



KIERKEGAARD AND 1848¹

BRUCE H. KIRMMSE*

The year 1848 was characterised by violent unrest which accompanied the fundamental economic and political changes marking the emergence of the modern market-based economy and the modern popular sovereignty-based state. 1848 was seen as a major watershed by many European thinkers, not the least of whom were Flaubert, Marx, and particularly Søren Kierkegaard, whose activity as an author straddled this divide and received decisive impetus from his understanding of it.

In Denmark the revolutionary changes of 1848 had transformed the state from an absolute monarchy built on a bi-national (Danish–German) base into a popular-sovereignty parliamentary monarchy based on universal male suffrage and a shrill, militant Danish nationalism. The new regime enjoyed the support of doctrinaire liberals such as H.N. Clausen and Orla Lehmann, romantic religious nationalists such as Grundtvig and Kierkegaard's own brother Peter Christian, and most appallingly (in Kierkegaard's view) opportunistic conservatives such as Bishop J.P. Mynster. Kierkegaard's arch-enemy was Christendom, the comfortable cultural synthesis of official piety and socio-political convenience, and 1848 threatened to give this synthesis increased legitimacy and a new and dangerously secure lease on life. Kierkegaard was sure that politics and public life had usurped the place of religion: 'Even now in '48 it really looks as though everything is politics, as it was before. But it will certainly become clear that the catastrophe is in reverse correspondence to the Reformation: then everything looked like a religious movement and became politics; now everything looks like politics, but will become a religious movement'.²

Kierkegaard repeatedly stressed the importance of 1848 in his coming to a sense of his true mission, e.g. 'Then came '48. I received the strongest impression of myself I have ever had';³ 'then came '48. Here I was granted a view of myself, which almost overwhelmed me'.⁴ Kierkegaard believed that '1848 accelerated [my attempt] to achieve the overview I reached: an overview of *history*, of *Christianity*, of *my activity as an author*'.⁵

HISTORY

Even at the time, in the summer of 1848, and with increasing certainty thereafter, Kierkegaard was sure that 1848 was a historical cataclysm without peer: 'Not even the dissolution of ancient civilisation was as great as the world-historical catastrophe that has loomed up...'.⁶ Old ways of thinking have been rendered obsolete overnight, and it is not clear what will replace them:

*Department of History, Connecticut College, New London, CT 06320, U.S.A.

The events of recent months, which have been of world-historical significance and have overturned everything, have brought into the world spokesmen of new-born, fantastic, and, of course, confused ideas, while on the other hand, everyone who has, in various ways, been a spokesman in the past has been reduced either to silence or to the embarrassment of being forced to purchase a brand-new suit of clothing. Every system has been exploded. In the course of a couple of months, the past has been ripped away from the present with such passion that it seems like a generation has gone by.⁷

1848 was 'the time of dissolution':⁸ 'the threads of intelligence broke in '48. The whine which heralds chaos was heard!'⁹ Nonetheless, as we will see, despite his certainty that 1848 represented an unparalleled historical catastrophe, in which other people's ideas have been instantly outmoded and rendered irrelevant, 1848 made Kierkegaard equally certain that his thought has not been outmoded, that he has been on the right track all along, and that he has what the new times require.

CHRISTIANITY

Kierkegaard was particularly sure that 1848 was a turning point in the history of Christianity and hence in the development of his understanding of how to respond to Christendom. In Kierkegaard's *Papirer* from 1848 and after, a marked shift can be traced in his attitude toward Bishop Mynster, who had long been both the focus of Kierkegaard family veneration and a symbol of the stability of the old order. Interestingly, many of these increasingly barbed references to Mynster also refer specifically to the year 1848. 'Then came '48. That year was of great significance for me and of great advantage to my cause'.¹⁰ Kierkegaard continues, writing that while he himself understood the crisis perfectly clearly and knew what needed to be done, Bishop Mynster refused to 'represent the complement, the suffering proclamation of Christianity, which derives no advantage from proclamation. He did absolutely nothing. He even abandoned or broke with his own tradition which bound him to the ancien regime'.¹¹ Under the circumstances it would have been better for Christianity if Mynster had gone down with Christendom's ship: 'well-meaning journalists have—with terrible satire—presented as admirable the fact that Bishop M. remained standing in '48 when everything fell. What would have been admirable, however, would have been if—in keeping with what his sermons and his quiet hours had led one to expect—he had had the character to fall with the others who fell'.¹² Again and again, when Kierkegaard searches for the point at which it became clear that he would have to break with Mynster and all he stood for, he fastens on the year 1848: 'now we are in the year '48. It was a catastrophe. In a catastrophe like that the Christianity represented by the preaching of Bishop M. is completely untenable'.¹³ For the careful reader of Kierkegaard's papers it thus comes as no surprise when, in an article published in *The Fatherland* on 18 December 1854 (which constituted the opening blast of the attack on Christendom) the assault on Mynster is explicitly linked to 1848: 'Bishop Mynster's preaching of Christianity was not in character, . . . outside of the quiet

hours he was not in character, not even in the character of his sermons, which as noted, compared with the New Testament are a serious watering-down of Christianity—this, again, one does not need to be particularly insightful to see, if by reading and listening to him one has the appropriate knowledge of his sermons. In 1848 and after, this became apparent even to blind admirers. . . .¹⁴ On the other hand, Kierkegaard insists that 1848 was a great help to his own understanding of the religious question:

[T]he catastrophe of '48 did better. It helped. It gave a boost to the religious problem and put it in its future form: from Sunday to Monday, from artistic accomplishments on Sunday to questions of reality on Monday. The question becomes one of what is required to dare call oneself a Christian . . . of whether it would not therefore be best if all of us with all our Sunday festivities made the confession to Christianity that this is not Christianity at all, but at most a toned-down approximation.¹⁵

Kierkegaard insists that 'the rebellion of '48' allowed critics to seize the New Testament and to prove quite easily that official religiosity is not Christianity at all. If the official establishment remains, Christianity is lost. But Kierkegaard also has his solution, because if, on the other hand, the official establishment 'admits that it is not really Christianity, then Christianity will not stand and fall with the official establishment'.¹⁶

ACTIVITY AS AN AUTHOR

As mentioned at the outset, Kierkegaard repeatedly returns to the notion that not only was 1848 pivotal with respect to his understanding of history and of Christianity, but also with respect to his own development as an author: 'Then came the year 1848, for me beyond all comparison the richest and most fruitful year I have experienced as an author'.¹⁷ Kierkegaard emphasises that the works by *Anti-Climacus* as well as the autobiographical writings are

from 1848, that year which was so significant for me, when I got so much work done, much more than in any other year; in which, additionally, I was supported—dialectically understood—by that frightful political catastrophe and had occasion to understand myself properly as an author; and in which I had occasion to turn inward in order to study and deepen myself in the religious, supported—dialectically understood—by the *political* catastrophe [and I carried out] the most reliable and the truest study of the religious which I possess.¹⁸

The 'study of the religious' occasioned by the 'political catastrophe' of 1848 specifically led Kierkegaard to the following conclusions: that *quantitatively* the human race had erred in placing emphasis upon the *numerical* rather than upon the *single individual*; that *qualitatively* the human race had erred in claiming *unconditional power* for human social and political institutions rather than relying upon the *Unconditioned*, i.e. God; that, in other words, we have confused or reversed the roles of religion and politics, and that the only solution was to sort out this confusion.

THE NUMERICAL

1848 and the years immediately thereafter made it clear to Kierkegaard that the established Church 'is not a hair better than the opposition'; neither of them have any higher notion of government than 'the numerical'.¹⁹ Even those who want to reform the official establishment (i.e. Grundtvigians *et al.*) share 'the misfortune of the times, especially now after '48 [which] is precisely the misunderstood movement of wanting to be reformers *en masse*'.²⁰

THE INDIVIDUAL

The only way to reform the situation and to restore the proper relationship between politics and religion is to insist upon the primacy of the category of the individual.

'The individual' is the category through which, in the religious sense, the times, history, the race must pass. And he who stood at Thermopylae was not safe as I am safe—I . . . who have stood at the narrows called 'the individual.' *His* task was to prevent the crowds from pushing their way through the narrows. If they pushed through, he had lost. *My* task has at any rate much less danger of being trampled to the ground, because it [my task] was . . . if possible, to occasion, to invite, to move the many to push their way through this narrow opening, 'the individual' . . .²¹

Kierkegaard is sure that whatever importance his work will have in the long run will be connected to this category of 'the individual', a category which, significantly, he repeatedly stresses he discovered *in 1848*.

My whole view about the crowd, which was perhaps thought to be a bit exaggerated at the time, even among the more insightful people, now, in 1848, with the help of the gesticulations of existence, . . . now the more likely objection is that I have not exaggerated enough. And that category 'the individual,' which was seen as odd and as the invention of an odd person. . . . Having brought this category forth in its time and in a decisive way is something I would not trade for a kingdom.²²

Any possible ethical significance I might have is unconditionally connected to the category 'the individual.' If this category was correct; if things were in order with this category; if I saw correctly here; if I understood correctly that this was my task . . . then I stand and my works stand with me.²³

Thus, according to Kierkegaard, 'the world revolutions of 1848 have brought an understanding of this considerably nearer', and the matter is quite clear: '[T]he movement here is *to come to* the simple. The movement is *from* the Public *to* 'the individual'. *Religiously understood* there is in fact no public, but only individuals. Because the religious is seriousness, and seriousness is the individual, though in such a way that every person, unconditionally every person, as he of course is a person, can be—yes, must be—the individual'.²⁴

UNCONDITIONAL POWER AND 'THE UNCONDITIONED'

Kierkegaard argues that the revolutions of 1848 are an attempt by the human race to seize unconditional power in order to rule over the merely pragmatic and approximate world of social and political arrangements. He admits that in the past—when, it must be remembered, Denmark was an 'absolute' monarchy—the relations between social and political superiors and inferiors often served as a sort of surrogate for the relation between God ('the Unconditioned') and human beings. Kierkegaard further admits that the idea of the relation between the Unconditioned and the conditional reality of human existence was used as an ideological justification for the existing distribution of goods and power in human society. But, Kierkegaard insists, despite the abuses that were obviously connected with pressing religious categories into the service of mundane power, those religious categories remain nonetheless real and constitutive of human existence. And Kierkegaard is fearful that in its fury to discard old constellations of worldly power, the human race will discard the very idea of the Unconditioned.

In our century, as never before, the human race and individuals in it—those who command, those who obey; the superior, the subordinate; the teacher, the learner, etc.—have been liberated from all the nuisances (if you wish to call them that) that stem from that fact that something stands, and must stand, unconditionally firm. . . . Indeed the human race will come to feel, as never before, the truth in the fact that what the race and every individual in it needs is for something to stand—and for something to *have to stand*—unconditionally firm. . . . Ask the sailor to sail without ballast—he capsizes. Let the race, let every individual in the race attempt to exist without the Unconditioned—it is, and remains, chaos. For intervals, for shorter or longer periods of time, it can appear otherwise, that there is firmness and security—fundamentally it is and remains chaos. Even the greatest of events and the most strenuous life [is] chaos or like sewing without fastening the end of the thread—until the end is again made fast by bringing forth the Unconditioned, or by having the individual, even if at great remove, at any rate relate himself to something Unconditioned. A person cannot simply live in the Unconditioned, breathe only the Unconditioned; he will perish as a fish which must live in air. But on the other hand, no one can 'live' in the deeper sense without relating to the Unconditioned. He exhales—that is, he perhaps continues to live, but spiritlessly. If—to stay with my theme, the religious—if the human race, or a another person can represent the Unconditioned for them—well, even so, for this very reason the Unconditioned cannot be dispensed with. Indeed it is all the less possible to dispense with it. So 'the individual' himself must relate himself to the Unconditioned. With the abilities granted to me and with the uttermost effort and much sacrifice, this is what I have fought for, fighting against every tyranny, also that of the numerical.²⁵

Thus, for Kierkegaard, 1848 is the point at which the human race comes into adulthood and leaves behind its 'childlike stage' in which human social relations mimicked the relation between God and the individual—and were justified by reference to that relation. There is nothing wrong with this revolutionary change, Kierkegaard grants, unless it tempts us to forget that we are rooted in the Unconditioned, i.e. that we have a fixed point in our very origin, and not some

imagined fixed point which is our intended destination. Kierkegaard holds no brief, either for revolutionaries or for counter-revolutionaries, because they are all playing the same game. They all depend on force and only on force. They all build with reference to some self-designed *terminus ad quem* and never with reference to a common *terminus a quo*. They will all end in the whirlwind from which they sprang, because they have no fixed point of origin.

[I]sn't this the law for the confusion of the recent events in Europe: they want to stop with the help of a revolution, and they want to stop a revolution with the help of a counter-revolution. But what is a counter-revolution if not also a revolution? . . . You will surely grant that I am correct in viewing the entire development in Europe as an enormous scepticism or as a maelstrom [Hvirvel]. What does a maelstrom seek? A fixed point at which it can stop. (And therefore, said parenthetically, I seek 'that individual'.) Thus we all seem to be in agreement that there must be a stop. But he who wishes to stop cannot find a fixed point at which he wishes to stop. Thus he who wishes to stop with the help of what is moved or moving of course only intensifies the maelstrom. . . . One becomes so tired that one becomes dizzy. One searches for a fixed place, a stop. . . . Most people believe that as long as one has a fixed point *to which* one is going, then one's movements do not constitute a maelstrom. But this is a misunderstanding. What really matters is a fixed point *from which to depart*. Stopping is not possible by means of a point *ahead*, but only by means of a point *behind*, which means that the stopping is within the movement, guaranteeing the movement. And this is the difference between a political and a religious movement. Every merely political movement—which is thus without the religious or is God-forsaken—is a maelstrom and cannot be stopped; it deceives itself with the notion of wanting to have a fixed point ahead. . . . Because the fixed point, the only fixed point, lies behind. And it is therefore my view of the entire European confusion that it cannot be stopped except by religion. And I am convinced that—just as the remarkable thing about the Reformation was that it looked like a religious movement but turned out to be a political one—so will the movements of our times, which look to be merely political, suddenly reveal themselves to be religious or a need for religion.²⁶

Thus, in this letter from the summer of 1848 to his friend Kolderup-Rosenvinge, Kierkegaard repeats the argument cited from his 1848 journals at the beginning of the present essay, namely that the danger of the present political confusion is precisely the reverse of that which accompanied the confusion of the Reformation: in the Reformation religion turned out to be politics, but in the present things are even worse, and politics will turn out to be religion. Therefore, while Kolderup-Rosenvinge thinks a strong man, a military dictator, can set things straight, Kierkegaard demurs, and calls for a single suffering individual: 'You are awaiting a tyrant, while I await a martyr'.²⁷

What 1848 taught Kierkegaard most of all was the danger of the combination of politics and religion in a 'Christian State'. 1848 filled him with a sense of urgency to combat the hybrid construction of Christendom just as it was about to make itself comfortable with the new legitimacy granted it by the post-1848 notions of 'The People's Church', 'nationality', and 'popular sovereignty'. In a tone reminiscent of the awestruck St John recounting his terrifying revelation, Kierkegaard writes in his journal for 1849: 'Then I saw with fear what was meant by a Christian State—and I saw that especially in '48. . . .'²⁸

History of European Ideas

Near the very end of his life, in a journal entry from May of 1855, Kierkegaard reverts again to the 'catastrophe of '48' in a piece entitled

'CHRISTIAN': 'STATE'
OR
THE ASSOCIATION FOR MUTUAL DESTRUCTION

... [H]uman existence caught fire by spontaneous combustion, so to speak, which is the meaning of the catastrophe of '48, and is explicable in that eternity was extinguished because serving it had been made finite. The Christian State, of course, imagines that it has Christianity as a part of itself, but this is a misunderstanding. Let me use an image. Think of a machine constructed with two wheels whose purpose and original arrangement was that the one wheel would rotate in the opposite direction from the other, so that the rotation of the one would engage with and counteract the rotation of the other. If someone were then to claim that he had a machine of this sort, and point out that it had both wheels—but, be it noted, that they did not rotate in opposite directions, but together—then it would of course not be true. It is not the same machine.²⁹

Here Kierkegaard attempts to spell out both his notion of what the proper interaction of politics and religion ought to be and where Christendom has failed. Politics and religion are part of the same 'machine'—i.e. human life, which, as Anti-Climacus explains in *The Sickness unto Death*, has both temporal and eternal components—but they have radically opposed functions which must be kept separate. They are not complementary parts of a grand and comfortable pattern, as in Coleridge's *Essay On the Constitution of Church and State*, where religion is assigned a role as the 'befriending opposite of the world'. Rather, for Kierkegaard, the two elements exist as parts of a whole kept together in tension, where no easy or comfortable solution is possible. The greatest danger, according to Kierkegaard, is when the two elements get combined in a grand synthesis, and he saw the post-1848 world as drifting toward the most ambitious attempt to date at building a Tower of Babel in which the eternal component of human life was domesticated within social and political arrangements. This is why 1848 was a principal turning point in Kierkegaard's life and why it is the key to understanding his violent attack on Christendom.

Bruce H. Kirmmse

Connecticut College

NOTES

1. I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities and the R. Francis Johnson Fund of Connecticut College for support in the preparation of this essay.
2. A.B. Drachmann, V. Kuhr and E. Torsting (eds), *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* [The Papers of Søren Kierkegaard], 2nd augmented edition by N. Thulstrup, index by N.J. Cappelørn, 16 volumes in 22 tomes (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968–1978) [hereafter *Pap.*], vol. IX B 63:7, p. 363 (1848).

Volume 20, Nos 1–3, January 1995

3. *Pap.*, X⁴ A 600, p. 417 (1852).
4. *Pap.*, X³ A 146, p. 152 (1853).
5. *Pap.*, X² A 515, p. 371 (1850), emphasis added.
6. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange (eds), *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker* [The Collected Works of Søren Kierkegaard], 1st edition, 14 volumes (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901–1906) [hereafter *SV*], volume XIII, p. 555 (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, written summer 1848, published 1859).
7. *Ibid.*
8. *SV*, XIII, p. 605 (from the second of the ‘Two Notes Concerning ‘The Individual’’, which Kierkegaard says was ‘written in 1847, though later worked over and augmented’ and appended to *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, written summer 1848, published 1859).
9. *SV*, XIII, p. 508 (‘My Position as a Religious Author in ‘Christendom’ and My Tactics’, a ‘Supplement’ [Følgeblad] to *On My Activity as an Author*, dated November 1850, published 1851).
10. *Pap.*, X⁶ B 221, p. 353 (1852).
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Pap.*, XI³ B 18:5 (1854).
13. *Pap.*, XI³ B 15, p. 39 (1854).
14. *SV*, XIV, p. 6 (‘Was Bishop Mynster a ‘Witness to the Truth,’ one of ‘The Genuine Witnesses to the Truth’—Is This True?’, dated February 1854 and published in *The Fatherland* (18 December 1854).
15. *Pap.*, X⁶ B 225, p. 359 (1852).
16. *Pap.*, X⁵ A 62, p. 68 (1853).
17. *Pap.*, X⁶ B 249, p. 412 (1849–1851).
18. *Pap.*, X⁵ B 219, p. 407 (October 1849). See also *Pap.*, X⁵ B 73 (1849–1850), where Kierkegaard again stresses that both works by Anti-Climacus (i.e. *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*) were ‘written in ‘48’.
19. *Pap.*, X⁵ A 126 (1853).
20. *Pap.*, X⁴ A 6, p. 7 (1851).
21. *SV*, XIII, p. 604 (from the second of the ‘Two Notes Concerning ‘The Individual’’, which Kierkegaard says was ‘written in 1847, though later worked over and augmented’ and appended to *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, written summer 1848, published 1859).
22. *SV*, XIII, pp. 554–555 (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, written summer 1848, published 1859).
23. *SV*, XIII, p. 605 (from the second of the ‘Two Notes Concerning ‘The Individual’’, which Kierkegaard says was ‘written in 1847, though later worked over and augmented’ and appended to *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, written summer 1848, published 1859).
24. *SV*, XIII, pp. 498–499 (The Introduction, entitled ‘The Reckoning’ [Regnskabet] to *On My Activity as an Author*, dated March 1849, published 1851).
25. *SV*, XIII, pp. 508–509 (from the ‘Supplement’ [Følgeblad] to *On My Activity as an Author*, entitled ‘My Position as a Religious Author in ‘Christendom’ and My Tactics’, dated November 1850, published 1851).
26. Niels Thulstrup (ed.), *Breve og Aktstykker vedrørende Søren Kierkegaard* [Letters and Documents Concerning Søren Kierkegaard], 2 volumes (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1953–1954) [hereafter *BA*], volume I, pp. 206–207 (letter written between 8 August and 19 August 1848 to J.L.A. Kolderup-Rosenvinge).
27. *BA*, I, p. 214 (letter of August 1848 to J.L.A. Kolderup-Rosenvinge, who had written to Kierkegaard that he had expected great things from the authoritarian General

Cavaignac in Paris, but had been disappointed and now expects another strong man to restore order).

28. *Pap.*, X¹ A 541, p. 345 (1849).

29. *Pap.*, XI³ B 126, pp. 202–203 (1855).