

INTRODUCTION

It is one of the characteristics of the present age that books of the previous century are reissued with more or less—usually less—learned prefaces. The point is partly that the new edition should have something new in it; partly that the reader should be told what a great classic will confront him when he is done with the preface. The reader wants to be reassured that he is not going to waste his time. And he is also supposed to be anxious to know what he should think of the book—which is another way of saying that he is supposed to be afraid of having to think for himself, though this is after all the only kind of thinking there is. In Kierkegaard's words, in *The Present Age*, the reader must be reassured that 'something is going to happen,' for 'ours is the age of advertisement and publicity.' Indeed, the preface is expected to say *what* is going to happen—or, more precisely, which parts of what is about to happen may be safely forgotten, which points are memorable, and what observations about them should be remembered for use in conversation.

The fact that a man wrote books to attack these and other features of the present age and that he strained to be offensive, especially to parsons and professors, provides no protection whatsoever. For it is also one of the features of the present age not to take offence, if only the author's reputation is above question and one can be sure that reading him is not a waste of time. If the dust has not yet settled on his books, of course, it is quite safe to say he is offensive, or his works are in bad taste or, better yet, completely 'unsound' (as Freud's

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writings were said to be early in the twentieth century)—and therefore not to read them. But once a writer has arrived and reached the stage where other men write prefaces for posthumous editions of his books, it would hardly be sophisticated to consider him offensive. Voltaire has to be placed in his historic context, Mephistopheles ‘works’ in the play or in the poet’s gradual development, and Nietzsche stimulated this or that development. To be offended by them would be quite as prudish as taking offence at Aristophanes or Joyce. Why, they are classics!

One of the most important functions of a preface is to forestall any possibility that after all some wayward reader, here or there, should be offended. Dates must remind such readers that the author is long dead and that the book is old. Names must assure him that the author’s thoughts were influenced by other writers and thus links in a development—not really, as one might think on reading them, deliberately nasty. And, of course, there should be many references to ‘anticipations,’ lest the reader take some statement as a provocation instead of considering it as the grandfather of someone else’s proposition, which may be quite dull, and even a great-grandfather, if only the later author is respectable when the preface is written.

How Kierkegaard might have enjoyed this comedy! Yet his laughter would hardly have been free of bitterness. His laughter rarely was. And in this case, there is abundant reason for sorrow. His name is now a name to conjure with, bandied about with great abandon both at cocktail parties and in books and articles that are as nourishing as cocktail party fare; but his central aspira-

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tions are almost invariably ignored, and even those who notice them often give reasons why the things that mattered most to him may be dismissed as really of no account.

That he is so often presented as a saturnine thinker, as sedate as the German existentialists, might have amused him, and he might have written a neat parody of prefaces in which there is no glimpse of his own sense of humour—not even a hint that something funny is ahead. But could he have smiled at the ever-growing literature that reassures us that he was, even if he did not know it, really a humanist?

Since Jaspers first dismissed Kierkegaard's 'forced Christianity' as well as Nietzsche's 'forced anti-Christianity' as relatively unimportant, lesser commentators have ornamented this notion with appalling metaphors: 'Kierkegaard satisfied this need [for metaphysics] within the withered bosom of Christian dogmatics—a satisfaction which ultimately harmed rather than enhanced the genius of his thought. But by Nietzsche's time this bosom was dry, and Nietzsche gratified his penchant for a well-rounded . . .' There is no need to continue. In this interpretation Kierkegaard winds up as a man who painfully groped his way 'toward a point of view which is largely identical with the insights of orthodox Hinduism, of primitive Indian Buddhism, and of . . . Zen,' but who also was a humanist.

Actually, of course, Kierkegaard's religious existence culminated in a grand *Attack on Christendom* and the refusal to accept the sacraments from any ordained minister. He wanted the last sacraments from a layman but, denied this wish, died without them, hoping soon

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'to sit upon the clouds and sing: Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!' He did not doubt the divine grace but felt that his church had betrayed Christ by not sufficiently insisting on his authority and the fundamental offence—what Paul had called the *skandalon* and what Kierkegaard often called the absurdity—of Christian teaching. Would he have been amused by the rarely questioned notion that one can have one's Kierkegaard and go to church, too—and that Kierkegaard must naturally be assimilated to such other revolutionary spirits as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche?

Those who consider him a humanist and those who think that the commitment called for in his writings is in essence the commitment to be either Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, and to support the church, or possibly the temple, of your choice, turn Kierkegaard into the very thing he most consistently opposed: an apostle of reassurance. These disciples, who often resent all criticism of the master and make much of their great admiration for him, really betray him with a kiss.

Indeed, the present age is the age of Judas. Who would stand up against Christ and be counted His opponent? Who openly rejects the claims of the New Testament? Who lets his Yea be yea, 'Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil'? Certainly not the apologists who simply ignore what gives offence or, when this is not feasible, offer 'interpretations' instead of saying Nay. To be sure, it is not literally with a kiss that Christ is betrayed in the present age: today one betrays with an interpretation. The interpretation may be bold, extremely bold, as long as it is offered as an

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interpretation and the reader is reassured that the original text is profound and beautiful.

This, of course, is not a pleasant way of saying something that could easily be put a little more politely. Why speak of betrayal and, worse yet, of Judas? Because Kierkegaard himself remarked in *The Sickness unto Death* that 'he who first invented the notion of defending Christianity in Christendom is *de facto* Judas No. 2; he also betrays with a kiss' (218).

But surely, good sir, you must see that it is quite a different proposition in the mouth of Kierkegaard, more than a century ago, than in a preface written in the present age! Besides, he spoke of Danes while you—you are offensive. You attack men whom you should applaud: fine, decent men who do their best to make the gospel inoffensive, reading into it an ethic that you ought to welcome.

Some men who think thus have no hesitation about putting Kierkegaard's name on their banners, along with many other fashionable names, certain that positions other than their own deserve not only criticism but strong language; but their own views, well, are different and plainly should be privileged. And anyone who fails to see that simply is not nice. It is easy to see this point—at least after one has been requested to behold it from a hundred angles: every time it is the speaker, or the writer, whose outlook is clearly an exception. Against A and B and C and D one might have used far stronger language if one only had admitted that, of course, X is superior to all criticism. Next time it is Y or Z or A or B. The idea is always the same: criticism is a splendid thing, as long as we are spared. And fashionable writers,

such as Kierkegaard, were marvellous—oh, simply marvellous—when they made fun of Hegel (as who did not?) or of all kinds of Danish theologians (of whom, but for him, we should not even know the names) or of ‘the public’ (which plainly means the others and not us); but if anyone made remarks at our expense, he either was badly mistaken and may therefore be ignored, if not abhorred, or, now that his fame has passed the point where that was feasible, he either did not mean it or that aspect of his thought was marginal and clearly should be disregarded.

Kierkegaard is fine, says the present age, provided only he is cut and dried a little, milked of his unpleasant venom, and—in one word—bowdlerized. But in the present age one no longer literally changes texts; instead, to say it once more, one betrays with interpretations. It may seem that this procedure is not new: some liberals consider Paul a pioneer of this insidious method; others, yet more radical, regard the Gospels as examples. However that may be, what *is* new is the scholarly approach or rather the display of dubious scholarship: the invocation of a multitude of names of little relevance, the desiccated prose that in its deathly pallor leans on pointless footnotes, and the striking fact that the perversion is accomplished without passion. Life and death are utterly out of the picture as is any question of a mission: we breathe classroom air or, yet more often, the dust of the journal shelves.

But, good sir! the present age replies; you cannot hope to excuse your bad manners by appealing to Kierkegaard; or do you really fancy that he could have approved of a preface that makes fun of prefaces? After all, he was a

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great human being—witness the large literature about him, which surely proves this, even if we have not read it—and it stands to reason that he would not have been guilty of lack of respect for fellow scholars. Classroom air and dusty journal shelves! Assuredly he'd never have gone that far.

Sancta simplicitas! The present-day Judases no longer know what they betray, any more than they know what they like: what they know is only the preface written by another hand, the lecture given by a parson or professor, the interpretation of the well-known critic. Of course, one is sure of one's likes and dislikes—much surer than one might be if one really knew the texts. One knows that Kierkegaard was a precursor of this and that, but not his mordant humour, nor the fantastic comedy he played out with his pseudonyms who attacked each other, keeping literary Denmark guessing whether these books with their tangled prefaces and postscripts by pseudonyms and editors were written by one, two, or more writers. Could he have endured a preface to a posthumous edition of *The Present Age* that did *not* ridicule prefaces and the whole stuffy establishment that he attacked, not only in *The Present Age*? He abhorred the modern apotheosis of good taste.

What makes *The Present Age* and *The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle* important is not so much that the former essay anticipates Heidegger and the latter, Barth: it would be more accurate to say that Heidegger's originality is widely overestimated, and that many things he says at great length in his highly obscure German were said earlier by various writers who had made the same points much more elegantly, and that some of these writers,

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including Kierkegaard, were known to Heidegger. Why should Kierkegaard's significance depend on someone else's, quite especially when many points that others copied from him may be wrong? And are his observations about 'the public,' which remind the modern German reader of long-winded 'philosophical' discussions of *das Man*, and American readers of even more long-winded, but also more intelligible, discussions of 'other-directedness' really very important? Surely, they are witty in a rather innocuous way: like statistics about Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, they allow us to smile and feel superior. Gratitude repays this favour by calling the author a remarkable psychologist who anticipated twentieth century insights.

Much of what Kierkegaard is too often praised for is not really very profound or beautiful but rather entertaining and amusing. And few writers protested more than he did against submerging challenges to our faith and morals in effusive talk about what is profound and beautiful. Sometimes he used these very words; at other times he juxtaposed what he called an aesthetic orientation with an ethico-religious outlook. One of his best-known and best books, *Fear and Trembling*, is directed in large measure against those who read the Bible from an 'aesthetic' point of view, admiring Abraham along with the beautiful story which tells of his readiness to sacrifice his son, although the readers would abhor as a religious fanatic any contemporary who resolved to act like Abraham. Kierkegaard may have misread the story, but it is perfectly clear that he was nauseated by prolonged talk about the profound and beautiful when the one question needful was how we should live.

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He once wrote an essay with the title: *Has a Man the Right to let himself be put to Death for the Truth?* Walter Lowrie's translation of it was published in the same volume with the original English edition of *The Present Age*, but is omitted in the paperback reprint. The essay is exceedingly prolix and takes its time to conclude that 'a man (unlike God) has not the right to let himself be put to death for the truth'; for he should be 'lovingly concerned for others, for those who, if one is put to death, must become guilty of putting one to death.' In the long reflections that lead up to this conclusion, there is a passage that sums up succinctly (for Kierkegaard) a point also found in *Fear and Trembling* and, for that matter, throughout his works:

'The parson (collectively understood) does indeed preach about those glorious ones who sacrificed their lives for the truth. As a rule the parson is justified in assuming that there is no one present in the church who could entertain the notion of venturing upon such a thing. When he is sufficiently assured of this by reason of the private knowledge he has of the congregation as its pastor, he preaches glibly, declaims vigorously, and wipes away the sweat. If on the following day one of those strong and silent men . . . were to visit the parson at his house announcing himself as one whom the parson had carried away by his eloquence, so that he had now resolved to sacrifice his life for the truth—what would the parson say? He would address him thus: "Why, merciful Father in heaven! How did such an idea ever occur to you? Travel, divert yourself, take a laxative" . . .'

A writer who so persistently distinguished between what he called an aesthetic approach and what we might call

an existential approach should not be approached and discussed on the aesthetic plane, as he usually is. All talk not only of profundity and beauty but also of influences and anticipations remains on the aesthetic plain. And it is more in Kierkegaard's spirit to take offence and to disagree than to defend him and betray him with a kiss.

Walter Lowrie had much more feeling for Kierkegaard than most commentators, and there is nobody from whom one can learn more about Kierkegaard. In his big book on *Kierkegaard* (293), Lowrie remarked: 'all the trends of his thinking find their ultimate and most adequate expression in this work [*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*], in the *Literary Review*, and in *The Book about Adler*,' all of which Kierkegaard wrote in his early thirties. Later (on p. 365), Lowrie makes clear that he is referring to 'the latter part of . . . *A Literary Review*, published in 1846,' that is, to those pages which are known in English under the title, *The Present Age*. And those who have read Lowrie's complete translation of *On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler* will agree that it contains passages that are quite exceptionally important for an understanding of Kierkegaard; that the book is quite exceptionally verbose even for Kierkegaard; and that he did well when, instead of publishing the whole manuscript, he polished for publication only the crucial passages, which he issued under the title: *Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*. In sum, the unusual significance of the two essays brought together in the present volume is that, for better or for worse, many of the central trends of Kierkegaard's thinking find superb expression in them.

Dear reader! Kierkegaard might say; pray be so good

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as to look for *my* thinking in these pages—not for Nietzsche's, Barth's, or Heidegger's, de Tocqueville's, or anyone else's. And least of all, dear reader, fancy that if you should find that a few others have said, too, what I have said, that makes it true. Oh, least of all suppose that numbers can create some small presumption of the truth of an idea. What I would have you ask, dear reader, is not whether I am in good company: to be candid, I should have much preferred to stand alone, as a matter of principle; and besides I do not like the men with whom the kissing Judases insist on lumping me. Rather ask yourself if I am right. And if I am not, then for heaven's sake do not pretend that I am, emphasizing a few points that are reasonable, even if not central to my thought, while glossing over those ideas which you do not like, or which, in retrospect, are plainly wrong, although I chose to take my stand on them. Do not forget, dear reader, that I made a point of taking for my motto (in my *Philosophical Scraps*): 'Better well hung than ill wed!'

Alas! he might add if he saw the *present* age; who remembers that motto? Of course, it is not easy to find. When I published my *Scraps*—or *Crumbs*, if you prefer—the motto could hardly be missed because it stared the reader in the face if he but turned the title page. But when these *Scraps* appeared in the *present* age, they had to be made respectable: they were called *Philosophical Fragments* (which is almost as dignified as *Opus postumum*) and began, naturally, with a long and solemn preface. Wedged between that and my own text, the motto was easily overlooked. And now there is even a triple-decker edition of the *Fragments* in which my lowly *Scraps* are sandwiched between two prefaces and a long com-

mentary. My book takes up little more than one third of that, let us hope, definitive edition: and who is likely to find the motto, now lost somewhere in the middle? Of course, it is a fine commentary, and the reader who studies it will note that I misquoted Shakespeare, to whom I attributed the motto—presumably because I had read my Shakespeare in German. A good point, surely well worth making. The commentator is a scholar and knows his job, far better than most writers of prefaces. But the pity of it is that nobody remembers that I, Søren Kierkegaard, would rather be ‘well hung than ill wed.’ Almost everybody who writes or talks about me is concerned to make me the victim of some unpleasant mesalliance, and by now I have been ill wed scores of times. What a relief it would be to be well hung!

In the present age, of course, it would be out of the question to go as far as that. We could not possibly accommodate the author’s own wishes when writing a preface to one of his books. But perhaps it would not be absolutely necessary to defy his spirit *in toto*, as he might have said. Let us at least try to meet him half way.

Suppose, by a bold flight of the imagination, that an author said in 1846 that in the present age a revolution is unthinkable. Suppose further, if you can, that in 1847 seven Catholic cantons secede in Switzerland and are forced in a short war to return to the federation; that in 1848 a revolution in France overthrows the monarchy and establishes a republic, while revolutions also sweep Germany and Austria and Italy; Denmark annexes Schleswig-Holstein (taking advantage of the fighting in Germany), a revolt flares up in Hungary, wars sweep through Italy, Prussian and Austrian troops expel the

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Danes from Schleswig-Holstein, the Communists in Paris rise against the new republic and are beaten down in bloody street fights, the Emperor has to flee Vienna, more bloody revolts are fought out in Paris, the Emperor of Austria is forced to abdicate in favour of his nephew—all in 1848. And then imagine things proceeding in a kindred spirit during 1849. But our author said in 1846 that 'in the present age a rebellion is, of all things, the most unthinkable.' Does it tax the sense of irony too far if we imagine further that, a century after the author made his statement, interpreters pretend that he made no mistake at all and actually tell us that he 'perceived the deeper trends and foresaw' not, to be sure, what was just about to happen (they don't deign to mention any of the events just recited) but—what shall we say?—the future?

Of course, one could consider extenuating circumstances. After all, he might well have perceived the deeper trends even if he did not foresee the future; and a good deal of what he said about the present age in 1846 might still be true of the second half of the twentieth century. Some historians might even argue that the revolutions of 1848 were peculiar in some ways and lacked the profundity of the French Revolution. If our author was right in spite of apparent evidence to the contrary, then it is not he that deserves to be well hung but rather his interpreters who have failed to come to grips with the evidence. And if a posthumous preface to one of his books ought to breathe a little of his spirit, it is not needful after all that it should turn against him; but it is entirely proper that it should attempt to rescue him from his friends. By all means, read his

book—only read it truly, and do not assume that any preface (whether this one or another) can all but take its place.

The case is similar to that of another so-called existentialist who all but borrowed Kierkegaard's title and published a little book on 'The Spiritual Situation of the Age,' as volume 1,000 in a popular series. Two years later, when his book had already gone through four editions, the Nazis came to power in Germany. Many people still cite it as a penetrating essay that perceived the deeper trends, even if it did not foresee what was just about to happen. And if the author considered Freud at least as dangerous as Hitler, he at least had the consistency to reiterate in 1950, in a volume on 'Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Age,' that Marxism and psychoanalysis are the two great representatives of anti-reason in the present age. His book, too, *was* quite perceptive in some ways; but surely his analysis 'of the Age' has its comic dimension, too, if one considers when it appeared. Yet writers on existentialism never tire of paying tribute to the supposedly marvellous manner in which Kierkegaard made fun of Hegel, while they would not dream of ridiculing existentialists.

Scores of professors have made fun of the supposedly so professorial Hegel, though they consider it exceedingly bad taste to make fun of Professor Jaspers, who wrote the two books just mentioned, of Professor Heidegger, whom Kierkegaard would surely have found funnier than Hegel, or of Kierkegaard himself. But they know not what they do. They are simply ignorant of the agonies of Hegel's life, of the gradual decline into insanity of Hegel's one-time roommate, Hölderlin; of his sister, as close to him

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as any human being, who lived on the verge of madness till she finally fell over the precipice; of his illegitimate, pre-marital son who brought heartbreak into Hegel's life again and again. Hegel's supposed remoteness from life and from his own existential situation is proverbial, and he is considered fair game, however unfair the dig; but if Kierkegaard made ridiculous errors, we must look the other way and pretend nothing happened.

When *The Present Age* first appeared in English, complete with preface and footnotes, there was no mention at all of politics or actual revolutions, and the author's statement that 'In the present age a rebellion is, of all things, the most unthinkable' was not glossed. All one was told of 1848 was that Kierkegaard did not really "speak in his own voice . . . until after the "metamorphosis" [?] of 1848. But he was already aware of it.' O his prophetic soul!

His *Misundelse* was translated, as it still is, as *ressentiment*. A footnote explained that this French term was 'first used forty years later by Nietzsche to describe the same process,' and went on to cite—not Nietzsche but a French book, *L'homme du Ressentiment* by Max Scheller. Scheler (Scheller was a printer's error) was, of course, a German philosopher who wrote in German (even if some of his essays were later translated into other languages), and his conception of *ressentiment* did not by any means agree completely with Nietzsche's, who had preceded him by roughly thirty years. Above all, Nietzsche did not 'describe the same process' that Kierkegaard describes in *The Present Age*; Nietzsche had found *ressentiment* in the heart of Christianity, he had found it creating the values of the New Testament. A detailed comparison of Kierke-

gaard, Nietzsche, and Scheler might be rewarding; but not giving us the original word at all and not rendering it literally, say, as envy (the best German translation says *Neid*, which is envy), but rather with a technical term from another man's philosophy, forestalls comparison, analysis, and needful thought. Indeed, a later essay claims that Kierkegaard, in *The Present Age*, 'forestalls one of the most famous passages in Nietzsche.' One may wonder how an author in 1846 could have forestalled a passage written forty years later—written and not forestalled after all—but such a claim at least forestalls doubts about Kierkegaard's prophetic powers: even if he neither foresaw nor forestalled the revolutions of 1848, he at least forestalled a passage in Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard is safely dead and therefore had the right to be as nasty as he pleased and to make fun of the professors of his day and of the foibles of his age. He can even count on the applause of those, a hundred years later, who walk in the footsteps not of Kierkegaard but of the men at whom he laughed. But to make fun of them—well, don't you see that in the present age that simply isn't done because it would be in bad taste? We must admire Kierkegaard for having done what, if anyone today presumed to do it, we should find detestable. Just so, we must admire Abraham and condemn those who imitate him. To be sure, that was the very attitude which Kierkegaard opposed throughout his literary work. But if anyone should take Kierkegaard seriously, which simply would not be genteel, instead of admiring him, which is the thing to do, he would be told: 'How did such an idea ever occur to you? Travel, divert yourself, take a laxative.' No, not really that: such a humorous

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way of putting it is much too Kierkegaardian. He would just be told that it was in horrible taste.

What, then, makes *The Present Age* worth reading, if it merely forestalled a passage in Nietzsche but not the revolutions of 1848? That kind of question, so characteristic of the present age, is here on trial. It is contested by the whole literary existence of Kierkegaard. 'Worth reading' and 'what should I get out of reading this?' are phrases that bring to mind Nietzsche's remark: 'Another century of readers—and the spirit itself will stink.'

Read for the flavour, chew the phrases, enjoy the humour, feel the offence when you are attacked, don't ignore the author's blunders, but don't fail to look for your own shortcomings as well: then the book will make you a better man than you were before. But if you should find it too strenuous to read for the joy and pain of an encounter with a human being who, exasperated with himself, his age, and you, does not—let's face it—like you, then leave the book alone and do not look for marvellous anticipations!

To be sure, *The Present Age*, which formed part of a long book review published over Kierkegaard's own name, is conclusive proof that he meant it when he said in one of his most important pseudonymous books, *Fear and Trembling*, that 'What our age lacks is not reflection but passion' (53); and probably he himself also believed that 'the conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones . . .' (109). Surely, the first of these statements, however understandable in the Victorian era, is ridiculously false in the *present* age; our time lacks both, but it certainly does not need any depreciation of reflection.

And the second statement cannot be fully excused by the age in which it was written. *The Present Age* refutes those who would dissociate Kierkegaard from these pseudonymous utterances, and it shows *why* he thought as he did, what provoked his anger, what he fought.

There are other places in his books where the same ideas find expression. In the 'Diapsalmata,' for example, early in *Either/Or*, he says, though not over his own name: 'Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is paltry; for it lacks passion. Men's thoughts are thin and flimsy . . . The thoughts of their hearts are too paltry to be sinful . . . This is the reason my soul always turns back to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. I feel that those who speak there are at least human beings: they hate, they love, they murder their enemies . . . they sin.'

Surely, one can understand Kierkegaard and sympathize with him without altogether agreeing. Perhaps the revolutions of 1848 *were* paltry compared with the French Revolution and with the upheavals of the *present* age—still it remains a fact that many thousands risked and lost their lives for their beliefs. And a hundred years later it had become rather plain that the conclusions of passion are by no means reliable, and that millions may lose their lives fighting for beliefs so utterly unfounded and inhuman that not even such a bloody sacrifice can hallow them. The reader who wants nothing but the truth should not read Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*—or other classics. But those who would know Kierkegaard, the intensely religious humorist, the irrepressibly witty critic of his age and ours, can do no better than to begin with this book.

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The essay on *The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle* also shows that the extreme authoritarianism implicit in *Fear and Trembling* represents the author's considered view, and that he really considered blasphemous any suggestion that, confronted with what purports to be God's word, we should first 'see whether the content . . . is divine, in which case we will accept it. . . .' Kierkegaard revered Abraham for the unflinching authoritarianism and the ethic of utterly blind obedience that he attributed to him, however mistakenly. He admired Abraham for not looking at the content of the commandment to sacrifice his son, and for not concluding that it was not divine and could not come from God. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard added: 'If faith does not make it a holy act to be willing to murder one's son, then let the same condemnation be pronounced upon Abraham as upon every other man' (41).

In *The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle* and in *The Present Age* we find the heart of Kierkegaard. It is not innocuous, not genteel, not comfortable. He does not invite the reader to relax and have a little laugh with him at the expense of other people or at his own foibles. Kierkegaard deliberately challenges the reader's whole existence.

Nor does he merely challenge our *existence*; he also questions some ideas that had become well entrenched in his time and that are even more characteristic of the *present* age. Kierkegaard insists, for example, that Christianity was from the start essentially authoritarian—not just that the Catholic Church was, or that Calvin was, or Luther, or, regrettably, most of the Christian churches, but that Christ was—and is. Indeed, though

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Kierkegaard was, and wished to be, an individual, and even said that on his tombstone he would like no other epitaph than 'That Individual,' his protest against his age was centered in his lament over the loss of authority.

In the present age it is fashionable to lump Jesus with the prophets and the Buddha, with Confucius, Lao-tze, and Zen, with the mystics and Spinoza—sometimes even with the French Enlightenment and Freud—as if everybody who had been at all attractive must, of course, have been a humanist, and only Hitler, Stalin, Calvin, and the Catholic Church had been authoritarian. It is axiomatic that Jesus' teaching was the most attractive teaching ever uttered, and any suggestion that it was not is branded as vilification. Only if the content was divine—or rather what the present age considers worthy of this epithet—may any teaching be ascribed to Jesus. The appalling possibility that Kierkegaard insisted we consider was that God's teaching might not agree completely with the predilections and the conscience of the present age.

If it were really axiomatic that God could never contravene our conscience and our reason—if we could be sure that he must share our moral judgments—would not God become superfluous as far as ethics is concerned? A mere redundancy? If God is really to make a moral difference in our lives, Kierkegaard insists, we must admit that he might go against our reason and our conscience, and that he should still be obeyed.

That, of course, is merely one aspect of Kierkegaard, though certainly one of the most important. But even if we come to conclude in the end that many of his ideas are untenable, or downright horrible, that does not mean

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that he was not 'worth reading.' The same consideration applies to Plato and Dante; and those who do not read the Scriptures after the manner of Judas might even agree that it applies to the Bible, too. Indeed, it is worth asking whether this is not a feature that is more often found than not found in the greatest books. They do not mainly seek to add to our knowledge: they do not disdain shocking us because what they most want to do is change us.¹

¹ For a more detailed discussion of Kierkegaard, see Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Anchor Books paperback), especially Chapter 10; but also some of the other passages listed in the Index.