

RADICAL THEOLOGIES



KIERKEGAARD AND THE REFUSAL OF TRANSCENDENCE

STEVEN SHAKESPEARE



Radical Theologies

Radical Theologies is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have entered or seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

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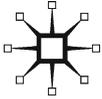
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TRANSCENDENCE

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Series Preface

Radical Theologies encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of twenty-first century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power.”

Radical Theologies reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, *Radical Theologies* expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as Rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of god theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.

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Abbreviations

Kierkegaard: Danish Works

SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (København: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1997–2007).

Kierkegaard: English Translations

- CA *The Concept of Anxiety* (Vigilius Haufniensis), ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- CI *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Johannes Climacus), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1992).
- EO I-II *Either/Or*, 2 vols (ed. Victor Eremita), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- FSE *For Self-Examination in For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- FT *Fear and Trembling* (Johannes de Silentio) in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).

- JC *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- KJN *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks, 7 Vols*—, ed. Bruce Kirmmse et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007–)
- PC *Practice in Christianity* (Anti-Climacus; ed. Søren Kierkegaard), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- PF *Philosophical Fragments* (Johannes Climacus), in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- R *Repetition* (Constantin Constantius) in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- SUD *The Sickness unto Death* (Anti-Climacus; ed. Søren Kierkegaard), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- WA *Without Authority*, ed. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- WL *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Heiberg's "On The Significance of Philosophy"

- OSP J. L. Heiberg, "On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age" in ed. and trans. Jon Stewart, *Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age and Other Texts* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 2005).

Spinoza's *Ethics*

In Chapter 7, the following abbreviations are used to make references to the *Ethics*:

P = Proposition

D (following a Roman numeral) = Definition

D (following P + an Arabic numeral) = the demonstration of the proposition

Cor = Corollary

S = Scholium

The translation used is from *The Essential Spinoza: Ethics and Related Writings*, ed. Michael Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

Introduction

Two Stories

There are two stories about Kierkegaard. One story goes like this.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings. As a result, he rules out a direct knowledge of God. At the same time, Kierkegaard faces a Danish bourgeois culture in which people assume they are born Christians, while living their lives in entirely worldly, aesthetic terms. All this is given an intellectual veneer by those wicked three-headed Hegelians, who, as we all know, created a totalitarian, immanent system that consumed all freedom, denied transcendence, and locked up God within the confines of a speculative paragraph.

Therefore, so the story goes, Kierkegaard had to turn to indirect communication: to a multiplication of pseudonyms, genres, and other devices. He did this so that he could smuggle Christianity back into a world that thought it was already Christian. And all the while, he could be true to the otherness of God and the paradoxical relationship between time and eternity, brought to its uttermost extremity in the absolute paradox of Christ, the God-man. When Kierkegaard stresses subjectivity, it is to challenge the arrogant claims of speculative knowledge and aesthetic consumption. He is by no means seeking to deny the objectivity of God or Christ. Indeed, his whole project underlines the otherness of God and the inability of human beings to know God without the condition for that knowledge being provided by God in the paradoxical event of the incarnation.

The structure of this story means that those aspects of Kierkegaard's texts that seem to call into question the status of Christian dogmas—poetry, indirect communication, negativity—can be recuperated and enlisted to serve an existentially inflected Christian orthodoxy. David Law, for example, in his book *Kierkegaard as a Negative Theologian* argues that Kierkegaard's work is full of apophatic motifs.¹ He defines these widely, so they include not only the transcendence and incomprehensibility of God but also the hidden inwardness of the individual and the limits of reason in

grasping existential situations. He ends by arguing that Kierkegaard is in fact more apophatic than the apophatics because he denies any union of self with God or the possibility of any higher gnosis. In other words, the heretical strains of negative theology are firmly controlled. God is and remains wholly other, an otherness that the Christological paradox only confirms and entrenches. The proper way in which to approach God negatively is therefore via the framework provided by the orthodox Chalcedonian definition of Christ's two natures.

That's the first story. I want to tell a different one.

On my account, Kierkegaard's focus on the paradox, far from preserving the transcendence of God, not only involves but also requires an assertion of identity between the transcendent and the immanent. As is well known, Kierkegaard's texts envisage a complex interaction between the what and the how of faith. On one level, objective and subjective modes of relating to the truth are set out: objectively, the emphasis is on the "what" or the content of truth; subjectively, the emphasis is upon the "how" or the mode in which the truth is appropriated. If this were all to be said, then we could easily conclude that, for Kierkegaard, the object of faith is still vital, but given its infinity and eternity, it cannot be grasped directly. Therefore, one must relate to it with the appropriate existential passion. Certainty is left aside to make room for faith.

This structure is still apophatic. Thought and being are separated in existence. Discursive, conceptual thought and language cannot successfully comprehend the eternal. Therefore, we must negate the discursive so that the understanding steps aside before the paradox and the existing individual becomes contemporary with Christ. On this model, the temporal and the eternal are clearly still held apart even in their paradoxical coincidence. It allows Johannes Climacus, author of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, to assert that, though existence can never be systematized by any existing individual, nevertheless it does constitute a system—for God. The implication is that a two-world cosmology remains in place. From the point of view of the eternal, existence is neither open-ended nor incomprehensible. By condescending into time, the eternal raises us, if not to the higher gnosis of the mystics, at least to an anticipation of the eternal in a contemporaneity with Christ that evades historical relativity. Sacred history, in which the believer participates, transcends mundane history.

If this were as far as Kierkegaard's writings went, they would be open to some obvious objections. Let's take the *Postscript* for example. This is the text most heavily relied upon by Law and other commentators as the apogee of Kierkegaard's articulation of his existential critique of idealism. The first problem is that the text contradicts itself (as I will establish at more length in chapter 6). It states that existence is a system for God,

but, by its own logic, there is no standpoint from within existence from which such an assertion could validly be made. It assumes the God's eye view it seeks to establish. Second, the whole premise of the *Postscript* and the earlier *Philosophical Fragments* is that a person's eternal happiness can have an historical point of departure. This establishes the difference between Christianity and Socratic recollection, for example. For the latter, the teacher and the historical circumstances of the teaching are vanishing occasions, mere catalysts to enable the learner to grasp a truth he/she has always known, but forgotten. In Christianity, the learner does not possess the condition for knowing the truth and must be given it by the god. The historical moment of encounter therefore becomes essential.

However, the closer we look, the more the historical disappears. The historical cannot be perceived directly, for it is intrinsically "illusiv" (the Danish implies fraud or deception) (PF, 81; SKS 4, 280). The past appears fixed and certain, but in fact it possesses an inescapable contingency, based on the fact that anything historical has come into existence. No event ever loses the dynamic contingency of that coming into existence. Doubt about the historical can only be terminated by a freedom commensurate with its own free contingency. This act is called *Tro* (faith). Faith is, we are told, an "expression of will [*en Villiens-Yttring*]" (PF, 83; SKS 4, 282).

A corollary of this is that no historical occasion for faith can be related to as a past event. Relative contemporaneity with the event or reliability of sources about the event become irrelevant. Indeed, the whole method of the *Fragments* is deductive. It is a thought experiment proceeding from the aforementioned axiom that there is a historical point of departure for an eternal happiness. It then proceeds to deduce from that axiom the kind of manifestation of the eternal in time that would be the appropriate occasion for faith. This turns out to look very much like the incarnation—the eternal lowering itself to our level and appearing incognito, so as to preserve human freedom and avoid an illusory appearance of direct communication (e.g., as if the god would be revealed through signs and wonders).

Hence, the exposition in *Fragments* is continually interrupted by a voice that takes objection to the thought experiment as an obvious act of plagiarism. This is no experiment at all, but merely a restatement of the well-known Christian narrative of the incarnation. For some commentators, this proves Climacus' (and Kierkegaard's) point: the incarnation is not something a human being can make up. It comes from the outside, as an unanticipated act of God. The experiment deconstructs itself and reveals that human understanding must give way before divine initiative.

I disagree. The logic of the text is that the historical point of departure for faith is inseparable from the act of faith itself. Another way of putting this is that there is an identity between discovery and production in the act

of faith. The reason for this is twofold. First, any historical event requires a willed act of assent if it is to be treated as an actual datum rather than a mere possibility. Second, the paradox is strictly incommensurable with any empirically accessible appearance. Therefore, any historical event and any appearance could be the occasion for paradoxical faith just as much as any other.

Such an argument undoes Climacus' claim in the *Postscript* that God's eternity can be kept in transcendent reserve. It is not just that we can have no possible basis for claiming that God sees existence as a whole. It is that existence simply is not the kind of thing that could be "seen-as-a-whole" without converting its contingency into necessity, and therefore negating it. Indeed, Climacus himself goes as far as to suggest that God is bound by his own incognito. It cannot be a temporary stage to be set aside to reveal God's true glory. God is trapped by the incarnation, by the paradox. And there is a short step from this claim to a fully blown Death of God theology.

I am suggesting that the paradox, and the concept of history behind it, deflates the kind of apophatic strategy that Law and others claim for Kierkegaard. Law keeps Christian doctrine and the objectivity of God and Christ in reserve. They are the eternal (or at least nonhistorical) *what* to which we must respond with an existential *how* of subjective passion. However, this ignores the logic of what Kierkegaard's texts are saying, a logic that entails that the paradox is not simply a way of delivering transcendence, but a fundamental *deformation* of transcendence.

The *Postscript* claims that "Being a Christian is defined not by the 'what' of Christianity but by the 'how' of the Christian. The 'how' can fit only one thing, the absolute paradox" (CUP, 610–11; SKS 7, 554). In a related journal entry, Kierkegaard expands, "there is a How that has the property that when *it* is precisely indicated, the What is also given—that this is the How of 'faith'. Here indeed, maximum inwardness is in fact shown to be objectivity" (KJN 6, 420; SKS 22, 414). Again, an 1850 notebook entry reads, "God himself is indeed this: *how* one involves oneself with him" (KJN 7, 219; SKS 23, 215). I propose that these statements should be read in a manner fitting to their content: not a resolution of the subjective/objective tension in favor of an ultimately secured object, but as the paradoxical identity and indifference of the objective and the subjective.

In this way, I hope you can see I am not arguing simply for a version of nonrealism, in which God is "no more than" a subjective projection of human ideals. In a sense, that would leave the terms of the subjective/objective opposition in place. Instead, Kierkegaard's texts displace that very opposition. Their indirect communication is not a circuitous route