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Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard, compiled and edited by Charles E. Moore (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House of The Bruderhof Foundation, 1999). 430 pp. \$14.00. ISBN 0-87486-981-1. Reviewed by Charles Adams, Professor of Engineering.

*The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!*
—Hamlet, I:5:205

Those words of Hamlet, found at the very end of Act I, give a clue to the melancholy countenance of Shakespeare's tormented Dane. They might also serve as an allusion to the life and writings of that most complex and profound child of the land of Elsinore and Copenhagen—Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard, like Hamlet, found himself in a time and space that appeared perversely twisted into untruth. For Hamlet that untruth was fratricide and incest. For Kierkegaard it was the self deception and hypocrisy of Christendom.

Kierkegaard's writings present readers—especially readers in English—with numerous obstacles before one even penetrates to the level of content. First are the varied translations from Danish to English. Earlier translators, like Kierkegaard's biographer Walter Lowrie, flavor their translations with *King James* English. More recent translators such as Howard and Edna Hong produce a more straightforward—one might almost say “austere”—and modern English text. A second problem one encounters is the deliberate division in Kierkegaard's works between the *aesthetic* and the *religious* writings. What Kierkegaard describes as his aesthetic writings are deeply philosophical, sometimes very serious and at other times imbued with ironic humor. What he describes as his religious writings are very much like sermons, although not the kind of sermons that would find favor with the current *praise & worship* crowd. His *Edifying Discourses*, for example, usually focus on a text of Scripture, stripping it of the layers of palliative interpretation and commentary that have accrued over the centuries, leaving the Word of God to stand before the reader naked, simple, yet profound—and impossible to evade.

A third obstacle that must be hurdled before attempting to digest Kierkegaard's ideas is his sentence structure. Prodigious in their length and complexity, one doesn't just read a Kierkegaardian sentence; one savors it, following the convolutions as they both clarify the idea and drive it home with aesthetic nuance and power. But that is hard work, and one must be in “intellectual shape” for it. At least a “workout” with one or more of the *Edifying Discourses* is thus well advised before one leaps into, for example, *Fear and Trembling* or *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Provocations, compiled by Charles E. Moore, brings together a concordant sampling of Kierkegaard's writings that allows one to immediately get to the substance of his thought. It allows the reader to circumnavigate the three obstacles mentioned above by daring to do the unthinkable—editing. As Moore writes in his introduction, he has “taken the liberty to abridge lengthy pieces, paraphrase complex passages, and tighten and simplify convoluted constructions” in order to “unearth some of [the] treasures” of Kierkegaard's writings (ix). The audacity of such a move is in good Kierkegaardian form—and it pays off. By reading *Provocations*, one is introduced to the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, and one begins to savor his style. Significant, however, is that having been *introduced* to Kierkegaard, the reader finishes the book *without* the sense that one has read any of his works, and *with* an eagerness to do so.

Unlike the other works of Kierkegaard, except perhaps his journals, *Provocations* can be read over an extended period of time in brief sittings. Composed of aphorisms and short essays, the book tempts one—especially if teaching—to use it as a book of quotations, selecting one of its many nuggets to enrich a handout, to set the tone at the beginning of a class session, or simply to inspire students to authenticity. How often, for example, might not the following line be used to shame and embolden those potted plants arrayed before you into bloom: “The majority of the people are not so afraid of holding a wrong opinion, as they are of holding an opinion alone”? (241)

Although the book is arranged in terms of a myriad of themes (“To will one thing,” “Truth and the passion of inwardness,” “The works of love,” etc.), these themes could be arranged into two categories: *authenticity* and *self-denial*. No writer has sought authenticity or denounced hypocrisy with such passion as Søren Kierkegaard. Authenticity for Kierkegaard means practicing the radical faith that one preaches. “The essential sermon,” he writes, “is one's own existence. A person preaches this every hour of the day with power quite different from that of the most eloquent speaker in his most eloquent moment” (263). Hypocrisy, by contrast, means conducting one's life in opposition to one's profession, which Kierkegaard describes in the following terms: “To let your mouth run with eloquent babbling when such talk is the opposite of your life is in the deepest sense nonsense. You become liable to eternal judgment” (263). His

ironic wit and concern for hypocrisy are exemplified in this memorable (paraphrased) vignette:

In the splendid palace chapel a stately court preacher, the cultivated public's elite, advances before an elite circle of fashionable and cultivated people and preaches emotionally on the text of the Apostle, "God chose the lowly and despised" – and nobody laughs! (xix, 356)

For Kierkegaard, hypocrisy also means conforming to the crowd. "To win a *crowd*," he writes, "is no art; for that only untruth is needed, nonsense, and a little knowledge of human passions" (23). If you want to be loathsome to God, just run with the herd (244).

From a reformational perspective, Kierkegaard can be criticized for his individualism. But that criticism often takes an unfair turn. Kierkegaard was not an individualist in the Enlightenment sense—far from it. Rather, his stress on the authenticity of the individual was a reaction to the corporate hypocrisy that he experienced within the official Danish (Lutheran) church, and it diminished his perception and understanding of the Body of Christ. This point becomes more apparent when one considers Kierkegaard's concern for the biblical teachings on suffering for right-

eousness sake, on self denial, and on radical servanthood.

Christ willed to be the socially insignificant one. The fact that he descended from heaven to take upon himself the form of a servant is not an accidental something which now is to be thrust into the background and forgotten. No, every true follower of Christ must express existentially the very same thing—that insignificance and offense are inseparable from being a Christian. As soon as the least bit of worldly advantage is gained by preaching or following Christ, then the fox is in the chicken house. (223)

It might be argued that Kierkegaard is one with reformational thinking on the topics of the sovereignty of God and the creaturely finitude of humankind. In accepting this argument, one also begins to see that Kierkegaard is far from being the irrationalist that he is thought to be.

If reformational thinking is to continue to contribute to God's Kingdom in the twenty-first century, it will need to remain fresh and authentic. One way of doing that is to learn about authenticity and radical servanthood as conceived by Søren Kierkegaard. And *Provocations* provides the best introduction to Kierkegaard and these lessons.

The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-based Schools and Social Agencies, by Charles L. Glenn (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 2000). 315pp, with a foreword by Peter L. Berger. Price: US \$35.00. Reviewed by John Hiemstra, Associate Professor of Political Studies, The King's University College, Edmonton.

Government daily offers an "ambiguous embrace" to the readers of *Pro Rege*. This community operates a variety of Christian organizations—day schools, social agencies, and colleges—as strategic ways of engaging the dominant secular culture. Inevitably, these organizations feel the embrace of government regulations, employment standards, professional certification requirements, and in some cases public funding. Charles Glenn does the Christian community a huge favor by carefully examining the effects of government action on these faith-based organizations. He argues that government's embrace of faith-based organizations is often ambiguous; that is, sometimes it's a fair and beneficial hug while at other times it's a stifling and secularizing squeeze.

The central thrust of Glenn's argument is that the government's embrace of religious schools and social agencies can weaken and eventually destroy their faith-based identities. Each chapter works through various external and internal threats to the identity of these agencies.

Even when government does not publicly fund faith-based agencies, Glenn begins, it rightfully supervises their activities in order to protect the weak and ensure the public interest. Threats to religious identity arise when government oversteps its proper competency. Glenn offers a very helpful exploration of how judicial interpretations of

the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the American Constitution have rigidly separated religious schooling from government while paradoxically allowing a far stronger relationship between government and faith-based social agencies.

When government chooses to publicly fund a faith-based agency, Glenn continues, a variety of policy instruments are available from which to choose, instruments that may maximize agency autonomy and minimize improper government oversight, e.g. franchising, grants, contracting out, and vouchers. Each mechanism has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. In particular, Glenn highlights the innovative new "Charitable Choice" provision of the Federal welfare law which serves to protect the religious identities of agencies that cooperate with governments in serving the poor (107-110). (For more information on this helpful new provision, see <http://cpjustice.org/charitable-choice.html>.)

Glenn offers an excellent and incisive analysis of the threat that secular professional norms pose to faith-based schools and social agencies. The problem with certain professional qualifications, Glenn argues, is that "the theories about human nature and about good and evil that have been elaborated as the basis for those professions are at important points in conflict with the biblical