

## Launch of *Passion for Nothing*

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It is a great pleasure and an honour to be launching what is a very fine contribution to the theological scholarship on Kierkegaard. *Passion for Nothing* is a thoroughly original work. Not only is there originality in thought, there is also freshness and innovation in the style of writing. The poetic artistry of Peter's writing shows us his ideas, rather than telling them to us. More on this in a moment.

I want to begin by making a few comments by way of setting Peter's exciting theological achievement in context. I will then move to personal reflections on what I appreciate about this wonderful book.

Theologians and other scholars who have wrestled with the intriguing, unconventional, and elusive thought of Kierkegaard have puzzled over its theological status. On one side, there have been robust theological readings by neo-orthodox and post-liberal theologians. On the other side, we have seen strongly anti-theological readings by post-structuralist and deconstructionist thinkers. The authorship itself was situated within the milieu of the theology of speculative idealism.

While it has certainly not been a major theme in the work of interpreters of Kierkegaard, there have been those who have similarly made a connection with the apophatic tradition. For those theologians like myself who began their career in science and/or engineering, the move to embrace apophaticism is a slow one, and some never quite make it there. Science celebrates objectivity, precision, determination, measurement, and clearly articulated modelling. The tradition of negative theology is a polar opposite. The light bulb should begin flashing for a theologian, though, as soon as she or he reads passages such as these from the Bible:

Then Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, “What is your name, so that we may honour you when your words come true?” But the angel of the Lord said to him, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful” (Judges 13:17–18).

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

Peter captures beautifully the apophatic mode that Kierkegaard adopts in approaching God. God is beyond every human word, thought, conceptualisation, and system. Peter puts it this way: ‘God is without determination, even negative determination. God is the absolute limit to thought, its “torment” leaves it without rest and conclusion, dis-placed and undone. God is beyond all speech, beyond all silence, too.’ [p. 65]

As I have already indicated, making a connection between Kierkegaard and the apophatic tradition is not new. What is innovative in Peter’s work is that he construes Kierkegaard’s apophaticism as a ‘lived enactment, a becoming nothing’. Moreover, Peter draws out the parallel with Meister Eckhart’s thought. For Eckhart, apophasis is not primarily a theological strategy for dealing with the unknowability of the divine, but rather a truly spiritual way of being in the world. Peter captures this beautifully: ‘Apophasis is an event, the birth of God in the soul, which is the becoming nothing of the soul, its letting go of things, a making room, a turning toward the outside that splits the inside open’ [p. 108].

In making this link with Eckhart, Peter presents a fresh and exciting way of reading Kierkegaard. He suggests that faith, hope, and love are construed by Kierkegaard as

apophatic movements. This means that he, Kierkegaard, thinks of these 'virtues' as negating or releasing themselves as virtues.

Having briefly set Peter's work in the context of Kierkegaardian scholarship, I would like now to offer an expression of personal appreciation. A saying that popped into my head in reading *Passion for Nothing* is this: 'It takes one to know one'. We learnt this in the schoolyard. 'Hey mate. You're a blankety blank'. As we all remember, 'Blankety blank' was never complimentary. The inevitable response was this, 'Yeah. Well, it takes one to know one.' I thought of this expression in thinking about Peter and Kierkegaard. Obviously I'm not referring to name-calling: 'Yeah, Kierkegaard, well you're just an apophaticist!'

Peter is an artist-theologian. He has a wondrous talent with paint brush and canvas, but I'm thinking more of the fact that he constructs his theology artistically and poetically. He connects with Kierkegaard so intimately and intuitively because the Danish genius is also an artist-theologian. It's this word of introduction by Peter to his approach in chapter 2 that captures for me this soul-mateship: 'The movement of this chapter...will not strictly conform to what is typically taken to be proper academic style: a logical sequence of steps that produce the form of an argument. Kierkegaard does not write this way. He does not argue in scientific sequences. He lures and disrupts by performing otherwise, in artistic sequences.'

Peter has this to say about Kierkegaard's method of indirection: 'Such deflection, which requires that one write at a slant or with a swerve, with an artistic touch and flair, is how Kierkegaard lets discourse remain restless, moving beyond any determinate position or self-possessed meaning.' I see the same style of writing 'at a slant', 'with a swerve' and 'with an artistic touch' in Peter. However, he is after all a working academic; he does want to say something. And he does this with admirable

clarity. I was not left in any doubt about the central propositions that Peter presents in his book.

Earlier I introduced a saying I grew up with. I'd like to throw another one into the mix: 'Too clever by half!' A number of Danish and other theologians writing at the time, thought that about Kierkegaard's writing, replete as it is with paradox, polyphony, and irony. They dismissed his work as lacking substance and seriousness. Quite a few contemporary theologians think similarly. What I love about Peter's work is the way in which it clearly shows that there is very definitely seriousness, ethical-religious intent, in Kierkegaard's literary method. This is how Peter puts it: 'Irony as Kierkegaard sought to cultivate it, however, has nothing to do with apathetic detachment or a refusal of commitment. [In the words of one of Kierkegaard's authors], Climacus, "the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that the earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that." Kierkegaard, like Socrates, deploys irony for ethical-religious purposes, in order to deepen commitment and intensify earnestness.' [p. 49]

I have a third and final saying for you: 'Quantitative weight does not decide on qualitative importance.' I guess you have figured out that this one doesn't come out of my childhood. Rather, it is from Peter's book. He is referring to the fact that it is only in a handful of places that Kierkegaard directly addresses the question of who God is. But what he does say is profoundly significant for understanding the nature of God and of God's way of being-with God's creation. Here I find Peter's articulation of an 'apophasis of divine intentionality' particularly insightful. He has this to say: 'Kierkegaard is explicit that in relation to creation God has "no intentions," no determinate plan, no why, only an infinite attention, intimacy, longing and joy. God is nothing but an absolute "with," the "with" of love without why.' [p. 64] Peter captures perfectly what Kierkegaard saw—and I would also line him up here with dialogical philosophers such as Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel—presence is the

truth of a genuine meeting. The essence of the divine-human relation is presence, relating through love without a why.

Well, there is so much more I could say about Peter's remarkable reading of Kierkegaard. But I have to stop somewhere. Let me offer my warmest congratulations, Peter. I declare *Passion for Nothing* officially launched.