, and Don Juan as the representatives of doubt, despair, and sensuousness respectively—all of which provided a wealth of material for his early aesthetic writings (*KJN* i, BB 1–25, 27–37, 49; DD 3, 6, 18–19, 22, 38, 68–9, 75; *SKP* i, C 46–127). The first half of the nineteenth century was known as the Golden Age of Denmark inasmuch as it was a period of high culture that boasted a number of fine literary artists, including the noted romantic poet Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850) and J. L. Heiberg, a dramatist, poet, prose writer, translator, aesthetician, literary critic, and director of the Royal Danish Theatre as well as Hegelian philosopher. Heiberg's mother, Madame Thomasine Gyllembourg (1773–1856), was an accomplished novelist whose works Kierkegaard read and reviewed favourably (*EPW* 64–7; *TA*). Heiberg's wife, Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812–90), was a celebrated actress of the Danish Royal Theatre whom Kierkegaard also admired and later reviewed appreciatively (*C*). Hoping to become part of the Heibergian cultural circle, which was 'the leading Copenhagen salon of its time', Kierkegaard wrote a long critical review of a novel by the contemporary Danish writer, Hans Christian Andersen (1805–75), who at this point in his literary career had won more acclaim as a novelist than as a writer of fairy tales.⁶³ Issued in 1838 under the odd title, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, perhaps with the recent deaths of his father and Møller in mind, this was Kierkegaard's first published monograph.⁶⁴

The Concept of Irony

In the fall of 1841 Kierkegaard petitioned the king for permission to submit a dissertation written in Danish, along with a statement of its theses in Latin, for conferral of the magister (doctoral) degree, the highest degree awarded by the faculty of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen (*LD* 23–5). This work, titled *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, marked the beginning in his published writings of a lifelong fascination with Socrates, who is credited therein with introducing the principle of subjectivity to the ancient world in the form of irony or an infinite absolute negativity toward the established order of his time. Kierkegaard

⁶³ Kirmmse (1990: 139).

⁶⁴ See also Cappelørn *et al.* (2006); Perkins (1999a); Walsh (1994: 23–41).

concludes that Socratic irony was historically justified but must be controlled in order to become a ministering spirit in the development of the personal life.⁶⁵ He also comes to terms with German romantic irony in this work, viewing it à la Hegel as an unwarranted expression of total irony or the negation of actuality as such in the exercise of an arbitrary and boundless freedom to create and to destroy at will.⁶⁶ Thus ended an early interest in and inclination toward romanticism, to which Kierkegaard was initially attracted by its passionate, imaginative, and infinite striving toward the ideal.

Kierkegaard's dissertation was successfully defended at a public forum conducted in Latin, the official academic language of the time, on 29 September 1841.⁶⁷ Soon thereafter he departed for Berlin to attend lectures by the famous German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), an erstwhile romantic and idealist thinker turned critic of Hegel who had been called out of retirement to counter 'the dragon-seed of [left-wing] Hegelian pantheism'.⁶⁸ He also attended lectures by Henrich Steffens (1773–1845), who is credited with introducing German romanticism to Golden Age Denmark, the right-wing Hegelian speculative theologian Marheineke, and the Hegelian logician Karl Friedrich Werder (1806–93). At first excited by, but soon disappointed in, Schelling's new 'positive philosophy' of revelation and finding Steffens's performance as a lecturer unappealing, Kierkegaard soon abandoned them and spent most of his time in Berlin attending and taking notes on Marheineke and Werder's lectures and working on the brilliant arabesque novel that would soon launch his literary career: *Either/Or* (CI 331–412; LD 55; SKP xiii, III C 26, 29; SKS xix, NB 8. 50; NB 9. 1, 2–9).⁶⁹

LOVE, ENGAGEMENT, RUPTURE

'I Came, I Saw, *She* Conquered'

Before turning to Kierkegaard's career as a writer, however, we must take note of a momentous event in his life. On 8 May 1837 he met a young girl named Regine Olsen (1822–1904). She apparently made a strong impression on Kierkegaard, as soon afterward he recorded in his journal: 'good God, why should the inclination begin to stir just now?' (*JP* v. 5220). Other than a series of mostly undated love letters and notes which he sent to her,

⁶⁵ See also Perkins (2001); Söderquist (2003). ⁶⁶ See further Walsh (1994: 43–62).

⁶⁷ See Kirmmse (2001). ⁶⁸ Kosch (2006: 123); Toews (1993: 383).

⁶⁹ See also Schulz (2007a) and Stewart (2007). On the arabesque novel, see Walsh (1994: 63–4).

little information exists about their courtship (*LD* 61–88). These messages were typically romantic, quoting bits of poetry, expressing his deep longing for her, showering her with compliments, arranging meetings, referring to small gifts and pictures being exchanged between them, etc. Slightly revising Julius Caesar's famous boast, *veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered), Kierkegaard quips in one letter, 'I came, I saw, *she* conquered', and years later he reveals that 'even before my father died my mind was made up about her' (*LD* 76; *JP* vi. 6472). On 8 September 1840 he proposed to Regine informally and two days later formally asked her father for her hand.

The next day Kierkegaard realized that he had made a terrible mistake—not because he did not love her or want to marry her but because he felt there were certain extenuating circumstances that made marriage inadvisable if not impossible for him. The reasons, as stated in a retrospective journal entry years later, were basically these: 'If I had not been a penitent, if I had not had my *via ante acta* [life prior to the act], if I had not had my depression—marriage to her would have made me happier than I had ever dreamed of becoming' (*JP* vi. 6472). What events in his prior life made him feel so guilty and penitent that marriage must be ruled out have been the subject of much speculation and remain obscure. Kierkegaard felt that his depression alone was sufficient to make marriage to him unbearable for her, and whatever his past was, so much would have to be kept from her that their marriage would be based upon a lie. In a page torn from his journal and crossed out, obviously not intended for public consumption, he states:

But if I were to have explained myself, I would have had to initiate her into terrible things, my relationship to my father, his melancholy, the eternal night brooding within me, my going astray, my lusts and debauchery, which, however, in the eyes of God are perhaps not so glaring; for it was, after all, anxiety which brought me to go astray, and where was I to seek a safe stronghold when I knew or suspected that the only man I had admired for his strength was tottering. (*JP* v. 5664)

'If I had had Faith, I would have Stayed with Regine'

Kierkegaard nevertheless remained in the engagement for thirteen months. On 11 August 1841 he formally broke it by letter and returned the engagement ring Regine had given him.⁷⁰ Needless to say, this was a very trying time for both parties, and Regine did not let him go without a fight,

⁷⁰ Garff (2005: 186).

pleading to him again and again not to leave her and threatening to despair if he did. His action was also a matter of great concern to her family and damaged his reputation in the city, where it soon became the talk of the town. Hoping to make it easier for her to accept the broken engagement, Kierkegaard tried to make himself look like a scoundrel in her eyes, poetically portraying himself in one of his early works ('The Seducer's Diary', in *Either/Or*, part 1) as a calculating seducer in order to repulse her, while suffering internally all the more as he continued to agonize over his action and responsibility in the whole affair. Much of his side of the story would later be poetically transmuted and told in one of his works in a section with the telling title: 'Guilty?'/ 'Not Guilty?' (*SLW* 185–397). Here and elsewhere in earlier and later journal entries and works, the rationale for the break that gained prominence in his own mind was a religious one, namely that he was under 'a divine counter order' that required him to forgo marriage and live as a penitent, giving religious expression to his erotic love for her through a relationship to God or the ideality of the religious (261, 330, 381, 423; cf. *JP* vi. 6472; *FT*). As Kierkegaard understood it, his personal relationship to God was 'in a way' a reduplication of his relation to Regine inasmuch as it helped him to understand what faith is (*JP* vi. 6470). In a journal entry from 1843, he states: 'If I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regine' (*JP* v. 5664). Six years later, in a rare admission, he writes: "The fact that I have gone through this experience has helped me in my own faith-relationship to God. Although my life goes against me and the world is sheer opposition, I nevertheless do have faith' (*JP* vi. 6470).

THE AUTHORSHIP AND ITS STRATEGY

The Early Pseudonymous and Upbuilding Writings

In a retrospective accounting of his authorship written in 1848, Kierkegaard maintained that it was 'religious from first to last', designed to cast the religious, more specifically the essentially Christian, into reflection for the sake of clarifying Christian categories, thus enabling his reader, whom he always addressed as 'that single individual', to become aware of what Christianity is and how to become a Christian (*PV* 6). Although this conception of the religious character and thrust of his writings was certainly not apparent to him or his readers from the outset, it became clearer to him as the authorship unfolded, which came at a furious pace. *Either/Or*, consisting of two large volumes, erupted on the public scene in 1843, followed by the publication of *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* on the same day later

that year. Then three more works appeared in 1844: *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *Prefaces*. 1845 brought forth another huge tome, *Stages on Life's Way*, and 1846 an equally long volume, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, his most important philosophical work. Of these works, Kierkegaard correctly predicted that '*Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough for an imperishable name as an author' (JP vi. 6491).

These works were published at Kierkegaard's own expense but not under his own name as author; instead, they were issued under the auspices of various pseudonyms, a literary strategy adopted in order to allow each work and its 'author' to express its own viewpoint and to indicate indirectly that his own life was lived in 'altogether different categories' (PV 86). In a statement appended to the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard explains:

What has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the creating, poetically actual individuality in his [the pseudonym's] mouth... Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them... Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine...

(CUP i. 625–7)

With the exception of the *Postscript*, which Kierkegaard regarded as *sui generis* (in a class by itself), these early works constituted what he called his 'aesthetic' writings (PV 7, 29 n. 31). Beginning with a portrayal of the aesthetic (from the Greek *aisthēsis*, meaning 'sense perception') stage of existence, which is a relatively non-reflective life in immediacy based on the satisfaction and enjoyment of one's sensate or natural inclinations and capacities, these works employ an indirect or maieutic (Socratic) method of communication through the use of a variety of literary genres, strategies, and poetic figures designed to 'deceive' people into the truth by helping them become aware of the need for a higher form of life in the ethical and religious stages of existence (PV 7, 53–4). Parallel to these indirect communications Kierkegaard published under his own name a series of direct communications in the form of upbuilding or ethical-religious discourses (*EUD*; *TDIO*).⁷¹ These discourses, he later claimed, provided a clear testimony that he was a religious author from the beginning and betokened that the upbuilding was what should come to the fore: 'With my left hand I passed *Either/Or* out into the world, with my right hand *Two Upbuilding*

⁷¹ See Pattison (2002b).

Discourses; but they all or almost all took the left hand with their right' (PV 36; cf. EUD 179).

The 'Second Literature'

With the publication of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which posed the problem of the whole authorship, namely how to become a Christian, Kierkegaard thought that he had reached the end of his career as a writer. On the contrary, this work became 'the turning point' that initiated a new burst of writing, often referred to as his 'second literature' (PV 55).⁷² Most of these works were explicitly religious and/or Christian in character and were published in his own name as author except for a few that presented Christianity in its strictest, most ideal sense, thus representing an existential position higher than he personally embodied. This flood of new writings, some of which were published posthumously or not at all, included: *Two Ages: A Literary Review* (1846), *The Book on Adler* (1846/7), '*The Single Individual*': Two 'Notes' Concerning My Work as an Author (1846–9), *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), *Works of Love* (1847), *Christian Discourses* (1848), *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (1848), *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (1848), *Armed Neutrality* (1848–9), *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Devotional Discourses* (1849), *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* (1849), *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1849), *Practice in Christianity* (1850), *An Upbuilding Discourse* (1850), *An Open Letter* (1851), *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1851), *On My Work as an Author* (1851), *For Self-Examination* (1851), and *Judge for Yourself!* (1851/2). This phenomenal outpouring then ceased for three years until 1854, when Kierkegaard suddenly burst into print again with a series of polemical articles against the state church in a local newspaper and serial pamphlet called *The Moment* which he published himself. His authorship ended shortly before his death in 1855 with the publication of *What Christ Judges of Official Christianity* and *The Changelessness of God*.

TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS

There were three events that precipitated and/or profoundly conditioned the emergence of these two new phases of Kierkegaard's authorship: (1) his encounter with a local tabloid called *The Corsair* in 1846; (2) the Danish political revolution of 1848; and (3) the death of Bishop Mynster in 1854.

⁷² Elrod (1981: p. xi).

These events played an important role in the development of Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity, the ecclesiastical-political establishment of the time, and his own personal life in relation to the common folk of Copenhagen, with whom he was accustomed to enjoy daily conversations on his habitual walks around town.⁷³

The Corsair Affair

The first of these events was occasioned by one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms being singled out for praise in a satirical weekly tabloid called *The Corsair* (from the French *corsaire*, meaning 'a pirate or pirate ship'), which in keeping with its name specialized in plundering and destroying the reputations of Copenhagen citizens of note. This scandal sheet, or 'pirate paper' as its editor Meir Goldschmidt (1819–87) called it, enjoyed the largest circulation of any newspaper in the city and appealed to the basest instincts of its readers, who apparently relished seeing their fellow citizens exposed, ridiculed, caricatured, and hung out to dry by all the rumours, gossip, and distorted facts anonymously reported in it.⁷⁴ Writing as his pseudonym, Kierkegaard published a response designed not only to protest this malicious practice but also to expose a person secretly involved in the whole enterprise, Peder Ludvig Møller (1814–65), a notorious aesthete and aspirant for a position as professor of aesthetics at the university who had published a vicious review of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works (*COR* 38–46, 96–104). Expressing a desire to be treated like everyone else, Kierkegaard's pseudonym complains: 'It is really hard for a poor author to be so singled out in Danish literature that he (assuming that we pseudonyms are one) is the only one who is not abused there' (46).

Accommodating this request, *The Corsair* unleashed a barrage of pieces over the next six months that subjected Kierkegaard to unrelenting comic ridicule. It identified him with a local insane horse trader called 'Crazy Nathanson' and caricatured his personal appearance, especially his humped shoulders, spindly legs, and uneven pant legs, leading him to comment in his journals that 'my whole life will never be as important as my trousers have come to be' (*COR* 108–37; *JP* v. 5863). This attack on his person had the terrible consequence of making Kierkegaard the laughing-stock of Copenhagen, so that even schoolchildren mocked him when he went out to walk and the name Søren became a pejorative nickname and euphemism for Satan that was often used for ludicrous characters in new plays of the time

⁷³ See also Bukdahl (2001); Kirmmse (1990); Elrod (1981).

⁷⁴ Garff (2005: 377); see also Perkins (1990).

(COR 238 and nn. 443, 451, 480). But this cruel episode in Kierkegaard's life was also the occasion of 'an awakening of awareness' in him, requiring him, as he put it, to 'think about or think through the dialectic of contemptibility' (COR 160). Not only did it teach him to know himself and the world better but also to discover 'a whole side of Christianity' not previously recognized or addressed in his writings, namely its outward dimension and external consequences, with the result that, as he lyrically expressed it in his journals, 'As author I have gotten a new string in my instrument, have been enabled to hit notes I never would have dreamed of otherwise' (JP vi. 6548; cf. 6594).

'In These Times Everything is Politics'

Looking back on his life a few years later, Kierkegaard remarked in his journal: 'Then came 1848. Here I was granted a perspective on my life that almost overwhelmed me' (JP vi. 6843). Besides being an extraordinarily productive year in terms of his authorship, it was during this year that the second major event occurred which profoundly affected Kierkegaard's life and the society in which he lived, namely the peaceful political transition from government by absolute monarchy to a constitutional, parliamentary monarchy in the state of Denmark. Absolute monarchy with the right of inheritance was established in Denmark in 1660, followed by a royal law in 1665 that granted ultimate authority over the church to the king and established the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the official state church.⁷⁵ This political-ecclesiastical arrangement remained in place and unchallenged until the nineteenth century, when a peasant awakening movement in the 1820s brought about a rural religious revival emphasizing individual piety and self-assertion as well as the enactment of agrarian reforms that allowed farmers to own their own land and to elect representatives to estate assemblies and town councils.⁷⁶ This was followed in the 1830s and 1840s by an urban liberal political movement espousing freedom of the press and, in alliance with the peasant movement, a host of broader economic and political reforms, including the establishment of a representative constitutional government.⁷⁷ Under threat of a popular uprising, on 21 March 1848 the king agreed to their demands, and the next year a constitution was adopted replacing the Danish absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy based on a representative government elected by universal male suffrage.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Lausten (2002: 132).

⁷⁶ Kirmmse (1990: 40–4); Lausten (2002: 226–7).

⁷⁷ Kirmmse (1990: 45–68).

⁷⁸ Ibid. 66–70.

Technically, according to the new constitution the state church was also abolished, inasmuch as the state no longer officially endorsed a state church as such and did not require members of parliament to belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church.⁷⁹ However, the constitution did state that ‘The evangelical-Lutheran church is the Danish people’s church and, as such, is supported by the state.’⁸⁰ The Danish state church thus became the Danish People’s Church (so-called because a majority of the people belonged to it), the only difference being that now one had to be baptized into the church instead of automatically becoming a member by virtue of being born a Dane, as was the case formerly. State support of the people’s church consisted in granting it income from church property, tithes, and state budget appropriations, and church governance remained in the hands of the king and parliament, as the church did not have an independent constitution.⁸¹ *De facto*, then, the Danish People’s Church remained a state church.

Kierkegaard’s reaction to these political and ecclesiastical changes was somewhat ambivalent, as he was sympathetic towards the monarchy but also a strong supporter of the common folk and human equality.⁸² As he saw it, the fundamental problem of his country lay not in its form of government, whether that be the old or the new governing body, but in the spiritual demoralization and disintegration of the age which these changes expressed (*JP* iv. 4149; vi. 6255). In Kierkegaard’s view the country had simply replaced the old forms of tyranny with a new one, the tyranny of the fear of men, carried out by the mob rule of the crowd, the majority, the public, the people, which ‘Of all tyrannies . . . is the most excruciating, the most mindless, unconditionally the downfall of all greatness and elevation’ (*JP* iv. 4144; cf. 4131, 4134; *PV* 19). What the times in the deepest sense needed, he believed, was not political equality, which in his view was not true or perfect human equality, as that is impossible to achieve in the temporal realm, which is characterized by dissimilarity (*PV* 103–4). Rather, it was the ethical and ethical-religious that should be advanced, since ultimately ‘only the essentially religious can with the help of eternity effect human equality . . . and this is also why . . . the essentially religious is the true humanity’ (*PV* 104). Thus, while everything appeared to be politics at the time, Kierkegaard regarded the ‘catastrophe’ of 1848 as indicative of a ‘crucial age’ in which ‘history was about to take a turn’ towards the religious (*JP* vi. 6255). Moreover, he perceived himself as having been singled out by God to be ‘that single individual’ or extraordinary agent by which an awareness of the religious could be brought about (*JP* vi. 6843).

⁷⁹ Lausten (2002: 229).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 230.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 230, 283.

⁸² Bukdahl (2001).

'Now he is Dead'

The third and final phase of Kierkegaard's authorship was precipitated by the death in 1854 of Bishop Mynster, whom Kierkegaard had known and revered since childhood but over the years increasingly had come to criticize in his capacity as Primate Bishop and chief representative of the Danish People's Church. The problem, as Kierkegaard saw it, was that Mynster and the established church he represented promoted a toned-down version of Christianity that actually had compromised, changed, and abolished true Christianity, virtually identifying it with paganism, aestheticism, worldliness, and Danish nationalism. Prior to Mynster's death Kierkegaard had called for an honest admission on the part of the established church in this regard, and when it was not forthcoming, he bided his time, waiting for the old bishop to die before attacking him openly.

The occasion for that presented itself when Professor Martensen, who was appointed Mynster's successor as Primate Bishop, eulogized him as 'a witness to the truth'—a figure whom Kierkegaard understood to be 'a person who directly demonstrates the truth of the doctrine he proclaims' and who is associated with the imitation of Christ, suffering, and martyrdom. None of these characteristics, in Kierkegaard's estimation, applied to Bishop Mynster, who had enjoyed a life of comfort, pleasure, and public esteem in the bishop's palace (*JP* iv. 4967). Thus, after three years of silence, Kierkegaard unleashed the pent-up polemic that had been smouldering inside him and brewing in his journals, venting it in an uncompromising attack upon the state church in a series of newspaper articles and pamphlets.

This attack, however, was short-lived, as Kierkegaard fell ill and was hospitalized in the fall of 1855, dying on 11 November of unknown causes.⁸³ During the attack he ceased attending church services and on his deathbed was willing to take communion only from a layman because 'the pastors are civil servants of the Crown and have nothing to do with Christianity'.⁸⁴ Ironically, Kierkegaard's funeral was held in the cathedral church of official Christendom, Our Lady's Church, which was overflowing with people who came to pay their respects and to hear the 'eulogy' given by his brother Peter, whose words about Søren were scarcely laudatory.⁸⁵ At the burial site a nephew voiced a protest against the funeral proceedings, which in his view were inconsistent with the deceased's views and wishes.⁸⁶ What little remained of Kierkegaard's estate, which literally had been used up in publishing his writings and maintaining the comfortable lifestyle to which

⁸³ See Søgard (2007); Garff (2005: 793–4).

⁸⁴ Kirmmse (1996: 125–6).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 132.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 133–5.

he was accustomed, was left to Mrs Regine Schlegel, née Regine Olsen, who had married her former suitor, John Frederik (Fritz) Schlegel, in 1843. Kierkegaard stated in his will: 'What I wish to express is that for me an engagement was and is just as binding as a marriage; and that therefore my estate is to revert to her in exactly the same manner as if I had been married to her.'⁸⁷ Since Regine was the muse who made him a poet, he also declared: 'It is my unalterable will that my writings, after my death, be dedicated to her and to my late father. She must belong to history' (*LD*, no. 239, p. 337; *JP* vi. 6537).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 48.