

PROPHETIC CRITICISM, INCARNATIONAL OPTIMISM: ON RECOVERING THE LATE KIERKEGAARD

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Actually the revolution is much closer than we think. The last band of free thinkers (Feuerbach and all related to him) has attacked or tackled the matter far more clearly than formerly, for if you look more closely, you will see that they actually have taken upon themselves the task of defending Christianity against contemporary Christians. The point is that established Christendom is demoralized, in the profoundest sense all respect for Christianity's existential commitments has been lost . . . Now Feuerbach is saying: No, wait a minute—if you are going to be allowed to go on living as you are living, then you also have to admit that you are not Christians . . . it is wrong of established Christendom to say that Feuerbach is attacking Christianity; it is not true, he is attacking the Christians by demonstrating that their lives do not correspond to the teachings of Christianity . . . What Christianity needs for certain is traitors. . . (JP 6523)

To many familiar with the early Kierkegaard's brilliant dialectics, his anatomy of the self and his philosophical and theological innovations, the polemical negativity of his later years has remained enigmatic.¹ The Kierkegaard of such frequently read works as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, the *Philosophical Fragments* and their *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, among others, seems radically transformed in both the published works and the labyrinthine journal pages of the years 1848–55. Most especially, in his public attack on the Danish church and society in 1854–55, Kierkegaard does indeed appear to be a 'traitor' to much of what he had respected and written in the previous years, though traitorously faithful, he claimed, to New Testament Christianity. He reviles his former spiritual father, the Danish primate and bishop of Zealand, Jakob Peter Mynster. He ridicules the clergy of the Danish church, condemns them as profiteering shopkeepers with a Sunday monopoly, falsifiers of the gospel, ultimately castigating them as 'cannibals' who live off the state, their parishioners and Christ himself.² (KAUC 40–50, 78–89, 95–100, 132–57, 203–30, 268–70). In the frenzy of this attack, published first in the newspaper, *The Fatherland (Fædrelandet)* and then in his own periodical, *The Instant (Øieb-*

likket), Kierkegaard ventured out beyond anticlericalism and hostilities with the cultural elite of Copenhagen. His radicalism came to encompass all of Danish society and much of human life. Sexuality, marriage, parenthood, women—all of these and many others aspects of life became the targets of his seemingly misanthropic and very nearly pathological invectives.

Needless to say, the late Kierkegaard's negativity perplexed his contemporaries, as Jørn Østergaard Christensen (1981) has demonstrated in a most perceptive study. His later writings continue to frustrate interpreters today.³ Many have elected to simply ignore the tortuous writings of these later years or to explain them away in various ways. Thus for some who attempt to confront him, the late Kierkegaard remains in essential continuity with his earlier writings. In the polemics of the later years, as they see it, Kierkegaard simply radicalizes his style of expression. The content, such interpreters would argue, is the very same mixture of Christian criticism and affirmation presented in the earlier, better known books. Another interpretive option is to dismiss this radical negativity as the result of emotional breakdown or personal animosity. A few students of the late Kierkegaard, in particular, the recently deceased Kresten Nordentoft (1973, 1977, 1978) and Bruce Kirmmse (1977), have resisted such reductionistic approaches and have produced the most exciting efforts at interpretation. Though there are substantive differences in their readings, both take the late Kierkegaard's radical negativity seriously, viewing it as an important developmental transformation in his thinking and praxis.

In what follows, I want to present the principal elements of a reinterpretation of the late Kierkegaard, one indebted and related to the Nordentoft's and Kirmmse's efforts but at the same time distinctive from them.⁴ I first want to argue that the late Kierkegaard engaged in authentic, historically and socially specific criticism, contra those who dismiss him as a social thinker. Further, it will be claimed that theological and social criticism became so intimately related for him as to become inseparable. I refer to this as 'prophetic' criticism in order to identify it with the eschatological prophetic criticism of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. (Schillebeeckx 1979, Theissen 1978). Last of all, I intend to examine the other side of the late Kierkegaard's thinking, namely the affirmative view I have called his 'incarnational optimism.' I do not mean to suggest, in bringing forth this other side, that such affirmation balances out or corrects or explains away the negative extremes of the late Kierkegaard's thinking. Despite the contentions of some scholars and the occasional remarks of Kierkegaard himself, there is a tension in the late Kierkegaard's social and theological perspectives. Perhaps it is a deliberately sustained dialectical one, perhaps not, but Kierkegaard's later writing does maintain a complex relationship between eternity and history, church and society, faith and praxis, in sum between Christianity and human life. He keeps, as he claims, 'the wound of negativity open' while at the same time

proclaiming reconciliation in God's grace and love. In the end, I feel such a tension in the late Kierkegaard is an interpretation preferable to those which impose either the straitjackets of continuity or breakdown upon him. As a whole, then, this recovery of the late Kierkegaard will bring us into contact with a figure other than the 'father' of existentialism we have hitherto known. It is my wager that in the late Kierkegaard we find a complex, critical modern theologian, one who, as Nordentoft and others have suggested, 'wounds from behind' our own late twentieth century sensibilities, one who addresses some of our social and religious concerns (Plekton 1982a, 1983b, Sløk 1978, 1980, Deuser 1974, 1980)

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No, the cultured and well-to-do class, who if not upper crust are at least upper bourgeoisie—they ought to be the targets and for them the price ought to be jacked up in the drawing rooms. (JP 236)

To understand both the force and complexity of the late Kierkegaard's criticism it is necessary to confront its principal target, 'Christendom.' Yet this is no easy task, since for such a Socratic gadfly and intellectual spelunker as Kierkegaard, the very object 'Christendom' is multivalent and nuanced. To be sure, Kierkegaard polemically contrasted Christendom as that 'illusion,' 'compromise,' 'accommodation' or even 'counterfeit' with 'ideal New Testament Christianity.' (JP 6075–6, 6859, 2764, 3061, 2753, 2217, 3032). John Elrod (1981) has captured at least this first layer in his study. Very early on in his writings, Kierkegaard came to distinguish between what passed for Christianity in the church and society of his Denmark and the authentic faith and praxis of the New Testament. His contemporaries, particularly Grundtvig, similarly noted such a discrepancy between the church as 'heavenly guest' and the civil institution it inhabited. (Koch 1954, Lindhardt 1958, Kirmmse 1977, Plekon 1983a) Kirmmse (1977) goes much further, locating Kierkegaard's criticism in its historical context. For him, Kierkegaard, originally leaning towards the conservative religious and political mainstream of the Danish 'Golden Age', the Heiberg-Mynster-Martensen camp, eventually elected a dissenting stance. Kierkegaard came to reject not only the conservative mainstream but the National Liberals and the folk-religionists (Grundtvigians). As Kirmmse interprets him, Kierkegaard understood Christianity's claims as prior to and transcendent of all social-political-theological factions. 'New Testament Christianity' stood in judgement over against any 'official' or 'established' church and its blessing of a particular class, value system or set of social structures. Along with earlier protestors in the Danish Awakening movements (*Vækkelser*) and with the critical voices of J. L. Lindberg and Grundtvig, Kierkegaard objected to both the state church of pre-1848 Danish

absolutism as well as the post-1848 'People's church' (*Folkekirke*) under constitutional monarchy. (Lindhardt 1978, J. Bukdahl 1961, Baagøe 1954).

Kirmmse's analysis, as well as that of Nordentoft, emphasizes Kierkegaard's criticism of Christendom as authentically social and political, something often overlooked by readers. Many would agree that Kierkegaard was hardly a social thinker at all. Space here does not permit an elaborate counterargument, only a brief discussion.⁵ As Teddy Petersen (1977) has shown, Kierkegaard's earliest published pieces in Copenhagen newspapers were critiques of the National Liberals and their leader, Orla Lehmann. Later in the 1840s he voluntarily entered into a notorious jousting match with Copenhagen's leading organ of social and political satire, *The Corsair*, edited by A. M. Goldschmidt. (Bredsdorff 1977). Throughout his writing in the same decade, Kierkegaard confronted not only the foremost system builder and social thinker of the era, Hegel, he also took on his contemporaries J. L. Heiberg, Grundtvig, Lehmann, Goldschmidt and other of the leading intellectuals of the Danish Golden Age. Hans Christian Andersen was the target of Kierkegaard's first book, *From the Papers of One Still Living*. During most of his life, both Kierkegaard's books and journals made regular mention of Danish society—the Royal Theatre, its director J. L. Heiberg and his wife, the stage's leading lady, Johanne Luise Heiberg, the church and its dominant figures such as Mynster, Grundtvig, Martensen and Rudelbach, not to mention many minor ecclesiastics (JP 4060–4242, 4495–4505, Kirmmse 1977, Nordentoft 1973, Plekon 1983d). If we inspect the works published from 1843 up to 1848, the bulk of the 'authorship' proper, we find that there too, social and ethical concerns are taken up consistently. There are the long monologues of the young aesthete and his friend, Judge William in *Either/Or* on marriage, civic duty and a host of other concerns. In *The Concept of Dread, Repetition, Fear and Trembling* and later again in *The Sickness Unto Death* one finds meticulous social-psychological dissection of the self alongside Kierkegaard's inventive theology. Henning Fenger (1976) has raised some provocative questions about Kierkegaard's connection with the literary life of Copenhagen in these early years. Often overlooked is perhaps the most concentrated piece of Kierkegaard's social criticism, *A Literary Review: Two Ages* (Plekon 1983d). Equally neglected is his principal treatment of ethics, *Works of Love* (Nordentoft 1978, Müller 1976). In a number of these earlier writings, Kierkegaard employed the category of 'spiritlessness' (*Aandløshed*) to depict the pathological condition of his age: ethical-religious emptiness, self-obsession, fatalism. (E/O 171–81, 343–56, CDr 47–52, 83–6, FT/SUD 26–34, 45–6, 49–52, 65, 78–91, 170–80, SLW 97–178, CUP 486–7, Kirmmse 1981, Nordentoft 1978, Taylor 1980).

If we turn our attention to the later years, social criticism courses through the journals and published works in the period 1848–55. I first want to lay stress on the authentic and specific nature of the attack on Christendom before

examining its convergence with Kierkegaard's theological protest. For Kierkegaard, 'Christendom' meant not only the church but the entire society, state and culture of his Golden Age Denmark. His focus on the Danish church, of course, stemmed from its centrality in Danish life. He often sarcastically observed that all in Denmark were Christians, and certainly in a purely sociological sense, this was true. Only a tiny minority found themselves outside the evangelical Lutheran church, and church membership was a prerequisite for full civil rights, for an education and membership in the guild system. If nothing else, Emmanuel Skjoldager's otherwise unfortunate study (1982) of Kierkegaard and the church makes at least one point abundantly clear. For all his apparent concentration on the inwardness of the 'single individual' and on existential decision, Kierkegaard was very much aware of the collective or social and political spheres, in particular, of the church as an historical, political and social institution. (Plekon 1983a, Kirmmse 1977, Nordentoft 1973, 1977). Put another way, it was precisely because of the church's prominence in Danish social structure and social life that Kierkegaard devoted so much attention to it, in addition to his purely theological concerns about the church. Most often Kierkegaard's social and theological criticism merged.

Quite regularly, Kierkegaard objected to what he saw as the church's tendency to externalize and objectivize dogma and praxis. He took exception, for example, with the Augsburg Confession's definition of the church, in its article seven, as the holy assembly in which the gospel is correctly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered (Tappert 1954, 32). For him this was too minimal, too objective a definition, for it ignored the conversion of the individuals who constituted the church (JP 600). Similarly, he objected to Grundtvig's 'matchless discovery' of the 'living word' of Christ, transmitted by the worshipping church through the centuries through the creed, the baptismal covenant and the eucharist, as too external and cultic. The central published work in the later years, *Training in Christianity* from 1850, teems with criticism of a church which is overly confident, 'triumphant' rather than struggling like the primitive church of the apostles and martyrs (TC 197–250). One can include here too Kierkegaard's ridicule for those who sought external church reform: Grundtvig's calls for doctrinal and liturgical precision in the 1820s and his later demands for liturgical freedom and the loosening of the parish bands, Rudelbach's proposal for dis-establishment of the church, the efforts of others for new hymnals and altar rituals, for a church constitution and for the legislation of religious freedom in Denmark. One could conclude, on the basis of such Kierkegaardian viewpoints, that he was hardly concerned with the visible, historical, institutional church. It is rather easy to assume that his quarrel with the church (and with the state and society in which it was established) was solely a spiritual one, not even really a theological debate

(Malantschuk and Sjøe 1956, Skjoldager 1982). This has been a fairly typical interpretation, given Kierkegaard's call for the 'admission' (*Indrømmelse*) that the church was not living up to New Testament standards. His demand for ruthless honesty about this has been taken as the urging of an inward renewal or conversion on the part of each individual.

Yet I think that closer inspection of the late Kierkegaard's writings reveals more than this. His attack was not simply an assault upon a concept, 'Christendom,' nor condemnation of a spiritual condition. As Nordentoft, Kirmmse and I have argued, Kierkegaard's confrontation was also historically, culturally, politically and socially specific, with the Danish church and not with Christendom in general. Kierkegaard names names both in his published works and journals: Mynster, Martensen, Grundtvig, Rudelbach, Lindberg, among others. Further, I would emphasize Kierkegaard's focus on *praxis* in the church. In the most powerful of his critical writings, he concentrated on praxis: the praxis of baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, the wedding ritual and their significance in a bourgeois church (KAUC 205–7, 212–22), the praxis of Mynster as a 'worldly-wise,' diplomatically astute prelate (KAUC 5–25), the praxis of Martensen as theologian, court preacher and finally as Mynster's successor (KAUC 67–72), the praxis of the civil servant clergy (KAUC 117–24, 174–7, 182, 208–11, 226–30, 268–72).

While Kierkegaard's polemic in the published literature of his 1854–55 attack are better known, his specific criticism, his stress on praxis and the convergence of these with his theological radicalism are especially evident in the journals and published works leading up to the 1854–55 public attack. In the later years, Kierkegaard rediscovered the New Testament and it is not too much to speak of this as a profound transformation on his part (Nordentoft 1977, 102–22). First, Kierkegaard's Christology became centered on the crucified Christ, the God come to earth as a poor, suffering servant (TC 127–44, 61–72, 140–3, 194–6, 219–46). Kierkegaard repeatedly refers to this Christ as the 'prototype' (*Forbilledet*) or 'pattern' (*Exemplar*) for the church and for each individual Christian (FSE/JFY 75–90, 159–217). This suffering Christ extends the central invitation of Christianity, inviting those who would follow him to do so in suffering and in service (TC 33–7, 40–60, 86–126). Christian life, then, is 'imitation,' literally 'following after' Christ (*Christi Efterfølgelse*). Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard the gospel is still good news to be preached to the poor, the sick, the suffering, to all at the margins of society (JP 3215, 4158, 6469, 3498, 3522, 4683, 3528, 3632; not trans.: Pap. X, 1 A264; X, 2 A55; X, 3 A123; X, 4 A453; KAUC 33–7). Lastly, for Kierkegaard the neglected message of the epistle of James needed reassertion. One could not validly halt at just hearing God's word. One had to do it, affirm faith and grace in praxis, in the 'works of love,' in suffering service, imitating Christ.

Now over against this understanding of Christianity, Kierkegaard juxta-

poses and condemns the praxis of his church and society. Commenting on Matthew 11, 5, in 1852, Kierkegaard points out that the good news preached to the poor and suffering is not money, health or status. It is the

. . . good news that to be unfortunate in this world (in such a way that one is abandoned by human sympathy, and the worldly zest for life even cruelly tries to make one's misfortune into guilt) is a sign of the God-relationship, that these poor from whom the generation divorces itself even more cruelly by making it a matter of their own guilt—that the good news is precisely for them . . . (JP 4685)

The church and society which have abandoned these poor and blamed them for their own situation of suffering falsify the gospel by their action:

- (1) Christianity is no longer glad tidings for those who suffer, consequently joy in suffering, is no longer suffering transfigured by the hope of the gospel, but is *the enjoyment of life* intensified by the hope of eternity.
- (2) Proclaiming Christianity no longer means suffering, suffering for the doctrine but happy in the hope of eternity—no, it is the most refined enjoyment of life (carried out with emphasis on the psychological) intensified by the hope of eternity.
- (3) The gospel no longer benefits the poor essentially; no, it has even become downright injustice to those who suffer (although one is not always conscious of this). Since proclamation of the gospel to the rich, the powerful, etc has been discovered to be advantageous, we are right back again to the very things Christianity wanted to oppose. The rich and the powerful not only get to keep everything, but their success becomes the mark of their piety, the sign of the relationship to God. 'Look,' they say, 'because this man is pious and God-fearing, everything goes well for him, this is why he amasses one barrel of gold after another, and when he responds to the proclaimers of Christianity with an appropriate contribution, they vouch for him that it is God's blessing, that it is because he is a true Christian, because this is most convenient for him and for the preachers.' But this prompts the old atrocity again—namely, the idea that the unfortunate, the poor are to blame for their condition, that it is because they are not pious, are not true Christians. Consequently they are supposed to have not only suffering but guilt as well, and the rich have not only pleasure but piety in addition. This is supposed to be Christianity. Compare it with the New Testament and you will see that this is as far from that as possible (JP 4685).

The church and society of Christendom have domesticated New Testament Christianity, in Kierkegaard's eyes, made it synonymous with bourgeois virtue and financial success. In the name of God, the rich and powerful do as they will and call it piety. Such an 'atrocity' is perpetrated and perpetuated by the figure, who for Kierkegaard, personifies the corruption of the church and society. In literally hundreds of passages in his later books and journals, Kierkegaard repeatedly strikes out at the pastor. Such a clergyperson's preaching may pay lip service to the New Testament, encourage charity toward the neighbour, even suggest that Christianity stands in judgement over

against the values and lifestyles of the upper class and bourgeoisie. Yet shockingly often, the pastor's preaching was wholly otherwise as was his life. The pastor was a civil servant, lived a reasonably comfortable life, was a respected social leader. The pastor did not model his life after that of the suffering Christ. He identified with the wealthy and powerful, rather than the poor and suffering. In the end, such a pastor's life and sermons preached upper and middle class points of view and, what was worst, attempted to legitimize these by appeal to the gospel. Kierkegaard at times mentioned specific clergy and at other times did not. His direct attacks are even more devastating when they single out specific clergy, such as Mynster. I believe the following journal entry from 1850, deserves quotation as one which summarizes much of the social and theological criticism under discussion here. Since it has not appeared in English, the translation is mine.

Mynster's sermon, 'A Consideration of the Fate of Those Denied Ordinary Human Abilities', was really not preached for the consolation of the disabled who suffer, but for the reassurance of the more fortunate, so that these people might return home from church armed against any thought of those who suffer.

There is something quite subtle going on here. Mynster does not intend to completely ignore the suffering ones of whom the gospel so often speaks. Rather he gives an interpretation which ultimately denies that their suffering is really painful. He offers no consolation to the suffering but says to the fortunate, 'Take comfort, it's really not so bad, there's a gentle side to the suffering of the disabled. There are many examples—the blind have clearer spiritual vision (think of Homer) and the deaf are deeper thinkers.'

But look, is this preaching? Really it is mockery of those who suffer. But the more fortunate, they're happy to hear such sermons which completely reassure them in their undisturbed desire to enjoy life to the full, unperturbed by human misery—'It's not so bad, it has its gentle side'.

Here's a sizeable domain for psychological observation: the subtlety with which human egoism, in the appearance of compassion, seeks to protect itself against any recognition of human misery so as not to disturb the voraciousness of the zest for life.

The whole thing is à la Goethe, on whom Mynster's modelled himself. But is it Christianity? Is it a sermon about the one who is compassion itself, who sought out such suffering ones and placed himself completely in their situation?

How often does one hear sermons about how the poor are far happier than the rich, and they are preached in the appearance of compassion. It's all presented so touchingly: how happily the poor live, free of all the burdens of wealth. Is this a sermon to comfort the poor? No, it's a twist quite welcome to the wealthy, for now they need not give anything to the poor who are really better off than they themselves are. See, poverty has a sweet side. So the rich go home from church to their wealth, to which they cling more tenaciously than ever, edified by those beautiful words, spoken in the language of compassion . . . (Pap. X, 3 A135).

When earlier in 1849, Kierkegaard had agreed with Rudelbach's claim that the state church had at least contributed if not directly given rise to the

proletariat, (JP 4164) he had in mind both the structural and ideological effects of the church's praxis. The concluding sections of the journal entry just quoted make clear the linkage Kierkegaard saw between the church and the upper and middle classes.

But just as the 'Christian state' really only recognizes one type of crime, theft—a terrible indirect proof against a 'Christian state'—so also do the favoured classes have their own pastors, sworn to them in contract. These know how to preach so that enjoyment of life will not in the least way be disturbed. Such pastors practise the art of coming as close to the gospel, but in such a way that it doesn't disturb the possession and enjoyment of earthly goods or a life preoccupied with acquiring and protecting them. If one were to preach the gospel free of charge for such people, they simply wouldn't have it. It is important to them that 'their pastor' possesses just about the same as they do. His income should correspond to theirs, his rank and position in society too, his household roughly comparable to theirs and his decorations as well. Thus, one would think there is a guarantee that he would be appropriately self-conscious in preaching the gospel so that the gospel would not be bothersome to them.

All of this holds true for all social classes: each wants its pastor to have the same situation as that class, so one will be assured that he won't stray from the norm. The middle class pastor can preach against the opulence of the upper class and that's fine for the middle class, since they lack the opportunities of the upper class; but he must canonize the situation of his respective class . . . (Pap. X, 3 A135).

Kierkegaard's ruthless 'materialist' critique, as Nordentoft calls it, of the clergy of their shopkeeper mentality and profit-seeking is not just a condemnation of individual misconduct or personal greed. Rather, his assault was directed at the pastors' and hence the church's alignment with political power and social prestige. The pastors' canonizing of the values and lifestyle of the upper and middle classes was for him a sign of the church's decay (Gustafsson 1962). Kierkegaard's criticism of a triumphant church in *Training in Christianity* is thus interpretable not only as a theological attack on the Danish church's deviation from the New Testament's radical demands. It is also social-psychological criticism of the church's praxis and ideology. Looking back at Kierkegaard against the backdrop of his contemporaries, then, it becomes clear that he was hardly singular in his social and theological criticism of the Danish church and society. While he consistently disavowed solidarity with fellow critics such as Grundtvig, Lindberg, Rudelbach, the Awakening folk and other more secular protestors such as Orla Lehmann and the young socialist Frederik Dreier (Stybe 1959, Mortensen and Nymark 1973) Kierkegaard did share their critique of the culture-Christianity, church-state synthesis in Denmark both before and after the political changes of 1848–9 (Plekon 1983a). For all the stress I have placed on the authenticity and specificity of Kierkegaard's social and theological criticism, I should note that I have only dealt here with the protest he launched at the church. He devoted considerable

attention to other aspects of Danish society as it moved into the modern era (Nordentoft 1973, Kirmmse 1977, Plekon 1977). Yet his focus on the church is not only central but crucial, for in it we can observe a singular convergence of social and theological criticism. Kierkegaard's attack, unlike those of other nineteenth century critics like Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche, was delivered from within the Christian community of faith. It was 'treason' in service of the New Testament and a unique demonstration of religion's possibilities for criticism. Hence the dialectical interplay between the theological, the *theoria* of the New Testament and its necessary consequence in *praxis*, between Christianity's prophetic criticism of all structures and the obligation in Christian faith, to follow after the suffering Christ in performing the 'works of love'.

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I must now take care, or rather, God will take care of me, so that I do not go astray by all too one-sidedly staring at Christ as the prototype. It is the dialectical element connected with Christ as the gift, as that which is given to us (to call to mind Luther's standard classification). But dialectical as my nature is, in the passion of the dialectical it always seems as if the contrasting thought were not present at all—and so the one side come first of all and most strongly (JP 1852).

Given the vehemence of Kierkegaard's criticism, it is not surprising that negativity dominates the writings of his later years. In what preceded it was clearly not my intent to explain this negativity away. Kierkegaard also said much that was harsh, insensitive and extreme. The Danish theologian K. E. Løgstrup (1968) was only one of a procession of scholars, including Nordentoft and Kirmmse, who refused to look aside from Kierkegaard's 'hard sayings' about marriage, family life, women and his insistence that Christianity was the enemy of all that is human (KAUC 41–2, 149, 157–9, 162–3, 166–7, 184–5, 227, 303–11, J. K. Bukdhal 1981). While it is not possible here to address the motivations behind these hard sayings, I should nevertheless like to argue that there was another side to the late Kierkegaard's thinking, an affirmative perspective I have called 'incarnational optimism'. Nordentoft (1978, 326–86, 112ff, 1973, 221–38) has observed something of the same, along with Lindhardt (1955, 1962). Paul Müller, in his study of *Works of Love* (1976) and in a recent anthology (1982) convincingly argues that Kierkegaard's theology is distinguished by the primacy of God's creation and grace as its principal themes. One's very existence is due to the grace of God's creation, and throughout a person's journey through finitude and despair, God's providence remains an unchangeable presence, a never depleted source of grace and love. Nordentoft identifies this as Kierkegaard's 'fundamental' optimism, playing on Kierkegaard's title for the never written companion to *Sickness Unto Death*: 'Fundamental Healing' (*Helbredelse i Grunden*).

Works of Love, though, contains most of what Kierkegaard would have written and is the central text for understanding Kierkegaard's optimism: After distinguishing between the preferential love of eroticism, friendship and family (*Elskov*) and that mandated in the New Testament to extend to every other person as neighbour (*Kjerlighed*), Kierkegaard identifies this latter as a presupposition, the eternal, immutable given in the heart of God and in the heart of his creation, humankind (WL 34ff, 58, 158, 185–94, 251–2, 292–303). Of God's love, Kierkegaard writes:

As the quiet lake is fed deep down by the flow of hidden springs, which no eye sees, so a human being's love is grounded, still more deeply, in God's love. If there were no spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither a little lake nor a person's love. As the still waters begin obscurely in the deep spring, so a man's love mysteriously begins in God's love (WL 27).

The 'ground' or foundation of human existence and Christian faith is God's love. As God's love resulted in creation, so it providentially continues to be constructive. Kierkegaard calls this love the 'sprout in the grain' (*Spiren i Kornet*) (WL 207), the love which constantly 'builds up' (*opbygger*) (WL 205ff). It grows and promotes growth by presupposing the presence of love in the human heart and, in turn, in the neighbour. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard does not simply juxtapose the vertical relationship of God and humankind with the horizontal relationship of neighbour to neighbour. Rather, Kierkegaard entwines them and makes them interpenetrate. God is the source of every person and is the 'third party' in every human relationship. God's love is not only the source but also the pattern for human love: creative, nurturing, enduring, forging.

I have also called Kierkegaard's optimism incarnational because his theology is Christocentric. Christ is the visible, accessible, human pattern, the sacrament of God's grace and love. In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard wrote:

Here one rightly sees the subjectivity in Christianity. Generally the poet, artist, etc. is criticized for introducing himself into his work. But this is precisely what God does; this he does in Christ. And precisely this is Christianity. Creation is really fulfilled only when God has included himself in it. Before Christ, God was included of course, in the creation, but as an invisible mark, something like the water-mark in paper. But in the Incarnation, creation is fulfilled by God's including himself in it (JP 1391).

Christ also comes as the prototype to be imitated, the suffering servant to be followed (JP 1852, 2503, 2481, 1862, 1877). It is the moment of the Christological dialectic that is most easily read in the writings of Kierkegaard's later years. Yet the other affirmative, optimistic moment did not disappear. It

remained, more than anything else, the baseline, the assumed given. Despite the sheer quantity of the prototype Christology and of negativity in general, Kierkegaard's incarnational optimism can nevertheless be traced throughout the writings of the later years. In the journal accounts of his Holy Week and Easter experiences in 1848 (JP 6131–5, 2465, 1942, 1213–4, 1123) and in the *Christian Discourses* (CDisc 101–54, 197–210, 269–73, 289–95, 297–303) from the same year, Kierkegaard gave voice to his rediscovery of God's forgiveness and abiding grace. The *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* from 1851 also express this optimism. Kierkegaard chose as his texts Luke 7, 47, 'It is the man who is forgiven little who shows little love', and I Peter 4, 8 'Love covers over many a sin' (FSE/JFY 9–16, 18–25). In the preface Kierkegaard connects this optimism with his social criticism:

... Christianly every person, absolutely every person is equally near to God. And how is he near and equally near? Loved by him. So there is equality, infinite equality between man and man ... (FSE/JFY 5)

Similar expressions are to be found in *Training in Christianity, For Self Examination* and in *Judge for Yourself*. Even in the heat of the public attack, between numbers 7 and 8 of *The Instant*, on 3 September 1855, Kierkegaard published a discourse he had delivered at Copenhagen's Citadel Church in 1851 (FSE/JFY 223–40). Entitled 'God's Unchangeableness', its text was from Kierkegaard's favourite epistle, that of James, Luther's 'straw letter', in which faith is held valid only insofar as it results in praxis. Kierkegaard focused on James 1, 17–21: 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation. . .' Here, in counterpoint to the negativity of his public attack, Kierkegaard speaks directly of the permanence of God's presence and of the unshakeable fidelity and depth of his love. Though God's omnipotence and omnipresence can strike fear and trembling into the human heart, the epiphany of 'God's Unchangeableness' is not the wrathful Judge but the Father of lights, the giver of every good and perfect gift. Kierkegaard piles image upon image to convey the infinite goodness of God, the truly good news of his grace and love, in particular the images of the spring/source employed earlier in *Works of Love* (*Kilde, Kildevæld, Grund*).

Finally, in this incarnational optimism, the ethical dimension is clearly affirmed. Kierkegaard does not merely express worshipful awe at God's grace and love. Rather, he points to God's human face, Christ the saviour and pattern/prototype. What Kierkegaard opposed in his church and society was Christian lethargy, 'spiritlessness', an easy, cheapened gospel that christened the prevailing social structure and its values. In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard called this a misuse of Christ as gift.

Luther is entirely correct in what he says in the preface to his sermons about the distinction between Christ as pattern and as gift. I am quite conscious of the fact that I have moved in the direction of Christ as pattern. But something must be kept in mind in this regard. Luther was confronted by the exaggerated misuse of Christ as pattern; therefore he accentuates the opposite. But Luther has long since been victorious in Protestantism and Christ has been completely forgotten as the pattern and the whole thing has become pretence in hidden inwardness. . . (JP 2503).

Kierkegaard's attempt to 'introduce Christianity into Christendom', then, involved a refocus on Christ, a proclamation of what he understood as the New Testament's Christological dialectic and its praxis in everyday life. A journal entry from 1849 suggests Kierkegaard's strategic use of this dialectic.

. . . Yet it must be firmly maintained that Christ has not come to the world only to set an example for us. In that case we would have law and works righteousness again. He comes to save us and to present the example. This very example should humble us, teach us how infinitely far away we are from resembling the ideal. When we humble ourselves, Christ is pure compassion. And in our striving to approach the prototype, the prototype is itself again our very help. It alternates; when we are striving, then he is the prototype; and when we stumble, lose courage, etc then he is the love which helps us up, and then he is the prototype again. . . (JP 334).

Very early in his days as a theological student, Kierkegaard noted that Christ's 'entire purpose' was activity for others—the proclamation of the good news for the poor and suffering, the healing of the sick and so on (JP 273). Even in his recognition of Christ as gift and saviour, as 'pure compassion', Kierkegaard continued to point to praxis, as James' epistle claimed, as the necessary consequence of hearing God's word (Deuser 1981). True imitation of Christ was not pious brooding on His passion and death, nor was it just the intense inward suffering Kierkegaard so copiously described. And it was certainly other than regular church attendance and bourgeois civility. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard clarified both his creation-grace theology, his 'incarnational optimism', and the mandate to be like Christ in ministry for others.

As Christianity's good news is contained in the doctrine of humankind's kinship with God, so its task is humankind's likeness to God. But God is love; therefore we can resemble God only in loving, just as, according to the apostle's words, we can only 'be God's co-workers in love. . .' Go and do likewise (WL 74–75).

While, Kierkegaard did not speak of 'eschatological prophecy', as do contemporary theologians, he nevertheless presented a Christ who fulfilled the model in Isaiah 61, 1–2, also heralded in Luke 4, 16–22, one anointed by the spirit of God:

to bring the good news to the poor,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives
 and to the blind new sight,
 to set the downtrodden free,
 to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

Such a prophet affirms the kingdom of God by critical witness against social, political and religious institutions in which God's justice and mercy are absent. Such a prophet's message includes the personal, inward conversion or *metanoia* we have so long associated with the existentialist Kierkegaard, the poet of the 'single individual'. Yet in what Sløk (1978) has called Kierkegaard's 'one-man revolution', and Paul Müller (1982) the 'permanent reformation', Kierkegaard made it clear that conversion is meaningless and faith empty without the right praxis of God's justice and love. We have here, then, a Kierkegaard whom most students of the modern history of Christianity have not encountered. To be sure, the late Kierkegaard's affirmation and protest is not identical to that of Bonhoeffer or Thomas Merton or the Berrigans. Neither is Kierkegaard's radicalism directly comparable to the efforts of contemporary 'liberation' theologians such as Gutierrez (1973), Sobrino (1978), Segundo (1978), among others. However, in recovering the late Kierkegaard we discover perhaps the first modern theologian to present both criticism and optimism. For some time, we have recognized in Kierkegaard's intense concentration on subjectivity and the complexity of the self a kindred spirit, a thinker both in tune with yet critical of our own modern consciousness (Berger 1970, 1973, 1977, 1979). My wager is that an even deeper kinship is recognizable in the late Kierkegaard's concentration of God's love as 'fundamental healing' and on the necessity of Christian praxis in everyday life. Against the view that the late Kierkegaard's thinking is worthless, pathological negativity, in short an enterprise in misanthropy and a distortion of Christianity, I would argue that he demonstrates religion's truly revolutionary, liberating possibilities (Berger 1969). This he does, as I have described here, by asserting Christianity's potential to stand in prophetic criticism of political and religious structures and ideologies. And in his incarnational optimism, Kierkegaard celebrates creation and the gospel's hope, the creative, nurturing love in the heart of God which we should also presuppose in the heart of humankind.

NOTES

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- 2 Here and for subsequent references to Kierkegaard's published works and journals, I will cite from the available translations, according to the *sigla* for Kierkegaard's works listed in the bibliography, although my research is based on the Danish texts, SV and Pap. Full citation of the Danish texts is available, along with more elaborate discussion of the late Kierkegaard, in my essays cited in note 4 below.
- 3 On Kierkegaard scholarship, see Nordentoft 1973, 8–24, Plekon 1980b, 1981b and on his social, historical and ecclesiastical background, see Kirmmse 1977, Plekon 1983a, 1983d.
- 4 My own work on the late Kierkegaard can be found in a number of essays, among them Plekon 1981b, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b.
- 5 On Kierkegaard's social thought see Nordentoft 1973, 1977, 1978, Kirmmse 1977, 1981, Sløk 1978, 1980, Elrod 1981, Deuser 1974, 1980, J. Bukdahl 1961, J. K. Bukdahl 1981, Adorno 1966, Mackey 1971, 1972, Crites 1971, 1972, Taylor 1980, Plekon 1980a, 1981c, 1981d, 1983c, 1983d.

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