

Christopher Ben Simpson, *THE TRUTH IS THE WAY: KIERKEGAARD'S THEOLOGIA VIATORUM* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

Reviewed by *Paul Tyson*.

Simpson's deceptively slim and digestible text is the result of an enormous amount of methodical scholarly spade work. Simpson has carefully read the full Kierkegaard corpus and then sought to discern, if you like, Kierkegaard's frank voice from out of the choir of glittering witnesses that the jubilant Melancholy Dane conducts. Using Kierkegaard's signed and Christian authorship as his hermeneutic key – and, of course, the explicit set of hermeneutic keys that the Christian Kierkegaard gives us in his late writings – Simpson outlines the overall themes of Kierkegaard's work. In this way the shape of SK's biblical doctrine, systematic theology, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics and praxiology is sketched in clear and beautiful outlines. And here, perhaps, is the surprise. The picture that emerges is far from novel. Kierkegaard is a mainstream orthodox Christian very much in harmony with the depth traditions of the 'merely catholic' voice of the church and with the doctrinally situated neoplatonist metaphysical perspective of that tradition. Simpson's description of Kierkegaard is thus fully in keeping with some excellent source work recently done by scholars at the University of Copenhagen on Kierkegaard's deeply patristic, somewhat Aristotelian and strikingly Platonist intellectual roots. Kierkegaard's work is not radically new and it is not belligerently Protestant. Most significantly he is no postmodern absurdist nor the archetypal existential individualist. Kierkegaard has no desire to break with Christian tradition and community and simply stand by himself in some Sartrean pose self-generated auto-responsibility. Or – one could equally say – being radically creative, deeply Lutheran, grounding his reason in 'simple' faith and seeking to live as a counter-enlightenment Christian swimming against the religious and intellectual tides of the times, is just Kierkegaard's way of being orthodox.

For anyone well read in Kierkegaard's signed and explicitly Christian authorship, there are no surprises in Simpson's text. Indeed, Simpson is not trying to surprise us. All he is seeking to do is to point out the elephant in the

---

room when it comes to reading Kierkegaard. He is an orthodox Christian. And as a Christian deeply grounded in the scriptures, doctrines, pieties and intellectual outlooks of the Christian tradition, it is not difficult to understand what his primary theological and metaphysical commitments are.

Interestingly, such a solidly mapped, theologically situated and accessibly integrative outlook on what Kierkegaard has done is rare (and, well... quite unwelcome) in the Kierkegaard literature. Despite its staggering saturation in well contextualized citations – it is a bullet proof work of scholarship – Simpson's enterprise has not yet received much critical acclaim. It is worth contemplating why this might be.

Perhaps it is rather fascinating for us to think of Kierkegaard as a person of fractured identity whose different voices are indeed different personalities within him. I suspect that most of us are strangely attracted to the post-Freudian psychological vertigo that arises when we suspect that there may indeed be no person behind our personas. It is probably for this reason that we take Kierkegaard's strong admonitions to quote the personas, rather than himself (in relation to the un-signed works, by the way) so seriously that it seems a travesty for us to 'impose' one voice, one person, as being the author of the extraordinary creative tapestry of dramatic characters that Kierkegaard assembles. So we get scholarly specialists in but one work, or one persona, and such scholarship is strongly tempted to *not* locate that work or persona within the Kierkegaard corpus, but rather to treat it with the 'integrity' of its own voice to the exclusion of any possible overarching purpose that the *actual* author might have had. So Kierkegaard himself remains unseen or is tacitly identified with the particular literary puppet that we do see, in much – often profoundly detailed – Kierkegaard scholarship today. But this emphasis on scholarly minutia (which Simpson bucks) is also a product of our academic milieu where specialisation is so highly prized and where the mere belief in integral knowledge is more or less heresy. And indeed, the splintered fragmented outlook on reality is the one we are, finally, comfortable with in the post-modern age, so Kierkegaard's Christianity is a bit embarrassing for why we often find his work so titillating. We have made him a champion of anti-system, a champion of polyphonic anarchy, and like Bach, we like his art but we don't want his faith. But both

---

Kierkegaard and Bach do not make any sense at all if their faith is understood as optional to a fair appreciation of the meaning of their art.

And there are two other reasons why Simpson's writing an outline of Kierkegaard's systematic (and equally praxiological) theology is unlikely to go down well. Firstly, the breadth, complexity and sheer size of Kierkegaard's written output makes it a very daunting task to sit down with the entire body of work and look for the common threads that hold it all together. Few have even considered attempting it. Perhaps jealousy of Simpson's apparent ease of achievement expressed in pin-head scholarly arguments on this or that fine nuance is an issue for Simpson's scholarly reception. But secondly, some of Kierkegaard's personas do indeed lend themselves to being appropriated by irrealist upholders of 'subjective truth', and so the idea that there is, simply, Christian Truth which guide's the Dane, like a pole star as he paddles out over 50,000 leagues of water, is just not what our very tolerant subjective truth pluralists want to hear.

So it seems that these three reasons – our pornographic fascination with fictive personas, the daunting size of any integrative scholarly endeavour and our liberal preference for the tolerance of pluralism over any metaphysically real and bivalent conception of truth – accounts for why there has been no book like Simpson's in recent times, even though Kierkegaard scholarship itself has never looked more substantial. But these three 'reasons' for a cool reception of Simpson's work are all of no substantial merit. Simpson's scholarship is excellent, his writing is very accessible and the theology of the Christian Way that Kierkegaard so strenuously gestures towards with all his being, is simply Christian. And most disconcertingly, the Kierkegaard Simpson's work points to is a powerful witness to the absurdities and tragedies of our modern times and a reminder of the difficulty of the challenge of seeking to follow Christ in any time. Any Christian, and certainly any theologian, who reads this text must find it an affront to our untruth. For, as Simpson puts it "the singular Christian way, for Kierkegaard, is the way of truth, of being true to the way things are, of living truly... As a Christian way, this life is that of a follower, a disciple, an imitator of Christ" (p. 198). This is an unwanted message to the objectifying, disconnecting, dissecting, mechanistic realism of the very ethos of modern scholarship. Kierkegaard, well heard, is always offensive to Herr Professor. That Simpson is a

Christian before he is a scholar is why he gets inside Kierkegaard so well, why his scholarship has such a sure touch, and, probably, why his work will remain something of an outsider to the scholarly field of Kierkegaard studies today.