

Joshua Cockayne. *Contemporary With Christ: Kierkegaard and Second-Personal Spirituality*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020. 280pp. \$49.99 (hbk).

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For someone who spends so much of his time twitting Hegel in labyrinthine prose, there is something oddly approachable about Kierkegaard. Behind all the guile and rhetorical gambit is an earnest soul who, to borrow language from the poet Mary Oliver, is concerned that we not waste our “one wild and precious life” at the hands of some impersonal vision of the common good. That fraternal concern often enough comes in the form of an emphasis on the importance of subjectivity and what one might call the “first-person perspective.” Kierkegaard would have us wrestle honestly with the dynamic tensions endemic to the human experience and construe personhood more as a vocation than a given. If Joshua Cockayne is right, however, we miss much of what Kierkegaard has to offer if we do not cast Kierkegaard’s work as importantly focused on the interpersonal as well as the intrapersonal level. Though it may ring strange in the ear of those used to thinking of Kierkegaard as “the champion of solitary selfhood,”¹ for Cockayne the Kierkegaardian project of personhood requires a second-personal dimension. In particular, it requires a spirituality rooted in a second-personal attachment to Christ.

To place Cockayne’s project appropriately, one must recognize that this is not a book that intends to be a contribution to Kierkegaard scholarship per se.² Cockayne very ably navigates the Kierkegaardian corpus and shows that he knows the relevant secondary literature. Moreover, the discussion is not without creative development of Kierkegaard’s views which might be read with interest in that context. One will not find, however, much by way of teasing out what is lost in translation between Danish and English, the contested history of Kierkegaard interpretation, or an accounting of Kierkegaard’s influences.

Instead, one finds a constructive project in which Cockayne articulates Kierkegaardian views with a mind to build upon a vein of research in contemporary

¹ Gregory Beabout and Brad Frazier, “A Challenge to the ‘Solitary Self’ Interpretation of Kierkegaard,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17:1 (2000): 75-98, 75. This article anticipates the interpretive correction that Cockayne provides.

² An observation with which the author agrees, as expressed in personal communication.

philosophy of religion.³ This contemporary literature is that associated with the “second person approach.” As a term that picks out a kind of view, the second person approach first started garnering attention in analytic philosophy with the work of Stephen Darwall in ethics.⁴ As an approach to the philosophy of religion, the term is most principally associated with the work of Eleonore Stump as exemplified in her landmark book *Wandering in Darkness*.⁵ An idea held in common by second personal approaches is that interpersonal phenomena of various kinds do not reduce to either matched first-personal or third-personal phenomena. Which phenomena is of interest varies, but it could be kinds of experience, reasons, abilities, virtues, and so on. The over-arching idea is that carving up the terrain into introspective self-awareness on the one hand and the proverbial God’s eye view on the other leaves out a lot. What it is like to stare into the eyes of one’s beloved is not reducible to a third personal description of the event or an introspective awareness of what does not essentially refer to the presence of the other party. So goes the thought.

In his marshalling of philosophy of religion literature in this second personal vein, Cockayne appears not so much concerned with arguing against other work taking that approach in favor of his own alternative package. Rather, one thing that stands out in the book is the degree to which he presents existing work of this sort in a complementary fashion seeking more to extend or fill it out with the help of Kierkegaard. A subtle service the book provides, then, is to provide an integrative perspective on how contributions to the second personal approach might fit together. Unfortunately, this aspect of the book was made harder to discern by an editorial decision by Baylor University Press to push references and discussion of those references almost completely into the endnotes.⁶ One has to know the literature to track where the boundary is between original and previously existing work in this vein. That’s not Cockayne’s fault though, and, it should also be said, he certainly has no problem pushing back against these sources to argue for what he sees as a better way forward (e.g. a strong counterproposal to Stump’s gloss on the Eucharist comes to mind). Furthermore, the creative dimension of integrating the work being done in the second-personal vein is not to be taken lightly.

It is important to Cockayne to emphasize that Kierkegaard’s work resonates, albeit in a different rhetorical register, with the work already present in the second personal approach to the philosophy of religion. But Cockayne also clearly thinks Kierkegaard contributes important insights this literature needs. For the purposes of this review, I want to focus on this latter matter. What, according to Cockayne, does Kierkegaard have to contribute to a second personal approach? The answer I think is

³ This gloss is supported by conversation with the author.

⁴ Cf. Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Whether it be Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* or Wittgenstein’s language games, one can, of course, find plenty of precedents for a second-personal approach that significantly pre-date Darwall.

⁵ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ Personal communication from the author, but I take responsibility for the critical phrasing.

found in the two main ideas from the book's title—"second-personal spirituality" and being "contemporary with Christ".

When it comes to contemporary philosophy of religion and analytic theology, "one could be forgiven...for thinking that being a Christian primarily consists in believing in a set of doctrines....[T]hese disciplines have thought much less about the practical and spiritual dimensions of Christian existence....In neglecting issues of spirituality, analytic philosophy of religion and analytic theology risk divorcing doctrine and spirituality...." (1-2). Kierkegaard is usefully concerned with the lived experience of faith and with the gap that can emerge between doctrine and lived experience. According to Cockayne, "For Kierkegaard the Christian life is importantly second-personal; that is, the goal of Christian Spirituality is not the acquisition of some body of knowledge, nor the cultivation of the right kind of personal experience, but rather it seeks closeness with God as a person" (4). "In the Kierkegaardian vision, [spiritual] progress is found in a reorienting of one's will and desires, in coming to know oneself more fully; but ultimately, it is found in drawing close to God by encountering Christ's presence" (5). Thus, although the book touches on a number of topics, it is anchored by this idea that Kierkegaard is important for developing a life where Christ is experienced as present.

The way in which Christ is experienced as present has to do with that strange Kierkegaardian phrase "contemporary with Christ". Cockayne provides two strains within the contemporary philosophy of religion against which to situate this notion. The first is the idea that religious experiences, or at least a range of very important ones, have to do with sharing attention with God. Shared attention, an important topic in developmental psychology, has to do with ways of relating to another person where, to one extent or another, one enters into a transparent, relational state with another person (e.g. when a child invites her father to attend and react to her joyful smashing of mashed carrots). The second is the idea that religious experiences are made possible by "cognitive penetration." That is, the very same sensory field may be experienced differently depending on cognitive factors (e.g. background beliefs) which direct attention, frame one's expectations, and help interpret the experience. One can, of course, think of these two ideas together. Sharing attention with someone is facilitated by cognitive factors that allow one to orient to the other person either in general or as this particular person (e.g. dad). Against this backdrop, Cockayne draws our attention to a way in which sharing attention with the historical Jesus could fall short of a religious experience of the Christ, namely, one could fail to attend to and share attention with Christ qua Christ. One might attend to Jesus as just another person. By contrast, "genuine contemporaneity" requires a "seeing with the eyes of faith" (58).

Second-personal spirituality, then, is an intentional marshalling of one's inner life so as to experience and act in the world as if Christ is present, not as a heuristic for good behavior but rather because one is committed to Christ's actually being present. From this starting point, we then in the second half of the book survey

prayer, scripture, the Eucharist, suffering, and death as distinct arenas within which there are special opportunities or challenges to practicing the presence of Christ in this way. The emphasis is not simply on Christ being present generally but being present to the individual and of the spiritual project being, in a sense, that of showing up before God qua individual. This comes through in a lovely way in the opening epigraph of the book taken from a collection of Kierkegaard's journals and papers.

You everywhere present One...When the single individual decided to go up into your house and went to it, you were present; but perhaps to him it was still not really being present—bless, then, our devotion that we all, each one individually, may in this hour apprehend your presence and that we are before you (1).

This quotation is a corporate prayer that each person present have a demanding private encounter with God.

To put some language on this idea which Cockayne does not use, one might say that practicing the presence of Christ through being contemporary with Christ is a sacramental vision for Christian living, though one of a distinctive sort. To use some standard Augustinian language, a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, but, of course, questions of what this invisible grace consists in are deeply intertwined with questions of presence (e.g. the “real presence of Christ in the Eucharist”). One might locate two vectors along which a sacramental approach might vary that affect how God is experienced as present in a sacrament, which will help us locate Kierkegaard as I'm reconstructing him from Cockayne's text.

The first is the extent to which the sacramental encounter is corporate or individual. A sacrament's mediating the divine presence to an individual depends on the individual's showing up for it in the right way. Just as a first century Jew or Roman may have failed to attend to Jesus in a way that conveyed the presence of the Christ, so too one may put oneself in a poor position to experience God as present. This is certainly a valid point of emphasis, but there is a counterpoint. Sacraments are realized within the life of the church. Thus, one might ask whether there are corporate aspects to a given sacrament or to a sacramental life generally. A priest or other figure may stand in for the divine. Life in a religious community might create a privileged context within which to have a sacramental encounter. They may enter constitutively into the content of the experience. One could even think that the primary effect of a sacrament is at the group level. Kierkegaard, by contrast, appears to, at best, deemphasize these possible social dimensions in favor of the naked encounter of the soul as an accountable individual before the divine.

The second dimension of sacramentality I would like to draw attention to here is that how large one takes the gap to be between visible sign and invisible grace can vary quite a bit. One might have a sacramental vision on which the presence of God is available in a quasi-perceptual way for those with the spiritual expertise (and

perhaps the moral character) to perceive it. Much like a horse expert sees things that a novice in matters equestrian would miss, so one might think of sacraments as mediating divine agency or divine presence in a way that makes the gap between the visible and invisible more a way of parsing the religious participants than the sacrament participated in. Those with eyes to see experience God as present, and the rest do not. There is, however, a different way to approach it.

The need to draw attention to a gap between the visible and invisible dimensions of a sacrament underlines the possibility that absence is an intrinsic feature of sacraments as we experience them, not just presence. One may experience the sacrament as a sacred opportunity to draw near to God, but the God to which one draws near is still hidden. The meaning of the sacrament may be manifest but the presence of God is something one takes on trust. Sacramental absence is important though. It means that a sacrament is not simply a time to receive spiritual succor from the nearness of God but rather a time to exercise one's faith. Sacraments, one might think, are still located in the realm of faith, not sight. The point transposes to spirituality generally. A second person spirituality could vary regarding the extent to which it is geared towards noticing and receiving the divine presence on the one hand and the extent to which it is premised on appropriately weathering the apparent absence of the divine on the other.

If I don't miss my guess, Kierkegaard's sacramental spirituality is distinctive in its emphasis on the individual but also on the gap between the visible and the invisible. This is precisely where we tack back in the direction of Kierkegaard's critique of rationalized religion, of his account of faith as a passionate commitment to what sometimes seems at variance with what is right before one's eyes, of the importance of subjectivity. My impression is that Cockayne softens the edges of Kierkegaard here, pushing Cockayne's constructive project in the direction of a view more centered along these two sacramental dimensions. That's fine, but I think it is also worth wrestling with Kierkegaard's hard edges. To see why, let us delve very briefly into one of those historical comparisons which falls outside of Cockayne's project.

In his lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel makes the following interesting comment about God's presence.

But in the hearts and souls [of believers] is the firm [belief] that the issue is not a moral teaching, nor in general the thinking and willing of the subject within itself and from itself; rather what is of interest is an infinite relationship to God, to the present God, the certainty of the kingdom of God—finding satisfaction not in morality, ethics, or conscience, but rather in that than which nothing is higher—the relationship—to God himself. All other modes of satisfaction involve the fact that they are still qualities of a subordinate kind, and thus the

relationship to God remains a relationship to something above and beyond, which in no sense lies present at hand.⁷

This is a Hegel many of us are not used to seeing, one that acknowledges the importance of relationship with God, of God's presence. The question, however, is how to make sense of how we could have this relationship and enjoy this presence given that it "in no sense lies present at hand." Without getting too much into the tangled weeds of Hegelian exegesis, one might think of this interplay between divine presence and absence as the relevant backdrop against which Hegel assimilates the work of God's spirit to a *zeitgeist* that works through groups of people to bring about God's kingdom on earth. In effect, along our two dimensions of sacramentality, I posit that Hegel very intentionally wrestles with the apparent absence of God in industrializing, secularizing Europe by positing that God's presence is social rather than individual and that, for those with eyes to see, it is visible in the progress affected by an identifiable group of people who get to count as Christendom.

I have no aspirations to Hegelian scholarship. That's not the second career I would choose. Against the relevant Hegelian backdrop, however, Kierkegaard's view pops into focus. In contrast to Hegel's pivot from the historical presence of Christ to the presence of God in a spirit animating a group of people, Kierkegaard reasserts the primacy of Christ's presence, but it is a hidden presence which the individual must pursue and engage as an act of faith.

Whether one agrees with Kierkegaard or not, his position is, as always, striking and well worth engaging with. Indeed, one might think that a posture of faith in the face of God's sacramental absence is one uniquely well-suited to spirituality in our secular age.⁸ We can be thankful to Joshua Cockayne for teasing out the dimensions of Kierkegaard's spirituality for us and integrating it with the contemporary second-personal literature.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3. Trans. R. F. Brown (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 322. I discovered this quotation and a related discussion in Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 13-14

⁸ As should go without saying, especially since Taylor's *A Secular Age*, in what sense we do or do not live in a secular age is a rich and controversial topic.