

Kierkegaard: Politics and the Modern Scandal of Religion

A reading group conducted by Leo Stan, SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow.

We will meet every other Thursday from 12:30 to 14:30; first meeting on Jan. 14, 2010.
Location: The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism,
Sommerville House, Rm. 2348.

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Modernity is typically equated with a liberation from the fetters—be they metaphysical, political, or psychological—of religion. Arguably, a perennial trait of the advent and development of the modern epoch is a definite and constant antagonism towards the Judeo-Christian spirituality. Noteworthy in this regard are Nietzsche's ecstatic proclamations of the death of God, the disenchanting ends of Marxian thought and of Freudian psychoanalysis, and especially, the iconoclastic assaults of positivism, inseparable as they are from the contemporary hubris of technology and science. At the same time, authors across a large ideological spectrum have expressed serious concerns vis-à-vis the existential and spiritual discontents of modernity. The death of God, they argued, might entail the death of humankind as such. To many this brutal truth seems abundantly confirmed by the atrocities of 20th century Europe. Thus, it is no surprise that the place of religion in the history and theoretical *weltanschauung* of modernity remains a source of bewilderment. So, given the deeply engrained and almost militant secularism of Western societies, what does it mean to be religious today? Will religion help us avoid such unspeakable evils as the Holocaust or the Gulag? Furthermore, to what extent are religious phenomena a peril to the future of (post)modernity?

Needless to say, such questions, their obvious urgency and actuality notwithstanding, are still too broad. Therefore, in our seminar I wish to open a few vistas into the topic with the help of an unusual thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, a philosopher who was essentially influenced by the no less singular (anti-modern?) fideism of Christianity. The atypical position—and therefore interesting character—of Kierkegaard's thought lies in its vehement endeavors to remain true to "the New Testament Christianity," while being fully aware of the undeniable and irreversible gains of modernity. As Kierkegaard once confessed, the principal quandary of his entire corpus is how the individual (in this case, the citizen of modern capitalist democracy) becomes a Christian believer. Nevertheless, in searching for possible answers, Kierkegaard battled both the apostatic proclivities of "the present age" and the latter's sustained efforts to discredit true Christianity by trivializing its arduous and sometimes subversive, ideals. That said, what I wish to propose for debate is first the way in which Kierkegaard's Christianity enables us to assess the religious crisis of modernity, if any. Second, we will critically enquire whether Kierkegaard's tentative depiction of possible ways out of this crisis is tenable from a socio-political standpoint and susceptible to earnest appropriation on the personal level. Only the most relevant primary texts will be targeted, in particular, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, *Two Ages*, *Sickness unto Death*, and *Works of Love*.