How to Write Being Christian in a Post-Christian Age

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The use of the word ‘write’ in my title might suggest that I am going to offer a 1980s or 90s-style Derridian reading of Kierkegaard that presents him as a proto-postmodernist deconstructionist avant la lettre, a practitioner of écriture. I am not unsympathetic to many of the readings of Kierkegaard that emerged from that milieu and the so-called postmodernist vogues of the 1980s and 1990s played a large part in bringing Kierkegaard back into the centre of philosophical and theological discussion, at least in the Anglo-American world. We should not trash our friends. However, we do not need to think of deconstruction or grammatology every time we hear the word ‘writing’. Why I nevertheless want to give due weight to ‘writing’ is simply that, whatever else we may know about him, Kierkegaard was a writer. Writing was what he did, and writing, as he testified, was one of the most constant and profound sources of joy in his short life. It was also, as he further emphasized, the way in which he acted out his particular Christian calling: gifted and guided by providence to be, quite simply, a writer, that is, a religious and even Christian writer. To which I would only add the further qualification that he was, qua writer, a writer of prose. I shall return later to the importance of this.

This opening statement may seem to say very little about either Kierkegaard or about his writing itself, its style, its content, its place in history. Given the extraordinary range of historical material transmitted in the form of ‘writing’ by ‘writers’ we may feel the need immediately to specify more closely what kind of writer he was and what kind of writing he produced. However, when we are dealing with a textual heritage as complex, multi-faceted, polyphonic, and even downright paradoxical as Kierkegaard’s, it is sometimes worth going back to what is indeed simple.

Librarians, publishers, and university teachers may need to agonize about whether to place Kierkegaard (or books or courses, about Kierkegaard) in philosophy, theology, or Scandinavian literature, but however we answer such questions and whatever else he was, Kierkegaard was a writer. But what did he write? At the most elementary level we can say that he wrote books, reviews, polemical articles, and journals—obviously? And even if (in good postmodernist style) we want to interject that it was not Kierkegaard but one or other pseudonym who wrote the best-known of these works, it is nevertheless the case that alongside the pseudonymous works he also wrote other works that he did indeed publish under his own name and also that he did, after all, write the pseudonymous works themselves in the most basic sense of the word ‘write’, that is, write.
them with quill pen in hand. But what was—or, should we say, what is—the matter of these writings?

I’m trying to avoid formulating this question as if it was a question concerning the subject-matter or content of Kierkegaard’s writing. It is not the question: what did Kierkegaard write about? That is a perfectly legitimate question and it is perfectly possible to produce a long list of answers that would be entirely correct: he wrote about aesthetics, Socrates, speculative philosophy, the existence of God, eternal blessedness, Jesus Christ, and ageing actresses. Yet precisely because the relationship between form and content is not only another of the topics that Kierkegaard did indeed write about but also a relationship internalized and problematized in the matter of his writing itself, to ask only what that writing was about would be to foreclose on many of the possibilities hinted at by the more basic question as to the matter of this writing. Focussing on the content, we might forget that, in this case, the content is only with difficulty separable from the form.

My title forewarns you of my preliminary answer to this question: being Christian. However, I should immediately gloss this in several ways. Firstly, there are a number of passages where Kierkegaard tells us that the task to which his writing is dedicated is not being Christian, but becoming Christian. And, secondly, he undertakes the ancillary task of drawing it to the attention of readers who believe themselves to be Christian that maybe they are not: not in the most radical, original, and true sense of the word. We might then, thirdly, see that Kierkegaard set himself a whole series of writing tasks, producing works that he differentiated as aesthetic, ethical, religious, and Christian, to which the secondary literature might add ‘early’ and ‘late’ Kierkegaard or further subdivide the authorship into pre-1848, 1848-51, and 1851-55, not to mention the writings prior to the ‘the authorship’ proper, which Kierkegaard regarded as starting only with Either/Or. How, then, can we bring this manifold under the single and simple rubric of ‘being Christian’? This, however, is my claim, that ‘being Christian’ is the unifying—if never finally unified—theme of these manifold ‘writings’. For being Christian, I suggest, is not just a matter of coming to accept certain propositions relating to the natural and supernatural life of Jesus Christ but is first and foremost a matter of life: the life, namely, of those who, being Christian, experience their lives as lived in and by the power of the life of Christ.

To which the immediate response might be: but what has that to do with articles about ageing actresses? How does celebrating the theatrical art of Mme Heiberg—or the demonic genius of Don Giovanni or the tragic fate of Antigone—manifest Christian life? Or, more subtly, how does the task of edification, to which another strand of Kierkegaard’s authorship is committed, manifest the Christian life, if, as Johannes Climacus at least claimed, it falls short of embracing the decisive Christian categories? Surely, if it is a matter of being Christian, we have to strip out the larger part of
Kierkegaard’s writings—all the aesthetic, ethical, philosophical, and upbuilding writings that lie outside the sphere of Christianity proper?

Here, however, I invoke the third element in my title: that Kierkegaard’s writing is writing in and for a post-Christian age.

Now if the claim that the matter of Kierkegaard’s writing is being Christian is controversial in ways that are familiar to Kierkegaard scholars, the claim that we are living in a post-Christian age is controversial for yet other reasons, as is the further implicit claim that Kierkegaard too understood himself as living in a post-Christian age. Even today we still here claims by leading figures in public life that our Western society is still basically Christian in orientation and values, despite the continuing weakening of ecclesiastical commitment. Fifty years ago, such claims were, of course, still more common—and more plausible. As for the nineteenth century, who can doubt that it was one of the great ages of faith? But even if Kierkegaard himself might be cited as one who, in the final attack on the Church, was amongst the first to say ‘No! We are not living in a truly Christian world’, it is plausible to claim that it was only at the very end of his career that he came to see the project of a public, officially recognized form of ecclesiastical Christianity as intrinsically flawed. And if, as some commentators believe, he might be read as allowing for some kind of radical free Church movement, in which membership is a matter of public record as well as private choice, it would follow that even the iconoclast Kierkegaard had not entirely given up on some idea of ecclesiastical Christianity.

But all of this, I fear, is to miss the matter at issue with regard to Christianity in Kierkegaard’s writing. Let us go back a couple of steps.

Clearly, Kierkegaard is by no means distinctive in his opinion that true Christianity cannot be decided by statistics relating to Church attendance or membership. Renewal movements throughout history and across all Christian denominations have implicitly distinguished between mere external adherence and true, saving conviction and commitment. The state of Christianity in the world cannot be decided by statistics. That said, the question as to Church attendance and membership would seem to give some indication as to the existential as well as intellectual persuasiveness of Christian life and teaching in any given age. As we know, even before the start of the nineteenth century Schleiermacher had already recognized that those Allen Ginsberg would call ‘the best minds of my generation’ were no longer self-identifying as Christian believers. In this regard it is also thought-provoking that one of the early reviews of Either/Or sparked off an exchange with Bishop Mynster on just this question, namely, whether the more progressive elements of Danish society still had any significant ecclesiastical commitment. A decline in Church-going, whether local and temporary or civilizational and long-term may indicate a transition to a post-Christian age, but this is not the decisive point.
Closer to the mark is the event named by Nietzsche as ‘the death of God’, an event connected with (although not identical to) such other phenomena of modernity as the flight of the gods, the disenchantment of the world, and, more broadly, secularization. Yet perhaps the mere assertion of the death of God doesn’t quite get to the heart of the matter either. Even after the death of God, many continue to affirm their belief in God, and many do so with arguments supporting the compatibility of such belief with the theoretical deliverances of natural science and the social and political requirements of a secular society. Despite the ‘theology of the death of God’ of the 1960s, it would seem that God is not yet (quite) dead and, if absent, is constantly rumoured to be about to return.

Perhaps, then, we can formulate the thrust and implications of the death of God in a rather quieter way by speaking of the end of the theistic consensus. As theologians will know, the history of Christianity has been accompanied by a succession of arguments for the existence of God—ontological, cosmological, and moral. However, theologians being mostly less foolish than their critics like to think, those who advanced such arguments were mostly aware that although they might be persuasive to a certain degree, they could not finally or absolutely prove God’s existence. Consequently, they often concluded their demonstrations with one final and really decisive argument, namely, the argument based on the *consensus gentium*, the consent of the peoples. This argument was extremely simple, involving little more than the assertion—self-evident to those who made it—that all people everywhere had always believed in some God. Belief, in other words, was an anthropological constant. A rhetorically powerful variation of this argument was offered by J.P. Mynster, when serving the congregation of the Church of Our Lady and attempting to raise funds for rebuilding the bombed out Church. Wherever you go in the world, he argued, to whatever town or city, amongst whatever people, the most significant public building is invariably the temple. So Copenhagen too must not neglect its ruined chief Church, but should strive to restore it to its rightful glory and pre-eminence. Honouring their God is what all humans everywhere do.

I have encountered the argument *ex consensus gentium* in English theological writing from the 1940s, although I cannot imagine that it would by then have persuaded many readers. And it is, I suggest, a sense for the collapse of this argument that is definitive for Kierkegaard’s relation to Christendom. As I have suggested, we might argue a similar case in relation to Schleiermacher’s *Speeches*, but with regard to Kierkegaard it is, I think, almost undeniable. For what is the outcome of this collapse? It is, quite simply, that God is no longer available as a self-evident point of reference in public discourse. It is still possible to speak of God and of faith in God—but those who do so can no longer presume upon the acceptance of their claims or even the intelligibility of these claims to non-believers. And it is this cultural shift, away from a basic theistic consensus towards a situation of
irreversible and irreconcilable diversity that I wish to indicate by the term ‘post-Christian’. Nor do I think that this would change in any essential respect if the established Churches of Western Europe were to be so re-invigorated as to compel the kind of ecclesiastical adhesion typical of the early modern period, since (if this was not the result of coercion from above) it would, from our point of view, be the kind of accumulation of individual choices that we see in, e.g., the United States, where despite the existence of a church-going population there is no longer an underlying theistic consensus in the public sphere.

Kierkegaard’s intuitive grasp of this situation is, I suggest, not just a feature of the polemical writings of the last years but underpins the whole movement of the authorship from at least Either/Or onwards, a movement from the aesthetic to the religious and on towards the Christian.

But there is a further, related feature of this situation that I want briefly to discuss before focussing more exclusively on Kierkegaard, and it is a feature that indicates is why I am giving a particular weight to the theme of writing and what the specific import of that theme actually is in this context. This is the theme of ‘the end of art’, a theme associated with Hegel’s aesthetics and, as such, not only known to Kierkegaard but also internalized into the body of his writings. It is probably best known in the Hegelian version by reference to the lines from the introductory lecture on how thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art and how the production of works of beauty no longer fulfils our highest need—‘we no longer bow the knee’. Raphael painted a Madonna, but we see a Raphael. The anti-Romantic implications of this theme are pervasive also in Kierkegaard. ‘The aesthetic’ is not just a stage of life to be rejected because it is morally flawed; it is also a stage of life relativized by the exigencies of the present age—‘the age of poetry is past’, as Frater Taciturnus puts it.

However, it is not only at the start of his lectures that Hegel flags up the ‘end of art’. The theme reappears in a slightly different guise at the end of the course, as Hegel considers the transformation of tragedy and comedy in the modern period. In terms that will be effectively repeated in Kierkegaard’s essay on Antigone, Hegel argues that modern drama no longer represents the conflict between great substantial powers, between divine and human law, but is no more than the interaction of more or less accidental, contingent subjectivities. As in the history of drama in the ancient world itself, the content of the work is emptied out until we reach the point at which spectators are no longer confronted with a drama of gods and heroes but see only themselves. In this way art moves from ‘the poetry of imagination to the prose of thought’. Now, strikingly, Hegel never developed a fully-formed theory of the novel, although we might argue that two of the major twentieth century theorists of novelistic literature, George Lukacs and M. M. Bakhtin, were effectively thinking through the implications of Hegel’s aesthetics for this newly dominant art-form.
Of course, Hegel himself died just at the point at which the modern prose novel was entering into a sudden and extraordinary flowering (from the 1830s onwards), but his (and Kierkegaard’s) expectation that the art produced under the conditions of modernity would be an art that was about as well as for ‘we moderns’ seems to have been well-founded. In this regard I believe that Bakhtin was correct (or at least very Hegelian) in drawing the conclusion that such art would not have the self-sufficient perfection of classical beauty (which Hegel describes as circle-like) but would be open-ended, multi-voiced, unfinalizable, and prosaic—just like life itself.

I hope you see where I am going with this. If the ending of the age of poetry and art is a further specification of what is involved in a world that is becoming ‘post-Christian’, then the writing of such an age will be writing that is open-ended, multi-voiced, unfinalizable, and prosaic—just like life itself. And Kierkegaard, I suggest is amongst the first Christian writers to grasp this and to do so not just in the way we grasp a theoretical truth but as a practical exigency. In other words, he didn’t just tell us that this is how it is; he produced a body of writing that showed how being Christian must or might now be written. The task is no longer—as for idealist aesthetics—finding a commensurate sensuous form in which to express the truth of the idea, but to display the idea as it is contested, obscured, and maybe even discarded in existence. It is this decisiveness in literary practice that, throughout the modern period, has made Kierkegaard accessible to those who by no means share his religious commitments—although I would also add that I think that the ultimate spur to just such a ‘secularization’ of art is precisely the Christian narrative of the God who became a poor, suffering human being devoid of all visible divine attributes. In this regard, Christianity is plausibly depicted as the remote, if often unwitting and unwilling, cause and destiny of modernity. In writing being Christian for a post-Christian world, Kierkegaard is bringing writing home.

These comments admittedly gloss over a number of stress points in Kierkegaard’s writings themselves. In published and unpublished works alike, Kierkegaard could refer to himself as a poet of the religious or of the Christian, and this self-designation has been taken up (often brilliantly) in the secondary literature. But isn’t this self-description offered by way of opposition to the prosaic reality of the modern bourgeois world? And doesn’t it therefore count against the position I am attempting to propose? The matter is complex. Yet, in the end, it seems to me that the poetic element in even Kierkegaard’s most Christian writing (as in some of the late communion discourses or the 1849 discourses on the lily and the bird) is, finally, a subordinate element to an essentially prosaic argument and not vice versa. The poetry does not stand alone but is worked into and serves the purposes of mundane persuasion. It is telling in this regard that, however suspicious we may be of the self-accounting of The Point of View, Kierkegaard here presents himself under the more general rubric of ‘author’ rather than ‘poet’ and if we had to give the work an alternative title it
would less likely be *Poetry and Truth* than *Writing and Truth*. Indeed it is precisely the ‘poetic’ rendering of Goethe’s auto-biography that Kierkegaard finds fatally suspect.

Closely related to these remarks is another claim we can trace back to Kierkegaard himself, namely, that he has never had any pretensions to be the ideal Christian, but what he can and does do is, precisely, to understand and to present the Christian ideal. We have already implicitly touched on the connection that both Hegel and Kierkegaard make between the ideal and the poetic, and if we see Kierkegaard’s task as presenting the Christian ideal or the ideal of Christ, then we may also be close to seeing him, again, as the poet rather than the prosaist, the writer, of the Christian life. And here we may remark on an anxiety that Kierkegaard himself seems to have experienced and to which many of his more critical commentators have also drawn attention, namely, the anxiety that there is, in the end, something Quixotic about the Kierkegaardian enterprise. *Don Quixote*, as one of the first great works of modern prose literature, invites being read as a critique of Quixotism and knight-errancy, including perhaps the errancy of knights of faith. Kierkegaard too could see that precisely to the extent that he elevated the Christian ideal above the prose of everyday market-town life in Copenhagen he would expose himself to a martyrdom of laughter at the hands of the mob or the pens of the mob’s more scurrilous mouthpieces. But that is also just what is so writerly about Kierkegaard: that with the same gesture by which he elevates the ideal above everyday life, he also shows us the incongruity between this ideal and the world—like the Christian Passion narrative, yes, but also like Don Quixote. Indeed, we could say that Kierkegaard is, in his way, Thomas à Kempis and Cervantes. The prosaic modernism of his writing covers Christian and comic points of view because it is writing that is open-ended, multi-voiced, unfinalizable, and prosaic—just like modern life itself.

We are now in a position to make a further and important point. If the characterization of Kierkegaard’s writing that I am developing is correct, then it is not only the case that the open-ended prose of his writing encompasses, absorbs, and mediates the poetic and idealistic elements of the authorship, but it also encompasses, absorbs, and mediates the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of *Either/Or* Part 1 and other works. Everything, from Don Giovanni, through the Seducer and on to the crises of ageing actresses belongs integrally to the stuff of Kierkegaard’s mongrel prosaic universe. Let us then extend our list: Kierkegaard is à Kempis, Cervantes and Baudelaire, who albatross might count alongside *Don Quixote* as, in some respects, a variant on the Christian Passion narrative. But if this is so, how can I also argue that the matter of Kierkegaard’s writing is being Christian. Surely it is one of the most elementary lessons of Kierkegaard’s writing that the aesthetic falls outside the religious, as too does even the ethical. Surely Kierkegaard’s authorship is ‘about’ the aesthetic (and even the ethical) only to the extent that it shows this is what must be discarded if we are to attain
Christianity and that Christianity in Denmark (and, we may suspect, elsewhere) is corrupt precisely by virtue of the fact that it has consciously or unconsciously succumbed to the lure of the aesthetic.

Indeed. But here we come back to the distinction I attempted to make between writing ‘about’ Christianity and writing being Christian. If, as I think Kierkegaard’s existential orientation requires, we see Christianity not as a set of propositions but as a life- and self-commitment on the part of an existing individual; if, that is, Christianity is not a set of truth-claims but a lived life, then all that belongs to that lived life is part of what it is for that living person to be Christian. For the person whose path to Christianity has been through the aesthetic, then the aesthetic too belongs to the overall narrative of what it means for that person to be Christian and the integration of the aesthetic into the religious will be an abiding feature of their Christian travail. This, I suggest, is essentially akin to what Assessor Vilhelm means by ‘repentance’, that is, choosing ourselves as we are in the totality of our lives ‘from the hand of God’.

Kierkegaard’s way is not the way of the monastery in any simple sense, even if he was already in the cloister when he wrote Either/Or. Of course, the person who has become or is serious about becoming a Christian will not persist in the habits of a Seducer or aesthetic prankster. But if Søren Kierkegaard the Christian has become a Christian by being reborn, the reborn Søren Kierkegaard is, nevertheless, the reborn Søren Kierkegaard and neither Peter Christian Kierkegaard nor P. L. Møller. In being Christian we are who we are even if we now see and know who we are in a transfiguring light, accepting the unacceptable, whilst seeing—perhaps more acutely than ever—just why it is or was unacceptable. Being Christian is neither self-forgetfulness nor self-deception but living the tension of an open-ended and, in this life, unfinalizable relationship between past, present, and what is to come. If we are to speak what this means, the poetic word—at least as construed by Romantic idealism—will probably fail us. Perhaps prose will not succeed either. But prose doesn’t have to succeed. It is not the aim of prose to produce a well-rounded whole, but merely to speak our world and our life in the world as and how they are, a living running commentary on and questioning of existence.

I have made my main point, but in conclusion—quite a long conclusion—I want to draw out three or arguably four further features of what this means in the case of Kierkegaard’s attempt to write being Christian after Christianity. If turning to the prose of everyday life as the medium of writing being Christian means renouncing the poetic and the ideal in the sense discussed above, it also involves further, closely connected acts of renunciation: the renunciation of metaphysics; the renunciation of history; and the renunciation of community, which we may sub-divide into the twofold renunciation of nation and Church as measures of human identity.
In a much quoted but undeveloped comment in the journals, Kierkegaard remarks that the error of modern dogmatics is to have laid its foundations in metaphysics. Better than metaphysics, he suggests, is rhetoric. Under the rubric ‘towards a rhetorical theology’ I have elsewhere taken this comment as a key to the strategy of indirect communication, arguing that, for Kierkegaard, this is not just a means of bringing readers to the point at which they can begin to ‘do’ theology but that the ‘how’ of communication is itself the matter of Kierkegaardian theology. Furthermore, this is a ‘how’ that requires the suspension of metaphysics precisely because, on a Kierkegaardian view, metaphysics will ‘always already’ have inscribed all the open-ended possibilities of existence within the ‘what’ of Being qua ousia, interpreted in the Latin West as essence. In many respects my argument today repeats that claim. However, it does so (I hope) in such a way as to be even less open to the interpretation that I am understanding Kierkegaard’s way of writing as a ‘strategy’ of communication serving a purpose that lies on some other, higher level. Fairly obviously, being Christian, for Kierkegaard and for us, must involve more than just writing books (and reading them). Yet if Heidegger, following Aristotle, is right that logos, Rede, is intrinsic to and inseparable from our human way of being such that to be human is to be the living being having logos, then how we speak about ourselves, our life, and our faith is intrinsic to and inseparable from whatever meaning we, our lives, and our faith might have. When Viktor Frankl developed his logotherapy for those traumatized by experiences of extreme terror, he was not playing with words, but recognizing just this: that how we are and how we speak about how we are are not, finally, two different things. How we are is how we reveal ourselves—intentionally or otherwise—in what we say. Loquere ut videam. In this sense, then, Kierkegaard’s writing is not just ‘about’ being Christian but is a disclosure of the meaning that being Christian had in the entire context of his life. These comments, it should be said, allow not only for what the author intended we should read in his words, but also for what those words reveal over and above and perhaps even despite what the author intended.

The second, and at first glance very different renunciation is that of history. In a theological perspective this is particularly salient with regard to the way in which Kierkegaard distinguished his own interpretation of the life of Christ from the historical reconstruction (or, in the case of Strauss, the historical destruction) of the life of Jesus. If we think of the life of Jesus movement in terms of positivistic historicism, it might seem to represent something very different from the poetic and the ideal. Yet apart from the fact that a great many of the nineteenth century lives of Jesus were indeed idealism and often highly poetic constructions, the restriction of what counts as historically authentic to what can be empirically proven is, in Kierkegaardian terms, a reduction of the fullness of life lived in the tension of actuality and possibility to just one set of possibilities. Such a reduction is precisely an instance of what Heidegger would call Gestell, felicitously if not entirely accurately
translated into English as ‘enframing’, which is to say that it allows only what appears within the frame that we ourselves apply to the world to count as reality. It is not really Kierkegaard’s question, but it is maybe relevant to seeing the consistency of his writing, that Heidegger would also see in the *Gestell* of modern positivistic science and technology the ultimate outworking of what the (idealistic) metaphysics of Plato had first set in motion and that found its theoretical summation in the philosophies of German Idealism and of Nietzsche.

Less well-known than his critique of the Hegelian version of historicism, is Kierkegaard’s assault on the Danish Church-leader N.F.S. Grundtvig’s ‘matchless discovery’ of the baptismal recitation of the creed as providing a historically reliable criterion of Christian faith and the continuity between the Church of the apostles and the Church as it is today. Here it is not the facts of history that are taken as demonstrating or undergirding the truth of Christian claims, but the continuity of the Church’s own liturgical life. As such, and for all the peculiarities of Grundtvig’s own version of it, it is an argument that has had much resonance in twentieth century, especially Catholic theology. Yet if tradition is in many ways a more flexible and open category than that of hard historical fact, Kierkegaard remains suspicious that here too the urgent exigency of Christian life is being weakened and reduced in favour of a view that has, so to speak, always already arrived at its conclusion.

The rejection of Grundtvig’s version of the historical point of view makes clear how the renunciation of history also involves a certain renunciation of community and, again especially clearly in the case of Grundtvig, how this relates both to community as nation and community as Church. In fact, as we look at the writings of Kierkegaard’s last years we cannot but be struck by the way in which the attack on Christendom, i.e., on established Christianity, is also an attack on post-1848 Denmark (often, even more particularly, on the ‘market-town’ of Copenhagen, its capital and cultural centre). Although these are distinct and separable strands, they criss-cross in complex ways—and this is just the point: that what goes wrong when we define ourselves in terms of nationality is when (perhaps inevitably) the nation makes claims that, ultimately, only God can make, asking not only for our taxes but also for our consciences. And the same is true if or to the extent that we define ourselves in terms of membership of an ecclesiastical community. For although an ecclesiastical community professes to be a community founded exclusively on conscience (and not on nationhood, ethnicity, or political expediency), the implicit claim that a visible and historically continuous community can also be a community of conscience is precisely what enables it to be the supreme instrument for confusing relations between individuals and nations. In unpicking the claims of ecclesiastical Christianity ‘as it now exists in Denmark’ Kierkegaard is also challenging his readers to rethink what it might mean to be Danish (or German or English or American) and what it might
mean to be Lutheran (or Catholic or Anglican or Baptist). If he remained conscious of the positive heritage of Danish life and language celebrated by the pseudonym Frater Taciturnus, he is also increasingly explicitly clear that these positive values can survive only to the extent that they are not contaminated by nationalism or collectivism.

Now, of course, these last points—Kierkegaard’s renunciation of metaphysics, history, and both national and ecclesiastical community—have been amongst the chief points at which he has been attacked by wave after wave of critics for his irrationalism, his flight from history, his individualism, and even his solipsism. However, by analogy with what I earlier argued in relation to the poetic and the Christian ideal, seeing Kierkegaard as a prose writer of being Christian in a post-Christian age means allowing for the essentially multi-voiced and unfinalizable nature of his authorship—which in turns means realizing that he does not simply renounce or reject, e.g., metaphysics, history, or community. Instead, renouncing and rejecting the absolutizing tendencies of these and other proposed criteria of truths and values, he draws them into a prosaic world in which their grander claims are brought down to the proportions of average everyday human discourse and exposed not only to counter-arguments, but to ridicule, misrepresentation, and all the misfortunes that can assail just about any human claim to anything. The writing of being Christian in a post-Christian age does not straightforwardly deny metaphysics, history, or community as possibilities of human existence, but it does deny their claims to define those possibilities in advance of the actual decisions of existing human beings. Even where Kierkegaard is at his most unworldly extreme, his medium of modern prose writing means that his world and his perspectives are by no means closed off from our own; within the Victorian age of faith he is already writing, as Christian today must also try to write, being Christian in a post-Christian age.

Perhaps these last remarks have over-emphasized the negative elements of this undertaking, that is, its renunciation of previously accepted criteria of validation. However, it should be at least implicit in the expression ‘writing being Christian in a post-Christian age’ that Kierkegaard is also setting out an account of what Christianity is as well as what it is not. It is not the aim of this paper to give more than a formal frame of reference for approaching this, and I shall not now begin to expound further how Kierkegaard goes about his self-appointed (or, if he is right, providentially appointed) task. There is much in it that is controversial and there are undeniable tensions between Kierkegaard’s Christian vision and what we might call classical Christian doctrine. But, if his authorship has the character I have described, then he, of course, would never have imagined that he could have won his readers without entering into what, in the sub-title of a satirical play on Hegelianism that he wrote as a student, he called ‘the all-encompassing debate of everything against everything’.