

Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence*

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Christopher A. P. Nelson

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In this much anticipated sequel to her *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), Sylvia Walsh has turned her attention, and ours, to what are variously referred to as the “later,” or “religious,” or specifically “Christian” writings of Søren Kierkegaard. By such appellations, commentators on Kierkegaard’s writings universally intend the works written between 1846 and 1851 and thus sandwiched between the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (published in 1846 under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus), and the various articles, essays, and pamphlets that comprise Kierkegaard’s explosive assault upon the established order of Christendom in the last 2 years of his life (1854–1855). And while it has become something of a commonplace to refer to the whole of the post-1846 production of Kierkegaard as his “second authorship,” or the “second period” in an authorship that comprises just two periods, Walsh effectively suggests a more appropriate division into three periods: the early and predominantly poetic production of 1843–1846, the later and specifically Christian production of 1846–1851, and the putatively culminating production of the attack literature of 1854–1855. Indeed, central among Walsh’s contentions is that neither of the ‘end’ periods, nor the authorship conceived as a whole, is adequately comprehended without a thorough understanding of the developments undergone by Kierkegaard and witnessed in the writings of this ostensibly ‘middle’ period. This period, according to Walsh, is governed throughout by a single question: What does it mean to be a Christian? And throughout the several works authored in this period, Walsh proposes that Kierkegaard develops and maintains a single answer: Christian existence is characterized by “the dialect of inversion,” or “inverse dialectic.” The elucidation of this peculiar dialectic is the subject of this book.

In its most generic formulation, the dialectic of inversion consists in that mode of existential comportment in and through which “the positive is known and expressed through

C. A. P. Nelson
South Texas College, McAllen, USA

C. A. P. Nelson (✉)
3201 West Pecan Boulevard, McAllen, TX 78501, USA
e-mail: the_lessar_gonzo@hotmail.com

the negative.” In four successive chapters, Walsh proceeds to elucidate this dialectic more specifically in terms of four complementary qualifications: the consciousness of sin / faith and forgiveness (Chapter one), the possibility of offense / faith (Chapter two), dying to the world and self-denial / new life, love, and hope in the spirit (Chapter three), and suffering / joy and consolation (Chapter four). In each case the positive, or what might be called the promise of Christian existence, is known and expressed by the negative, or what might be called the existential comportment of the striving Christian. Inversely correlated, these complements bear something of a qualitative proportionality: forgiveness is (humanly) expressed by a deepening of the consciousness of sin; faith is (humanly) expressed by a widening of the possibility of offense; new life in the spirit is (humanly) expressed by dying to everything else; and joy is (humanly) expressed by a heightening of suffering. Such is the relationship that obtains between the divine and the human individual when the former is conceived as something qualitatively other than the merely latent potentialities immanent in the latter. Being a Christian means becoming the living expression of this relationship.

That something like an “inverse dialectic” is operative in Kierkegaard’s ‘directly’ religious writings will surely not be contested by anyone familiar with these still relatively underappreciated works. That the recognition of this dialectic of inversion, as the essential qualification of Christian existence, constitutes the “central achievement” of Kierkegaard’s thought, however, is a more ambitious thesis. And to her credit, Walsh has argued compellingly that this is in fact the case. Always mindful of the danger inherent in any endeavor to clarify conceptually what is offered for personal appropriation—i.e., discourses that are meant to be read, and read aloud, and read aloud to oneself, and ultimately read aloud to oneself before God—Walsh has, at the very least, secured the “academic” justification anticipated in her Introduction. For, not only has she offered a thoroughly engaging account of the significance of the second period of Kierkegaard’s authorship—a period relatively neglected by scholars because either (a) the writings themselves are relatively uninteresting, or (b) the writings themselves prohibit the adoption of an academic posture in their regard—but Walsh has also offered an invigorating invitation to revisit the writings of the more ‘interesting’ periods as well. The writings of the early period—those through which most readers are introduced to ‘Kierkegaard,’ e.g., *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Philosophical Fragments*—are now viewed as preparatory exercises. The writings of the last period—those in which Kierkegaard is most willing to play the part of unapologetic social critic—are now viewed, albeit tentatively, as products of a certain recognition. What lies between is the terrain that Walsh has mapped according to the rubric of the inverse dialectic.

Suffice it to say, in the growing literature on Kierkegaard—all of which is perhaps worth reading in one sense or another—*Living Christianly* may be numbered among the very few must-reads. As a guide to the writings of the middle period in particular, Walsh’s contribution is now indispensable. The importance of Walsh’s admittedly academic exposition, however, extends well beyond the province of the community of Kierkegaard scholars. In the words of Chesterton (now practically cliché), “the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” As far as either of them lets on, both Kierkegaard and Walsh would appear to endorse this sentiment (although one and perhaps both of them would want to replace “difficult” with “humanly impossible”). The important thing is to get as clear as possible about what it means to be a Christian. But this is important, not because it constitutes one more discrete entry in one’s intellectual inventory, but because it permits, or rather forces one to make a choice: Will I or will I not become a Christian? And in an age where “the tendency to turn religion into a feel-good form of aesthetic entertainment that reflects and reinforces the basic values and goals of secular society rather than critiquing them from the standpoint of a higher spiritual ideal is perhaps even greater . . . than in Kierkegaard’s

time,” the epithet that adorns the title page of the last book published in Kierkegaard’s middle period (*For Self-Examination*) springs to mind as a most-fitting summons to Walsh’s *Living Christianly*—a work that is herewith and without reservation, “Recommended to the Present Age.”