

---

LETTERS TO THE  
EDITOR

OCTOBER 23, 2019



# Writing Kierkegaard's life

**Writing Kierkegaard's life, Women flyers,  
Floodlit football, etc**

Sir, – Søren Kierkegaard's writings revel in contradiction, paradox, irony and humour; it is often hard to identify the genuine authorial voice behind the sequence of masks. The same is true of Kierkegaard the man. Everything is eminently interpretable. Unfortunately, M. G. Piety's review of Clare Carlisle's *Philosopher of the Heart*

(October 4) suggests that both the thinker and the man can be dealt with in terms of simple black-and-white contraries and that it is relatively straightforward to pick out what Kierkegaard really thought and who Kierkegaard really was. This over-simplification, however, blinds Piety to the point (as well as the pleasures) of Carlisle's book.

Piety objects to Carlisle's comment that Kierkegaard was deeply ambivalent towards Christianity. Drawing on a distinction that is indeed made very clearly in the Dane's later writings, Piety contrasts "Christianity" with "Christendom", the former denoting the genuine religion of Jesus Christ and the latter the bourgeois conformist churchgoing of Kierkegaard's Denmark, a kind of religion that makes no real demands on its members. She notes that Kierkegaard unambiguously affirmed the former and equally unambiguously rejected the latter. This is not exactly untrue – but the full picture is more complicated. Not only was Kierkegaard himself extremely hesitant in going public with his attack on Christendom, but his relation to the Christianity that he affirmed was itself deeply ambivalent. This can be seen in his insistence that the more we love

God the more we suffer. The identification of love and suffering comes to a climax in the very last journal entry that he wrote in which he figures God as obsessed with finding a person who, brought to an extreme condition of suffering, is able to believe both that God is the direct cause of this suffering and that God does it out of love. He loves me: he makes me suffer; he makes me suffer: he loves me. If this is not ambivalence, I am not sure what is.

Piety also complains that Carlisle “simply invented” the thoughts that she attributes to Kierkegaard at various points. But it is quite clear to any sensitive reader that Carlisle is not claiming to have direct and demonstrable insight into the undocumented workings of Kierkegaard’s mind. Rather, she uses these acknowledged fictionalized episodes to conjure forth a sense of Kierkegaard as a living “restless” human being, thinking, feeling and reacting to experiences and events in ways that other human beings also do – rather than as a vehicle for ideological positions. In this connection, Piety’s complaint that Carlisle ascribes Kierkegaard’s isolation from society to pride and egotism is quite misplaced: in fact, Carlisle only introduces “egotism” in the context of

Kierkegaard's self-questioning, as he ruthlessly scrutinizes his own motives, as if he was asking himself (as he did, many times) whether it was all down to pride and egotism. If a biography is intended to bring us closer to the life of its subject, then imagination is sometimes as effective a tool as an assemblage of facts. In missing the element of imagination, Piety is in this case missing the whole.

In a further contribution, Piety questions whether it is possible to write a biography of Kierkegaard without taking into account his views on Jews and Judaism after the "revelations" of Peter Tudvad's book on Kierkegaard and antisemitism. As always, Tudvad's work presented a great deal of fascinating historical material, but whether this material demonstrates that Kierkegaard was obsessively antisemitic (and more so than other early to mid-nineteenth century theological writers) is far from obvious. It is not even obvious whether this was in fact a main theme in his work at all.

GEORGE PATTISON

Department of Theology and Modern European  
Thought, University of Glasgow.

Sir, – I have recently read Clare Carlisle's extraordinary, moving and absorbing philosophical and literary biography of Kierkegaard. I then read M. G. Piety's review of the same. The review put me in mind of the story of the (no doubt apocryphal) French logician, who patiently listened through every note of a Beethoven symphony, only to turn to his companion, and ask, "and what, precisely, have we learned from that?"

CHRISTOPHER INSOLE

Durham.

### **Women flyers**

Sir, – C. G. Grey, the editor of the *Aeroplane* mentioned in Ann Kennedy Smith's review of Henrietta Heald's *Magnificent Women and their Revolutionary Machines* (October 18 ), was widely regarded for many years as the doyen of aviation historians.

He was undoubtedly wide of the mark and wholly prejudiced, however, when commenting disparagingly about the capabilities of women flyers, as