



NORLIT 2011

Conference on literature and politics

ROSKILDE, AUGUST 4.-6. 2011

ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

Papers published in relation to the NORLIT 2011 conference are made available under the CC license [by-nc-nd]. Find the terms of use at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/dk/legalcode>.

Papers, som er offentliggjort i forbindelse med NORLIT 2011 konferencen stilles til rådighed under CC-licens[by-nc-nd]. Læs mere på <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>, hvis du vil vide, hvordan du må gøre brug af de registrerede papers.

Accessible online: <http://ruconf.ruc.dk/index.php/norlit/norlit2011/schedConf/presentations>

Julie K. Allen
University of Wisconsin-Madison
NorLit 2011 Paper Abstract

Connecting the Crises: The Danish Constitution of June 1849 and Søren Kierkegaard's
"Attack on Christendom"

"Today I must unfortunately tell you about a scandal that scarcely has its equal in recent Danish history. Yesterday our famous man Søren Kierkegaard was buried after a funeral at the Church of Our Lady."¹ University of Copenhagen theology student Frantz Sodemann wrote these lines in a letter to P.M. Barfod on November 18, 1855. The scandal to which Sodemann refers was an unscheduled speech given at Kierkegaard's grave by his nephew Henrik Lund, who protested Kierkegaard's burial "by 'the Official Church' as a beloved member of the same." Citing Kierkegaard's very public and provocative repudiation of *Folkekirken* (the Danish Lutheran church) in a series of newspaper articles in 1854-55, Lund argued that *Folkekirken* "has laid violent hands upon him [Kierkegaard]. It has condemned itself by regarding him as 'a Christian,' i.e. as a member of the 'official Christian Church.'"² The decision to give Kierkegaard a conventional church funeral was his brother Peter Christian's, himself a *Folkekirken* pastor. His choice to hold the service in the Church of Our Lady (*Vor Frue Kirke*) annoyed Bishop H.L. Martensen, the primate of Zealand, who, in his own letter of November 18, raged at the "tactlessness shown by the family in having him buried on a *Sunday*, between two religious services, from the nation's *most important church*."³

At first glance, Lund and Martensen seem to be united in their opposition to the overtly Christian trappings of Kierkegaard's funeral, but the reasons for their disapproval

¹ Bruce H. Kirmmse, ed., *Encounters with Kierkegaard. A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996), 132.

² Kirmmse, *Encounters*, 134.

³ Kirmmse, *Encounters*, 135.

stand in direct opposition to each other. Lund spoke out against the fact that *Folkekirken* performed the service primarily for the sake of the associated fees, not out of any concern for Kierkegaard himself or his eternal salvation. In his view, this callous calculation confirmed Kierkegaard's accusation that the church was a business that had little to do with true Christianity, in contrast to Kierkegaard's sincere personal striving for the same. Martensen, however, condemned Kierkegaard's funeral because he felt that Kierkegaard was, if not mentally unstable, at the very least a "philistine," whose criticism of the church promoted secularism and atheism. Although Kierkegaard's works did find an enthusiastic reception among German theologians in the late 19th century, it is Martensen's view of him as an antagonist of Christianity that has largely prevailed in both the Danish and global reception of his work.

Alas, poor Kierkegaard. Misunderstood in life and misrepresented in death, his twentieth-century reputation as the "Father of Existentialism," as a philosopher whose preoccupation with abstract ideas rendered him unwilling and unable to contribute productively to socio-political discourses, has largely obscured the influential, though oblique, role he played in mid-19th century Danish society and politics, particularly in the area of religious freedom. Although many of the pseudonymous texts from his early period offer veiled satirical critiques of particular individuals and institutions in Danish society, Kierkegaard's final literary accomplishment, the series of articles known collectively as the "Attack on Christendom" (1854-55), presents his most sweeping indictment of Danish society, a critique of the unity of state and church that had been an integral part of Denmark's political structure for nearly a thousand years. Bishop Martensen's hagiographic description of his predecessor as Primate of Zealand, Bishop

J.P. Mynster, as belonging to “the holy chain of truth-witnesses stretching back to the days of the apostles,”⁴ has frequently been identified as the reason for Kierkegaard’s final diatribe, but it is no coincidence that his outspoken critique of Danish state-sponsored religion appeared just a few years after the establishment of religious freedom in the June Constitution of 1849. Scholars have, however, been slow to make the connection between Kierkegaard’s brilliantly insightful and stylistically masterful last work and the societal changes that both gave rise to and followed the granting of this fundamental civil right.

In this paper, I examine Kierkegaard’s literary critique of *Folkekirken*, particularly as articulated in the “Attack on Christendom,” in the context of the social and political developments of the historical period in which he lived. Far from being an ivory-tower intellectual with little interest in or contact with the common people of Denmark, Kierkegaard was passionately invested in the temporal and spiritual affairs of his countrymen and he used his literary talents to challenge both establishment practices and received truths. While his contributions to existentialist philosophy are undeniably important, his legacy of using literature to critique and reshape social norms is equally significant. Although Kierkegaard was generally conservative in his political views, if only in the service of dialectical critique, and had not initially been a proponent of the introduction of constitutional religious freedom, his insistence on the right and responsibility of individuals to make sincere, informed choices about their relationship to God at a time of far-reaching socio-political upheaval in Denmark ultimately positioned him as a seminal influence on the gradual liberalization of Danish cultural discourse about religion.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, “Var Biskop Mynster et ‘Sandhedsvidne,’ et af ‘de rette Sandhedsvidner’—er dette Sandhed?,” *Samlede Værker*, Volume 19 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1964), 9.

One of the reasons that Kierkegaard's late writings about religious autonomy became so influential is because of the extent to which they resonated with contemporary popular challenges to governmental and social authority as a whole, including the state church. At the end of his letter about Kierkegaard's funeral, after summarizing Lund's remarks at Kierkegaard's grave, Sodemann reports solemnly, "Prof. [H.N.] Clausen was in truth right yesterday, when he pointed out to the younger theology students that these were dangerous times for theologians."⁵ In his memoirs, Bishop Martensen reports that Kierkegaard's articles "created ill-will" toward the church among the common people and "contributed in no small measure to the growth and strengthening of unbelief in this country."⁶ Yet Martensen himself acknowledged, however reluctantly, that religious indifference and opposition toward the church was already a common phenomenon among Danes, many of whom used Kierkegaard's works to legitimize their own position, whether they wanted to be free from religious obligations altogether or to join a different religious community than *Folkekirken*. It was public desire for precisely such rights of religious self-determination that contributed to the revolutionary demands for a Danish constitution that toppled Denmark's absolute monarchy in March 1848.

The years immediately following 1848 were dangerous times in Denmark for politicians as well as theologians, as Professor Clausen had discovered to his chagrin. A professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen, a founding member of the National-Liberal party, and a longtime advocate for a constitutional monarchy, Clausen had played a leading role in the revolutionary upheaval of early 1848. When he was a candidate for the Constitutional Assembly in Denmark's first democratic elections in

⁵ Kirmmse, *Encounters*, 133.

⁶ Kirmmse, *Encounters*, 203.

October of the same year, however, he was soundly defeated by the weaver Hans Peter Hansen. The educated Danish elite (*Dannelsebourgeoisie*), of which Clausen was a leading figure, was taken aback by the belated realization that its role in bringing about the enfranchisement of the male Danish peasantry would not ensure that the peasants would continue to follow their lead in political matters. Even without the mandate of absolute monarchical power, the government retained a significant measure of control over the political system, and Clausen was ultimately selected as one of the king's appointees to the Constitutional Assembly. It would be more than half a century before the principle that the democratically-elected government should represent the majority of voters was implemented in Denmark.

Under the leadership of the first Minister of Culture, Religion, and Education (*Kultusminister*), Bishop D.G. Monrad, the Assembly met in October 1848 and drafted a document that has come to be known as the June Constitution, after its ratification date in June 1849. This first Danish constitution is quite conservative in many respects, for example in giving the king the right to choose his own ministers without legislative approval. Yet its very existence and basic structure laid the groundwork for modern Danish government by abolishing absolutism and establishing a constitutional monarchy, with a bicameral legislature, greatly expanded male suffrage, separation of powers, and a wide range of civil rights for common Danes, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and limited freedom of religion. This latter provision was a matter of heated debate among the delegates, many of whom were clergymen, including Bishop Mynster, who insisted on a privileged legal position for the evangelical-Lutheran *Folkekirke*. Despite such concessions, however, Monrad's pragmatic recognition that the stability of

a democratic system required more freedom for dissenting religious groups carried the day. Paragraph 81 of the June Constitution⁷ decreed that “citizens shall have the right to gather together in communities to worship God in the manner consistent with their convictions, as long as nothing is done that contravenes civic order and common morality.”

Although the Assembly decided to omit the first few words of Monrad’s proposal, which declared explicitly that “religious freedom is hereby granted,” and stopped short of a separation of church and state, the inclusion of *de facto* religious freedom in the first Danish constitution represented a significant step beyond the almost complete lack of religious liberty in Denmark up to that point. Since the mandated conversion of the entire country to Christianity under King Harold Bluetooth in the 10th century, there had not just been complete unity between church and state; the two were identical, even after the nation’s conversion *en masse* to Lutheranism under Christian III in the 16th century, which precipitated a civil war known as the Counts’ Feud. For nearly a thousand years, the Danish state followed the principles of “*cuius region, eius religio*” and “*jus emigrandi*”: i.e., that the ruler determines the religion of the country and if you don’t like you, you can leave. From 1733 to 1787, a policy known as *adscription* forbade male Danish peasants between the ages of 14 and 36 from leaving their villages, while other laws required them to attend the local church each week or be fined.

This conflation of church and state permeated many aspects of everyday life for Danes. Rural pastors functioned simultaneously as spiritual shepherds and government officials, conducting the census, collecting taxes, and enforcing military conscription. Baptism into the Danish Lutheran Church was required for all children born in Denmark,

⁷ The same language appears as Paragraph 67 in the current Danish constitution.

confirmation into the state church was mandatory for citizenship and its attendant civil rights of marriage and property ownership, and Danish citizens were forbidden by law from converting to a different religion; if they did so anyway, they forfeited any property or inheritance they held in Denmark and were required to leave the country.⁸ The most public cases of conversions that invoked such penalties involved Danish students at Catholic universities on the continent, as well as one instance of 5 theology students at the University of Copenhagen in 1706. Two of the five eventually returned to the fold and served as Danish Lutheran priests, while the other three found employment, respectively, as a librarian in the Vatican, a Jesuit and professor of theology in Cologne, and a librarian at the Royal Library in Madrid, then Mexico, and finally London.⁹

Two religious movements in early nineteenth century Denmark brought the question of religious freedom to the forefront of Danish culture and politics: a widespread lay revival movement (*de gudelige Vækkelser*) among Danish Pietists in the 1820s and the establishment of the first Danish Baptist congregation, under the leadership of P.C. Mønster, in Copenhagen in 1839. A 1741 ordinance forbidding public gatherings without the approval of a parish priest was used to justify imprisoning many of the lay preachers, who were suspected of fomenting political unrest along with their message of literal Biblical interpretation and intense empathy with Christ's suffering. After converting to the Baptist faith and beginning to win converts among his countrymen, Mønster was also imprisoned on at least 3 occasions. In 1840, Mønster submitted a petition to the government outlining the Baptist faith and requesting religious freedom for all Danes. Far from achieving his goal of full freedom of religion, however, Mønster's efforts resulted

⁸ Jens Rasmussen, *Religionstolerance og religionsfrihed. Forudsætninger og Grundloven i 1849* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2009), 56.

⁹ Rasmussen, 57.

in the issuance of a special ordinance concerning Baptists [*Baptistplakaten*] in 1842, which granted them the status of a “tolerated” foreign religion, but also stipulated that they must register with the local police magistrate, refrain from proselytizing, and present their infant children for baptism into the Lutheran church. This final provision had been the subject of heated debate within the government, but it was retained in the final law in order to protect the principle of the Lutheran Christian identity of all Danish citizens. The failure of Danish Baptists to obey this provision led to a decree requiring Danish Lutheran pastors to forcibly baptize the children of Danish Baptists into the state church.

This measure aroused opposition among both Baptists and Lutherans; many pastors, particularly those of a Grundtvigian or Pietist persuasion, disliked the idea of forcing the Church’s sacraments upon unwilling recipients, while some Baptist congregations threatened to excommunicate members who obeyed the law. In 1843, Martensen published *The Christian Baptism*, in which he spoke out against both forcible infant baptism and the adult baptism practiced by Baptists, while Clausen contributed to the discussion with an 1845 pamphlet urging the state to rescind this demand, which he believed contradicted the personal religious freedom of conscience endorsed by Martin Luther.¹⁰ Along with several other members of the Brethren’s Conference in southwestern Zealand, Kierkegaard’s older brother Peter Christian, pastor of Pedersborg parish, refused to perform forced baptisms, despite the threat of dismissal. The constitutional establishment of religious freedom a few years later was, to a large extent, intended to clarify the problematic situation of the Danish Baptists.

Yet this solution created a host of new problems for every one that it solved, for it turned out that declaring religious freedom on paper and implementing religious freedom

¹⁰ Rasmussen, 189.

in practice are very different endeavors. The immediate consequences of the provisions of Paragraph 81 included determining precisely what Danes were now free to do or not to do with regard to religious matters. Freedom of religion did not yet encompass freedom from religion, such that individuals could choose not to belong to any religious group. A person could choose to convert to a different faith than Evangelical Lutheranism, but s/he was not permitted to simply disavow religion altogether. In November 1850, N.M. Spandet proposed a law designed to institutionalize “as complete a freedom of belief as reason and Christianity demand and as the Constitution allows,” by permitting civil marriage for all citizens, granting parents the right to decide their children’s religious affiliation, and allowing individuals to declare themselves indifferent to religious and disassociate themselves from all religions.¹¹ Spandet’s proposal was supported by Grundtvig, but opposed by a majority of the members of parliament. Clausen functioned as their spokesman, warning against the “weakening, possibly even the gradual dissolution of every religion,” *Folkekirken* in particular, that must inevitably result from Spandet’s law.¹² Following Clausen’s lead, the first Danish parliament passed a much narrower law in April 1851 that granted the right of civil marriage only to members of non-recognized religious communities such as Baptists, whose priests did not have the legal authority to perform marriages, or in cases of mixed couples in which one of the parties belonged to a non-recognized religion. Members of *Folkekirken*, however, and other state-recognized religions, such as Catholics or Jews, were not granted the right of civil marriage until 1923.¹³

¹¹ Rasmussen, 243.

¹² Rasmussen, 245.

¹³ Rasmussen, 246.

To return to our starting point, then, the scandal that erupted over Søren Kierkegaard's open grave was directly connected to the sociohistorical circumstances leading up to and resulting from the June Constitution, in particular the threat posed by religious freedom to the privileged position of *Folkekirken*. Kierkegaard was not a revolutionary; he was, in fact, deeply distrustful of mass movements and had generally supported the government's position in the political debates in the 1830s over such issues as press censorship. In 1845, during the uproar over the forcible baptism of Baptist infants, Kierkegaard wrote to his brother to express not only his sympathy with Peter Christian's dilemma, but also his solidarity with Bishop Mynster, on whose insistence the Baptist ordinance had been issued. Yet Kierkegaard's views of religion became increasingly radical during the 1840s, a shift that is documented in a series of texts urging individual religious self-examination. This trend culminates in *Sickness unto Death* (1849) and *Training in Christianity* (1850), in which he challenges the dominant and domineering position of the Danish Lutheran Church in Danish theology and culture. He blamed the church for enabling the "spiritlessness," which was "characterized by ethical limitedness and narrowness,"¹⁴ that afflicted the urban middle class in Denmark, causing its members to ignore the need to develop their own religious consciousness and fail to exercise their religious agency.

The coincidence of Kierkegaard's authorial transformation from a reasoned reformer to a passionate crusader against Danish cultural Christendom in 1849/50 with the June Constitution suggests that he regarded the advent of religious freedom in Denmark as an opportunity to help his countrymen, as Bruce Kirmmse asserts, learn to "differentiate between religion as an absolute and prior commitment of the individual to

¹⁴ Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden-Age Denmark* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 365.

God *and* religion as a socially supportive institution.”¹⁵ Driven by concern that the re-branding of the state church as *Folkekirken* would entrench its self-congratulatory approach to unthinking mass spirituality, Kierkegaard’s “Attack on Christendom” placed him in the paradoxical position of attacking Christendom in order to preserve Christianity and earned him a central spot in Danish political discourse about religious freedom. Consisting of a series of polemical articles published in Denmark’s leading national-liberal newspaper, *The Fatherland (Fædrelandet)* and in his own journal *The Moment (Øjeblikket)* in 1854-55, “The Attack on Christendom” deals with a range of issues relating to the position of religion in Danish society and government, including a call for the “permanent, legal, and final separation of Church and state.”¹⁶ Despite his genuine respect for Mynster, Kierkegaard rejects Martensen’s *de facto* canonization of the deceased bishop on the grounds that Mynster’s teachings undermined New Testament Christianity by glossing over the challenging requirements for individual spiritual struggle. Kierkegaard’s challenge to the authority of his one-time mentor parallels the destabilization of the Danish state church by the legal legitimization of competing religious communities.

From this fairly mild beginning, the tone of Kierkegaard’s articles becomes increasingly vitriolic, using vivid metaphors to condemn the destructive influence of government-sponsored religion on individual spirituality. Kierkegaard denounces paid clergymen as cannibals, who live off the suffering of Christ and his disciples, yet are celebrated as witnesses of truth. He describes complacent Danish Lutherans as fatted geese ready for the slaughter, unwilling to take the leap of faith of trying out their wings

¹⁵ Bruce Kirmmse, *Golden-Age Denmark*, 381.

¹⁶ Kirmmse, *Golden-Age Denmark*, 451.

to see if they can fly. Although Kierkegaard was never affiliated with any of the dissenting religious groups that flourished in the wake of the June Constitution, he critiques the automatic equation of Danishness and Lutheranism as repressive and stunting, preventing individuals from achieving self-knowledge in order to preserve social order. He was a deeply committed believer in New Testament Christianity, but he felt that the indiscriminate assurance of salvation to all Danes merely because of their membership in the state church invalidated the promises of Christianity.

For this reason, Kierkegaard refused to call himself a Christian, despite his sincere faith, in order to redefine the term. By so doing, he emerged as a defender of the individual's right to determine his or her own religious identity, despite the social and bureaucratic turmoil such freedom entails. In the article, "We are all Christians," he speculates that,

If a person were to live among us, a free-thinker, who, in the boldest of language, declared all of Christendom to be a lie, *item* in the strongest language declared himself not to be Christian: it will do him no good; he is a Christian. According to the law, he can be punished, that is something else entirely, but a Christian he remains. "What nonsense," says the state. "What will it lead to? If we allow one man to declare himself not a Christian, it would surely end with everyone refusing to be Christian. No, no, *principiis obsta*, and stand by our principles. We have all of the records in order, everything is organized, everything has its place, based on the assumption that we are all Christian—*ergo* he is also a Christian;

such conceit, that just wants to stand out, cannot be tolerated; he is a Christian and thus it stands.¹⁷

The hypothetical situation Kierkegaard lays out, with its autobiographical overtones, posits the Danish state's sponsorship of Christianity to be a byproduct of bureaucratic inertia rather than a reflection of theological conviction.

The scandal at Kierkegaard's grave was a memorable instance of life imitating literature, one that illuminates the political dimensions of Kierkegaard's highly individualistic philosophical and literary work. This historical moment, which so uncannily echoes Kierkegaard's texts, illustrates the tension between the administrative orderliness of a state in which everyone belongs to the same religion and the disorderliness generated by the freedom to choose differing religious identities. By holding the funeral under the auspices of *Folkekirken* and thereby implicitly asserting its claim on his brother, Peter Christian Kierkegaard chose to uphold the status quo and disregard his brother's self-exclusion from Christendom, while Henrik Lund defiantly asserted the primacy of his uncle's own convictions, whatever the social repercussions of his choice of religious identity. Yet though it may have appeared to contemporary observers that Kierkegaard's untimely death had neutralized the threat he posed to the stability of Danish society, the dramatic social and political changes that took place in Denmark in the decades following his death prove both the prescience of his writings and their enduring value as documentation of the cultural impact of the June Constitution on Danish society.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, "Vi er Alle Christne," *Samlede Værker*, Vol. 19 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1964), 117.