# Editors' Preface

Paul L. Holmer (1916–2004) was a unique and potent theological force. While his own reflections were *sui generis* and extraordinarily elusive, he had a pervasive and significant (but often unacknowledged) impact upon the development of Christian reflection in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Holmer served as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota from 1946 to 1960, and then as the Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale Divinity School from 1960 to 1987. After his death in 2004, his family gave The Paul L. Holmer Papers, comprising thirty-eight archival boxes, to the Yale University Library, where they form the Holmer Papers Special Collection at Yale Divinity School Library.

Holmer's thought is not as well known as its stature deserves. Holmer published only a few books during his lifetime, and many of his essays appeared in rather hard-to-find journals or only circulated in manuscript form. The editors have carefully reviewed the papers at Yale Divinity School, and have concluded that the publication of three volumes of The Paul L. Holmer Papers will serve to illuminate three important aspects of Holmer's contributions to theology. In volume 1, we have painstakingly reconstructed Holmer's unpublished, and much-rumored, book-length manuscript on Kierkegaard, presented under the title *On Kierkegaard and the Truth*. In volume 2, *Thinking the Faith with Passion: Selected Essays*, we have chosen some of the seminal essays that represent the wide scope of Holmer's thought and interests. In volume 3, *Communicating the Faith Indirectly: Selected Sermons, Addresses, and Prayers,* we present another aspect of Holmer's thought and work as philosopher and theologian, including both his reflections upon, and his practice of, the sermon or religious address.

Paul Holmer's writings about Kierkegaard are almost as peculiar and demanding as Kierkegaard's writings themselves. They defy neat

categorization in terms of genre and often defy the conventions of academic scholarship. They are certainly not a linear explication of the texts of the Kierkegaard corpus. Nor are they a sustained effort to illumine the texts by situating them in the complexities of Kierkegaard's historical environment. Moreover, they do not attempt to clarify Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* in the light of their author's odd psychological dynamics. Holmer treats the corpus neither as an extended presentation of a metaphysical "position" nor as a disguised exercise in theological revision or doctrinal repristination. Holmer does not reduce the meaning of the texts to the intentionality of their author, nor does he identify the meaning with any worldview suggested by the texts themselves. Like Kierkegaard, Holmer mixed the citing of evidence and the building of a case with exhortation and solicitude for the moral and religious well-being of his readers. Also like Kierkegaard, Holmer developed his own idiosyncratic vocabulary and quirky style. His sentences have the cadences and punctuation of his speech, and, again like Kierkegaard's own sentences, seem to have been intended to be read aloud. In Holmer's pages philosophical reflection, cultural polemics, and religious edification are curiously mixed.

In spite of this oddness (or perhaps because of it), Holmer was an enormously influential figure in the history of Kierkegaard studies in the United States and Canada. His impact was felt more through his teaching than through his published writings. First at the University of Minnesota and then at Yale, Holmer guided and provoked several new generations of Kierkegaard scholars whose own writing and teaching would shape yet more generations.

Holmer's own approach to Kierkegaard did not spring fully armed from the brow of Zeus. Holmer's engagement with Kierkegaard was deeply indebted to the work of David F. Swenson (1876–1940), a professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota.[1] By the late nineteenth century, the writings of Kierkegaard were circulating within the Scandinavian immigrant communities of the northern Midwest. In 1898 Swenson discovered a volume by Kierkegaard by accident in a local library, immediately became enamored with it, and by 1914 had begun lecturing on Kierkegaard, transmitting his enthusiasm for the

1. See David Swenson, *Something about Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1941); David Swenson, *Kierkegaardian Philosophy in the Faith of a Scholar* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1941).

Danish thinker to his students. For Swenson, Kierkegaard provided a welcome alternative to the two major interpretations of religion available within contemporary American philosophy: the empiricist dismissal of religion, and the idealist assimilation of religion to grand metaphysical systems, mostly of a monistic sort. In the one case religion was deemed irrational, and in the second it was evacuated of personal pathos. Disillusioned with both empiricism and idealism, Swenson was attracted to what he perceived to be Kierkegaard's refusal to divorce matters of passion and matters of reason in his treatment of Christianity. Swenson developed an interpretation of Kierkegaard that differed from that of the existentialists whose influential appropriation of Kierkegaard was beginning to permeate the academy. Swenson's Kierkegaard was no extreme anti-rationalist but rather a Christian philosopher whose work implicitly suggested that belief in a transcendent source of meaning is a legitimate response to the ambiguity and anguish of human life. Of course, this transcendent source of meaning does elude all procedures of objective verification. However, for Swenson, there is a kind of rationality resident in the passional dynamics of human life that becomes evident when an individual begins to strive for personal coherence. The emotions, passions, and feelings that characterize human lives have a type of logic. In light of this, the embrace of Christianity is by no means counterrational, even though it cannot be justified by the research procedures of empirical scientists.

While an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota, Holmer studied under Swenson during the time that Swenson was preparing his translation of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Holmer met with Swenson once a week to discuss the thought of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Moving to Yale for his PhD after Swenson's death, Holmer wrote his dissertation on Kierkegaard's epistemology, a project he described as unabashedly Swensonian. Upon returning to the University of Minnesota to teach in 1946, Holmer saw himself as continuing Swenson's legacy of providing an alternative to the positivism that dominated the philosophy department.

Holmer had enormous respect for the intellectual rigor and precision of the positivist heritage, and was troubled by the suspicion of the truth and meaningfulness of Christian convictions that it

spawned. Holmer was intrigued and disturbed by the form of positivism that became popular at the University of Minnesota through the influence of Herbert Feigl, who had joined the philosophy faculty in 1940. He shared positivism's suspicion that metaphysical speculation was nonsense, but recoiled at its equation of meaningfulness with the procedures of verification or falsification. Holmer rejected the suggestion that moral and religious language was nothing more than the expression of affective states or personal preferences with no reference to realities beyond the individual's inner life. Holmer, inspired by Swenson, welcomed what he took to be Kierkegaard's insight that "rationality" is not a homogenous, univocal concept, whose meaning is determined by modern science.

Using his dissertation as a foundation, Holmer began composing a comprehensive book on Kierkegaard's thought. He wrote several different drafts, from the late 1940s through the late 1960s, never entirely satisfied with the results. He was deeply sensitive to the danger of misrepresenting Kierkegaard by paraphrasing his literature as if it were a set of theological or philosophical propositions that could be grasped dispassionately. Such a procedure would subvert Kierkegaard's purpose of occasioning a possible transformation of the reader's passions and dispositions. Consequently, Holmer's work evolved from a summary of Kierkegaard's opinions to a set of suggestions for reading Kierkegaard for one's own self. Holmer was keenly aware that any scholarly writing about Kierkegaard should not function as a substitute for firsthand wrestling with the texts themselves. As he noted, reading Kierkegaard's literature should function as a sort of moral and religious pedagogy. Holmer wanted his book to contribute to Kierkegaard's goal of stimulating the process of becoming a responsible person rather than sabotage that process by communicating results. He did not want to summarize Kierkegaard's thoughts or arrange them in a neat system; he merely sought to coach the reader in the most felicitous ways to engage the literature that would avoid appropriations that sabotaged their edifying purpose. Most of all, Holmer sought to remove the most basic impediment to appropriately reading Kierkegaard that typically afflicts learned people, namely, the tendency to engage a philosophical or theological text as a compendium of "results" that systematically answer all human questions.

In spite of these caveats about the proper way to read Kierkegaard, Holmer did not hesitate to present Kierkegaard as a genuine philosopher. Holmer's sensitivity to Kierkegaard's desire to provoke the reader to a passionate concern about the quality of the reader's own life did not prevent Holmer from realizing that Kierkegaard's literature also served as a clarification of certain perennial conceptual puzzlements. In order to disabuse learned readers of intellectual tendencies that could impede their ability to engage life seriously, Kierkegaard, in Holmer's view, developed a way of doing philosophy as a type of analysis of the concepts that were most basic to various ways of living. According to Holmer, this led Kierkegaard to reflect long and hard on the way that life-shaping concepts come to have meaning. As a result, Kierkegaard recognized the importance of drawing distinctions between different networks of concepts. Holmer's pages trace the ways in which Kierkegaard's corpus can be construed as a type of meta-analysis of the conditions for the appropriate use of existentially relevant concepts. As such, Kierkegaard exhibits all the argumentative rigor and even "objectivity" traditionally associated with philosophical writing. In a way, in Holmer's view Kierkegaard's many volumes implicitly present a sustained argument about the nature and limits of human intelligibility and communication that serves as an alternative to traditional metaphysics.

As the drafts evolved, the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein became more evident. In Wittgenstein Holmer discerned an illuminating parallel to Kierkegaard's theme that the way of appropriating and using a concept is constitutive of its meaning. Wittgenstein's attention to the particularities of context and purpose seemed to him to clarify Kierkegaard's insistence that the right context of pathos must be present in order for religious and moral discourse to be meaningful. The concept "God" cannot be grasped without imagining the purposes of praising, confessing, and exhorting in which the concept "God" is embedded.

The evolution of the different recensions of the manuscript also shows an increasing sensitivity to the literary qualities of Kierkegaard's work. Holmer realized that the conceptual content of any Kierkegaardian text could not be divorced from its mode of communication. Grasping Kierkegaard's purpose required an appreciа-

tion of his literary art. Holmer was keenly aware that Kierkegaard's rhetorical performance contributed so much to their meaning that any purely discursive paraphrase would be a gross distortion of their meaning.

In order to prepare the reader for a potentially edifying encounter with Kierkegaard's texts, Holmer reiterated a few different themes to keep in mind as the texts are being read. One is Kierkegaard's conviction that the objective pursuit of knowledge does not lead to moral or religious growth. There is no necessary connection between scholarship and religious seriousness. The mood of detachment is utterly inappropriate for considering moral and religious matters. Concern for the integrity of the individual's own life must be present in order for moral and religious discourse to be meaningful. An intelligible nexus of passions, emotions, concerns, and purposes is essential for establishing the meaning of authentic ethical and religious communication. Understanding morally and religiously significant language requires the ability to at least imagine the hopes and fears that words are trying to evoke, express, or recommend. This would even lead Holmer to emphasize Kierkegaard's dissatisfaction with the allegedly "scientific" approach to the interpretation of the Bible.

Because of this, no neutral assessment of Christianity's claims is possible. All concepts only make sense within their own domain of discourse, embedded in a network of relationships with other concepts from the same domain, all mutually defining each other. Meaning evaporates when concepts from disparate domains are mixed indiscriminately. Psychological explanations do not make sense in the context of moral responsibility, and notions of historical causality do not make sense when assessing the religious significance of an event. Human beings do not have access to a neutral, omniscient meta-perspective from which all these domains can be coordinated and integrated into a "system." The concepts of Christianity constitute a unique way of life with a distinctive set of virtues, aspirations, dispositions, and passions.

Christianity should not be assimilated to any other academic discipline or cultural sensibility. Christianity is not to be identified with any set of secular political projects, societal values, or popular cosmologies. No meta-perspective is available that could serve as the

basis for synthesizing Christianity with some grand vision of the way the universe really is or with some totalizing project of human amelioration. Holmer insisted that Kierkegaard must be read as someone who resisted the accommodation of Christianity to nationalism, generic spirituality, and popular standards of decent behavior.

By stressing these themes in Kierkegaard's literature, Holmer was hoping to warn the reader away from potential ways of misreading Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard should not be read as a rather peculiar and sustained apology for a particular way of life. Nor should Kierkegaard be read as an invitation to indulge in the freeplay of the imagination and make criterionless choices. Kierkegaard should be read neither as an alternative metaphysics, nor as a doctrinal revisionist, nor as an existential irrationalist. Holmer's Kierkegaard is not the Kierkegaard of the ontologists like Paul Tillich, nor the neo-orthodox theologians like Emil Brunner, nor the existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre. In Holmer's view, Kierkegaard did not simply want to convey information; rather, he sought to foster the possibility that the reader might become a more responsible, coherent self, perhaps even a Christian, through the act of reading. Christian communication must activate self-reflection and concern for the significance of one's own life and provoke a crisis of accountability for the shape of one's own life.

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A few words of explanation about the editing process are in order. Holmer wrote these drafts before concerns about gender-inclusive language became common. The editors have not attempted to conform Holmer's writings to current practice, but beg the reader's indulgence, and note that Holmer's own practice on this shifted in later years.

Holmer wrote most of these pages before the selections from Kierkegaard's journals and papers edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong appeared. Consequently, when referring to a journal entry, Holmer cited either Alexander Dru's briefer set of translated selections or, if Dru had not translated a particular entry, the then available Danish edition. Seldom did Holmer cite both. The editors have supplemented Holmer's citations of Dru with the corresponding passages in the Danish edition of the papers that Holmer used.

We have also supplemented his references to the Danish edition with the English translations now available, either from *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, or from *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist.