

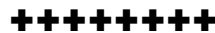
Eastern Elements in Kierkegaard's *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*

Michael Plekon

Abstract

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The author, having published on Kierkegaard for over thirty years, here surveys the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* and in so doing gleans many thematic elements common to Eastern (particularly Russian) theology, especially *kenosis*, *theosis*, and *Bogochelovechestvo*. With reference to the thought of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Paul Evdokimov, Sergius Bulgakov, Lev Gillet, Nicholas Cabasilas, Seraphim of Sarov, and the Greek Fathers – including Irenaeus of Lyons – the author sketches simultaneously a vision of God in Kierkegaard and a vision of Kierkegaard himself that both run counter to oft-heard notions of a despotic deity and a despondent Dane. Instead, what emerges from the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* as well as the *Works of Love* is a God of love whose kenotic self-emptying is manifested in His limitless goodness and eternal giving of every good and perfect gift from above. The author concludes with some reflections on Kierkegaard's methods as a theologian, and here also certain features common in Eastern theological methods may be glimpsed.



Father in heaven! You hold the good gifts in your gentle hand. Your abundance is richer than can be grasped by human understanding. You are very willing to give, and your goodness is beyond the understanding of the human heart, because you fulfill every

prayer and give what we pray for or what is far better than what we pray for. Give everyone his allotted share as it is well pleasing to you, but also give everyone the assurance that everything comes from you, so that joy will not tear us away from you in the forgetfulness of pleasure, so that sorrow may not separate us from you, but in joy we may go to you and in sorrow remain with you, so that when our days are numbered and the outer being is wasting away, death may not come in its own name, cold and terrible, but gentle and friendly, with greetings and news, with witness from you, our Father who is in heaven! Amen (EUD, 79).¹

Introduction: Images of God

Some years ago J.B. Phillips published a small book with the startling title, *Your God is Too Small*.² It was the time of Bishop J.A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God*,³ also of Altizer, Hamilton and others identified with the "death of God" movement. At first, many thought this line of inquiry merely the latest stage of deterioration in religious faith, a sell-out or accommodation to the secularization of the modern era, theological cowardice in the face of contemporary unbelief. Still others took a different interpretation, seeing in the criticism of traditional theological language the renewal of faith and its expression.

Could it not be a kind of interpretive key to a theologian's work to ask what picture, which images, what attributes and characteristics, what dominant features are given to God in that material? The Russian tradition of spirituality and theology has focused upon the "kenotic" Christ, the suffering Son of God who, in the words and imagery of the letter to the Philippians

¹ Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. and trans., *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* (henceforth in the text as EUD), *Kierkegaard's Writings* 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Earlier translations used "edifying" but here the Hongs chose "upbuilding" to more closely resemble the Danish *Opbyggelige*.

² Touchstone, 2004. The original was published in 1952.

³ SCM Press, 1963.

(2:7) “empties himself.”⁴ In his *kenosis*, Christ takes upon himself the place of a slave or servant, lowers or humbles himself to death on the cross even though equal to, and sharing in, divinity. There have been other efforts at identifying dominant theological motifs, among these those of Gustaf Aulén, H. Richard Niebuhr and Jaroslav Pelikan.⁵

To characterize Kierkegaard’s theological tone or key as “optimistic” would strike many readers as improbable, given the profile of this “melancholy Dane” that has developed over the years. Yet for all his intensity in delineating the “Christianity of the New Testament” over against that of Bishop Mynster and other domesticators of the faith, for all his rigor in identifying discipleship with “dying for the teaching,” there nevertheless is a most affirmative theological dimension in Kierkegaard’s thought. I have referred to this as “incarnational optimism,” seeing it as the “other side” of his critical theology’s negativism.⁶ Even in the literature of his public attack on the Danish Church in 1854–55, despite the polemical, often-vicious language, Kierkegaard does reveal that his

⁴ Nadezhda Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1938); Paul Evdokimov, *Le Christ dans la pensée russe* (Paris: Cerf, 1970) and “God’s Absurd Love and the Mystery of His Silence,” in *In the World, Of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader*, eds. and trans. Michael Plekon and Alexis Vinogradov (Crestwood New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 175–194; Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (NY: Harper & Row, 1963); Michel Evdokimov, *Le Christ dans la tradition et la littérature russes* (Paris: Desclée, 1996); and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “The Kenotic, the Humble Christ,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel*, ed. Michael Plekon and Sarah E. Hinlicky (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 29–40. *Kenosis* figures most importantly in the work of Sergius Bulgakov. See in particular its centrality not only for Christ but for the Father and the Spirit in *The Bride of the Lamb*, Boris Jakim, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 60–61, 112–18, 142, 226–231, 386–426, 437, 451.

⁵ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See also William J. LaDue, *Jesus Among the Theologians* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001).

⁶ “Prophetic Criticism, Incarnational Optimism: On Recovering the Late Kierkegaard,” *Religion* 13 (1983): 137–53.