Kierkegaard’s *Attack upon “Christendom”* and the Episcopal Church

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*Kierkegaard’s Attack upon “Christendom” was aimed at the established church in Denmark. Since the Episcopal Church often has a fantasy of establishment, this essay explores the implications of Kierkegaard’s book for the American church. Kierkegaard first criticizes the preaching and the public worship of the Danish Church. In response to this situation Kierkegaard emphasizes the difficulty of becoming a Christian and living the Christian life. He argues that leniency has led to the abolition of Christianity in Denmark and calls for rigor in these matters. The author describes his own experience of leniency in several dioceses of the Episcopal Church. Then the works of Ruth A. Meyers and the Standing Liturgical Commission on Christian initiation which treat these issues are examined. Finally, Kierkegaard’s later works are seen as predicting the horrors of the twentieth century and Kierkegaard scholar Howard A. Johnson’s interpretation of this for President Roosevelt are recounted.*

Kierkegaard’s *Attack upon “Christendom”* was aimed at the established Lutheran church in Denmark in 1854. The Episcopal Church in the United States has always trailed clouds of glory from its origin in the established Church of England; witness the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, known as the Washington National Cathedral and the site of major national memorial services. The current mission statement of the Cathedral states

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that it “harkens to the Cathedral founders’ intent that it be the spiritual home for the United States.” It also states that one of the goals of the Cathedral is to be “a national treasure symbolizing the role of faith in America.” Also there is St. John’s Episcopal Church on Lafayette Square across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, known as “the Church of the Presidents.” Then there is the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine of the Episcopal Diocese of New York with “the longest aisle in Christendom,” thus firing a shot across the bow of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome in which the lengths of other large cathedrals, such as St. Paul’s in London, are marked by brass plates in the floor, but not, of course, St. John the Divine’s whose plate would be several yards out in front. There are also the original and long-term Episcopal chaplaincies at the national Army and Navy training institutions at West Point and Annapolis. Finally there is the Episcopal Saint Grotlesex (St. Paul’s, Groton, Middlesex) and Andover-Exeter, Harvard-Yale route to high posts in the U. S. government exemplified in the careers of Henry Cabot Lodge, Franklin D. Roosevelt, McGeorge Bundy, Dean Acheson, Cyrus Vance, and many others. This also applies to high posts in business, law, the arts, and media. A modest and reverse version of this sense of establishment is found in the account of novelist Curtis Sittenfeld that at the age of five she had watched the marriage of Diana and Prince Charles on TV. Then she told her parents that she would like to marry a prince some day and asked what steps she might take to achieve this. Her father responded, “That would not be possible, since we are not Episcopalians.”¹ These factors point to a tendency toward a fantasy of establishment among some Episcopalians. Furthermore, this fantasy refers to the idea that the Episcopal Church is for people who are the most intelligent, cultured, and wealthy, and “at ease in Zion,” rather than to its being the church for all people in the nation, which is what establishment really means.²

Of course the Danish church was in fact established, with clergy paid by the government, while the Episcopal Church is established only in the fantasies of its clergy and members. The established churches of Europe are in decline, and this is also true of the

Episcopal Church. In 1963 John A. Gates published a book entitled *Christendom Revisited: A Kierkegaardian View of the Church Today*, in which he argues that Kierkegaard’s criticisms of the Danish church of his day “were just and . . . most of them apply to the church in our day also. . . . The church is characterized today by a vast and ignorant complacency.”3 There has long been a disestablishment movement in the Church of England and at times it has gained the agreement of its leaders, as, for example, in the case of William Temple, who as Bishop of Manchester, when Parliament failed to ratify the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1928, stated that disestablishment was not too great a price to pay for the church’s freedom. So it may be time for Episcopalians to disestablish their fantasies of establishment.

In this essay I shall examine Kierkegaard’s *Attack* and then discuss the extent to which it applies to the Episcopal Church. Kierkegaard has been associated with Anglicanism through the fact that the first translator into English of most of his writings was Walter Lowrie, an Anglican priest and for many years rector of St. Paul’s Within the Walls American Church in Rome and a historian of the ancient church. Furthermore, the editor of all of Lowrie’s translations for the Doubleday edition was Howard A. Johnson, an Episcopal priest, the first American to be admitted to the doctoral program at the University of Copenhagen, visiting professor of theology at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, professor of theology at the University of the South, canon theologian at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, and adjunct professor at Columbia University. He was described by Lowrie in 1953 as one who “knows Kierkegaard better than any other man now living.”4 Finally, for many years the senior professor of theology at the Episcopal Theological (now Divinity) School in Cambridge, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Kierkegaard, was a learned Kierkegaard scholar and often offered courses on Kierkegaard. (In this connection it might be mentioned that Anglican theologians have usually spent as much if not more time studying scholars other than Anglicans than they have on Anglican figures such as Hooker, Maurice, Gore, Keble, and Temple. This is exemplified in

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the fact that the translators of all or most of the works of Barth, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer have been Anglicans.)

The *Attack upon “Christendom”* was almost the last work published by Kierkegaard, and it consists largely of short pieces from two periodicals entitled *Fatherland* and *Instant or Moment*. It begins with a critique of Professor Martensen’s hailing of Bishop Mynster as a “witness to the truth.” Kierkegaard argues on the contrary “that Bishop Mynster’s proclamation of Christianity (to take just one thing) tones down, veils, suppresses, omits some of what is most decisively Christian, what is too inconvenient for us human beings, what would make our lives strenuous, prevent us from enjoying life—this about dying to the world, about voluntary renunciation, about hating oneself, about suffering for the doctrine, etc.” Kierkegaard makes the same point about Martensen, who succeeded Mynster.

Kierkegaard had pursued this issue earlier, in 1844:

In our day, scientific self-importance has tricked pastors into becoming something like professional clerks who also serve science and find it beneath their dignity to preach. Is it any wonder then that preaching has come to be regarded as a very lowly art? But to preach is the most difficult of all arts and is essentially the art that Socrates praised, the art of being able to converse. . . . What Socrates criticized in the Sophists, when he made the distinction that they indeed knew how to make speeches but not how to converse, was that they could talk at length about any subject but lacked the element of appropriation. Appropriation is precisely the secret of conversation.

Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journal* in 1847, “The category ‘for thee’ (subjectivity, inwardness) with which *Either/Or* concluded (only the truth which edifies is truth for thee) is precisely that of Luther. . . . As I now open his Postil—right away in the Gospel for the First Sunday

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in Advent he says ‘for thee’; that is the important thing.” Thus, “for thee” amounts to personal appropriation. In regard to the Episcopal Church there is general agreement that preaching is generally poor and for about the same reasons that Kierkegaard offers.

Kierkegaard pursues the issue of preaching at some length in *Practice in Christianity*, where he laments that sermons have become merely detached “observations,” so that

the sermon presentation has abolished what Christianly is decisive in the sermon presentation—the personal: this *You and I*, the speaker and the one being spoken to; this, that the one who is speaking is himself personally in motion, a striver, and likewise the one being spoken to, whom he therefore stirs up, encourages, admonishes, and warns, but all with respect to a striving, a life; this, that the speaker will continuously not go away from himself but come back to himself and will help the listener, not to go away from himself but to come back to himself. In our day, the sermon presentation has itself first totally disregarded, and subsequently has contributed to its being totally forgotten, that the Christian truth cannot really be the object of “observations.” . . . Therefore it is a risk to preach; for as I go up into that holy place—whether the church is packed or as good as empty—whether I myself am aware of it or not, I have one listener more than can be seen, an invisible listener, God in heaven, whom I certainly cannot see but who truly can see me. This listener, he pays close attention to whether what I am saying is true, whether it is true in me, that is, he looks to see . . . whether my life expresses what I am saying.

Kierkegaard goes on to point out that neither Mynster nor Martensen fulfills the further meaning of a “witness to the truth,” namely,

the extent to which the proclaimer’s life expresses what he says (and this, note well, is Christianly decisive). . . . A truth-witness is a person whose life from first to last is unfamiliar with everything called enjoyment . . . ; on the contrary, from first to last it was initiated into everything called suffering. . . . A truth-witness

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8 See my detailed analysis of this in *Christian Life and Practice: Anglican Essays* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2009), chap. 6.
is a person who in poverty witnesses for the truth, in poverty, in lowliness and abasement, is so unappreciated, hated, detested, so mocked, insulted, laughed to scorn.10

I might point out to those Christians who live in relatively peaceful surroundings that in the twentieth century forty-five million Christians died as martyrs, that is, as “believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility.”11 Furthermore, few Episcopal clergy could describe their situation as one of poverty, lowliness, and abasement.

Kierkegaard’s critique of preaching also applies to the public worship of his day. He addresses this in a Journal entry in 1854 in a parable about tame domesticated geese.

Every Sunday they gathered together and a goose preached. The gist of the sermon was as follows: “What a high destiny geese have, to what a high goal the creator . . . had appointed geese. With the help of their wings they could fly away to distant regions, blessed regions, where they really had their homes, for here they were but alien sojourners.” . . . There were a few individual geese among them who looked poorly and grew thin. The other geese said among themselves: “There you see what happens when you take seriously this business of wanting to fly.”

Kierkegaard concludes, “So also with Christendom’s worship services.”12

In 1855, six months before he died, Kierkegaard declared in an issue of Fatherland:

Yes, this is the way it is, the official divine worship (professing to be the Christianity of the New Testament) is, Christianly speaking, a forgery, a falsification. But you, you ordinary Christian, you are entirely bona fide [in good faith] credulous in the conviction that everything is quite in order, is Christianity of the New Testament. This falsification is so entrenched that there may be even

pastors who entirely *bona fide* go on living in the delusion that everything is quite in order, is the Christianity of the New Testament. This falsification is really forgery brought about over the centuries, whereby Christianity has gradually become just the opposite of what it is in the New Testament.\(^\text{13}\)

It should be noted that as a good Lutheran Kierkegaard takes the New Testament as the final authority in assessing the Christian character of the church, thus following the Lutheran Confessions, from which also the sixth of the Articles of Religion is largely derived.

Shortly before his death Lowrie persuaded Johnson to write a supplement to Lowrie's introduction to his translation of Kierkegaard's *Attack*, in order to place the latter in "proper historical and theological perspective." In this supplement Johnson points out that Kierkegaard intended his critique as nothing more than "a corrective," and that, except for the final few months of his life, Kierkegaard went regularly to church, preached in churches on occasion, and regularly received the sacrament of the altar.\(^\text{14}\) Here he refers to Kierkegaard's *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* and his moving equivalent of the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church in the final discourse in *Practice in Christianity*. According to Johnson, Kierkegaard was a loyal son of the church, longed to serve it as a priest, and had no proposal with respect to change in externals such as doctrine or hymns. Furthermore, Kierkegaard never attacked the church as church but only when it was becoming a culture-religion, a religion with a too simple identification of church and state and with clergy paid by the state. Kierkegaard sought not the reform of the church but its revival or awakening, as in the subtitle of the first part of *Practice in Christianity*, "For Awakening and Inward Deepening." Kierkegaard stated that "from an ideal Christian point of view, there is no such thing as an established Church but only a militant one. . . . If it should ever happen that an established Church would not tolerate that this be said even under the stated condition, then it is a sign that such a Church is in error and that a direct attack is called

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\(^{14}\) Johnson notes that the term "corrective" is found in Kierkegaard’s *Papirer XI.1.A28*. 
Johnson observes that his attack cost Kierkegaard the agony of endless soul searching, for he was attacking something to which he was devoted. Kierkegaard wrote, “He who must apply a ‘corrective’ must study accurately and profoundly the weak side of the Establishment, and then vigorously and one-sidedly present the opposite. Precisely in this consists the corrective.” When there was no reaction to his critique Kierkegaard stated, “Henceforth I will write in such wise as to irritate people into facing the issues.”

According to Johnson, Kierkegaard conceived the church to be composed of “individuals,” people “standing before God as he is revealed in Christ,” who know themselves “judged, forgiven, restored to fellowship, taken out of ‘the world,’ and sent back into the world as witness for service.”

Kierkegaard pursues these points at great length in the *Attack*, refers to the established Danish church as “Christendom,” and concludes that Christianity does not exist in Denmark. Historically Christendom began to emerge in the West when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 392 under Theodosius I. It continued through the Middle Ages and began to disintegrate under the influence of nationalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the French Revolution, and the secularization of society. The remnants of Christendom remain in the established churches of Europe and in a few other nations. Kierkegaard’s point is that in Christendom Christianity did not conquer the world but rather the opposite: the world conquered Christianity and Christianity became acculturated. This results in the situation of establishment in which all are Christians as a matter of course.

In response to this situation in Denmark Kierkegaard tended to stress the difficulty in becoming a Christian and living the Christian life. If being a Christian “is something so terrifying and appalling,” he asks, “how in the world can anyone think of accepting Christianity?”

Very simply and, if you wish that also, very Lutheranly: only the consciousness of sin can force one, if I dare to put it that way (from the other side grace is the force) into this horror. And at that very

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same moment the essentially Christian transforms itself into and
is sheer leniency, grace, love, mercy. Considered in any other way
Christianity is and must be a kind of madness or the greatest hor-
or. Admittance is only through the consciousness of sin; to want
to enter by any other road is high treason against Christianity.18

Another way of approaching this issue is through Kierkegaard’s
treatment of rigor and leniency, or in his terms, severity and mildness.
At times he seems to stress the demand for rigor in the Christian life
as requiring a strict imitation of Christ.19 At other times he suggests a
balance such as the following: “The Gospel is not the Law; the Gospel
will not save by rigorousness but by leniency; but this leniency will
save you, it will not deceive you; therefore there is rigorousness in
it.”20 However, the more the resistance of the established church to
his writings increased, the more Kierkegaard resorted to an emphasis
on rigor as a critique of what he saw as the extreme leniency in the
teaching of the church. In 1850 he stated:

Leniency was therefore substituted for rigorousness; because one
did not dare to command and one shrank from having to com-
mand. . . . In this way Christianity was abolished in Christen-
dom—by leniency. Without authority, Christianity creeps around
in Christendom in worn-out decrepit clothes. . . . But if there is
only one rescue for us, Christianity, then there truly is only one
possible rescue for Christianity: rigorousness.21

The best historical analysis of the relation of rigor and leniency
in Christian history is the volume entitled The Vision of God by Ken-
neth E. Kirk, Bishop of Oxford in the last century, in which he traces,
from the Bible through the Reformation, the relation of rigor and
what he calls “humanism,” which is his term for leniency. He does
not treat the rigor manifest in the preparation for baptism in the early

18 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 67–68.
19 See Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and
Shall Love.”
21 Kierkegaard, Practice in Christianity, 227–228. The best analysis of rigor and
leniency in Kierkegaard is David D. Possen, “The Voice of Rigor,” in International
Kierkegaard Commentary, Volume 20: Practice in Christianity, ed. Robert L. Perkins
church which for each individual sometimes extended for three years under the direction of a catechist. This was gradually shortened to the six weeks of Lent after the toleration and promotion of Christianity under Constantine. He also does not discuss the controversy over those who lapsed and became apostates under persecution. Cyprian argued for leniency and for the lapsed to be readmitted after penance, but the Novatianists argued for rigorism and this led to schism. Kirk’s conclusion is that both are necessary in the Christian life:

The other-worldly and the this-worldly seem to have equal claims both upon theological statement and upon Christian behavior. . . . The thought of the transcendent God over His creation . . . represents one factor in the Christian revelation. . . . It is to this factor that asceticism . . . has borne consistent witness. It must stand alongside humanism, as a permanent witness to an aspect of the doctrine of God which separates Christianity for all time from naturalism and pantheism.22

My sixty-five years of experience in the Episcopal Church gives me the clear impression that the emphasis is on leniency in preparation for adult baptism and confirmation. I had no catechetical instruction for my baptism and very little for my confirmation, both at the age of twenty-one, let alone any treatment of the difficulty of becoming a Christian. I had the same impression of leniency in the various parishes in which I worked in the Dioceses of Washington, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and California. Gates states, “It is the failure of Protestantism that it has not made the demanding aspect of Christianity plain to men.”23 The one exception I have experienced is the case of the religious orders, especially the oldest Anglican


23 Gates, Christendom Revisited, 11. For the history of this leniency and the various attempts to overcome it, see Ruth A. Meyers, Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1997), 9–10, 12, 48, 50, 62, 216. She notes that this development involves the gradual breakdown of a Christendom model and the emergence of a post-Christendom model. This latter point is also elaborated by Daniel B. Stevick in Holy Baptism, together with A Form for the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows with the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop also called Confirmation, Supplement to Prayer Book Studies 26 (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1973), 36–39.
men’s religious order, the Society of St. John the Evangelist. I worked closely with the chapter of this order in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in studying and receiving spiritual direction and offering instruction to novices. It should be noted, however, that the forms for adult baptism in *The Book of Common Prayer* include questions to the candidates that could be interpreted and applied in a more rigorous manner than I have experienced: “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?” Similar rigor is possible in preparation for the questions posed in the Baptismal Covenant in regard to the Apostles’ Creed.24

This widespread leniency may be in part the result of the sense of establishment mentioned above and also one of the causes of the decline of membership in the Episcopal Church over the past sixty years. On the other hand, conservative evangelical and pentecostal churches, which tend to consider themselves anything but established, both are growing and tend to be more rigorous in the training of new members.25 Episcopalians tend to look at these latter churches as more suited to “the lower classes” and thus not suited to be “established” in the sense mentioned above.

It should be noted, however, that Kierkegaard considered the concern with numbers to be antithetical to Christianity. He states in the *Attack* that if the priesthood is concerned with numbers, “that is very easily done; There is nothing to it. Get hold of the children, drop a little water on each child’s head—then he is a Christian. . . . Then in a very short time we have more Christians than there are herring in the herring season.” Yet Christianity is in fact “related inversely to number,” he asserts:

Because the concept “Christian” is a polemical concept, one can be a Christian only in contradistinction or by way of contrast. So it is also in the New Testament with regard to God’s wanting to be loved, and it is a relation of contradistinction precisely in order to intensify love; thus the Christian who loves God, in contradistinction to other persons, comes to suffer because of their hatred and persecution. As soon as the contradistinction is taken

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25 See the reports of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, found at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/.
away, being a Christian is blather—as it is in “Christendom,” which has cunningly abolished Christianity by means of: We all are Christians.26

The importance of what Kierkegaard calls “inwardness” means that there can be no objective way of measuring the health of churches on the basis of their growth or decline.

Ruth A. Meyers has presented a study of the development of the practice of the Episcopal Church in regard to Christian initiation which has taken place in the past century and suggests that this development is the result of the transition from a Christendom situation to a post-Christendom situation. She states:

The question of infant baptism becomes particularly crucial in the shift to a post-Christian worldview. In the Christendom model, the entire society is presumed to be Christian and infants are baptized as a matter of course, with the expectation that Christian nurture will occur as part of daily living as well as through participation in the life of the Church. But as Christendom crumbles and the broader social supports for a Christian worldview disappear, increasing emphasis is placed upon individual decision and commitment. . . . Two very different of models of baptism are at work: a Christendom model, which views baptism as a rite of passage marking birth and confirmation as a rite of adolescence, and a post-Christendom baptismal ecclesiology, in which baptism is incorporation into a faith community distinct from secular society.27

Meyers’s description of leniency in the Episcopal Church and my own experience of it lead me to believe that we have something further to learn from Kierkegaard’s treatment of rigor and leniency.

As noted above, Kierkegaard sometimes seems to stress the demand for rigor in the Christian life, as requiring a strict imitation of Christ leading to suffering and persecution, and at other times he suggests a balance. First, it is necessary to understand Kierkegaard’s interpretation of what Christianity really is. To the speculative philosopher Christianity is

a sum of tenets. But suppose that Christianity is nothing of the kind; suppose that, on the contrary, it is inwardness, and therefore the paradox, in order to thrust away objectively, so that it can be for the existing person in the inwardness of existence, by placing him decisively, more decisively than any judge can place the accused, between time and eternity in time, between heaven and hell in the time of salvation. . . . Faith is the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest.28

By inwardness or subjectivity Kierkegaard refers to the unfinished or open-ended character of the affective dimension of human life, which involves a process of becoming and determines the direction and continuity of such a life. A passion is a sustained and enduring emotion that gives shape to a life. C. Stephen Evans has observed that “for Kierkegaard himself Christian faith is a passion, a new master set of concerns that both gives continuity to a person’s life and enables a person to bring some unity to the discordant elements that characterize a human existence.”29 The paradox is the coexistence of the eternal in the temporal, which makes no sense to reason. He also refers to it as “the absurd,” the claim that the eternal God is fully manifest in one particular human life, that of a servant. This results in the possibility of the offense about which Jesus warned his disciples.30 For this reason Kierkegaard contrasts Socrates, who helps us to understand what we at some level already know, and Jesus, who makes it possible to receive something that otherwise is beyond our reach (because of our sin).

In the pseudonymous works Philosophical Fragments and Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard presents a lengthy and complex argument that faith is based on a revelation of God in the incarnation, which he describes as the absolute paradox and which reason cannot make sense of. It is not contrary to reason but above reason, a mystery that reason cannot comprehend, namely, that the

30 Evans, Kierkegaard, 20, 34, 145.
eternal has become temporal. If reason can recognize its limits in this paradox, it is at the same time fulfilled.

It should be noted at this point that on the title pages these two pseudonymous volumes are attributed to the author Johannes Climacus, John of the Ladder, a seventh-century monk. Below this is the statement “Responsible for publication S. Kierkegaard.” Why did Kierkegaard write these books pseudonymously? The main current interpretation of this phenomenon is that Kierkegaard was, as he put it, attempting to “reintroduce Christianity into Christendom” and this required what he called “indirect communication” and “double reflection.” Religious ideas cannot be stated directly as objective fact but only indirectly as involving a way of life. This requires that the hearer not only grasp the content of what is being said but also what this means for the hearer’s existence, for how the hearer’s life should be lived.\[31\]

This leads to Kierkegaard’s understanding of the difficulty of becoming a Christian. In 1846 he stated:

> There is hope that there still remains a similarity between a Christian now and in those early days and that wanting to become a Christian will once again become foolishness. In those early days, a Christian was a fool in the eyes of the world. To the pagans and Jews it was foolishness for him to want to become one. Now one is a Christian as a matter of course. If someone wants to become a Christian with infinite passion, he is a fool. Formerly a Christian was a fool in the eyes of the world; now that all men are Christians he nevertheless becomes a fool—in the eyes of Christians.

Because personal appropriation lies at the heart of his picture of faith (as a passion, a subjective decision, a risk), Kierkegaard regards becoming a Christian as more difficult for people who were baptized as infants (and regard everyone in Denmark as a kind of Christian) than people who do not regard themselves as already part of the church.

Nowadays the difficulty in becoming a Christian is that one must self-actively transform an initial being-a-Christian [baptism in

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infancy] into a possibility, in order to become a Christian in truth. . . . In short, it is easier to become a Christian when I am not a Christian than to become a Christian if I am one; and this decision is reserved for the person who has been baptized as an infant.

What is baptism without appropriation? It is the possibility that the baptized child can become a Christian, neither more nor less. . . . To become a Christian then becomes the most terrible of all decisions of a person’s life, since it is a matter of winning through despair and offense (the Cerberus pair who guard the entry to becoming a Christian). An infant two weeks old cannot have passed the most terrible examination in this life, one in which eternity is the examiner.

Kierkegaard concludes, “I venture according to my poor ability to take on the responsibility for making it [becoming a Christian] as difficult, as difficult as possible, yet without making it more difficult than it is. . . . My thinking goes something like this: if it is the highest good, then it is better if I definitely know that I do not possess it, so that I aspire to it with all my might.”32 It seems to me that the Episcopal Church needs to rid itself of any fantasy of establishment and recover some of Kierkegaard’s sense of the necessity of rigor in its interpretation of the Christian life and in its preparation of those entering it. Becoming a Christian in our rapidly changing church and society needs to be about personal appropriation.

As a result of the work of the Standing Liturgical Commission, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved in 1970 a form for baptism and for post-baptismal “Affirmation of Baptismal Vows” for trial use. The latter form is described as “an act and occasion for (more or less) mature personal acceptance of promises and affirmations made on one’s behalf in infancy,” which should be “strongly encouraged as a normal component of Christian nurture.” These affirmations should be received by a bishop, who “should recall the applicants to their Christian mission.” The rite is also suitable “when a person whose practice of the Christian life has become perfunctory, or has completely lapsed, awakes again to the call of Christ and desires to signalize his response publicly, and to receive a strengthening gift of the Spirit for renewal.”33 It is to be hoped that this use will lead

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32 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 216, 366, 372, 373, 381.
33 Standing Liturgical Commission, Holy Baptism, together with a Form for the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows with the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop, also
to greater rigor in the way the Episcopal Church prepares people for a more deeply Christian life and practice.

Kierkegaard was not yet aware of the emergence of a post-Christendom situation, but he was concerned with the question of the relation of the church to the modern cultural and political situation which was emerging. In his book *Kierkegaard and Christendom* John W. Elrod addresses Kierkegaard’s “second literature,” namely, that which he wrote after the *Postscript* and in which he argues against the “the political, economic, and cultural changes rapidly transforming Denmark from a feudalistic to a modern nation.” Elrod states that “Kierkegaard sought to rescue the individual from the illusion that his spirit was being improved by his participation in the modernization of Denmark,” which was based on the philosophical “principle of individualism” developed by Hobbes, Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith. For Kierkegaard this development nurtured an “egotistical mode of subjectivity” which “sets individuals in uncompromising opposition to one another,” and he was convinced that the Danish church collaborated in this development. Kierkegaard thus believed that “to live in Christendom involves nothing less than living in a religiously legitimated social order that cultivates and nurtures egotistical relations among its citizens.” He viewed his task as the “Socratic one of awakening his reader from three illusions: his ignorance about himself as a being who egotistically loves himself and desires to achieve a publicly recognizable and valued identity; his self-deception that he is a Christian; and his belief that Denmark is a Christian nation.”

Howard Johnson, however, inspired by Kierkegaard, saw Christendom in an even darker manner. He saw this as “the age in which man decided to build the Kingdom of God on earth.” He saw Christendom as “a culture religion,” as “a profane messianism, in which man himself was scheduled to be the messiah,” in an age that worshiped the “new gods” of progress, science, education, and humanity:

These things gave us the Century of Progress, a century of progressive concern with the creature rather than the Creator. Kierkegaard knew that upon these things the wrath of God would fall. For God is love. And God will not tolerate idols because idols are

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not good for man. . . . When he warned that the skies were about to fall, his contemporaries dubbed him a misanthropic Henny Penny. In our day, however, the tragic consequences of finite self-sufficiency have become apparent. The idol's clay feet are breaking. Like the prophets of Israel S. K. is read and heard only after the event. His apprehension at the beginning of the age is ours at its end. The warnings with which he tried to save us from our fate now help us to interpret our fate. Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century was trying to do what God in our century is doing by means of two world wars.35

In seven lectures delivered at twenty-two universities and colleges in Japan in the summer of 1952 Johnson expanded on this theme. He observed that “Kierkegaard’s “most prophetic political insight” was the perception that by replacing theism with secular humanism, the nineteenth century was planting the seeds of the totalitarianism that would bloom in the twentieth century. Kierkegaard understood that secularism never remains merely secular but always becomes religious again, though “religious in a perverted way.” Further, “Kierkegaard knew what the new absolute would be. He learned from Hegel what it would be. It would be the State—a State that demanded of its citizens uncritical allegiance, unconditional obedience, religious devotion, self-immolation.36

The story is taken up from here by Denis de Rougemont. He states: “The best interpretation of the collective phenomena of today was given in about 1848 by the Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard, the capital thinker of our era.” This is what one may read in his intimate diary:

In contradistinction to the Middle Ages and those periods with all their discussions of possession, of particular men giving themselves to evil, I should like to write a book on diabolic possession in modern times, and show how mankind en masse, gives itself up to evil, show how nowadays it happens en masse. It is for this reason that people gather into flocks, in order that natural,

36 Unpublished, unedited lectures, Lecture 1, pp. 7–8; in Box 37 of the papers of Walter Lowrie in the Rare Books and Collections of the Firestone Library, Princeton University. This insight that secularism tends to become religious again was taken up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and proponents of secular theology in the 1960s.
animal hysteria should take hold of them, in order to feel themselves stimulated, inflamed, and beside themselves. The scenes on Blocksberg\(^{37}\) are the exact counterparts of this demoniacal pleasure, which consists in losing oneself in order to be volatilized into a higher potency, where being outside oneself one hardly knows what one is doing or saying, or who or what is speaking through one, while the blood courses faster, the eyes turn bright and staring, the passions and lusts seething.

De Rougemont continues: “What could Kierkegaard be thinking of when, in his bourgeois, pious and comfortable Denmark, he wrote these prophetic lines?” and answers, “Kierkegaard understood better than anyone and before anyone the creative diabolical principle of the masses: fleeing from one’s own person, no longer being responsible, and therefore no longer guilty, and becoming at one stroke a participant in the divinized power of the Anonymous.”\(^{38}\) Charles Bellinger expands on this in an essay entitled “Toward a Kierkegaardian Understanding of Hitler, Stalin, and the Cold War,” in which he argues that Kierkegaard offers an explanation of the roots of violence in *The Concept of Anxiety*, in the form of anxiety before the good in the demoniacs of the gospels, and anxiety before the evil in the Pharisees. He states, “These two character types represent the extreme, pathological forms of the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence. . . . Adolf Hitler’s life reveals anxiety before the good in its ultimate demonic extreme. . . . Karl Marx is a classical example of the ethical sphere of existence.”\(^{39}\)

During 1944, when Johnson was on the staff at St. John’s Church, Lafayette Square, he invited Eleanor Roosevelt to speak to a group at St. John’s, at which time she learned of Johnson’s study of Kierkegaard which she apparently mentioned to the President. Later Johnson

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\(^{37}\) The Blocksberg, the highest mountain in north Germany, played a role in German legends and figured as the site of witches’ gatherings referred to by Goethe.


received an invitation to dinner at the White House. He showed it to a diplomat friend, who stated that it was a third level invitation and described how it would proceed. When Johnson appeared at the White House his hat and coat would be taken and he would be ushered into the East Room, where Mrs. Roosevelt would preside at a dinner for about twelve guests. But when Johnson appeared at the White House and after the hat and coat had been taken, he was ushered to the rear of the first floor and taken on an elevator to the Roosevelts’ personal quarters. He was taken down a hall, and a knock at a door produced the sound of a well-known voice saying, “Come in.” He stepped in and was received by the President, who asked him if he would join him in a martini. Johnson managed to respond, “Yes, thank you, Mr. President.” And Roosevelt proceeded to quiz Johnson on Kierkegaard for almost an hour. Johnson described to him how Kierkegaard explained the rise of totalitarianism and the Nazis, and Roosevelt was very impressed, asked questions, and took notes, as was explained in Frances Perkins’s book on Roosevelt.

She stated: “He had relatively little interest, as I have said, in the philosophical concepts which absorb those who approach religion from the intellectual point of view, but in the last year of his life he ran into one theological concept that was important to him because it explained what made the Nazis the way they were.40 He spoke of it a number of times, so that one may assume it was an important intellectual experience for him.” Some time after the dinner, Roosevelt asked Perkins, “Frances, have you ever read Kierkegaard?” She responded, “Very little.” The President continued, “Well, you ought to read him. It will teach you something. It will teach you about the Nazis. Kierkegaard explains the Nazis to me as nothing else ever has. I have never been able to make out why people who are obviously human beings could behave like that. They are human, yet they behave like demons. Kierkegaard gives you an understanding of what it is in man that makes possible for these Germans to be so evil. This fellow,

40 Here I would add: “namely the concept of sin.” British poet and philosopher T. E. Hulme states, “The essential unity of all philosophy [since the Renaissance] seems obvious. It all rests on the same conception of man, and exhibits the same inability to realize the meaning of the dogma of original sin.” See T. E. Hulme, Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924), 13.
Johnson, over at St. John’s, knows a lot about Kierkegaard and his theories. You’d better read him.”

Johnson continued his study of Kierkegaard in summers in Copenhagen. During this time he was a visiting lecturer in theology at the Virginia Theological Seminary in 1944–1945; professor of theology at the University of the South from 1949 to 1953; canon theologian at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and an adjunct professor at Columbia University from 1954 to 1966. In 1959 he undertook a two-year trip around the Anglican Communion, which he later described in a book. His study of Kierkegaard was cut short, however, by a case of food poisoning in the fall of 1973, which led to his retirement to Southern California and his death in 1974 in Long Beach. His essays on Kierkegaard, however, constitute a warning to Episcopalians and others about any fantasy of establishment and also about any accompanying tendency to leniency in regard to preparation for and practice of the Christian life.

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