

Richard McCombs. *The Paradoxical Rationality of Soren Kierkegaard.* Indiana University Press 2013. 264 pp. \$40.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780253006479).

VLOG REVIEW: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhkFjMf2110>

McCombs' exciting central thesis defends Kierkegaard from the charge of being an irrationalist, while simultaneously demonstrating that Kierkegaard is a special form of rationalist. Much of McCombs' argument draws inspiration from Kierkegaard's unconventional personal piety that Socrates became a Christian posthumously. The implication is that Christianity ought to be conceived of as the telos of reason. In other words, reason leads to faith and faith leads to one becoming more reasonable. This is a view widely panned by contemporary culture and by those with a superficial knowledge of Kierkegaard's works. McCombs' text corrects misconceptions concerning the gloomy Dane and reframes the eternal public debate of faith's relationship to reason. McCombs' argument is also predicated upon the incompleteness of objective thought, not only logically, but also because speculation fails to speak to the entirety of the person. Pure theoretical reason does not address the emotions and conscience that drive most human activity (7, 18, 35-6).

Kierkegaard would never clearly present the argument coming under consideration, as McCombs beautifully illustrates throughout the book, for one must communicate subjective truth indirectly and non-inferentially in order to meet people where they are. McCombs speculates that Kierkegaard may have gone along with the unwarranted irrationalist label in order to clarify the reasonableness of Christianity. Sometimes it takes a madman to teach us something of the truth. Kierkegaard was no madman; however, some of his literary personas emphasized the offensiveness of the Absolute paradox to shake people from groupthink and allow them to discern the Christian truth for themselves. When Kierkegaard did this, he imitated Christ according to McCombs. Just as God humbled himself in lowly human form, Kierkegaard meets people where they are, which is in their confusion and irrationality (49, 55, 57-8, 75, 77).

McCombs' (and by extension Kierkegaard's) argument runs as follows. Once an individual has transcended aesthetic delights and comes to a realization that their personal ethical project is futile, one enters the stage of resignation. One is resigned toward temporal goods, suffering, and guilt consciousness and if done correctly culminates in total reliance on a subjectively unknown God. Kierkegaard believed Socrates (sans revelation) to be the perfect exemplar of resignation, for Socrates acutely knew reason's limits and willed its downfall, meaning Socrates unconsciously sought reason to be integrated and perfected within something larger. Just as self-love gives way to romantic love and then to self-less love, reason, as personified by Socrates, was bound to give way to the perfecting powers of faith (108, 136-37, 163).

The resigned person receives from faith the condition for the truth and the truth. The condition for the truth is sin-consciousness, which in this scenario means we cannot autonomously make ourselves good, wise, or happy. We live in despair and need help. The incarnation (the truth) demonstrates our error. We can be offended at this notion and reject the truth or submit to it and build a subjectively true relationship with the revealed truth (165-66, 168, 175-76, 190).

For what reason, would an individual submit to or rather build a relationship with the Incarnation? There is no objective or theoretical reason for it, but as Socrates and others have shown, we have grounds to be skeptical of pure reason. Reason frequently fails to deliver on what it promises.

We take up the offer in Christ because a) despair presses us toward the truth and b) our conscience (a rational faculty) communicates to us that Christian life coordinates the fractured components of the self and provides unparalleled meaning. Kierkegaard may be anti-pure objective reason; however, he is in favor of a discerning holistic reason that has been perfected by faith. If we truly seek happiness, then we have holistic reasons generated by conscience and experience to exchange theoretical reason for discerning Christian life. Thus, Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist. He is a paradoxical holistic rationalist (191, 208-09, 211-12, 215, 219)

One critique of McCombs' book is that he takes over 200 pages to communicate an incredibly insightful idea that many Kierkegaardians sense but have perhaps clumsily adumbrated. McCombs' tangents on indirect communication are interesting; yet, the eager scholar may feel teased and want to devour the essential idea already. How Kierkegaardian of McCombs! By slowly unfolding the general argument, McCombs does not leave much room to critique his fully developed primary point. Perhaps he was writing with a different audience in mind and imitated Kierkegaard who was imitating Christ and did not want to give away the store directly. McCombs may want us to judge for ourselves. Can any intelligible criticisms to the argument be articulated?

One potential problem will be raised. This problem is not aimed directly at McCombs, but at Kierkegaard and all of us who do Kierkegaard research. It seems that those who embrace holistic reason at a mature age do not lose their faith all that easily. McCombs and Kierkegaard could claim that this is because reason and conscience have been perfected in faith and God is subjectively known. It would be actually irrational to go back to agnosticism, atheism, or another faith. Fair enough, but what about all the non-Christian faith adherents who choose their religious path with subjective discernment and conscience over resignation? What are the ramifications of this phenomenon in light of the argument McCombs has given us? McCombs, echoing Kierkegaard, can claim that this isn't problematic and that God can meet people where they are and if he has surrogates other than Christ, then so be it. This is a lovely sentiment and the corresponding implication is that all those that earnestly strive for God will find Him. This is great for all of us honestly undertaking religious pilgrimages of the self, but what are the ramifications for Christianity? Does this not make the Christian faith just another option? Would Kierkegaard be comfortable with that conclusion? Presumably not, if Christ is the 'Absolute' paradox. What does the good Christian say to the good Muslim or the good Hindu if we think there is something special about the Incarnation? This might be one of the most pressing questions for Kierkegaard research. The appeal to a holistically rational life as a conversion mechanism will likely be ineffective with those who find meaning in their current faith tradition and no thoughtful Kierkegaardian wants to start speculating above their pay grade about eternal destinations.

Two responses hold promise for solving the dilemma: 1) Perhaps Kierkegaard isn't speaking to a multicultural world and is only addressing those brought up within Christendom. 2) All this fretting about Christianity's fate ought to be tabled for it displays an unchristian narcissism. Addressing these concerns in order, is Kierkegaard only speaking to Christendom? If so, such a move would inadvertently devalue the Christian truth, for he sees no need to promulgate it beyond established boundaries. Also, it would call into question the Kierkegaardian project writ large. If Kierkegaard is trying to say something universal about subjective life and then excuses those outside of Christendom from a particular aspect of the project, has he not contradicted himself? Is not his description of the self's journey to apply equally amongst all humanity? This route appears beset with dilemmas. Maybe the second response is more promising. Kierkegaard is fond of railing against

world historical moral efforts, for a multitude of reasons. Chief among them is the immoral narcissism that says God needs our help to forge a more perfect social order. Might Kierkegaard find our obsession with preserving the existential superiority of Christianity to be symptomatic of the same sort of narcissism? Could Kierkegaard forcefully claim that we are doing something anti-Christian by fretting over the fate of Christianity and that our energy ought to be conserved for the subjective relation to the Incarnation? He would have a point. The status of Christianity is best saved for the one who inaugurated it, but of course this raises the issue of what constitutes appropriate Kierkegaardian apologetics.

Luke Johnson, University of Georgia