

Kierkegaard and the Political

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Edited by

Alison Assiter and Margherita Tonon

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4061-0, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4061-3

CONTENTS

	Acknowledgements	vii
	Introduction	1
Chapter One	The Singular Universal: One More Time <i>David Wood</i>	7
Chapter Two	Kierkegaard, the Phantom of the Public and the Sexual Politics of Crowds <i>Christine Battersby</i>	27
Chapter Three	Love for Neighbours: Using Kierkegaard to respond to Žižek <i>Alison Assiter</i>	45
Chapter Four	Kierkegaard's "Aesthetic Age" and its Political Consequences <i>Thomas Wolstenholme</i>	63
Chapter Five	Suffering from Modernity, an Assessment of the Hegelian Cure <i>Margherita Tonon</i>	83
Chapter Six	A Fractured Dialectic: Kierkegaard and Political Ontology after Žižek <i>Michael O'Neill Burns</i>	103
	Bibliography	125
	List of Contributors	135
	Index	137

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to thank all the participants in the conference “Kierkegaard and the Political,” from which this volume emerged. The conference was hosted by the Department of Politics, Philosophy and International Relations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, in April 2010. But they would like to offer a huge thank you to Elisabeth Salverda whose work as a copy editor vastly exceeded what one would expect of someone in such a role. To our knowledge it is the first time she has ever done this kind of work.

INTRODUCTION

To address the issue of Kierkegaard and the political appears at first sight as a paradoxical task. The philosopher of inwardness and of irreducible individuality seems to have little to teach us about the sphere of the political: not only was this dimension never explicitly addressed in writings of the Danish philosopher, but also the positions he took with regard to such a domain were always marked by a strong critical attitude. Moreover, he appeared to be a conservative with regard to any movement towards democratisation and equality, opposing liberal democracy as well as socialism, while not refraining from taking up explicitly misogynous positions. With this in mind, one could easily dismiss Kierkegaardian philosophy as exclusively relevant to the private domain of individual existence and irremediably unable to speak to wider concerns such as those encountered in the public dimension. In fact, the Danish philosopher's emphasis on the irreducible singularity of existence seems to overlook all forms of participation in social and political institutions as a dangerous diversion from the important task of being and becoming oneself. For the sake of such a task, the only relation with the other that really matters is with the absolute otherness of God. Thus, at first sight, Kierkegaard's turn towards interiority and transcendence seems to take place at the expense of the political.

However, in spite of his emphasis on singularity, or perhaps precisely because of it, over the years Kierkegaard's philosophy has given rise to interpretations that recognise its relevance for the political. For instance, the crucial importance of ideas such as self-choice, earnestness and subjective passion are easily imported from the individual sphere into the realm of the political, coming to have a bearing on notions such as responsibility and commitment. In addition, Kierkegaard's accent on the irreducibility of the individual to the universal interestingly resonates in those forms of thinking that from the margins call into question the domination of an exclusionary model of reason. Similarly, Kierkegaard's rejection of the institutions and values of his time does not resolve itself in mere intellectual and spiritual isolation, but inaugurates a critique of the ills of his age, which is rich in social and political implications. Furthermore, the religious writings themselves, in outlining new models of self-other relations, offer potentially subversive ways of political resistance. In short, from Critical Theory to Existentialism, to Deconstruction and Feminist philosophy (even despite the scattered

misogynistic remarks of the Danish philosopher), the political potential of Kierkegaard's message never went undetected.

While the potential political ramifications of certain Kierkegaardian themes come into focus in the 20th century philosophical reception of the Danish philosopher, the available secondary literature never directly addresses the theme of the political as such.¹ This book sets itself the purpose of filling this gap, explicitly engaging with the political potential and implications of Kierkegaard's philosophy. The authors do so by both directly interrogating Kierkegaard's texts, in order to draw out his often implicit politics, by engaging with his critics and putting his thought in dialogue with other philosophical positions and traditions, as well as using Kierkegaard in order to interpret and respond to contemporary issues. The political Kierkegaard that emerges from such a new approach to the question is a paradoxical figure that stands in the tension between restoration and radical critique. On the one hand, the Danish philosopher was a self-proclaimed conservative and his understanding of religion, based on an asymmetric relation to a silent God, carries potentially regressive consequences. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's relational and radically contingent notion of the self represents an objection to the dominant liberal account of subjectivity, as well as a resource for an understanding of the subject which is aware of sexual difference. Moreover, his analyses of the ills of early capitalist society anticipate important aspects of 20th century social criticism. Even more radically, in his notion of agapeic love, understood as a task, there lies the possibility of the rise of a truly collective subject, beyond the limitations of the autonomous self.

Yet, writing about Kierkegaard and the political is by no means a straightforward matter: the Kierkegaardian oeuvre—both the pseudonymous texts and the religious discourses—offers little direct textual reference upon which to elaborate a Kierkegaardian “theory” of the political. For this reason, any inquiry concerning the political cannot

1. An exception to this are Mark Dooley's 2001 *The Politics of Exodus: Søren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility*, New York: Fordham University Press and Alison Assiter's 2009 *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory: Unfinished Selves*, London/New York: Continuum. Another helpful recent resource for the study of Kierkegaard and politics is *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries—Philosophy, Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Jon Stewart, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

simply rely on a systematic approach to Kierkegaard's work, but instead needs to organise itself around a specific text or cluster of texts. The most relevant textual reference for an investigation of the political is the anonymously published *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, where Kierkegaard, analysing the fictitious characters of a novel, outlines a critique of his time through a confrontation with the immediately preceding age. It is not by accident that this is such a topical reference for a political reading of Kierkegaard, insofar as it can be read as an early essay in culture critique and a thoroughgoing and transparent examination of modernity at its very outset. Kierkegaard analyses the mutations that take place in the public space and the increasing influence of new social agents, such as the media. Most importantly, he denounces the impersonal character of the force that takes hold of public life—which he calls “levelling”—and its fateful consequences, first and foremost the reduction of any social or intellectual interaction to a quantitative law and its increasing irrationality. Such an analysis is particularly insightful insofar as the examined phenomena do not only concern the public space of the city of Copenhagen, but can also be inscribed into a larger trend that interests nineteenth century Europe and go so far as to touch contemporary globalised media-dominated culture.

Two Ages: A Literary Review is thus a pivotal text for a political reading of Søren Kierkegaard, yet the pseudonymous writings and the signed religious works, as well as the notes collected in the papers and diaries, are replete with interesting material for such a reading. The authors' textual selection, however, has the merit of avoiding the most commonly addressed Kierkegaardian texts, those which most obviously engage with ethical or political themes, privileging instead the writings which address the topic in a more subtle, indirect, or even controversial manner. For example, writings such as the second part of *Either/Or* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are not central to the present discussion despite the fact that they engage with what traditionally may appear as one of the most obvious political themes, that is, the question of self-choice and passionate decision. In addition, *Fear and Trembling*, another topical text for the political, is not tackled directly, even if it is present in the background of many of the contributions.

A good deal of attention is paid instead to the aesthetic writings, insofar as they outline elements of culture criticism and modernity critique. Particularly important here is the essay on “The Tragic in Ancient Drama

Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama,” where the salient features of modernity—individual isolation, the disintegration of communities and institutions—are examined against the backdrop of antiquity. *The Seducer’s Diary*, on the other hand, is examined insofar as it sheds light on Kierkegaard’s notion of the feminine, and on the emancipatory notion of relationality which is attached to it. An in-depth examination is similarly reserved for *The Concept of Anxiety*, where the anxiety of freedom that qualifies self-positing is used to exemplify a socio-political situation where no objective truths are given, and instead the subject is called to engage in the creation of a truth in becoming.

The religious production—in particular the pseudonymous texts—are also interrogated, bearing in mind the question of whether Kierkegaard’s uncompromising and irreducibly singular ideal of faith avoids lapsing into fanaticism and fundamentalism. On the other hand, the otherworldly faith of the religious pseudonyms can also be seen as the strongest objection and opposition—a way towards a different type of politics—to the alienating logic that dominates social life. A similar type of answer is also worked out with the help of the signed religious writings, in particular the *Works of Love*, where the notion of love for one’s neighbour—as care for the stranger, and even for the abuser—lies at the core of new unconventional forms of political praxis.

David Wood’s article centres on the question around the meaning of being religious today and its relation to politics. Wood identifies the regressive and reactionary tendency of religion, but also its potential source of resistance. In particular, Kierkegaard’s asymmetrical and non-dialogical conception of the relationship with the divine can be seen as reinforcing aspects of the bad reality such as patriarchy. However, Wood suggests that from a seemingly conservative position, Kierkegaard’s approach to the religious can provide tools to outline a more progressive notion of the self as well as ontological, metaphysical and ethical resources for the political. Wood identifies several ways in which Kierkegaard’s philosophy can help us to overcome the dominating notion of liberal subjectivity by outlining a new kind of relationality that reinvests immanence with transcendence.

By examining the *Two Ages*, Christine Battersby asks how the individual can counter the levelling of the crowd in such a way that makes an impact on the political. She comes to the conclusion that the notion of the individual is an anti-political category which does not constitute a

challenge to the social order. It is in the aesthetic writings that Battersby finds more resources for the political, specifically in the account of the female self as a relational self which is entangled in relations of dependency and unequal power structures. Battersby suggests that, starting from a similar account of the self, it would be possible with Iris Marion Young to outline a political theory that is aware of relations of oppression and domination and can differentiate degrees of responsibility. Kierkegaard's contribution to political theory however remains limited, insofar as he does not furnish us with any model of resistance or criteria to distinguish abusive and non-abusive forms of power.

Alison Assiter responds to Žižek's reading of Foucault's interpretation of the Iranian revolution as well as to Žižek's critical reading of Kierkegaard's love of one's neighbour. She argues that Kierkegaard's notion of neighbourly love offers a notion of sublimity similar to that found by Foucault in the Iranian revolution, and an idea of freedom that overcomes determinism, thus outlining a "universal" subject and laying bare the limitations and delusion of the autonomous self. Such a subject is able to overcome the anxiety which is generated by the bankruptcy of the goals of the people as a collective. Assiter maintains that the incredibly difficult task of agapeic love founds a relationship akin to the sublime, and allows us to act as part of the whole humanity, truly as a collective subject.

Thomas Wolstenholme examines Kierkegaard's definition of his time as an aesthetic age in *Two Ages: A Literary Review* and inquires into the correspondence between the socio-political structure of a time and the prevailing existential way of life. While such correspondence is not to be understood deterministically, Wolstenholme argues that specific socio-political arrangements favour a certain type of existential comportment over another. This brings us beyond a merely subjectivistic perspective and links the individual existential endeavours to the whole of society. According to Wolstenholme, a task for politics is to examine whether the politics that it tries to implement favours or hampers the existential development of the subject.

Margherita Tonon's article considers Kierkegaard's account of individual suffering in modern society in the light of Axel Honneth's Hegelian characterisations of such a malaise. Tonon addresses the merits and limitations of Hegel's proposed cure and identifies Kierkegaard's rejection of such a cure in his refusal to recognise an underlying rational structure that permeates reality. Following Lukács and Adorno's

interpretation, Tonon suggests that categories such as alienation and reification are more apt to capture the coercion and irrationality experienced by the Kierkegaardian individuality in modern society. In Tonon's reading, Kierkegaard's turn towards inwardness, however, leaves the contradictions of modernity unchallenged and, in doing so, even calls into question the possibility of the salvation of the individual self.

Michael O'Neill Burns, by assessing Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Kierkegaard, argues that Kierkegaard's political potential lies in his ontological project more than in his ethical or anthropological considerations. The leap of faith lays bare the ontologically inconsistent and fractured nature of reality. This sheds new light on the much criticised turn towards inwardness, which is instead understood as a preparatory moment for every political action. Burns submits that Kierkegaard's implicit ontology of contingency—centered upon that radical interruption which is the leap—creates the conditions for rigorously thinking through the possibility of socio-political novelty and intervention.

Overall, therefore, the book sets out to challenge the assumption that there are few resources in Kierkegaard for an analysis of the political. It also raises serious doubts about the claim that Kierkegaard focuses on the individual at the expense of the community or the whole. Whilst the collection does not produce a single perspective on Kierkegaard and the political, it provides resources that might indeed challenge the dominant liberal model in political philosophy, of the subject as an abstract and autonomous rational self.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SINGULAR UNIVERSAL: ONE MORE TIME

DAVID WOOD

Kierkegaard may be an essentially religious thinker but what does it mean to be a religious thinker today? Does it mark a detachment from the political or take one to its very heart?

My earliest philosophical hero as an undergraduate at Keele was Anthony Flew, a hard-bitten atheist whose regular public debates with a campus Christian scientist were the stuff of legend. Son of a Methodist minister, he turned atheist at 15. I came to associate atheism with intellectual freedom and enlightenment. Not long ago, he shocked me by turning deist at the age of 81, after accepting a version of the argument from intelligent design.¹ More to the point, within the continental tradition, Levinas has operated as the thin end of a wedge that has opened up what has almost become an industry of postmodern theology, with names like Marion, Nancy, Vattimo, Agamben, Derrida, and in the US, Caputo, Keller and Kearney all strongly championing a new respectability to a certain thinking about God, or at least “God,” or the divine. This too was a shock to one taught by deconstruction to connect the very idea of God with a metaphysical will-o’-the-wisp, a “transcendental signified”. Unlike Flew, however, this discourse, often drawing on a Catholic heritage, while typically eschewing a personal God, understands the religious in what we might broadly call an ethical, rather than a substantive sense. At the same time, we have been witness to an extraordinary rise in the unashamed politicisation of religious belief. Žižek inverts Dostoyevsky’s caution by saying that “If there is a God, then anything is permitted” (especially blowing up innocent bystanders) (Žižek 2012). Religion, whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish is repeatedly marshalled as a justification of public, even state, violence. This applies to US military intervention in other countries, to Islamic extremism, to Jewish territorial claims to Jerusalem, and to the murder of abortion doctors. What Kierkegaard dubbed Christendom has often been at the forefront of intolerance. The Catholic church has been shown to be deeply complicit in permissive attitudes to child-molestation, the American Episcopal Church has refused

to recognise gay priests, and Christian evangelicals have taken the lead in resistance to acknowledging anthropogenic climate change, or indeed climate change as such, not to mention evolution. Women have borne the brunt of religious dogmatism. American Christian churches have taken the lead in resisting the availability of abortion and contraception especially in parts of the world where birth control is a vital need. It is increasingly thought perfectly legitimate for these religious preferences to inform not just domestic public policy, but also foreign aid to those with quite different religious views. And in the United States, with few exceptions (Quakers, Universalist Unitarian Church), churches have resisted the ordination of women into the clergy, and some (like the Southern Baptists) have even reversed their earlier willingness to ordain women (2000). To be fair, Žižek also recognises, and so should we, that

religion is one of the possible places from which one can deploy critical doubts about today's society. It has become one of the sites of resistance. (2008, 82)

But as we have seen, religion seems to be an equal opportunity resister, resisting, for example, the protection of children, the equality of women, as well as being in the forefront of famine, poverty relief and so on. And it should not be surprising that in an increasingly secularised world, in which many meanings, values, rituals and traditions are being challenged and replaced by those with greater utility function, religious institutions and movements are often looked to for an antidote.² This explains why religions and churches can offer a home and a pulpit to the most regressive practices, as well as offering alternative liberating spaces of significance in an often alienating world. And there will be continuing disagreement about which is which.

The regressive tendencies of many of the attitudes and beliefs in question here offer a particular window on the affective aspect of contemporary faith, especially in conservative faith-based groups.³ Intolerance of others' beliefs, a sense of certainty, patriarchal proclivities, a refusal to engage creatively with complex issues, provide a psychological backdrop to the most visible political power of religion.⁴

In *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger offers us a choice between going counter to a great thinker, and "going to their encounter". If we want to pursue the political dimension of Kierkegaard's thought, given the

importance of religion to him, it would be something of a scholastic project if religion had faded into insignificance as Dawkins and Dennett might wish.⁵ But if anything the religious struggles of 19th century Denmark make Kierkegaard's contributions to religious thinking, and hence to the political, especially significant to our own Present Age (Kierkegaard 1962). In her essay "Sexual Difference," Irigaray (1993) suggests that every age has a defining issue, and that sexual difference might play that role for us. I think by such an issue she means one with an overriding concrete political urgency, one which radiates equally through theory and practice. This suggests that the question of Being, as Heidegger proposed it, might be too abstract ever to be a candidate for such a burning question. Although sexual difference is hardly exhausted as an issue, the kind of evidence I have cited makes it tempting to propose religion as the central issue for *our* day. In the light of Kierkegaard's anguished personal response to this very question, he would seem like an especially plausible candidate for scrutiny.

Nonetheless, on first reading, we might conclude that, fascinating though Kierkegaard is on so many other topics, his political insights are something like a reactionary residue we should walk past on our way to his original thoughts. He was a royalist, a misogynist,⁶ and fought a rear-guard action against the more communitarian Christianity gaining ascendancy in Denmark at the time. And yet people not obviously associated with the intolerant right have taken him seriously. Sartre wrote an extraordinary late piece in 1964, "The Singular Universal" extolling his contemporary significance. Elsebet Jegstrup (1995), Christine Battersby (1999), Alison Assiter (2009) and others have championed his political importance. And Sylviane Agacinski (1988), Jacques Derrida (1996), Mark Dooley (2001) and others have made Kierkegaard into a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*.

In her excellent *Hypatia* review (1999) of Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh's collection *Feminist Interpretations of Kierkegaard* (1997), Christine Battersby lays out the map not only of that volume, but also perhaps of the broader possibilities for thinking through the options for a feminist reading of Kierkegaard. The first group of essays in this book claim that he is no ordinary misogynist, arguing that he can and should be read at different levels. The second reminds us, nonetheless, that he presents dangers for feminism. The third group, as Battersby puts it, (1999, 172) "mix critique with commendation," while the last group

“reclaims the feminine”. Her own suggestion is that it may be his aesthetic works that are more useful than his ethical or religious works.⁷ These works:

provide us with resources for rethinking the self in ways that privilege natality, relationality, ontological dependency and epistemological uncertainty...[his writings] can help us reconstruct identity in ways that take the female subject-position as the norm. (ibid., 175)

In many ways, it might be said, Kierkegaard’s position here mirrors that of Nietzsche: a seeming misogynist, who nonetheless supplies the tools for a broader deconstruction of the foundations of metaphysical, i.e. patriarchal selfhood. Nietzsche’s most cutting remarks, disparaging women’s capacity for friendship, are immediately turned against men too. And German feminist groups at the time are said to have found in Nietzsche a powerful ally. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche raise the fascinating question of quite how to see the relation between, let us say, the emancipation of women, and success on a broader front. Superficially, at least, it looks as if they were able to think further than they were able to act—that as men they were stuck in the common dispositions of their time, perhaps for peculiar personal/family reasons. (Battersby suggests that Kierkegaard might have been abused; Nietzsche was brought up by women with no father figure around.)⁸ This raises the question of whether feminist philosophy is finding a potent path of access to a broader philosophical summit—let us say the deconstruction of the metaphysical self or subject, the grounds for which might be other or deeper than patriarchy, but the structure of which is writ large there. This would be one way of reading Irigaray’s claim (1996) that sexual difference could be the defining issue of our time—one that vividly exhibits a broader pattern of domination and exploitation found in race, class and international relations. The other way would be that patriarchy, the subordination of women, is fundamental, and that, as brilliant abstract thinkers, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were only able to fumble at the buttons of feminism’s blouse, coming away with a good road map, but not really knowing what country they were in.

On the broader front both Elsebet Jegstrup and Alison Assiter take up the thought that one way or another Kierkegaard offers a way of displacing the sense of self implied by the liberal individualism of someone like

Rawls. Although these categories may not survive prolonged scrutiny, these arguments all in effect find in Kierkegaard *ontological or metaphysical* resources, quite as much as ethical ones, with which to reinscribe the political.

The wider postmodern response to Kierkegaard (see Agacinski 2009) could equally well be said to focus on the aesthetic dimension of his work, taking seriously the importance of irony, indirect communication, the how rather than the what, and the effective deconstruction of the authorial self (and by extension the patriarchal self), implied by his pseudonymous writing.

But the implication in each case, is that the more we get into Kierkegaard's ethical and religious thought, the more problematic it becomes. Perhaps because it is more solidly encrusted with his own idiosyncratic ways of filling out the fundamental relational, processual insights. We may suppose, for example, that a relational self would be filled out by reference to significant other humans. But it is clear in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1980b) for example, that the constitutive relationality Kierkegaard has in mind is with God, not with a lover or friend or community.⁹ The self is a relation that relates itself to itself though God.

Wittgenstein (1961, 73) articulates a relational sense of self when he writes: "Man is an essentially dependent being". He goes on: "that on which we depend we may call God". To which the obvious response is—yes, we may call this pole of dependency God, either in the permissive or the modal sense of "may". But we need not. Might it not be that the tendency to call this dependency God, reflects a certain shape of desire, one that itself needs interrogation? This was in effect Freud's claim in *The Future of an Illusion*—that religious belief is a way of dealing with the lingering sense of our infantile helplessness, long past the point at which it need overwhelm us. The conversion of the elderly, such as Flew, could be explained by their approaching again that same state of helplessness at the other end of the line. Whether or not we accept Freud's analysis, what it reflects is a particular interpretation of relationality, that of (utter asymmetrical) dependency. This is not the dialogical inter-dependency of two good friends, or a couple, but a hierarchical relation in which, typically, power and authority are centrally in play. Where does Kierkegaard stand on this? Battersby (1999, 175) suggests that the theme of seducer/seduced in Kierkegaard, notably in the first part of *Either/Or*

(1987a), rewrites Hegel's master/slave relation in a way that returns a certain agency to the supposed victim. She writes:

Antigone becomes a (modern) daughter of Oedipus who is neither the fully responsible, Kantian (male) person of modernity, nor simply a token of the family to be punished by (pre-modern) fate.

I am not entirely sure how far all of this destabilises Hegel's account of the journey of Spirit towards the Absolute. His master/slave relation was itself unstable; the slave had certain unanticipated advantages over the master, not least being closer to nature. And Marx brought out these instabilities in no uncertain way. Did Kierkegaard perhaps have to oedipally idealise and then kill his Hegelian father to effect a break from him? Might there not be a performative repetition of hierarchical relationality in the very attempt to break with it? We might perhaps derive a general formula from this lesson that would begin to explain the paradoxes of Kierkegaard's potential contribution to the political, in a certain resonance with Derrida's early remark that we do not necessarily escape from the metaphysical structures we can expose. But to the extent that we maintain our sense of the distinctive importance of religious discourse today, we are still left with the question of whether we need to develop another approach to the religious through Kierkegaard's aesthetic texts, or whether his discussions of ethics and religion can directly feed into a new politics. Surely not if the relation to God is essentially vertical, asymmetrical, and governed by authority.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard argues that the fact that there are two forms of despair, despair at willing to be oneself, but also despairingly willing to be oneself, proves that we cannot be completely self-constituted. Only a being constituted by another Power could continue in despair—knowing, as it were, that he was not alone, that there was an outside investor with an interest in the project. For Kierkegaard faith in this Power is indeed a matter of fear and trembling, of obedience without rational grounds. But does this really supply the basis for a new politics? It is common, as we have seen, to contrast Kant and Kierkegaard when it comes to the self, with Kant being attributed a self-contained self tailored to liberalism. Kant's response to Abraham's situation was that he should have questioned whether it was really God speaking when he was told to sacrifice Isaac.

If God should really speak to man, man could still never know that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and recognize it as such. But in some cases man can be sure the voice he hears is not God's. For if the voice commands him to do something contrary to moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion. (Kant 1992, 155)

Kant can prove that it is not God's voice because it is contrary to the moral law, which has its own authority, which can generate a "must" ("... he must consider it an illusion"). Kant is proposing a more complex, less straightforwardly vertical relation to God, but only because he has established an internal vertical relation with the moral law, which does not replace God, but acts as a kind of security check. But even Kant is not proposing a dialogue with God: Are you sure you have thought through what would be involved in my killing Abraham? How could I then be the father of the tribe of Israel—which you want?

My point is that when it comes to the religious, Kierkegaard seems pretty heavily invested in non-dialogical relationality. Can we really set aside this aspect of his thought? And if we leave it intact, what purchase would that give us on the contemporary politics of religiosity? Indeed, worse flows. If Angst, fear and trembling, comes precisely at the point at which the universal moral law is being superseded by a direct singular connection to God's will, does it not set the scene for any and every act of terror committed in the name of God? I do not mean the Charles Mansons of this world, but the sincere religiously motivated zealots who really do believe, and are encouraged to believe that heaven will be their reward.

If, with Irigaray, we agree that the economy of desire to which we individually or collectively subscribe is of paramount political importance, is Kierkegaard a sound guide? We *do* need to understand, and find ways of combatting, authoritarianism, fanaticism, nihilism, fascistic anger and so on. And we learn a lot from Nietzsche, Adorno and Deleuze and Guattari. But Kierkegaard? The desire for closure, for certainty, for simple solutions can indeed be seen as responses to the problem of anxiety. In this light we may applaud Kierkegaard's complex psychological treatment. But the question we are then left with is: does an existential treatment of anxiety, one which locates its proper locus and resolution in my relation to God—

does such an account address the political problem of anger, resentment, intolerance and violence? Or does it, on the contrary, serve to legitimate these attitudes? Isn't a God who can command death just the kind of God from whom we might pray to be saved? Is there, to repeat, not a real struggle between the kind of God we can construct through Kierkegaard's aesthetic writings, and the God of his religious writings?

For Kierkegaard, anxiety has its proper place at the instant of the teleological suspension of the ethical. Along with Keats, when he wrote of negative capability, Kierkegaard understands what religion is essentially about, inwardness, as the ability to live with the anxiety that going beyond the ethical entails. As the focus of political concern, this is surely a momentous discovery, or at least reminder,¹⁰ on Kierkegaard's part. For fear and anxiety increasingly seem to be the most powerfully manipulable affects.¹¹ Whether or not we tie this back to Freud and infantile helplessness, it would seem that religiosity in general, and institutionalised religion in particular, cannot but trade in fear and anxiety, and their reduction and/or management. Whether it be fundamental existential anxiety (Who am I? What is the meaning of life? What will happen to me when I die?) or more concrete (How will I feed my children? How will we escape the enemy? How can I deal with an incurable illness?), we seek reassurances about many imponderables, some of which would paralyse us if we could not answer them, at least formally. Religion could be said to meet these needs. But it does so hand-in-hand with social policy and political ideology. It is symptomatic that the US combines widespread religious fervour with the absence of a proper healthcare system. Does religious faith take up the slack in healthcare provision? Hysterical national security measures seem to be attempting to repair a broken sense of absolute security (before 9/11) that religious faith has accustomed Americans to expect. And politicians not only pander to these absolutes, but fan the flames of fear to prepare the ground for promises of protection. The role played by religion here is highly complex. Islam is distorted into a ground for terrorism (killing the infidel). It is also constructed as the enemy by a hysterical Christianity. In each case God functions to contain, shape and direct anxiety through faith, obedience, and dogmatism, even in the most destructive ways. As Nietzsche (1998, 118) observes: "man would much rather will *nothingness* than *not* will..."

It is tempting to say that whenever we come up with this sort of troubling conclusion that Kierkegaard is to be found on the side of the

angels, so to speak, because it is precisely what is at stake in his critique of Christendom. Everything we worry about has to do precisely with the externalities of religion, not the inwardness of faith. Is this true?

In his last years, as is well known, Kierkegaard mounted an attack on the established Danish Church. But he also attacked attempts at its reform by people like Grundtvig and Rudelbach, who, as it has been put, emphasised a more joyful, celebratory and communal Christianity.

There is nothing about which I have greater misgivings than all that even slightly tastes of this disastrous confusion of politics and Christianity, a confusion which can very easily bring about a new kind and mode of Church-reformation, a reverse reformation which in the name of reformation puts something new and worse in place of something old and better... Christianity is inwardness, inward deepening. If at a given time the forms under which one has to live are not the most perfect, if they can be improved, in God's name do so. But essentially Christianity is inwardness. (Kierkegaard 1982, 53)

The question we face is whether inwardness or subjectivity is best understood as a justifiable refuge from a shallow mimetic sociality, in which we have sacrificed the uncertainties of self for the comforts of conformity. Or whether it is actually a refuge from the complex relational exchanges of the public realm, one that attempts to manage the anxiety that that human complexity generates by locating it all in one vertical Man/God relation. It is as if we are being asked to agree to pay a steep up-front anxiety tax (to God), to avoid the unpredictable complexity of negotiating relations with other humans. It is true—we don't know what God wants of us, or why he wants what he says he wants, but is there not a certain security in knowing we only have to deal with one Other, and one that ultimately has our salvation at heart? My question, then, is whether there is not a peculiar kind of comfort in consolidating all our debts with one creditor, however hard to read. It might be said that reference to "the complexity of negotiating relations with other humans" is existentially underspecified. If the others with whom I am negotiating selfhood are all shallow spiritless couch potatoes, the bar on what counts as an adequately defined relational self might be set far too low. And anyway, on that model, how does my singularity even get a look in? What these questions suggest is that there can indeed be myopic unchallenging communities,

and social or historical circumstances in which certain arguably important dimensions or possibilities of self-realisation, or of collective synergy, are not adequately realised. That has to be right. What does not follow, not yet anyway, is that these dimensions need be intrinsically connected to a God relationship. The historical specificity and contingency of patriarchy, for example, might be something to which a wide range of social arrangements, ones that took it for granted, might fail to alert me. But some forms of God relationship would merely repeat that relation rather than question it. And one can surely imagine forms of communicative engagement that would work to subvert and displace it that would not require at least Kierkegaard's version of the God relationship. One way of thinking of *this* would be to imagine ways of suspending the ethical that do not move into the religious quite as Kierkegaard understands it.

To explore this possibility, I will now consider four alternative ways of understanding the religious each of which can in some way be grafted onto Kierkegaard's own position, but none of which replicates the hierarchical God relation he seems to take for granted. It will be my claim that it is by such means that we can address the contemporary political power of religion—and I am speaking (as was Kierkegaard) largely of Christianity and the West—without endorsing its regressive tendencies. Just to be clear, it is my guiding assumption that there may be a very high price to pay for refusing to engage with a discourse that has a strong public presence—namely that one leaves the determination of its future shape and direction to forces over which one has no control. In that context, I claim, it may be better to work out how creatively to deploy the word “God,” than to abandon it altogether to a dogmatic faith community.

To pursue this objective, I want now to look at four thinkers each of whom offer us a way of moving forward in thinking about the relevance of Kierkegaard's theology to politics: Sartre, Derrida, Kearney and Irigaray.

1. Sartre's 1964 essay “The Singular Universal”¹² was part of a UNESCO conference on *Kierkegaard Vivant*.¹³ The basic problem he deals with is how Kierkegaard can live on for us when his whole message was to contest the significance of the kind of knowledge, or positive content of a life, that might be thought to survive death. Sartre shows however that it is Kierkegaard's existential appropriation of his historical contingency, his performance of his own singularity, that lifts him out of history, his Singular Universality. And in a way that anticipates Derrida's sensitivity to

the problem of a consuming totalisation of the other in his Memoirs *The Work of Mourning*, Sartre honours Kierkegaard's religiosity as opening the way for Sartre's own becoming-an-atheist. He finds categories by which to connect Kierkegaard's witnessing to a singular life with his own, without appropriating one to the other. The *deep* atheism in Sartre's thought has to do with the ways in which immanence appears folded back onto the world rather than as a transcendence set against the world: the infinite arises in the finite, the absolute in the contingent. Bearing witness to my contingency as an existent being transforms it without reaching for another dimension. Sartre also salutes Kierkegaard's refiguring of a certain immortality in terms of inwardness, and freedom as tied up with historical situatedness and particularity, not limited by it. It is in Kierkegaard's manner of response to Christianity, one that bears witness to these connections, that Sartre connects with him. As Sartre put it, in words that could not more profoundly or more beautifully honour a thinker he disagreed with:

within each of us he offers and refuses himself, as he did in his own lifetime; he is my adventure and remains, for others, Kierkegaard, the other —a figure on the horizon testifying to the Christian that faith is a future development forever imperilled, testifying to myself that the process of *becoming-an-atheist* is a long and difficult enterprise. (Sartre 2008, 166)

2. Irigaray's essay "Sexual Difference" (and her related "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" in the same volume) weave an extraordinary dance with the divine (Irigaray 1993). She is exploring the possibility that through sexual difference, through the richest experiences of sexual congress, something of the divine might be relocated, might find its proper place. Sexual difference, she writes, "would represent the advent of new fertile regions as yet unwitnessed" (ibid., 165). She imagines that this "place" would save us from the displacements that the idea of God has suffered. Wonder is to be found in the experience of the sexual other, not in the heavens or in that fact that anything exists rather than nothing. This erotic space transcends our temptation to merely negate the evils of the world, among which she includes the regressive return to religion. She links this transition to a new age to:

a change in the economy of desire, necessitating a different relationship between man and god(s), man and man, man and the world, man and woman. (ibid., 168)

As I see it, she is proposing a desire not based on lack, one in which:

man always tends towards something else without ever turning to herself as the site of a positive element. (ibid.)

Woman, she writes, represents a place for man, offering him an envelope, while having no place herself. In language that echoes Kierkegaard's discussion (in *The Sickness Unto Death*) of the self as constituted by its mediated relation to God, she insists on such a third term in the form of wonder, angels, the child, and other possibilities of "birth". Her argument is that God, traditionally understood, is taking up the existential slack in human relationships constituted by an economy of desire based on lack. Carnal intimacy offers the possibility of drawing the divine back to its proper place, in which, through love as celebratory mutuality, as one might say, transcendence becomes immanent again. As an example of the kind of desire she is trying to move beyond, she cites Levinas's account of the caress as a touch that engages the other in a way that anticipates a future for the toucher, nourishing his future pleasure. She opposes to Levinas's "autistic, egological solitary love":

a shared outpouring, the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundaries of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath. (Irigaray 1993, 180)

She continues:

In this relation, we are at least three, each of which is irreducible to any of the others: you, me and our work, that ecstasy of ourself in us, that transcendence of the flesh of one to that of the other become ourself in us, at any rate, 'in me' as a woman, prior to any child. (ibid.)

Her broken reflexive syntax is evidence of the struggle to articulate an ecstatic relationality in ways that do not fall back on clichés of sameness and difference.

For Irigaray the Song of Solomon represents a point prior to the emergence of a God of law, associated with writing, in which flesh and the feminine are still in play. She is trying to demonstrate that the language of the divine, of transcendence, of ecstasy, and finally of God, can all be powerfully inscribed in a post-egological eroticism, one which bears witness to the residual power of the feminine. I understand this thought to be political in that it projects a world governed by a new economy of desire, and it offers a path—the re-opening of the erotic—through which we can imagine that this economy might more generally be realised.

3. I have written at length elsewhere about Derrida's treatment of Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death* (1996) (see Wood 2002, 125-134). Suffice it to say here that Derrida generalises from Abraham's situation—"the moment of decision is madness"—to the conclusion that any serious decision, any truly responsible claim, takes us beyond the ethical in the sense of rule-based behaviour, beyond the algorithm.

Such, in fact, is the paradoxical form of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion, or explicitation. (Derrida 1996, 77)

For Derrida, God is, as he puts it, "the figure and name of the wholly other," (ibid.) which (again) allows the Abraham/Isaac story to illuminate the structure of any ethical decision, to the extent that it responds to the other person in his/her singularity.

But, intriguing though this account is, it does not obviously deal with the distinctiveness of Abraham's relationship with God as an authority figure with the power to demand sacrifice. That there is an excess to any decision that cannot be codified seems correct. And it offers one way of thinking "transcendence in immanence," one that successfully secularises God. But a generalised openness to otherness does not address the irreconcilable conflicts this generates, and offers no protection against extremist appropriations of religion. Derrida is clearly wary of giving away everything to a new religiosity and its post-modern subject.

As we have mentioned, it is often argued, one way or the other, that Kierkegaard is useful in attacking the essentially patriarchal liberal subject, opening the way to a constitutively more relational subject, whether this is intrinsically feminine, or simply writ large in the feminine.

This does seem both important, and of great consequence for politics and the political. But we should not think that this new orientation is itself free of ambivalence or uncertainty. We want the new Subject to be interactional, open to negotiation, a bit fuzzier around the edges. But, as we have suggested, this is a relationality with which Kierkegaard is not altogether comfortable. And we cannot discount the importance of those subject formations that, as Badiou suggests, bear a revolutionary potential, refusing the current order, and struggling for a new one. And if, as is common, we come to see problems with “rights” talk—too invested in Kantian autonomy—and insist on the importance of a capacity for response to singularity, we must also bear in mind Derrida’s remarks:

We must more than ever stand on the side of human rights. We need human rights. (Derrida 2004, 132)

They are not enough, but they are essential in standing up to the even bigger sovereign authority—that of the state. This is a hard political lesson—that yesterday’s weapons may still be needed in tomorrow’s struggles, that to avoid the worst violence, we may need at times, to work with the subject-formation we have.

4. Finally I would like to mention Richard Kearney’s treatment of the religious in his recent book *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (2010), which follows on his book *The God Who May Be* (2001). In both of these books, it might be said, Kearney flirts with atheism, but does not embrace it. Atheism is a negative knowledge. His position, in his earlier book, is to argue for God as possibility, not just in an extended Pascalian sense—that God might exist—but in the sense that much of the sense of God is tied up with possibility. In *The God Who May Be*, he suggests three senses of possibility: 1. the idea that our everyday assumptions are put in question by an open future, and that opening ourselves to it is up to us: “Without us, no Word can be made flesh” (2001, 4). 2. that if there is evil in the world it is our responsibility, and 3. that what seems impossible to us is only seemingly so, for with God all things are possible. These thoughts are ones that Kierkegaard himself could have penned. He wrote, after all, that higher than the actual is the possible, and,

if I were to wish for something, I would not wish for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating! (Kierkegaard 1987a, 41)

In *Anatheism*, he takes a slightly different tack:

it is only if one concedes that one knows virtually nothing about God that one can begin to recover the presence of holiness in the flesh of ordinary existence. (Kearney 2010, 5)

In particular Kearney finds the divine in the stranger—both in Levinas’s ethical welcoming of the orphan, widow, and stranger, but also in the monstrous, alien and fearful. He writes of the “holy insecurity” of radical openness to the strange, and “radical dispossession”. In a way consonant with Sartre, Irigaray and Derrida, Kearney is retrieving the God of eschatology after the substantive metaphysical God has died. God the noun may have passed away, but God the adverb is going strong.

Kearney’s work essentially confirms what we have been arguing through discussion of Sartre, Irigaray and Derrida, that there is considerable potential for working religious language, the divine, the sacred, the holy—back into everyday existence, for re-investing immanence with transcendence. What Sartre offers in his reflections on Kierkegaard as singular universal is a way of understanding the general structure of this re-investment—witnessing, attesting, existential performativity. One could say that the sacred appears at the moment at which the individual re-emerges from under the cover of the universal in the shape of a singularity. For Levinas, singularity appears in the call of the other in need—this one here now. For Irigaray it appears in wonder at the presence of my lover. For Derrida, it lies in my openness to the wholly other. For Kearney, it lies in possibility, or the Stranger. Each of these formulations names God in a new way, and translates the religious into new subjectivities, new relationalities and new shapes of practice, each with some claim to be listening to Kierkegaard.

5. I have worried about the privilege of vertical relationality in Kierkegaard, but there is yet another political path, one with which

Kierkegaard seems less able to deal, and it is this with which I will conclude. In *Fear and Trembling*, in a way not unlike Levinas's rejection of the sacred groves of paganism (Levinas 1997), Kierkegaard highlights the spiritual dimension of human existence by contrast with a kind of Homeric naturalism:

if there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power which writhing with obscure passions produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath all—what then would life be but despair? If such were the case, if there were no sacred bond which united mankind, if one generation arose after another like the leafage in the forest, if the one generation replaced the other like the song of birds in the forest, if the human race passed through the world as the ship goes through the sea, like the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless activity, if an eternal oblivion were always lurking hungrily for its prey and there was no power strong enough to wrest it from its maw—how empty then and comfortless life would be! But therefore it is not thus, but as God created man and woman, so too He fashioned the hero and the poet or orator. (Kierkegaard 1985a, 49)

This stunning piece of prose is so constructed as to juxtapose a natural world with and without spirit. Without spirit it would be without meaning, and we would be driven to despair (This is not far from Flew's position!). What is billed as an argument for man's "eternal consciousness" ends up explaining what poets are for, as Heidegger might put it. Arguably, however, a lot of work is being done by animating eternal oblivion as a monster seeking to devour us, a thoroughly naturalistic if nightmarish image. And this perhaps opens up a line of dialogue with Kierkegaard. For it is hard not to read him as a radically anti-naturalistic thinker, one for whom inwardness, subjectivity and faith essentially constitute the human, and our embodied being, and the shape of our engagement in the material world, is something of an embarrassment.

There are those who have dubbed our Present Age the Anthropocene, a geological term meant to capture the significant post Industrial Revolution impact of humans on the planet.¹⁴ For many, this impact has not been too positive in terms of the health and vitality of non-humans and the conditions that sustain life on earth. This opens up the space of biopolitics in which what comes to the fore are precisely the collective material