
LETTERS TO THE
EDITOR

OCTOBER 8, 2019



Writing Kierkegaard's life

Writing Kierkegaard's life, etc.

Sir, – Knowing M. G. Piety only by her online dissections of other scholars' work, I cannot tell whether she was unable or unwilling to approach my Life of Kierkegaard on its own terms, ie as a literary work combining biography and philosophy (October 4). I do know, however, that her claim that the book's references are incomplete is simply false. Thanks to a meticulous copy-editor, the

endnotes are all in order – apart from a tribute to Jonathan Lear's brilliant work on irony, which I accidentally deleted, so I am glad of the opportunity to mention it here.

To observe that Kierkegaard felt ambivalent towards Christianity is not, as Piety supposes, to question his commitment to it. On the contrary, ambivalence inflected almost all his deepest loves, as I state in the preface to *Philosopher of the Heart*. The book illustrates this insight with many citations from Kierkegaard's writings – though the review, for some reason, implies otherwise. I also show repeatedly how Kierkegaard's distinction between Christianity and Christendom was crucial to his thought; conflating these terms would be an elementary error, and Piety's suggestion that I did so is just baffling.

Like much else in her review, her complaint that my portrait of Kierkegaard is “not new” (yet at the same time too creative) reflects a grim positivism, so at odds with Kierkegaard's sensitivity to the spiritual depths of a human being's inwardness. The facts of his life are expertly documented in the

recently completed critical edition of his journals and in earlier biographies, most notably Joakim Garff's monumental *SAK*, which Piety has been hounding through the dark tunnels of her blog for years. My book offers no new facts, but a new interpretation that seeks to enter Kierkegaard's inner life, to dramatize his philosophical insights into subjectivity and time, to express the troubled truth of his experience, and to explore with him the open question of how to be a human being in the world. Of course, how far it accomplishes these things is for readers, not the author, to decide.

Piety's latest blog post dismisses Kierkegaard's biographers en masse – all eight of us – while declaring that “it is fairly easy to write a biography of Kierkegaard”. Actually I found it rather difficult. Like any biographer I encountered literary challenges, along with profound questions about the shape, truth and value of a human life.

Kierkegaard pursued these very questions through many complex, remarkable works as well as through the streets of Copenhagen. For me writing his life was always a thoroughly philosophical task – and often haunted by the Kierkegaardian thought that one person can never really understand

another.

CLARE CARLISLE

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Sir, – In her ferociously negative review of Clare Carlisle's biography of Kierkegaard, *Philosopher of the Heart*, M. G. Piety implies that there is something unscholarly in the author's attributing certain thoughts to the philosopher on his journey home to Copenhagen from Berlin. Other scholars have received Carlisle's approach very positively, for they have appreciated that this is a literary biography, and that Carlisle's way of proceeding exceeds a rigid and reductive conception of scholarship. She is creative in this respect, and pushing the limits of biography and philosophy in the process. Very Scandinavian, but at no cost to the facts.

Carlisle is accused of overlooking the distinction between Christianity and "Christendom" (institutional religion). In fact, it is central to her interpretation of Kierkegaard's thought, although she is certainly exploring it in new ways; she shows

Kierkegaard “asking how to express his inner need for God within a Church that offers to meet this need, yet seems often to diminish or divert or falsify it”.

Piety claims that Carlisle's picture of Kierkegaard is not new. This is an odd criticism when set alongside the objection that her approach is over-creative, and it is clear from the few things that Piety says about the book that it is highly original. It offers a creative imagining of Kierkegaard's life, and lurking within it there is a rather interesting philosophy of desire. Scholars are urged to take a look!

FIONA ELLIS

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US aggression

Sir, – Leigh Clark misread the paragraph objected to in his letter (October 4), claiming that I said no “coherent explanation” was given for “US international aggression”. I said no such thing: I clearly stated that no explanation was given for the