Communicating to the Religiously Secure: 
Kierkegaard, Luke, and Indirect Communication

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Familiar material can be seen through fresh eyes when approached by those outside of our discipline. Soren Kierkegaard’s (1962) work from the late 19th century helped a multitude of theologians re-evaluate their understanding of the *New Testament* (1992) and influenced many in the realm of philosophy in the opening half of the 20th century. It is possible that his work could shed new light on our understanding of the Controversy Sections in the Gospels between Jesus and the Pharisees. Kierkegaard’s attempt to help those caught in “Christendom” move to “Christianity” will be compared with the “Gospel of Luke”’s presentation of Jesus attempting to move the Pharisees to true faith. Structural Analysis, an adaptation of Form Criticism, will be employed to demonstrate that the Gospel’s presentation of Jesus’ approach to the Religiously Secure parallels that of Kierkegaard.

*Keywords:* Kierkegaard, Luke, indirect communication, Religiously Secure

Introduction

Established church goers or prominent Synagogue attendees can be the hardest people to introduce to God\(^1\) (Buber, 1964, pp. 102-113). In their eyes, they are moral and spiritual, and thus religiously self-secure. The dilemma is how to tell them they are caught in the delusion that they are believers. Soren Kierkegaard attempted to help this type of person during his day. As his goal was to awaken self-confident, deluded and proud Danish Church attendees, he could be a guide for our efforts to appropriate what the Gospels teach us to do for the religiously self-secure in our churches.

Kierkegaard’s Indirect Communication

Much of Kierkegaard’s writing employed an “indirect communication” procedure but it was towards the end of his career that he made this method more explicit in his *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to Histor* (Kierkegaard, 1962, pp. 22-28). In his understanding, an indirect approach was necessitated by the particular situation of the Danish Church. His Danish audience was culturally “Christian”, but turned a dull

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\(^1\) The Hasidic masters would agree. They say there is hope for one of two extremes among men. One type is wholly evil. He knows his Lord, yet deliberately defies him. The other type believes he is wholly righteous, and has a good reputation. He studies, prays incessantly, and fasts, but he toils in vain, for he has no true faith. He who is all evil can be cured when he wakens to the Turning. He can turn to God with a whole heart and beg God to point the way to the light. The other does not have the possibility of recognizing the greatness of his Creator and the true nature of service because, in his own eyes, he is righteous. How can he turn? This is a paraphrase of Martin Buber who has translated sayings from the Hasidic masters (Martin, 1964, pp. 102-103).
ear to any discussion of the penetrating truths of real Christianity. Kierkegaard (1962) believed that indirect communication was required for those who were, to paraphrase his famous words, part of “Christendom” but were not real “Christians”. Being under the illusion that they were Christians, Kierkegaard (1962) believed “an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed” (p. 24). He understood we needed to “approach from behind the person who is under an illusion” (pp. 24-25). A more contemporary manner of stating this would be to say we must “get behind” their defense mechanisms before we could have hope of successfully challenging someone to change.

The Communicator

Kierkegaard’s (1962) approach focused as much on the indirect communicator as it did on the procedure of indirect communication. He believed that the teacher had to discipline their disposition to be patient and humble (p. 25). Such humility might necessitate looking less pious or less spiritually impressive (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 24). Setting aside how spiritual one appeared put the indirect communicator in better position to focus on the points of view or innermost thoughts of his audience. Focusing on others took courage but it had a source—it was in the “fear and trembling” before God.

The Procedure

Humility mentioned above was a part of the procedure and surprisingly, Kierkegaard encouraged the necessary humility to employ a form of deception. This is an alarming proposal to hear from a serious Christian, but deception can take several forms. First, Kierkegaard proposed that we deliberately appear to be less Christian or less pious than those caught in their deluded piety as such humility helps us get behind the defense mechanism of the one deluded. Second, he proposed that we start out by appearing to be the pupil: “to be a teacher in the right sense is to be a learner” (Kierkegaard, 1962, pp. 29-30). The student is enticed to listen because they felt empowered, not attacked.

Kierkegaard (1962) repeatedly stated that the communicator was not to have “might”. The procedure was not to try to dominate or force belief on the deluded and thus we were to never seek a position of supremacy. Since true faith cannot be compelled, we could, however, compel someone caught in illusion to take notice. Once a person took notice, then that person had to judge or was compelled to make a decision and then at the right time the communicator had to press forward quickly and nimbly with the truth (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 26).

In short, the “indirect approach” began with us being dedicated to truly helping the religiously self-righteous and with us being bathed in “fear and trembling”. Thus, we could become free enough to humble ourselves beneath the self-deluded. This deliberate choice to appear less spiritual was in part a deliberately deceptive act, but it disarmed and caught the person off guard. It was in this way that we could “come behind” or “lower” defense mechanisms that a direct approach would raise. Not imposing our views on another, we were to force our audience to “take notice”, compelled them to form an opinion or made a judgment and then sprang the trap. This sounds a bit ethereal and Kierkegaard gave several examples but instead of giving his, we will look at the Gospel of Luke.

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2 “Even to the extent that one is not even considered a Christian at all”.
3 “A genuine martyr never used his might but strove by the aid of impotence”.

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The Gospels often record Jesus dealing with the religiously self-secure of His day which took the form of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes. A particular example of this and a demonstration of Kierkegaard’s method is found in a story Luke records of Jesus attending a formal dinner of Pharisees (7:36-50) that was interrupted by a prostitute. Prior to this example, in Luke 5:20-24, 30-39, and 6:1-11, we learn that opposition to Jesus had been building among the conservative religious leadership. However we may feel towards such people Luke presents them fairly, for despite their antagonism to Jesus, the Pharisees were willing to have dialogue and fellowship with Jesus which a dinner invitation in that culture suggests.

The First Accusation

Accepting their offer, it is clear Jesus wanted to convert them to a higher view of religion, something much more in line with the Hebrew Bible (1984) and wanting them to see clearly who He was. In this episode, Jesus did not preach or rail against the Pharisees, but walked onto their turf, into one of their homes, and dealt directly with them. Humbly, He dealt directly with them in one sense and indirectly in another.

As alarming as it sounds, Jesus’ approach began with deception and the deception entailed what Jesus allowed to happen. Learning of Jesus’ attendance at the banquet, a prostitute entered the room and began to grovel at His feet. Weeping at His feet she wet them with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head, finally kissing them. Then she anointed His feet with perfume.

What she had done, from one point of view, was touching. This woman was truly repenting. She repented not merely in words, but in deeds just as Israel’s great prophets begged Israel to do. In a poor society, perfume was seldom found among the average woman, but only among the rich, and of course, among prostitutes who used it in that warm climate to make themselves more attractive to customers. In addition, her hair, an important aspect of feminine attractiveness in Middle Eastern society (witness the covering of a woman’s hair to this day in Arab culture), was made filthy as she washed his feet. Astoundingly, she was giving up the tools of her trade in a true act of repentance. She did something that would bring tears to every true rabbi, priest, or preacher’s eyes.

What Jesus allowed the woman to do was, from another point of view, startling. In that tense atmosphere, He allowed her to touch Him and being regarded as a holy man, a Rabbi, at that time such a thing was not done. It was scandalous. It was also a bit deceptive in that Jesus’ action allowed His host to view Him as spiritually inferior.

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5 See also Luke 7:30, where Luke directly tells us that the Pharisees (the conservative, bible believing leaders of that day) had rejected John whom Jesus was praising.
6 Their offer was proved to be disingenuous as the story unfolded and Jesus was aware of it.
7 This approach is not new to Luke. The first recorded speech in Genesis that is addressed directly to humans is an indirect approach: But the Lord God called to the man, Where are you? Certainly, God knew where Adam and Eve were. He was not calling for an angelic search party to find the humans who He could not locate in the foliage of the Garden of Eden. God was calling directly to Adam and Eve: He knew exactly where they were and not only spatially. However, He acted like He was ignorant of their location. The feigning of ignorance was used to get His audience to express their thoughts and begin a dialogue. See also 3:11 in the second sentence of this verse God asked the man if he had eaten from the forbidden tree. Of course, God knew what he had done but feigned ignorance in order to give the human a chance to repent. When the greatest power in the universe, condescends to speak to any human being there must be “hidden glory”.
Kierkegaard (1962) said:

… The helper must first humble himself under him he would help, and therewith must understand that to help does not mean to be a sovereign but to be a servant, that to help does not mean to be ambitious, but to be patient, that to help means to endure for the time being the imputation that one is in the wrong and does not understand what the other understands. (pp. 27-28)

Jesus’ action prompted the first of two accusations to be leveled against Him at the dinner. His scandalous action induced Simon to think Jesus was either ignorant or a fraud.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself: “If this man were a prophet He would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner”8.

Placing Himself humbly beneath Simon with His acceptance of this woman Simon was convinced he was more perceptive9. When Jesus let the woman touch Him it made Him seem imperceptive, something a prophet was not supposed to be, and thus by deduction Jesus could be considered a fraud10.

Jesus had forced Simon to make a judgment and once He had Simon’s attention the follow-up was composed of three sections. The first two parts were dialogues with His host (7:40-43) which Jesus controlled by the leading questions He asked. The dialogues compelled Simon to move being a passive listener to being part of the educational process. In the first dialogue, Jesus asked Simon to give Him permission to speak—“Simon, I have something to say to you” (7:40). Simon’s only publicly correct response would be to give Jesus such permission.

The second dialogue also began with Jesus’ initiative (Kierkegaard, 1962, pp. 26-27)11 and it took the form of a story about two debtors12. One debtor owed 10 times more than the other and both were unable to repay their debt. Both debtors were said to be graciously forgiven. Then Jesus induced Simon to make another decision with the question: “Now which of them will love him more?” (7:43). Forcing Simon to take notice when Jesus allowed the woman to touch Him, Jesus now forced Simon to make a decision.

The little story or parable that Simon was asked to comment on subtly portrayed both Simon and the prostitute as sinners. It also subtly showed Simon that Jesus not only knew who the woman was but also who Simon was as, both Simon and the woman were sinners. However, the sting was mitigated by the manner in which Jesus did it. The manner was one of excessive humility, but not self-congratulating humility. Even the humility was subtle.

The humility was displayed by Jesus employing a familiar pedagogical form used in that culture. It is found often in the Talmud (1996) and other extensive records of rabbinical discussion that have been preserved. Jesus

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8 Luke 7:39 (NIV, as all quotes will be from that version).
9 This same type of deception is used in Luke 24:13-19 when Jesus addressed the disillusioned disciples who were walking Easter morning on the road to Emmaus. His approach there was also to feign ignorance when He joined them in their walk, and they did not recognize Him. He opened the conversation with: What are you discussing together as you walk along? Though He was chided for being so uniformed of current events, Jesus humbly persisted with another seeming display of His lack of awareness. He asked another question: What things? Here as elsewhere in Luke, Jesus is portrayed as humbly asking questions of finite humans even though as God He was omniscient.
10 The author owes this insight to Isaac Webb in personal conversation in the fall of 2012.
11 “The one who is disposed to help bears all the responsibility and makes all the effort”.
12 N. T. Wright, says a “heads-on attack would certainly fail, the parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favour (sic) which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety”. The New Testament And the People of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God) (1992, p. 38).
had slyly induced Simon to use it. Often a story, or a biblical quote or biblical story was presented followed by a request from the student to the Rabbi for insight. It more or less took the following form: “Rabbi, how does it read to you?” (Straus, 1996, pp. 48, 128, 138). Jesus made Simon the Rabbi. Jesus put Simon in the superior position as the one who gave the interpretation or solution.

Simon’s answer in regard to which debtor would love the benefactor more had forced him to say: “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled” (Luke, 7:40). Jesus quickly followed with the humble acknowledgement of Simon’s wisdom: “You have judged correctly”13. Simon had agreed that a person such as the woman before him had the potential to fulfill the great Shemah better than him. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”14.

Simon, who had passed judgment on the woman and on Jesus for His acceptance of this woman, had the tables turned on him in two ways. First, by his own judgment of who could love more and secondly by the evidence drawn from the comparison of his own actions with hers.

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet”. (Luke, 40:40-43)

Kierkegaard (1962) reminded us that the indirect communicator must be alert for the right time to bring his point home.

“Therefore, he must have everything in readiness, though without impatience, with a view to bringing forward the religious promptly, as soon as he perceives that he has his readers with him, so that with the momentum gained…” (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 26).

Jesus carefully, patiently, and indirectly approached Simon so as to bring him, as much as possible, to a point of seeing for himself where he was spiritually.

Simon then heard the words: “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much” (7:47). This statement clearly showed that Jesus did not approve of prostitution, and that He was more in line with the heart of the God of the Hebrew Bible: Jesus proclaimed the love the God of Israel had for sinners.

The Second Accusation: Luke 7:48-50

In the conclusion of this dinner episode, Luke records that Jesus again caused His audience to take notice and to make a judgment. It is odd that Jesus did this as He had won the day. Simon had made a judgment and falsely accused Jesus of being a fraud, or at the very least, imperceptive of whom the woman was. In response, Jesus showed Simon his error but also showed Simon the way to the heart of God. What Jesus did was brilliant and humbly done. Love does not seek victory when dealing with those damned by their illusion. Kierkegaard (1962) said:

13 See also Luke 10:28 when the “expert” in the law stood up to test Him. Jesus again forced the man to judge and make a commitment, because Jesus had placed him in the role of the Rabbi. Jesus’ response to the scholar’s answer was very similar to His reply to Simon: “You have answered correctly”, Jesus replied: “Do this and you will live”. Again, Jesus had taken the challenger’s own statement as the basis for the spiritual challenge.

14 Deuteronomy 6:5. This is widely regarded as the central command of the Old Testament.
If, however, I am disposed to plume myself on my greater understanding, it is because I am vain or proud, so that at bottom, instead of benefiting him, I want to be admired. But all true effort to help begins with self-humiliation; the helper must first humble himself under him he would help… (p. 27)

Jesus had proved to be an excellent debater possessed with a quick and agile mind who was fully fluent with the heart and intent of the Torah. However, He came to serve, not be served, and so He pressed on with a statement that seemed, at first glance, to be redundant.

Jesus said to the woman: “Your sins are forgiven” (7:48). The proverb of the preceding verse had already implied she was forgiven, so why did Jesus say this? The answer is found when one looks at the structure of the whole passage. It is composed of two sets of three: alarming action, accusation, and answer. In the first accusation cycle, Jesus’ action of allowing the woman to touch Him caused Simon to take notice and utter to himself an accusation against Jesus. Then Jesus answered Simon’s hidden thoughts and indirectly showed Simon where he could be helped.

In the second accusation cycle, Jesus’ statement in verse 48 was again an action that forced those present to take notice (7:49): The other guests began to say among themselves: “Who is this who even forgives sins?” His wider audience now had to make a judgment, and they were convinced of their superiority to Jesus’ piety. In their eyes, Jesus had moved into the realm of blasphemy. Only God could forgive sins. Jesus had put Himself in a much more difficult position than the allowance of the woman’s touch.

Twice Jesus had forced those who were caught in illusion to take notice, and twice they made judgments or accusations against Him. Twice Jesus answered, however, in the second answer, there was a difference. The difference was not what Jesus did, but what He did not do. He did not answer the second accusation against His person. At least, it was not answered directly. Luke had already shown his readers that Jesus knew how to answer them as the same accusation had been leveled against Him when He forgave the paralytic lowered into His presence by friends in Luke, 5:20-21.

When Jesus saw their faith, He said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven”. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves: “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”.

In that story, Jesus openly answered their hidden critique in 5:22-26, but in our story He chose not to.

The religious leaders’ objection was a reasonable one and Jesus must have thought so as it was answered in Luke 5. Often Jesus defended either Himself or his actions. See examples of this in Luke 5:30-32, 5:33-35, and 11:14-22. Since Luke repeatedly presented Jesus as logically debating with His detractors, what could have motivated Him not to justify this action?

A choice had been made. Jesus chose to serve the woman not Himself and thus in (7:50) His response was not addressed to His detractors, but to the woman—“Your faith has saved you; go in peace”. Many commentators feel Luke was portraying Jesus as showing respect to the woman. For example, I. H. Marshall (1978) correctly said: “Luke could not leave the woman as simply the object of a discussion between Jesus and

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15 Two alarming actions are: allowing the woman to touch him in 7:37-38 and the controversial taking of the role of forgiving sins in 7:48. The two accusations are: in 7:39 by Simon and in 7:49 by the other guests. The two answers are: 7:40-47 in response to Simon and 7:50 which is surprisingly not addressed to His accusers.

16 See also Matthew 11:22-28, where Matthew gives his readers examples of Jesus defending Himself on this same issue.
the Pharisee, and so his story had to contain some saying addressed to her” (Marshall, 1978, p. 307). In line with Marshall, we could go farther and say this woman needed to hear directly that she was forgiven and that she had other pressing needs.

Jesus was portrayed in the Gospels as being acutely aware of what others were thinking so it was reasonable to infer that Jesus was aware of this more serious accusation. However, Luke recorded Jesus as passing up the chance to defend His reputation. It seemed like He had other priorities. Jesus had before Him a vulnerable woman. The woman knew she was despised and looked down upon, and she must have been embarrassed. Luke portrayed Jesus as seeing the woman’s importance and value as equal to that of the souls of the religious leaders who were trapped in illusion. So He took what was despised, her touching a Rabbi and glorified it. Jesus made her out to be the model of hospitality. In addition, she was assured by inference and then directly told (at great cost to His standing in the room) that she was forgiven. Finally, she was taught something of enormous value in the opening phrase of verse 50 and then graciously dismissed (to get her out of that hideous atmosphere).

She was dismissed but in a manner that let her know He was not embarrassed or angry with her actions, but that she was on good terms with Him. She was dismissed in peace or in Shalom. “Shalom” means in Hebrew something much closer to “communion” or “fellowship” than what we more commonly mean in the English word “peace”. It is the “Sholamim”, or the “peace offering” in English, that is the final sacrifice before a pilgrim went home after coming to God to sacrifice where God caused His Name to dwell. Israelite worshippers were to go home in harmony with God, with each other, and with the clergy symbolized by sharing a meal with one another17.

Finally, she needed to know what her part was that brought about her salvation. It was her faith, signified by her courage to brave the judgmental atmosphere of the religious leaders of her own nation. She risked humiliation because she had hope and faith. Perhaps, there was something about Jesus of Nazareth that was different. It could be that in her unconscious mind, she sensed that God was different than what the religious leaders portrayed. She risked that Jesus was truly like the real God18.

His pronouncing forgiveness was technically blasphemy if Jesus was seen by Luke as merely a man. It was revelatory if Jesus was more, and was what the Church would soon proclaim. He was fully man, but also fully God. His dangerous pronouncement was both helpful to the woman and His claiming of the prerogative to forgive sins was potentially helpful to the religious leaders. Indirectly, it revealed the central message of Christianity: the Incarnation. God had come to earth in human form in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps, they could be moved to see the kindness towards the woman as an image of the kindness of God. Perhaps, they could see by her courage that was necessary in their own lives to have faith. It would start with seeing sinners differently and follow with seeing who Jesus was and then risk the loss of their reputations and their very lives that both perceptions would entail. The message was there plainly and clearly for the woman, but for those caught in illusion the message was subtle and indirect.

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17 It is easy to see why Jesus would institute the central sacrament of the Christian Church containing the elements of eating a meal with God. It was to become the dearest rite the Church would possess.
18 There are seven passages in Luke (5:20, 7:9, 7:50, 8:25, 8:48, 17:19, and 18:42) where Jesus pronounces the presence or the lack of faith. In all seven, of which this is one, one could easily substitute the word “risk” for “faith” and the passage would make perfect sense. Even in the discussion of how to obtain faith in Luke 7:1-10, the risk to favor the little ones and the risk to believe one could be happy if one forgave their enemies (17:1-4) fits this pattern.
Conclusions

Kierkegaard’s indirect approach demands a very clear thinking and creative mind to accomplish. One not only has to understand where their audience’s mind set is, but also subtly and creatively designs an approach that comes from behind the religious person’s defense mechanisms. Luke presents Jesus as carefully telling a story in such a way that causes Simon to make a decision without realizing that his participation in the story of the two debtors was setting a trap for himself.

Kierkegaard’s approach also demands a great deal of discipline to keep under control one’s passions and pride in allowing oneself to seem inferior to those he wishes to communicate with. The humility necessary to let the opponent seem smarter, wiser, and more pious, so as to draw them into a deeper discussion is difficult to do. Jesus is presented as humble enough to let Simon accuse Him of being a religious fraud and not to take offense, but rather let Simon assume the superior position of a rabbi making a judgment. When one’s personal integrity is attacked, it is very difficult to stay focused on the needs of the attacker instead of one’s wounded self-esteem.

Kierkegaard’s indirect communication technique demands of the communicator a deep love for those who are self-righteous and demands a piety infused with humility. The key to conquering one’s pride in Kierkegaard’s approach is to deeply love those one wished to communicate with. For Kierkegaard, concern of the audience helps subdue pride. Luke presents Jesus as deeply interested in Simon’s spiritual well being so as to humbly let Simon be the “teacher”. Even more remarkable is when Jesus is accused of blasphemy He chooses to dismiss the opportunity to defend His actions but to focus on the vulnerable woman before Him. He does not address His accusers but speaks only to the woman.

A quick, subtle, and creative mind, focused on the needs of others and in control of one’s pride dominated Kierkegaard’s indirect approach. It takes religious discourse to a very high level. Luke’s portrayal of Jesus as a role model for His followers when trying to persuade the Religiously Secure displays all these characteristics.

References