

Preface

Literary critic Harold Bloom has defined “genius” as “a mystery of the capacious consciousness.”¹ What he means by this phrase is not as puzzling as it may seem. For Bloom, the genius has the peculiar ability to imagine and to engender an abundance of perspectives, both of and beyond the time period in which she lives. This, however, is not an isolated capacity. Through the creative process, the genius also deepens and expands the awareness of her audience. For that reason, a work of genius affects persons in ways that a merely clever one cannot. Genius, quite literally, shapes the persons who encounter it, even if this impression will not be as broad as the consciousness that produced it.

Bloom himself classifies Søren Kierkegaard’s genius as an openness to the “power of wisdom,”² but, in such an opinion, he is hardly alone. As George Pattison puts it, “[T]he list of philosophers, theologians, writers and artists who owe an acknowledged debt to [Kierkegaard] reads like a *Who’s Who* of Western culture over the last hundred years.”³ Indeed, if anyone can be said to have had a

1. Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 5.

2. *Ibid.*, xiii. Also see 189ff.

3. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith* (London: SPCK, 1997), 1.

“capacious consciousness,” surely it is Kierkegaard. But this strength has—as Bloom predicates of all geniuses—served to complicate the historical reception of Kierkegaard. Commentators have analyzed, characterized, and categorized him in innumerable fashion. Furthermore, certain aspects of his authorship have risen to the fore, often due to the particular interests of interpreters, rather than to his own broader emphases. Hence, for better or for worse, a brief pseudonymous work such as *Fear and Trembling* has garnered far more attention than the lengthy, signed *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Incomplete views of Kierkegaard have resulted, and a number of these perceptions have hardened into stereotypes. “The melancholy Dane,” “the father of existentialism,” “the unhappy lover”: these and other notions, despite their limitations, have come to color the reception of Kierkegaard. On the other hand, important features of his life and thought have been marginalized, if not utterly forgotten. Such may be the cost of genius, but it need not be a *fait accompli*.

The aim of this work is to shed light on an aspect of Kierkegaard’s authorship that has received insufficient attention—namely, his spirituality. That is not to suggest, of course, that Kierkegaard’s religious thinking has been ignored altogether. It has been well documented that Kierkegaard wrote a great deal about Christianity, not from the disinterested perspective of an outsider, but as one who shared (or endeavored to share) the Christian faith. And though Kierkegaard is still viewed primarily as a philosopher, it is also true that many studies have examined, say, his understanding of Christ or his accent on Christian love. At the same time, however, Kierkegaard’s standing as a spiritual author remains underdeveloped. By “spiritual author” this book means one who writes with an eye to “the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of . . . a direct and transformative presence of God.”⁴ Put more simply, a

spiritual author does not merely reflect on the grammar and logic of a given faith but, rather, seeks to involve the reader in that faith.⁵ As will be seen, these and other related themes play a decisive role in Kierkegaard's authorship, thereby situating him among Christian spiritual masters such as John of the Cross and Johann Arndt. It is time, then, to investigate his spirituality more fully, to elucidate it for those who are keen to know more about Kierkegaard's understanding of the self's journey to God.

This book will be divided into five chapters. Chapter One will survey Kierkegaard's Pietist upbringing and his interest in Catholic and Protestant spiritual literature, as well as clarify his own category of "upbuilding." Chapter Two will introduce Kierkegaard's understanding of the interior life, paying particular attention to what he sees as each human being's decisive spiritual itinerary: the passage from despair to faith. Chapter Three will serve as a bridge of sorts. It will point out that, despite his warnings about the dangers of "the aesthetic," Kierkegaard was fond of illustrating faith by what he terms "pictures" of godliness. Can this apparent contradiction be reconciled? This chapter will argue "yes," reasoning that, for Kierkegaard, aesthetic imagery can serve in the manner of icons, rather than idols.

In turn, the final two chapters will explore Kierkegaard's images of godliness or, as I prefer, "icons of faith." Chapter Four will explore how Kierkegaard uses pictures of the natural world—from birds and flowers to the ocean—to represent faith in God. Chapter Five will

4. Bernard McGinn, introduction to *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Modern Library, 2006), xiv.

5. Gregory S. Clapper has argued that Kierkegaard's contribution to Christian spirituality lies in his understanding of "how theology and spirituality should be related to each other" ("Relations Between Spirituality and Theology: Kierkegaard's Model," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 9 [1988]: 161). However, he limits himself to this formal consideration, rather than investigate the ways in which Kierkegaard attempts to foster "the personal assimilation of [Christian] truth" (*Ibid.*). The goal of this text, in contrast, is to demonstrate that Kierkegaard does more than provide a theoretical framework for the importance of spirituality; he seeks to make it real.

extend this topic to the human realm, demonstrating how Kierkegaard depicts certain biblical figures as “icons of faith.” For him, in other words, persons such as John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, and the woman who was a sinner embody faith in a variety of ways. Thus they serve as exemplars for persons who long to grow closer to God.

Those who are familiar with my research to date—above all, my previous book, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (Ashgate, 2011)—will recognize that this work is an extension or, better yet, an application of the historical-cum-textual work preceding it. To understand Kierkegaard’s personal involvement in the rich, multifaceted movement of Pietism is to understand that his own oeuvre is, in a number of respects, a reworking of Pietist themes—themes that themselves hark back to the wider tradition of Christian spirituality. In other words, given the importance of spirituality in Kierkegaard’s own life and reading, it only makes sense that some kind of spirituality would be present in his writings.

And yet, I am aware that the issue is not so straightforward. There is, of course, the obligation of scholarly accuracy and integrity, which is the lot of everyone in academe. But there is also the fact that this text commits *me* to an interpretation of Kierkegaard that its predecessor did not. That is to say, whereas *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* largely (if not exclusively) concerns a historical reconstruction of Kierkegaard’s relation to the Pietist movement, this book aims to establish a particular way of reading Kierkegaard. Thus it is an idiosyncratic effort. It does not feign to present “the whole Kierkegaard,” nor does it claim to offer the only way of understanding the Dane’s work. And while its findings may very well have implications for the philosophical and theological questions churned up by Kierkegaard, it will not be confused with a treatise on Kierkegaard as a philosopher of religion or as a systematic theologian.

That is not to suggest that such matters are irrelevant, only that they are not dealt with comprehensively here. In a sense, then, my task is at once ambitious and simple: I want to treat Kierkegaard's oeuvre as a place where one's relationship with God can be illuminated and deepened, and, in doing so, I hope to provide fresh insights into Kierkegaard's writings, especially those dealing with spiritual awakening and upbuilding.

Ideally, this book would find a broad audience—scholars and students, to be sure, but also non-specialist readers. Thus I have made its critical apparatus as straightforward as possible (perhaps a quixotic aim in Kierkegaard research!) and have tried not to overburden it with footnotes. Quotations from Kierkegaard's published work generally have been taken from the current standard English translations of his work, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, issued by Princeton University Press under the direction of Howard and Edna Hong. On occasion, however, I have elected to provide my own translations of Kierkegaard's writings, and, when appropriate, I have made a note of that decision. Accordingly, the standard Danish edition of Kierkegaard's works, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* [SKS] is also indicated.⁶

Quotations from Kierkegaard's *Nachlaß* have been taken from two places: either *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* [JP], the seven-volume set arranged by the Hongs, or the new (and still in progress) *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* [KJN], which is under the general editorship of Bruce H. Kirmmse. As with the published writings, I have cross-referenced the journals and papers to SKS as well,⁷ though, in rare instances, I have needed to use the older

6. Full citations list the text in question, the volume number (when apt) and the page number(s): for example, SKS 7, 41 / CUP1, 34.

7. Volume number, journal designation, and journal entry number are provided for SKS, while volume number and entry number are supplied from the Hong edition: for example, SKS 17, AA:13 / JP 3, 3245. When KJN are used, only the volume number is added, so as to avoid

Papirer.⁸ In addition, a register of abbreviations has been included, and complete documentary information can be accessed in the Works Cited section.

Finally, before moving on to the book itself, a few words of acknowledgement are in order. This book was started while I was teaching at Berry College in Rome, Georgia, and I would like to sincerely thank all who helped me while I was there, especially the members of the Department of Religion and Philosophy and, above all, the Dean of the Evans School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Tom Kennedy. I have since moved on to Villanova University, where I have been welcomed by more people than I can begin to enumerate. However, I would be remiss if I failed to mention my department chair, Peter Spitaler, as well as my faculty mentor, Marty Laird, both of whom have encouraged my research in a number of ways. Needless to say, I have also benefited from the attention and insight of many persons working in Kierkegaard scholarship. Once more, it is impossible to list everyone, so I would like to mention those who have furthered this particular project in one way or another: Andy Burgess, Abraham Khan, Vincent McCarthy, George Pattison, Simon Podmore, Peter Šajda, Brian Söderquist, Jon Stewart, and Sylvia Walsh (with added thanks to Clark Elliston, to whom I first pitched the idea for this book over breakfast at the St. Giles' Café in Oxford). Lastly, I would like to thank Michael Gibson and everyone at Fortress Press for their interest and support.

redundancy with the SKS (after which the KJN is modeled): for example, SKS 17 / KJN 1, AA:10.

8. These citations will be formatted as follows: *Pap.* V B 227 / JP 2, 2114.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Stacy, who had no idea where all this would lead but married me anyway.

Christopher B. Barnett
Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania
May 2014