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# Notes and Comments

## KIERKEGAARD AND THE THEOLOGIANS\*

THERE ARE THEOLOGIANS who may have heard something about and who may also have read something of Kierkegaard but who have never gone through his school. They have not had to stand up to him. Somehow they have got by him. Whether their thinking is more orthodox or more liberal, more pietistic or evangelical or social or political, more speculative or more activist, whether their strength lies in preaching or teaching, in pastoral care or in learned science, these men are characterized by a cheerfulness of speech and conduct which in the long run never fails them. Their vocation as such constitutes no temptation (*Anfechtung*) to them. They know "what is what" and thus are not aware of any embarrassments. They know Christianity and their position as its representatives to be securely fitted into the structure of the other elements and functions of human society. They are glad to see Christianity, and with it their own activity, sanctioned and basically approved by all good men. Among these good men they are not in an alien place, but rather at home as part of them. Apart from occasional harmless disturbances they are at peace with themselves, with the Church, with the world, and so also with God. Kierkegaard lived, suffered, and struggled in vain for them.

There are other theologians who have worked themselves deeper and deeper into Kierkegaard, so much so that they could not work themselves out of him any more. They are men who thus failed to graduate from the senior year of Kierkegaard's school. The infinite qualitative difference between God and man, with all its consequences, has eaten itself right into them. They see themselves and the others, the Church and the world, surrounded by nothing but threatening negations. Their vocation is to them one continuous temptation (*Anfechtung*), the genuine, authentic Christianity one continuous attack on all other "Christendoms." The salvation of human existence is their concern in their ever fresh cognition of its absolute questionableness. Their message: the vacuum is filled and it must be emptied again and again, made clean of what keeps filling it. Their sad pleasure or pleasant sadness is the irony which they see covering everything and with which they themselves cover everything: it is a seriousness which never allows them to be really serious, a smile which may never be laughter.

\*This article appeared first in the journal *Reforme*, No. 947 (May 11, 1963), under the title "Il y a des théologiens qui . . ." A few days later a German version of it was published in the *Kirchenblatt für die reformierte Schweiz*, Vol. 119, No. 10, under the title "Kierkegaard und die Theologen." Both this *Journal* and the translator, H. Martin Rumscheidt, are grateful to Professor Barth for permitting the publication of an English translation.

Even if, in practice, they do not imitate the master in all things—if, for example, they not only become engaged but also normally married—they nevertheless try to make plain, as much as is possible in their conduct and their teaching, and perhaps also in their writings and their books, that they seek neither to stand nor to lie down but to be in a state of suspension and that they are annoyed with their environment when it does not itself try to be in that same state. Kierkegaard has become a system for them.

A third kind of theologian also read Kierkegaard and went through his school (*ist durch seine Schule gegangen*)—but passed through it (*ist durch sie hindurchgegangen*). These men also experienced fright on account of him, they also were shaken by the vast otherness of his Christianity, by the newness of his message and the severity of his demands. The problematical character (*die Problematik*) of human existence uncovered by him gave them a fright also. They too could not put behind them the stimulation received from Kierkegaard; they too could no longer succumb to the slumber of a merely aesthetical piety. They too could not return to the flesh-pots of a bourgeois “Christianism” and a churchiness of an ancient or a modern colouration, never again ignore or suppress the “No” uttered in the gospel to the world and the Church. But they—and this led them beyond Kierkegaard—could now just hear it and witness to it as the “No” enfolded in God’s “Yes,” witness to it as the fire of his love which aims not only at this or that individual but at the entire godless world and seeks to be proclaimed as such by the Church. Only thus could they understand and give validity precisely to the incisiveness of this “No.” It lost its philosophical, its axiomatic character. Without thereby becoming silent, the “No” could no longer be the law imposed on them and the others. It could no longer be their theme. Their desperation changed into confident desperation (*desperatio fiducialis*, Luther). Their vocation and the temptation (*Anfechtung*) confronting them in it even now was subsumed under the sign of hope. They found the comfort of the ever so pitiful Christians, the comfort which is for the whole world and so also for them in that which God, in the majesty of his free grace, has done, is still doing, and shall do again and conclusively, for and with man. There they sought it, instead of in something which man could be or do on his own for God. Resting on this they could not interchange theology, secretly or openly, with an existential philosophy; they could not fit theology directly or indirectly into the structures of such a philosophy. Similarly, they had to become really serious and also peal with laughter, just as they could become a little more human on that basis. They had no use any more for irony. They no longer felt a need of, and a desire for, the state of suspension. Instead they were permitted to learn to walk. But exactly for that they had to attend schools other than that of Kierkegaard.

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