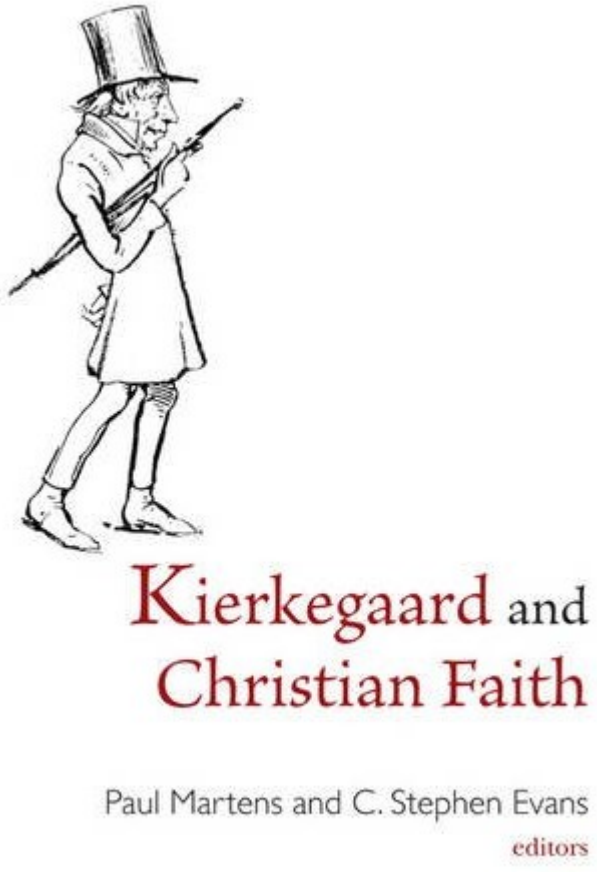
Kierkegaard in translation

The Danish philosopher thought faith had become too easy. This book doesn’t have that problem.

by Elizabeth Palmer

March 29, 2017

In Review



Kierkegaard and Christian Faith

edited by Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans
Baylor University Press

In 2013, the Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture celebrated the 200th anniversary of Kierkegaard's birth with a scholarly conference organized around the question "Is Kierkegaard a Christian for *our* time?" The answers that emerged—many of which can be viewed here—are now compiled in an impressive collection of essays.

Impressive but difficult. One of the endorsements printed on the back cover claims that the book is invaluable to both scholars and "all those interested in Kierkegaard's profound vision of the Christian faith." To suggest that the book is accessible to a wide readership of non-academics is . . . well, a leap.

For example, Cyril O'Regan's essay on Kierkegaard's notion of "the perforated temporality of the self" begins with this caveat about the "Kierkegaardian objection to prognostication" by academics:

> Professional theologians and philosophers tend to make embarrassing sibyls and seers; very much out of their element, they compensate in vatic tones for an enterprise that all too easily can be associated with the reading of the flight of birds or regressing to the status of a haruspex gawking at the entrails of an animal about to be immolated. But of course Kierkegaard's objection cannot in the end be suspended. . . . The future is contingent and unknowable, and it may well be the mask of an eternity that does not come under the compulsions of time.

This prose is beautifully (if not subtly) Kierkegaardian. I'll admit that I had to open the dictionary more than once in reading this paragraph, but I did so with a sense of awe at O'Regan's careful, vivid use of language. And I often have to open the dictionary when reading Kierkegaard too.

O'Regan's essay is not for the casual reader. Understanding it requires considerable effort and background knowledge. The author presupposes familiarity with concepts like Heidegger's "forensic use of the ontological-ontic distinction in *Being and Time*." O'Regan exquisitely unfolds the Pauline underpinnings of Kierkegaard's conception of what it means to be a coherent person at once struck and supported by divine love. His notion of the perforated self has implications for how we interpret the Bible,

regard sin, and understand the work of God in the world. But getting to these implications requires immersion into rigorous arguments and specialized terminology.

O'Regan's essay is paired in the book with an essay by Simon Podmore that explores how forgiveness unites despair and joy in impossibility. "Despair affirms human possibility and negates divine possibility. The Holy *impossible possibility* of forgiveness, however, negates the affirmation of human possibility while also overcoming the apparent contradiction between human and divine possibility." Thus, the cry "It is impossible! . . . pronounces doubt and faith in the same moment of apophatic beatitude," a moment that is moved by divine love. Surely apophatic beatitude is not meant to be pinned down, so one should hardly complain that this concept is hard to understand. I imagine it resembles the sort of freedom Martin Luther felt when he finally acknowledged that he both *could not* and *did not need to* earn his salvation.

Podmore's essay is not for the academically faint-of-heart, but its topic is crucial for the life of faith. Of the forgetting that accompanies forgiveness, he writes:

> The apophatic self desires to empty itself of its wrath of knowledge, to unknow or will-to-forget in the longing to break its wounded self-inclosure in order to be with the wounding other in Love. As such, the forgiving apophatic self undergoes a *kenosis-in-ekstasis*: a *via oblivionis* that reconciles the self in relation to its transgressing other within a transfigured narrative of desired possibility.

Both Podmore and O'Regan are talking about the difference an encounter with God makes for human existence. The infinitely qualitative difference between God and humans (which Kierkegaard described as an abyss 70,000 fathoms deep) doesn't prevent Christians from being saved by Christ or transformed for living authentically and faithfully in a broken world. God interacts with us in ways that matter, even if that interaction is so painful that it's best described as a *wound* or *perforation*.

These essays—as well as the many others in the book that are less technical—are fascinating. They're somewhat puzzling, as Kierkegaard himself is. Still, the book is worth reading. Kathleen Norris's charming introduction reveals how Kierkegaard influenced her during her difficult teenage years. The chapters on Stanley Hauerwas, Walker Percy, and the epistle of James are accessible and broad in scope.

Kierkegaard’s main critique of Christianity was that it had become too easy. The least we can do, then, in reading him (or reading about him) is to put in some effort. This book is well worth leaping into. It shows how Kierkegaard’s thought might speak, both rigorously and creatively, to the challenges faced by Christians in today’s world.